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Ip Man 2 as a New Discourse: Challenging the Existing Hegemonic Order

National identity, within the international realm, often navigates through a series of oppositional relationships—one nation's identity is made manifest through the creation of another. Within this identity, a nation imagines itself against an Other who is dismissed for representing all of the undesirable qualities. Constructing a relationship that operates on several of these theoretical opposites, or what can be referred to as binary oppositions,¹ is important in establishing how a nation perceives itself, and, accordingly, how its members perceive themselves. This tendency to “conceive, create, and communicate about social reality in terms of otherness” (Kadianaki and Gillespie 76) results in different modes of social and cultural discourse that create a particular perception or imagined construction of a particular nation versus its Other.

Regardless of the extent that the relationship is imagined, constructed, or devised, this oppositional dynamic is vital in establishing a nation's social and cultural hegemony. The opposing identities are “largely interdependent, co-constituting one another, and jointly producing meaning” (Kadianaki and Gillespie 76), thereby working together to construct the idea

¹ *Dictionary.com* defines binary oppositions as “a relation between the members of a pair of linguistic items, as a pair of distinctive features, such that one is the absence of the other, as voicelessness and voice, or that one is at the opposite pole from the other, as stridency and mellowness.”

of who the dominant nation is versus its secondary or subordinate nation(s). Creating an evident power imbalance, the relationship naturally gives one nation hegemonic authority over another while also producing the formation of stereotypes and depictions of the nations involved. The East/West dynamic, similarly, is continually imagined and re-imagined within the Western world—especially through the concept of Orientalism²—where the West places itself in this constant “positional superiority” and never loses the “relative upper hand” (Said 7) in its relationship with the East. Deemed as the Other, the East is portrayed as corrupt, uncivilized, and feminine, while the West is portrayed as moral, civilized, and masculine—this is where a “framing of all competing definitions of reality” (Lull 40) works to complement the dominant nation and how the West is able to give itself power over the Other. Orientalism has enforced these broad stereotypical depictions of the East through the use of rhetoric, media, scholarly investment, and other “accepted grids for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness” (Said 6). These two global realms become abstract concepts and, beyond themselves, represent a system of ideas.

As I am speaking from a Western perspective, I have introduced the East/West dynamic in terms of its Western lens; however, the East has also done its part in asserting its own identity through the very same grids. This dynamic varies depending upon the lens through which you are observing it; naturally, the dynamic through the Eastern lens has many differences from its presentation through the Western lens. There have certainly been social and cultural modes of discourse within the Eastern realm where, rather than “venerate the West at the expense of the oriental Other” (Thorton 141), the East is instead “valorized at the seeming expense of the West”

² See “Additional Resources” for information on Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.

(Thornton 141), especially through the use of film. Chinese cinema, for example, has long carried out the function of asserting a national identity, where it has “served almost exclusively as the ideological instrument for political mobilization” (Darr and Tang 813). Film is a way for nations and global realms to communicate new realities and perceptions of their nations’ identities—and has been a way for the East to reconstruct the East/West dynamic by reconstituting itself in relation to the West.

For example, the film *Ip Man 2*³, a Chinese martial arts film produced in 2010 by director Wilson Yip, focuses on an Eastern character and a Western character and addresses the East/West dynamic. The film revolves around the central conflict between the two characters, where a Western boxer named Twister challenges an Eastern martial artist named Ip Man to a physical match. Focusing on the era of China during British colonial rule, the Western characters throughout the film are constantly characterized with highly aggressive and immoral qualities. In contrast, the Eastern character is elevated above this Western aggression by appearing calm, wise, and honorable in comparison; he is allowed to rise above the Westerner’s actions when, in the end, Ip Man wins the match. The film, along with its other aspects, presents the East/West dynamic in a significantly different way than how it is known in the Western world.

