

BRUCE LEE: TEN YEARS AFTER

The Legend Fights On

By Sandra Segal

America had flirted with the martial arts prior to 1973; it didn't fall in love with them until it fell in love with Bruce Lee.

Ten years after Lee's death, Americans have become infinitely more sophisticated about the martial arts, understanding its traditions, history, and wide range of styles in much greater depth. America has even made its own contribution to the ancient Eastern art in the characteristically anti-traditional refinements of tournament sparring. Yet after a decade, the love affair with Bruce Lee continues: few who first fell under his spell ever broke away, and new converts—mostly from the ranks of first-time viewers of *Enter the Dragon*—are still being made today.

Bruce Lee changed forever the image of the martial arts—and of the Chinese—in the minds of Americans. But he went far beyond this limited goal: he became a potent image of the hero; even, in the minds of some, a demi-god with near supernatural powers; an image of self-perfection through self-discipline; a fearless rebel against a corrupt social order.

How did a Chinese star of four low-budget kung-fu movies, a man whose personal life was not above criticism (even close friends commented on his wild mood swings and flashes of temper, as well as the arrogance which overcame him after his first film success) become the object of intense adoration and even worship from American fans?

Bruce filled a void in America's spiritual life: its desperate need for heroes. In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph



No one radiated pure power more successfully on screen than Bruce Lee. Here he dominates the camera—and Master Han (Shih Kien)—in this climactic fight from *Enter the Dragon*.

Campbell describes the hero myth which emerges in every culture, and turns up even in dreams. "The hero is the man of self-achieved submission," says Campbell, and charts the steppingstones to heroic achievement as: "a separation from the world; a penetration to some source of power; and a life-enhancing return." From sophisticated Greek myths to simple yet richly suggestive stories of African tribes, the potential hero must begin in a society which is corrupt or lacking some vital essence; he then sets off

on his journey, on which he encounters hardships and trials of initiation. Often he must defeat some monster of force which represents the restricting bonds of his own culture before he finally breaks through to a new liberating vision and returns to his society. Here he teaches his fellows how similarly to free themselves from the mind-forged manacles of their decaying world.

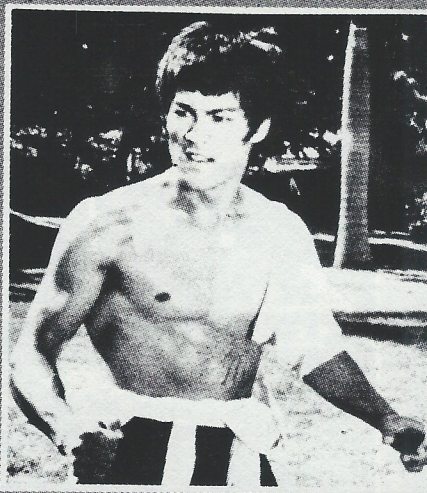
Lee's life in many ways resembled the elements of the hero-tale. Although born in San Francisco on November 27, 1940



The Big Boss (Fists of Fury), which broke all boxoffice records in Hong Kong, catapulted Bruce Lee to fame in the Far East, and made Western film executives sit up and take notice. Left, Lee smashes a small army of racketeers with such force that one of the victims takes part of the wall with him. Below, another bloody confrontation with the Boss' henchmen. Right, Lee takes on the Big Boss himself (Han Ying-chieh) in a beautifully choreographed death match. Below, trouble is brewing as pretty Nora Miao pours Bruce a glass of lemonade.

where his father was performing in a Chinese opera, Bruce grew up in Hong Kong. In this socially-stratified, high-pressure environment, Lee looked for outlets for his high energy and ambition. Some of his outlets were socially acceptable—training in wing chun under the reknown master Yip Man, acting in Hong Kong “family” films, becoming a championship cha cha dancer. Other outlets were more dangerous: he became increasingly active as a streetfighter and gangleader, and was often in trouble with the law. Bruce Lee’s obsession with self-perfection and the competitive drive to excel became clearly evident during his adolescence. His sister Agnes was quoted as saying, “As a teenager, he began to get into more and more fights for no reason at all. And if he didn’t win, he was furious! He always considered himself a winner, and losing even occasionally was unbearable to him.”

Bruce moved to San Francisco to escape from his violent life in Hong Kong, and to discover a positive channel for his ambitions. Yet he found America of 1958 to be a racist society, one which either actively discriminated against Chinese, or blandly ignored them. As he became more aware of this prejudice, Lee decided not to pursue the film career he had successfully started in Hong Kong and to teach martial arts instead. Looking back at this period of his life, Lee said, “How many times in (Hollywood) films is a Chinese required? And when one is required, he is always branded as the typical tung, dung, tung, tung, tung with the little pigtail in back . . . So I said the hell with it.”



