



Martial Arts Cinema as Post-Capitalist Cinema: Akira Kurosawa, Johnnie To, and Critical Intertextuality

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Abstract

Slavoj Žižek argues that 'Western Buddhisms', or East-meets-West cultural formations such as martial arts, are ideological in that they do nothing to fundamentally disrupt capitalist ideology. With an understanding that, yes, martial arts can anesthetize us to capitalism as Žižek claims, it does not follow that this is their inherent function. This paper explores the critical intertextual link between Akira Kurosawa's martial arts saga *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943) and its spiritual successor, Johnnie To's *Throw down* (2004), and suggests to the contrary that martial arts as humanism can allow individuals to internalize resistance. More specifically, it explains how To applies Kurosawa's poetics of humanist cinema to contemporary Hong Kong in order to foreground dehumanization in capitalism and propose a meaningful alternative to our current global capitalist routine.

Contributor Note

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Once intertextuality branched out to cinema studies from its literary origins, it primarily sought to address two distinct strands of postmodern inquiry. On the one hand, it furthered genre studies by drawing attention to the links between media texts, journalistic and institutional discourse, and cultural formations to elucidate the manner in which a particular genre evolves over time and explain the complex relationship between audience expectations and genre formations (Gray 2006: 4; Stam 2000: 154). This is the heart of intertextuality's post-structuralist origins, in which the death of the author(ity) allows the reader to individually interpret any one text (Barthes 1977: 148). On the other hand, researchers also locate intertextuality as a symptom of post-modernity and advanced consumerism, where texts talk to one another in an endless stream of back-and-forth references and replace a real and objective history with a history of aesthetic styles (Collins 2000: 761-763; Jameson 1998: 3-7). Limiting intertextuality to this postmodern framework, however, overlooks the ways in which texts can function as critical cultural and intercultural dialogue. I therefore propose to move beyond intertextuality as a postmodern buzz word and instead articulate a critical intertextuality that allows us to talk about cinema – particularly martial arts cinema – in a global capitalist framework with regard to its potential to disrupt the taken-for-granted truth of neoliberalism as a benignly beneficial return to individual freedoms.

Neoliberalism is the economic logic of global capital, and as Harvey (2005) reminds us, its observable outcomes over the past 40 years do not mirror its promises of liberated economies but are instead realized in a growing global

wealth gap (16) and the preservation or creation of capitalist class power (42). Indeed, as the state retreats from social welfare under the pretense of empowering the people, its collusion with transnational corporations and the military industrial complex ensure that free markets around the world remain free – but only for the benefit of the capitalist class. This warrants problematizing neoliberalism for its impact on real people's lives, to say nothing of its dehumanizing effect wherein people are solely defined by their ability (or lack thereof) to consume.

Cinema is primed to address these issues, for Benjamin's (2009: 30-31) claim still holds that cinema can render depictions of social life and our surrounding space simultaneously recognizable and revolutionary, allowing us to negotiate chaotic social and urban development. Similarly, Iwabuchi passionately argues that media texts 'can play a significant public role – affectively, communicatively and participatorily – in the promotion of cross-border dialogue' about global phenomena such as neoliberalism (Iwabuchi 2010: 416).

Iwabuchi's (2010: 415-416) claim of media-as-dialogue is of particular importance for this study, which explores Hong Kong director Johnnie To's 2004 martial arts film *Throw Down* as both a spiritual successor to Akira Kurosawa's debut film *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943), called *Judo saga* in the West, as well as a prime example of the intersection of martial arts, humanism, and neoliberalism. Teo (2007: 169), who by far has done the most academically to solidify To's position as an important contemporary filmmaker, believes it a mistake to think of *Throw Down* as a simple remake of *Sanshiro Sugata*, explaining instead how it pays tribute to Kurosawa's humanist

philosophy as a 'poetics of cinema'. Whereas Kurosawa's film established the humanist qualities of judo in a period Japan setting, *To* transplants the narrative and central themes to contemporary Hong Kong, long championed by the Heritage Foundation as one of the world's freest economies (Heritage Foundation 2013), which allows for an inquiry into that city's intensification of neoliberalization.

