

Video Killed the Martial Arts Star: Distribution Technologies and the Vagaries of Jackie Chan Fandom in Japan

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Jackie Chan has been synonymous with Hong Kong cinema amongst mainstream Japanese moviegoers since he first appeared on movie screens in the late 1970s. Indeed, his popularity in 1980s Japan was such that apocryphal tales of his rabid Japanese female fan base punctuated Western reporting on the star in the 1990s, which seamlessly enfolded them in pre-existing media discourses of female fan hysteria. Thus, it is ironic that by the end of the 1980s, on the cusp of a widely reported, if niche, phenomenon of Japanese female fandom of Hong Kong stars, Chan had been all but relegated to the periphery of Hong Kong film fandom in Japan. This paper examines the rise and fall of Jackie Chan's star (persona) among Japanese female fans. In particular, I consider the ways that changing technologies and patterns of Hong Kong film consumption in Japan exposed fans to new stars and films, effectively sidelining Chan in the process.

Only four Hong Kong films had received theatrical release in Japan prior to Bruce Lee's arrival on Japanese screens in late 1973. To a film, these movies failed to make any lasting impression on Japanese audiences, the result of Japanese filmgoers' indifference to films outside the Japan/Hollywood binary.¹ This changed with the release of Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* in December 1973. In contrast with previous Hong Kong films,

¹ Yau, *Honkon-Nihon*, 250.

Enter the Dragon received wide distribution in Japan by virtue of being a co-production between Lee's own Concord Productions and Warner Bros., thus gaining access to an already well-established distribution network in Japan. *Enter the Dragon* made an immediate and lasting impact on the Japanese film market: the film ran for several months in theaters, finishing the year as the second-highest grossing foreign film of 1974.² Subsequently, Tōwa and Tōei studios entered into competition for the distribution rights to the remainder of Lee's films,³ and he posthumously ended 1974 as Japan's "number-one moneymaking star."⁴

Given the limitations of posthumous stardom, Japanese film distributors turned to then-emerging star Jackie Chan as a way of capitalizing on the new martial arts 'boom'. In Japanese titles and promotional materials for his early films, Chan was carefully positioned as the mischievous 'monkey' to Lee's more somber 'dragon'. He was targeted to male audiences with an emphasis on his performances of masculinity: daredevil acrobatics, ability to withstand pain, and heterosexual sex appeal. Kung-fu movie magazines featured photographs of Chan (alongside photos of Lee and up-and-coming star Jet Li) in all their muscle-bound ferocity, and articles about the martial arts philosophies of each were bookended by advertisements for the kung-fu paraphernalia featured in Hong Kong films (nunchucks, yellow track suits, black Chinese slippers, etc.). Given the general accessibility of Chan's comedy kung-fu, it is unsurprising that Chan enjoyed some popularity among women (as well as children and even the elderly) from

² "1974 Yōga sakuhin haikyū shūnyū," 113. All dollar figures are based on the average exchange rate for the year given.

³ Kuroi, "Kōgyōkai," 92; Yau, *Honkon-Nihon*, 252-3.

⁴ Udagawa, "Gunshō doragon," 90.

an early point in his Japanese career. However, it was not until the 1982-83 period that women began to take a noticeable interest in him. Well received television broadcasts of *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (1977), *Drunken Master* (1978), *The Fearless Hyena* (1979), and *The Young Master* (1980), helped to introduce Chan to audiences otherwise unlikely to encounter him in theaters.⁵ Additionally, Hal Needham's 1981 comedy, *The Cannonball Run*, was also instrumental in bringing Chan to a mainstream viewership. The third-highest grossing film at Japanese theaters in 1982, *Cannonball Run* was marketed in Japan as a Jackie Chan vehicle, his face positioned front and center in the film's Japanese poster. *Cannonball Run* further extended Chan's reach into the mainstream Japanese audience when it was broadcast on Fuji Television on April 7, 1983, garnering the highest ratings of any Hong Kong film to that point at 26.4% of audience share.⁶ The following year saw two Chan films, *Cannonball Run II* and *Project A* (1983), rise to the top of the year's highest-grossing foreign films, trailing only *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.⁷

It was around this time that Chan's growing female fandom, which was making itself known at promotional events attended by the star, began to be acknowledged and even courted in publications targeted at men. Articles with such unwieldy titles as "An Introduction to Kung Fu that Even Girls Can Understand"⁸ appeared alongside detailed discussions of Chan's martial arts prowess, and in them women were called upon to account for their unlikely interest in the star. As one fan wrote,

Much more than Bruce Lee or Jet Li, Jackie Chan seems approachable and

⁵ Kurata, *Honkon den'ei hyakka*, 130.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "1984 yōga sakuhin haikyū shūnyū," 124.