It is notable that this portrayal has somewhat “contributed to an inversion of Orientalism as it relates to East Asia” (Thornton 141). Along with the ways that the film works to elevate the East’s identity over the West, it also largely does so through masculine depictions of the East—such as winning the physical match in the film. Whereas Eastern males have often been “marginalized or excluded from hegemonic [Western] masculinity” (Hiramoto 387), there is a

³ See “Additional Resources” for plot summary.

more readily dominant masculine portrayal of the East, where the stoical nature, disciplined movements, and moral adherence of Ip Man put into question the notion of the East as being effeminate within Western discourse. The role of gender plays a significant part in establishing any kind of cultural or national hegemony—it is typical that a nation that portrays itself as more masculine is likely to position its Other as more feminine. Especially in the Western perspective, the East has “historical roots as the exoticized and eroticized conquered Other in the gendered binary relationship with its Western conquerors” (Gomes 12) and, consequently, has assumed a feminine identity—this includes seeming “weak” as well as lacking in “physical strength and size” (Hiramoto 387). Through the use of martial arts as a vessel, however, China has assigned masculinity as the “‘default’ gender [that] has been canonical in representing Hong Kong national and Asian transnational global significations of cultural ideology” (Gomes 11). Nevertheless, Chinese martial arts characters in the West often carry a “masculinity of a different sort than that defined by more western features” (Hiramoto 387). One of the main components of this film, then, is the very nature of the film’s portrayal of Eastern masculinity, for the way that Eastern masculinity is presented in *Ip Man 2* more closely aligns with the Western notions of gender and masculinity.

Through the same system of stereotypes, and by navigating through the same kind of binary oppositions, the East’s hegemonic capability is both resituated and reasserted in respect to the West in *Ip Man 2*; this is mainly done, however, through establishing a masculine identity of the East within the film. Even though the film seemingly mimics an inversion of Orientalism, the Eastern’s portrayal of masculinity “may be considered as a feature of hegemonic masculinity in Western norms” (Hiramoto 389) and therefore does not seek to assert a dominant masculinity

over the West but, rather, creates the space for a shared masculinity. This shared masculinity, then, is the film's way of proposing transnationalism and potentially overcoming the typical binary oppositions between the East and the West.

The first step of the film's enforcement of its social and cultural discourse is resituating the East in a new system of binary oppositions: whereas the East, through the Orientalist or Western lens, was made to be the corrupt Other, the film instead assigns this role to the West. Making the Other appear as corrupt plays the needed role in establishing the binaries that elevate a nation morally over another one. This has especially been common within the West's portrayal of the East which, for instance, portrayed China as a menacing octopus figure labelled with words such as immorality, cheap labor, small-pox, bribery, robbery, and "similar accusations [that] were widespread in North America" (Welch 198). The "demonising" of the East Asian figure depicted the East as being "collectively inferior to Europeans" and only regarded "the understanding of morality defined in puritanical European Christian terms" (Welch 192), which heightened the perceptions of Eastern moral corruption in the Western world.



Fig. 1. May, Phil. [*Yellow Peril*] *The Mongolian Octopus – His Grip on Australia*.

The role of the Westerner in the film, then enacts the same kind of ideological manifestation. The film's portrayal shows little resemblance to how the role of the Westerner is enforced through the Orientalist lens; rather, the Western "foreign devils" are the ones that are made corrupt, represent figures of bigotry, and are deceitful in order to gain the upper hand. In one particular scene of the film, for example, the Western character Superintendent Wallace is seated inside of an office, dressed in military attire, and positioned with a manner of authority at his desk. He is stationed in China as a police superintendent who oversees a particular town of China during the British colonial rule. The camera begins by panning into a wide shot with him at the very center; as his role is to collect the money from two Chinese men in the film, he makes

the comment: “Mmm, your money stinks⁴, but I like it.” When the money is given, the conversation is over; however, the camera then lingers upon a complete shot of the Western character pulling the money out of the envelope and sniffing the wad of bills—and in an especially sensual and lustful manner (00:29:24-00:29:50).

Another instance when Superintendent Wallace is analogously seen in this manner is when he punishes the editor-in-chief of the Chinese newspaper and other Chinese journalists for publishing a negative piece about the West⁵. As the Chinese journalists are thrown into the jail cell, the scene shows Superintendent Wallace walking in aggressively, positioned high and mighty in his military attire, approaching a small Chinese journalist. Before he hits the Chinese journalist on the wrist with a metal bar, he says: “You better remember: This is what happens to people who mess with me.” The camera omits the Chinese journalist from the scene, only including his cries of pain as Superintendent Wallace is shown continually striking him with a metal bar (1:18:40-1:19:37). Characterizing Superintendent Wallace as a selfish, exploitative, and even derogatory man thus imbues the Western character with corrupt motives and intentions. By looking at the film’s portrayal of the Westerner, one can assert that it is no longer the “vicious ‘pathology’ of the Chinese” (Welch 198) that is being carried across to a Western audience, but rather that same lens, reversed: It is the corrupt Westerner that is now a part of this Eastern discourse. In all of these scenes, the Chinese man is either left to watch in horror or condemned to be susceptible to this corruption from the West. Instilling the idea of corruption as present in one nation, and not the other, contributes to the idea of one nation being purer than another—and consequently, as conceptualized within the film, the East is morally superior to the

⁴ He is referring to Chinese money smelling like fish.