Then Bruce had an unexpected breakthrough: a demo at Ed Parker’s 1964 Internationals led to the role of Kato in the *Green Hornet* television series. Lee’s popularity in this role helped swell his martial arts schools; but after the series ended, he found that it led to nothing in the film world. As Stirling Silliphant, a noted Hollywood scriptwriter and a student of Bruce’s explained in a recent interview, “Bruce was Chinese, and it was and still is the executive belief that a Chinese star means zilch at the American boxoffice . . . Just don’t ever forget that this is a white film industry, and this is a huge white country, 280 million people who think Caucasian . . . What happened to Bruce happened in spite of Hollywood, not because of it.”

This is where the hero takes over. While Bruce’s friends were telling him to content himself with the small guest appearances he had on *Longstreet*, *Blondie*, *Here Come the Brides*, and in the feature film *Marlowe*, Bruce took matters into his own hands. Leaving his new home, he returned to Hong Kong, and negotiated a film deal with Raymond Chow, who had recently formed the Golden Harvest Film Co.

The Big Boss (Fists of Fury) was a strange film with which to introduce a superstar. Bruce didn’t have a single fight in the first half: the action was carried by James Tien, a popular young Hong Kong martial arts actor. But when Bruce finally exploded—significantly to counter the corrupt status quo—it was clear even to the highly-critical Hong Kong audiences that something revolutionary had happened. Bruce broke through to a new possibility for screen fighting; and the film broke all boxoffice records in Hong Kong. Later, when *The Big Boss* was distributed with Bruce’s second film, *Fist of Fury (The Chinese Connection)*, in the U.S., they grossed \$6 million between them during their first run, an unprecedented amount for a Chinese kung-fu flick.

Bruce’s success proved to the white film executive that he was a cinematic force to be taken seriously. And after he directed *Way of the Dragon (Return of the Dragon)* and started filming *The Game of Death*, he finally began getting the offers from American film companies which he had so coveted in his Hollywood days. After an agreement for a coproduction between Golden Harvest and Warner Bros. was finally reached,



Bruce Lee began work on the film which was to make him a superstar in his native country: *Enter the Dragon*.

Although *Enter the Dragon* was in many ways a compromise between Chinese and American sensibilities, the hometown audiences ignored the discrepancies in characterization and plot. What they saw was Bruce Lee's personal power, a power visible in every sharply-defined muscular line; a body tense with an energy just barely under iron control. Bruce's explosive strikes and kicks, intense fighting expressions, and unbelievable speed all testified to near superhuman ability. And this power was always used to crush the most visible emblems of corruption. In *The Big Boss*, it's the rich landed owner of the ice factory; in *Fists of Fury*, the Anglo-Japanese racism against the Chinese in turn-of-the-century Shanghai; in *Enter the Dragon*, master Han's perversion of martial virtue.

Enter the Dragon remains today one of the top-grossing films of all times. More important, this was a breakthrough film for Hollywood: for the first time, a Chinese man had the lead role, and the film was a smash hit. Using the same angry power with which he kicked down the infamous "No Dogs or Chinese" sign in *Fists of Fury*, Bruce forced film executives to reevaluate their prejudices.

On July 19, 1973, one month before *Enter the Dragon* was released, Bruce Lee left us: the hero had taken his last step.

Ten years later, it's become clear that Bruce Lee's impact was not felt in the film world, where his battles were actually



fought. We can still look in vain for a Chinese leading man in an American movie. Instead, his power as an actor—and a man—were most felt in the world of martial art. Bruce Lee was—and is—an inspiration to his fans, and this inspiration led many of them to embrace the martial arts. And in becoming dedicated practitioners and instructors, they found a pathway to those heroic elements which they had admired in Bruce Lee: the lure of self-perfection through rigorous self-discipline; personal power of both body and mind; and a rich and evolved Asian tradition with which to confront an abandon materialistic American values.

Ironically, Bruce Lee himself was far from a traditionalist, calling rigidly structured martial arts systems "exercise in futility" and "organized despair." Though based on wing chun, his feet have do was in some ways much closer to the unrefined American attitude of "use what works."

This point, of course, is unimportant. It is only important that Bruce Lee has the power to beckon Americans toward the pursuit of martial artistry. For in watching his films, after we share the joy of heroically destroying the evil which entraps us, we can hear a whisper in our own ears: This is a possibility, even now, even for you.