⁸ Saijō, "Onna no ko demo wakarū kunfū nyūmon."

more like a friend. Bruce Lee is a grown man who's been around, and it's hard to imagine him being playful. Jet Li is still a child; he might be playful, but you couldn't talk with him about adult things. But Jackie is a mix of maturity and boyishness, and it seems like you could be both playful and have an adult conversation with him.⁹

Similarly, in a March 1984 *Kinema Junpō* (Movie Times) magazine feature, another woman breathlessly described meeting with Chan, noting that he was “much smaller than he looks in the movies... more like a little boy than a man.”¹⁰ As described by female fans, Chan’s boyish persona and openness were at the heart of his appeal to Japanese girls and women. As one fan explained, “I don’t know if it’s because he’s Asian and different from Western stars, but he seems approachable.... It feels like, hey, you never know, even I could marry him.”¹¹ It was this emphasis in female fan accounts of Chan’s perceived approachability that was critical to his eventual reconfiguration along Japanese pop idol lines.

Which is to say, Japanese distributors discerned a potentially lucrative audience in Japanese girls and women, whose discretionary spending had spawned such popular culture industry behemoths as the boy-bands (or ‘Johnny’s’) of music promoter Johnny Kitagawa. Thus, from as early as 1983, Chan was associated with so-called ‘idol’ culture in publications that typically promoted Japanese pop singers such as *My Idol* magazine. In 1984, *My Idol* produced a special issue commemorating the Japanese release of Chan's

⁹ Kiyohara, “Jakkī Chen no sugao,” 66-7. All translations are mine.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹ Sasaya, “Omowazu,” 75.

Project A in conjunction with Tōhō-Tōwa, the film's distributor. In addition to film stills, the special issue featured a short manga depicting Chan's childhood and early career, a centerfold of Chan signed by the star "To Japanese Movie Fan," and an advertisement for the "Jackie Chan Cine Club." Similarly, the *Project A* film pamphlet, available at extra cost to moviegoers in theaters, included an interview with a self-described female fan (who attached a picture of herself taken with a smiling Chan), as well as a section entitled "All About Jackie Chan." This section featured not only commonly known information (Chan's birthplace, birthdate, and physical characteristics), but also such minutiae as his favorite foods, colors, and clothes, a description of his "ideal woman," and the age at which he would most like to marry.¹²

Also in 1984, Chan released an album in Japan entitled *Love Me*, which included songs in English, Japanese, and Cantonese such as the titular "Love Me," "Movie Star," and "Wait for Me." Cumulatively, such promotional activity signaled a concentrated effort to align the martial arts star with Japanese pop idols, the better to capitalize on an emerging Japanese female fan base. These efforts culminated in the publication of a volume entitled *Okurimono* (Gift), 'presented' to Chan's Japanese fans in 1985. Ostensibly authored by Chan himself, *Okurimono* invited fans to imagine an intimate relationship with the star, first through cover art featuring Chan wearing a white tuxedo and bearing flowers and champagne for his fan-reader, and later through a collection of photos featuring him in a hotel room, both dressed and – eventually – undressed.

Like much of Chan's Japanese promotion in the early 1980s, *Okurimono* walked a fine line between courting fans and seeking to contain their desire. Come-hither images of the

¹² In fact, Chan had already married, unbeknownst to his fans, two years earlier.

star were interspersed with features that worked to inscribe a properly distanced mode of fandom, even as they evoked a fantasy of marriage-centered intimacy with Chan. In a section entitled, “Love Ya!” in which Chan assumed the role of agony aunt, he anticipated and deflected fans’ desire for real intimacy with him by emphasizing ‘appropriate’ ways to handle disappointment in love. In one letter to Chan, “Mary” writes that she regrets having used a proxy to tell a boy about her feelings for him, to which Chan responds, “I was really moved by Mary’s letter. If Mary had been here by me, I probably would have hugged and blessed her. At the least, I would likely have treated her to apple pie.”¹³ Having thus assured his readership that he would have been *there* for her, both literally and figuratively, Chan goes on to observe that there are three things she should be proud of in her behavior: “One, she confessed her feelings to him even though she’s shy.... Two, she’s recovered from her heartbreak in a really healthy way. Three, she’s reconsidering her decision to have someone else speak for her.”¹⁴ The star’s approbation here is echoed in a subsequent message for 28 year-old “Cindy,” who cannot forget a man she dated for a year. Chan writes, “If you still think that this man is wonderful even now, isn’t it alright for you to embrace that feeling in your heart and love him until the feeling fades?... If you want to dispel the sadness – I know, watch one of my movies. My movies are there for people like you.”¹⁵