⁵ In the film, the Western Boxer Twister ends up killing a Chinese martial artist during a boxing match, where the boxer is supposed to cease punching once his or her opponent is down: he does not.

West.

Another feature of the film's pursuit in the hegemonic re-situation of the East is giving into the same kind of derogatory rhetoric that Orientalism uses (such as calling the East the "gooks"⁶ or referring to "the yellow peril"⁷, for instance); this strategic and derogatory name-calling is imitated by the film in referring to the Westerners as "bloody foreigners" (1:26:03) or "western dogs" (1:25:41). Throughout the film, it is significant that the Western character is never referred to by name, only repeatedly referred to as the "foreigner" or "westerner." The rhetoric itself creates two worlds, one where a person is not a "foreigner" and one where a person is, indeed, "foreign"; as in Orientalism, this "produces and identifies difference for the purpose of exclusion" and sets up the "rhetoric of superiority" (Rahman 347) that can place one nation over another based on this sense of difference. Through this separation and categorization, the East/West dynamic is re-created in the film but made to function in ways to complement Eastern hegemony, dominance, and power.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most significant ways that the film categorizes the East is through a reasserted masculine identity—this works to dismiss the understanding of the East as being effeminate in Orientalism discourse. What is especially noteworthy, however, is that this conception of masculinity in the end functions more to align the East with the West than to elevate it above the West. In several cases, the Eastern character Ip Man demonstrates typically Western masculine traits such as remaining calm and collected in all circumstances (rather than becoming emotional), being physically able-bodied and fearless, as well as by maintaining a

⁶ A derogatory term used to describe persons of Asian descent, as seen in the film *Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick.

⁷ See appendix for image.

dominant role in his relationship with his wife. This emphasis helps establish the East's hegemonic capability, since it is so common that a powerful "masculinity [or masculine figure] occupies the hegemonic position" (Hiramoto 387) and helps supply the East the conceptual outlook needed to be an ascendant national power in comparison with the West.

As Ip Man's speech throughout the film tends to be decisive and brief, and is never too expressive of a particular emotion, even in times of pain or emotional strife, it is one of the chief means by which the Eastern character's masculinity is represented. An important instance is in the scene where Ip Man is pitted against the Western boxer Twister, in which he is repeatedly and violently punched to the point of severe injury to his face—but Ip Man never emits a word during the fight and only displays a fixed and determined gaze (1:33:04-1:34:01). As the Chinese masculine figure, he is "tough, silent to the point of being callous, and though almost destroyed physically, never once compromises his moral scruples" (Hiramoto 390). Even when constantly provoked by Twister's remarks during the fight such as, "this will be a piece of cake, mate" (1:30:10) or "I can finish you off in two punches" (1:30:04), Ip Man remains stoical, does not return the Westerner's foul remarks or dirty tactics, and does not deviate from the task of reaffirming the Chinese identity as the truly respectable and civilized one. Of course, in the end, Ip Man's physical prowess also accords with common conceptions of masculinity: Ip Man is seen fighting off multiple people at once and is able to inflict major physical damage on the central Western character, Twister. In his match with Twister, Ip Man at first does not injure Twister in any significant way, but receives injury himself; as the match progresses, Ip Man gains stamina, throws major punches at Twister, and ultimately defeats him. This winning of the match demonstrates the Chinese male's bodily and mental strength to endure and overcome

seemingly insurmountable challenges.

