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Huang Fei-hong Returns

By Ric Meyers



Tsui Hark is alive and well and making crazy movies in Hong Kong. After being unable to secure financing for his labor of love, a big-budget, special effects-packed, live-action retelling of the Monkey King legend, the man who has been called the "Steven Spielberg of Asia" is back with a vengeance. The special effects are still there aplenty, as is the political content that has gotten him in trouble with the big studios before.

Even so, he's now working with the major HK distributors to give his newest production the wildest audience possible. The most anticipated film of the Chinese summer was his *Once Upon A Time In China*, a sweeping martial arts epic which is in the greatest tradition of kung-fu films, being the 99th movie to feature the character "Huang Fei-hong"—a Confucian scholar and healer who also happens to be the finest lion dancer and martial artist on the planet.

The venerable Kwan Tak Hing is best known in the role, having played the man over 80 times from the very beginnings of Hong Kong cinema to such popular new wave kung-fu movies as *Dreadnaught*, starring Yuen Baio, and *The Magnificent Butcher*, starring Sammo Hung. Even so, such other well-known actors who have played the part are Ku Feng in *Master Of Kung Fu*, Liu Chia Hui (Gordon Lui) in *Instructors Of Death*, and even Jackie Chan in *Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*.

This time, Lin Lei Jei, aka Jet Lee, the star of the Mainland Chinese Shaolin Temple trilogy, plays the part in the most overtly political, religious, and bloody chapter of the series. When the city leader goes to fight the French in the early 1900s, Huang Fei-hong is put in charge of the local militia, who not only have hostile British and American forces breathing down its necks, but is in conflict with the vicious local Tong gang.

All these forces come together to frame Huang for a series of crimes, including white slavery and the murder of a European priest. Complicating matters even further is the beautiful Rosamund Kwan, playing an American-educated beauty who is in love with the seem-

ingly oblivious Huang, and a naive Peking Opera performer played by Yuen Baio, who is in love with her. He is so anxious to become one of Huang's disciples that when the master unavoidably rejects him, he sides with a bitter, envious kung-fu expert intent on destroying the philosophical pacifist.

It all climaxes with one of Hark's patented multilevel battles where Huang must face his enemy, Yuen must face himself, the Tong leader tries to rape Rosamund, and all wind up facing the Westerner's guns. It makes for a meaty entertainment highlighted by the finest classical martial arts since the aforementioned Shaolin Temple series.

Although there's a little too much "wire" work for my liking, which allows the actors to fly and float, Tsui (and supposed co-director King Hu) give Jet Lee plenty of time to shine with the fastest, most powerful, and most precise kung-fu exhibitions seen in many a moon. Even the fast-focus MTV editing can't kill the pleasure of Lee's virtuoso displays of skill.

The only other major disappointment in this effort is the absence of Sammo Hung reprising his role of the "magnificent butcher"—one of Huang's most beloved disciples. Instead, the part goes to veteran funnyman Kent Ching, who is fine in the acting department, but no martial artist. A hidden pleasure, however, is the heavily made up Jackie Cheung, "Little Jackie," playing Huang's bespectacled, buck-toothed Chinese American translator.

For those who miss the golden era of the Shaw Brothers traditional costumed kung-fu epics, Huang Fei-hong #99: *Once Upon A Time In China*, is not quite nirvana, but still nectar for the eyes.

About the Author: Ric Meyers writes a monthly column for Inside Kung-Fu.

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