The emotional distance of the advice offered here was one means by which Chan (and his handlers) carefully differentiated between real-world romantic attachments and the imaginary fannish one cultivated throughout *Okurimono*. This differentiation played a

¹³ Ibid., 80.

¹⁴ Ibid., 80-82.

¹⁵ Ibid., 83-84.

critical role in the book's attempt to control the conversation about Chan's own love life, which, by 1985, had become the subject of tabloid fodder in Japan as well as Hong Kong. On the heels of his advice to lovelorn fans, 'Chan' turns the conversation to his own romantic troubles. He angrily denounces media intrusions into his personal life while taking care not to alienate his female fans, writing "there is a world of difference between [the press's questions] and the warm words from fans asking about the same thing."¹⁶ Then, Chan confides to his fans that he actually does have a girlfriend, but that they are not planning to marry. In fact, he had married a Taiwanese actress three years earlier, while his popularity was still on the rise in Japan. Chan had not announced his marriage in Hong Kong or elsewhere, and since his promotion to Japanese girls and women was predicated in part on his imagined eligibility, he remained tight-lipped about it.

Ultimately, the tension between Chan's (somewhat disingenuous) assertion of his right to a private life and his marketing as a marriageable Japanese-style pop idol formed what Martti Lahti and Melanie Nash term the "constituent instabilit[y]"¹⁷ of Chan's Japanese star persona. Chan blamed news about his relationship with Lin for the 1985 Tokyo suicide of a young female fan, as well as the attempted suicide of a 24 year-old Japanese woman outside of Chan's Hong Kong offices in 1986. These stories eventually grew into a pervasive discourse about his legions of emotionally unstable Japanese female fans, circulated by Chan himself in the American press during his last, successful push into the American market. Through their repetition in such wide-reaching publications as the *New*

¹⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁷ Lahti and Nash, "'Almost Ashamed to Say,'" 71.

York Times Magazine and the *Chicago Sun-Times*,¹⁸ these stories contributed to Chan's establishment as a pan-Asian superstar to mainstream Western moviegoers heretofore unfamiliar with his extensive oeuvre.

Ironically, however, perceptions *within Japan* of Chan's female fandom as immature, and himself as highly mediated by his Japanese promoters, combined with the rise of home video technology in Japan to constitute the structuring absence of Hong Kong film fandom among Japanese women in the 1990s. By the late 1980s, Chan's films were marketed alongside those of the '*kyonshī*' (Chinese vampire) boom as part of broad attempts to capitalize further on the tastes of female moviegoers. Ostensibly drawn from the 1985 *Mr. Vampire* series of films starring Lam Ching-ying, the *kyonshī* boom was more accurately attributable to the Taiwanese *Hello Dracula* series. These films featured children and, in particular, a toddler *kyonshī*, lending them a *kawaii* (cute) factor that led to their successful marketing to Japanese girls and women through an extensive range of paratextual material including stuffed *kyonshī*, keychains, and notebooks. The Taiwanese pedigree of the *Hello Dracula* series notwithstanding, they were considered part and parcel of 'Hong Kong cinema' in Japan and, in achieving near ubiquity at the same time that Jackie Chan was enjoying his greatest Japanese success, films of the two booms merged in a pervasive and enduring sense in Japan of Hong Kong cinema as "kitschy"¹⁹ and highly mediated.

Yet, by the end of the 1980s, this reflected neither much of what was coming out of the Hong Kong film industry, nor the evolving tastes of a growing fandom – both male and

¹⁸ Jaime Wolf, "Jackie Chan: American Action Hero?" 22; Jae-ha Kim, "Jackie Chan Wants to Conquer Your Country," 1.