A more subtle yet perhaps more significant alignment with Western notions of masculinity, along with the above examples, is seen in Ip Man's relationship with his wife, which is sanctified and yet kept separate from Ip Man's "masculine domain" (Hiramoto 395). When Ip Man must leave his home to fight against Twister in the Chinese-Western boxing match, a scene shows Ip Man and his wife, Cheung Wing-Sing, saying their good-byes. The two are facing one another in a medium close-up shot, gazing with solemn eyes and heavy hearts—but Ip Man's wife is visibly pregnant and in fact is almost ready to deliver their second child. Regardless of their child's imminent birth, and the presence of their five-year-old son, Ip Man's wife sends him off saying, "Don't worry and practice well. But don't practice too late. You have to win" (1:23:58-1:24:33). As Ip Man finally departs from her, she is rubbing her pregnant belly—this furthers the audience's understanding of Ip Man's sacrifice, for he must depart from his beloved wife and future child to fulfill his masculine duty in defending the Chinese identity in the face of a Western challenger. A later scene shows Cheung Wing-Sing in bed at home listening intently to her husband's match as it is narrated through the radio—a clear portrayal of the female domestic figure waiting patiently for her husband to complete his duties and return home⁸ (1:31:56-1:32:19). She then goes into labor, and the neighbor who is taking care of her while Ip Man is away announces her intent to go and tell him. Immediately, however, Ip Man's wife begs her not to "distract him" (1:26:49-1:27:00). Her response emphasizes the need for the wife and family to remain supportive of the husband, thereby enabling him to fulfill his societal duties.

⁸ See appendix.

The above scenes with Ip Man's wife serve to highlight his masculinity by emphasizing his position of power and authority over the female. As Hiramoto explains, in the male-female dynamic, the female characters must "quietly part from their men without interfering with their male affairs" (395), while the male characters must complete their male duties in the public realm. Similarly to the Western tradition, where men are expected "to set aside their lives and livelihoods to aid their countries through military service" (Nye 417), Ip Man's role is comparably the same—he must defend both his honor and his country's, which means placing national concerns over the familial (as illustrated in the above scene by foregoing the importance of witnessing his child's birth). The importance of this hierarchical relationship is further reinforced at the end of the film, in the penultimate scene: Ip Man happily returns to his wife, while she holds their newborn son and asks what they shall name him (1:43:07-1:43:52). Ip Man's identity is now solidified as the male head of the household who returns to tend to his wife and children, as it is his "patriarchal obligation" to do so (Nye 430).

Significantly, while notions of masculinity are often based on "anti-femininity," "anti-gayness," or on excessive exhibitions of "male domination" (Hiramoto 392), Ip Man's character and relationships clearly align with Western notions of masculinity, which uphold the importance of the male and his "transitions between civilian and military masculinities" (Nye 417). Despite the fact that the majority of the film works to characterize the East as a superior hegemonic power, through Ip Man, the latter part of the film posits that this shared conception of masculinity underscores that East and West are not representing competing masculinities (ideologies) that are mutually exclusive, but rather that the two global realms share an essential commonality. In other words, the qualities that make up the film's conception of desired

masculinity in the East is the same desired model of masculinity within the West.

The film's intent, therefore, is not simply to reverse these binary oppositions, but to promote transnationalism mainly through this shared conception of masculinity, which now represents a mutual value system that is embodied and manifested through the masculine figure. When, near the end of the film, Ip Man wins the match with the Western boxer and is given the microphone to make a speech, his final message calls for a relationship of mutually supportive coexistence, rather than one of actual dominance over the Other:

Ip Man (in Mandarin): "Hello. By fighting this match, I'm not trying to prove Chinese martial arts is better than Western boxing. What I really want to say is, though people may have different status in life, one person's integrity is not worth more than another's. I hope that from this moment on, we can start to respect each other. That's all. Thank you." (*Ip Man 2*. 1:40:40-1:42:18)

With an emphasis on "integrity" and "respect," Ip Man's speech references the idealized figure of Western hegemonic masculinity: a powerful man of valor, conscientious of his moral duties. Twister's defeat explicitly demonstrates that the brutishness that comes when masculinity is misaligned with aggression and immoral qualities is, in contrast to the honorable masculine figure, altogether undesirable. After this speech is made in the film, the entire audience—which consists of both Western and Eastern spectators—gives Ip Man a warm standing ovation, with cheers and nods alike. Ip Man's speech emphasizes the fact that he, as the film's Eastern embodiment, is not trying to prove which is better—East or West—but is trying to establish a basis for respect among the nations in order to promote a shared global authority.

Therefore, although the movie's attempt *has* been interpreted by some Western critics as

one that serves merely to prove that the East is better—for example, a film review from *The Hollywood Reporter* identified the movie as one of “crude nationalism,” while one from *The New York Times* addressed the movie as containing the “nationalist first-pumping often found in mainstream Chinese productions”—Ip Man’s final message overtly contradicts this sole intent. His sentiments underscore that it is not the West that is being “defeated” and relegated to the position of Other, but the corrupting influences *within* the typical hegemonic relationship as represented by Twister that have been repudiated. In other words, despite the many differences that the two nations have, a purified and valor-based masculinity symbolically serves as a common foundation through which to establish a more equitable, mutually beneficial, relationship.

As a film, moreover, *Ip Man 2* can be regarded as an international agent that directly influences social or cultural discourse. Its release in Hong Kong and, later, in the United States, is indicative of the way that film is able to communicate, address, or challenge ideological norms—in this instance as the East challenges the West’s ideological norms—and push past the limits of an established system of discourse. As Aitken notes, film, with its ability to “move beyond national boundaries” (1703), can project a re-envisioned ideological reality into the global realm through popular platforms such as *Netflix* or DVDs. With its new depictions heightened in visual reality, *Ip Man 2* can be seen as a “resistance”⁹ to the dominant Western culture that is “no longer contained in a national space” (Aitken 1703) but stretches beyond its Eastern borders to reach a Western audience. At the same time that *Ip Man 2* is able to communicate its self-imagined conception of the East, however, it also seeks to bring together

⁹ Concept brought up in discussion with Professor Rodrigo Lazo, University of California, Irvine

“all the people of the earth measurable within the limits of a common culture” (Aitken 1703), by emphasizing internationally shared values, such as those derived from commonly established masculine norms. Of course, such an emphasis undoubtedly plays a role in promoting sales, since the filmmakers, conscious of a global audience, would find it economically advantageous to promote a commonality between East and West. Nonetheless, *Ip Man 2* is an important artifact embodying a cultural self-visualization; in viewing film, audiences, through their capacity to perceive the projected visual reality as real, help to transform the imagined *into* reality. With new signifying systems placed in opposition to existing ones, stereotypes can be altered or dismantled, rhetorical positions can be reimagined through dialog, and new images can be psychologically internalized, for film’s transformative power can help effect a reconfiguration of perceived reality. Though a commercial film, *Ip Man 2* itself plays an undeniable role in re-presenting the way the East is commonly conceptualized within a Western framework, and in demonstrating that hegemonic identity is malleable and can be altered. Viewed in its entirety, moreover, it reveals how film can help bring together dominant global realms, reformulating competing ideologies of power and, instead, positing one that can be mutually empowering.

Appendix



1.

Fig. 1. Opper, Frederick. *The Yellow Peril*.

Frederick Opper, a political cartoonist of the early 1930s, produced *The Yellow Peril*, a cartoon that shows a man illustrating to a worker what will happen if we let the Chinese genie out of the bottle and don't control immigration.



2. Fig. 2. Nast, Thomas. *Christmas Eve*.

As shown in Professor Fahs' Winter 2015 lecture, *Christmas Eve* was produced during the Civil War in Harper's Weekly, an abolitionist magazine. Thomas Nast, an editorial cartoonist during the 1860's, depicted the sentimentalized image of a soldier who remembers home while his wife and family await his return.

Additional Resources

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_(book))
An excerpt from the link to a summary of Edward Said's Orientalism: "Orientalism is a 1978 book by Edward W. Said, in which Said studies the cultural representations that are the bases of Orientalism, the West's patronizing perceptions and fictional depictions of "The East" — the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Orientalism, the Western scholarship about the Eastern World, was and remains inextricably tied to the imperialist societies who produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to power, and thus intellectually suspect."
2. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1386932/synopsis>
An excerpt from the link to a summary of *Ip Man 2*: "Hung accepts Twister's challenge to

a fight so that he can defend his culture. Although Hung has the upper hand at first, he begins to weaken from asthma and is eventually beaten to death. News of Hung's death rapidly spreads throughout the enraged Chinese populace, causing a scandal that spurs Wallace to hold a press conference, where he states that Hung's death was an accident, and Twister announces that he will accept any challenge from the Chinese. Ip arrives and accepts the challenge. As his wife goes into labor, Ip finishes training and begins his fight with Twister. Ip manages to exchange blows with the boxer but is knocked down many times, but in the end he finally manages to knock him out. While the Chinese audience cheers, Wallace is arrested by his superiors for corruption, as Fatso had secretly reported him.”

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