¹⁹ Terumoto, "Aija no ren'ai eiga," 98.

female – of Hong Kong cinema and stars in Japan. In 1986, John Woo’s action hit *A Better Tomorrow* became the highest-grossing local film in Hong Kong history. Intending to capitalize on its Hong Kong success, Nihon Herald released the film in Japan during the prime ‘Golden Week’ window²⁰ to a box-office take of only US\$590,000, lagging far behind the 1987 box office returns of other foreign films.²¹ In its South Korean release, as Jinsoo An has observed, *A Better Tomorrow* did equally poorly in mainstream theaters which, he notes, were primarily a site of female film-going. The film’s subsequent popularity among South Korean men resulted from its re-distribution in ‘mini-theaters’ that catered primarily to ‘teenaged males.’²² In contrast, in Japan the film was revived not in urban mini-theaters (which were frequented by women in any case) but on home video. Ultimately, the wide reach of home video translated to the wider dissemination of Hong Kong films throughout the country and across genders.

Japan’s video rental market peaked at the same time as films such as *A Better Tomorrow* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) were finding their way onto video rental shelves.

During the 1986-1989 period, when video players achieved a 53% penetration of Japanese households,²³ over 300 Hong Kong films became available for rental on subtitled (or, in some cases, dubbed) VHS.²⁴ The majority of films released during this period were targeted at an audience of male martial arts and action film fans.

²⁰ ‘Golden Week’ refers to four nearly-consecutive holidays spanning the end of April/beginning of May.

²¹ Kitagami, “Jugekisen to kajo na bōryoku,” 109; Nikaidō, “Jūdan no shuraba,” 111; “1987 Yōga sakuhin haikyū shūnyū (1987 Foreign film box office receipts),” *Kinema Junpō* (February 15, 1988): 196.

²² An, “*The Killer*,” 104-5.

²³ Nakamura, *Nihon bideosofuto shi*, 200.

²⁴ Ui, *Honkon eiga bideo*. Nakamura (200) notes that, by 1990, 3,237 of 7,090 foreign films on video were *mikōkai* (direct-to-video), surpassing the total number of domestic Japanese titles available on video (2,180) at that time.

Nonetheless, the low cost of obtaining Hong Kong film distribution rights, relative to those of Japanese and Hollywood films,²⁵ meant that a wide range of Hong Kong film genres received distribution, often through small-scale companies.²⁶ And it was the geographies of video rental activity that were critical in attracting a specifically female audience to the 'new' Hong Kong cinema.

Although emerging rental chains often carried the widest range of videos, the majority of rental activity (53%) occurred in small shops located near train stations and residential neighborhoods: 'papamama' (mom and pop) home electronics shops, bookstores, and convenience stores, in particular.²⁷ Such sites stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the grocery stores, dry cleaners, and coffee shops that women frequented, effectively bringing Hong Kong cinema into the daily patterns of women's lives. Furthermore, while Japanese video rental shops of the 1980s and 1990s employed the same general organizational structure as their American counterparts, within specific genres (drama, horror, action, etc.) the films of popular performers and filmmakers were often grouped together where critical mass allowed. Between 1988 and 1997 Hong Kong films migrated through the organizational hierarchy of Japanese video stores, positioned first within the anonymous mass of genre offerings and gradually coalescing into a coherent 'Asia' category organized by stars. Thus, in the case of Chow Yun-fat, cult action films such as *A Better Tomorrow*, *City on Fire* (1987), and *The Killer* (1989) eventually came to stand alongside other films of Chow's oeuvre, including the drama *Love Unto Waste* (1986), the romance *Dream Lovers* (1986), and the *A Better Tomorrow* parody, *The Romancing Star* (1987).

²⁵ Tochigi, "Factors in the Asianization," 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nakamura, *Nihon bideosofuto shi*, 173.

Such breadth of work was an intrinsic part of the Hong Kong star system of the 1980s and 1990s, designed to capitalize on a relatively limited number of stars in such a way that they appealed to every imaginable demographic. In turn, actors' flexibility afforded star-centered Japanese female fans a means of sampling a wider variety of genres than in markets where Hong Kong cinema was defined almost exclusively by its martial arts and action genres. Moreover, it enabled female fans a means of consuming Hong Kong cinema that circumvented prescriptive Japanese marketing of what they were 'supposed' to like, in favor of where their evolving, subjective tastes took them. To the extent that Jackie Chan was something of an anomaly within the Hong Kong film industry, concentrating his talents on martial arts/action blockbusters, fans' changing tastes – facilitated by this technological shift in distribution practices – ultimately translated to his effective erasure from a robust, if niche, Japanese female fandom of Hong Kong stars in the 1990s.

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