However, in arguing that martial arts cinema critiques neoliberalism, this study is potentially at odds with Žižek's (2001) Marxist (re-)interpretation of the "post-ideological" era', in which Leftist notions of multiculturalism and tolerance actually reinforce the capitalist ideology rather than seriously address the inequality that stems from it. Žižek (2004) specifically targets New Age wisdoms including yoga and the internationalization of martial arts - practices which he argues are not inherently anti-capitalist and thus unable to mount any sort of meaningful resistance. His position is that these New Age wisdoms are ideological in that they allow us to 'fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity' (Žižek 2001: 13-15). Or, as Bowman interprets Žižek, 'the job of such practices and belief systems is to keep us shopping and "tolerating" and "respecting difference" - as long as that difference is merely the difference of different types of shopping, and not the rejection of consumerism' (Bowman 2010: 60). Consumption is our only true freedom under neoliberalism, and New Age wisdoms help us feel less guilty about our complicity in the market system.

Žižek's (2012) main point of contention with the Left as an impotent progressive force is its lack of ambition for radical

emancipation, meaning that it is firmly entrenched in the ideology of the free market even as it calls for equality. Indeed, the equality that the Left calls for is equal access to the free market under the guise of healthy competition, not emancipation from commodification and consumption. As Bowman points out, this has led Žižek to take an unwavering position that 'something so *apparently* innocuous, gentle, naturalistic, sweet and innocent as Taoism [is] *ideological* [italics in original]' (Bowman 2007: 69).

In a Žižekian framework, then, a study on Kurosawa's humanist judo philosophy in *Throw Down* as a potential refutation of Hong Kong neoliberalization would seem irrelevant, for its inclusion in the film could be dismissed as a fetishistic supplement, an ideological means for the characters to survive Hong Kong's postmodern urban chaos without actually engaging the city's myriad political and economic problems, or perhaps as a model for audiences who are themselves facing difficult circumstances (see Chan 2006 for an example of martial arts cinema modeling success in 1960s-1970s Hong Kong). Jameson likewise argues that any critique of neoliberalism must grapple with and explicitly theorize an alternative, such as socialism, lest it falters as a 'merely moral discussion' (1991: 207). Thus, Jameson calls for a complete dismantling of the taken-for-granted truth of neoliberalism, because, as he states most adamantly, "the market is in human nature" is the proposition that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged' (1991: 263), implying that neoliberal championing of the free market is detrimental to the human condition.

Throw Down may not be the anti-capitalist anthem to make Žižek rejoice

in celebration, but it does not follow that it appeases the liberal ideology, and to argue in either direction is to overlook the film's significance. A more interesting framework is instead put forth by Liu (2011: 6), who makes the point that the strength of martial arts' narratives lies in their creation of stateless subjects, individuals whose responsibility is to human community rather than the laws of the state. In this framework, *Throw Down's* critique of global capitalism and the presumed truth of the market is less about radical emancipation and more about the way it proposes a way of life in which humanism is in human nature and is best attained through judo.

Updating Kurosawa for a neoliberal era

With *Sanshiro Sugata*, Kurosawa established the humanist themes to which he would return throughout his career: respect for nature, self-improvement, and reverence for life. The titular character in the film is Sanshiro Sugata (Susumu Fujita), a talented yet impetuous young man who travels in search of a sensei to teach him martial arts. After witnessing judo master Yano (Denjiro Okochi) dispatch a group of thugs, Sanshiro begs him to take him on as a student. Yano accepts and trains Sanshiro, and although Sanshiro is a strong and skilled fighter, he is corrupted by his immaturity. When Yano threatens to turn Sanshiro away, arguing that teaching him judo is tantamount to giving a knife to a lunatic, Sanshiro jumps into a freezing pond to demonstrate his loyalty. After sitting in the icy pond for a day and throughout the night, Sanshiro marvels at the natural beauty of a lotus blossom with the coming of dawn (see below). Upon emerging from the pond newly born, he

pledges complete loyalty to Yano and asks for his forgiveness. Sanshiro is then put through intensive training before the film's climactic confrontation, set in a windswept field between Sanshiro and the leader of the thugs, Kodama (Yoshio Kosugi), who practices jujitsu.



Fig. 1: from *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943)

Sanshiro's journey throughout the film does not end with him becoming a judo master, but instead with his self-discovery through judo. Galbraith (2001: 41) describes this common theme of Kurosawa's as 'parallel education', in which the hero is educated both physically/intellectually and metaphysically, an approach which thematically separates *Sanshiro Sugata* from the various martial arts films to follow in which the heroes are made heroic through competition and exhibition (*The Karate kid*, 1984), Robin Hood-like do-goodings (the *Zatoichi* series, 1962-1989), and revenge (*Snake in the Eagle's Shadow*, 1978, and *Drunken Master*, 1978). For Kurosawa in *Sanshiro Sugata*, martial arts are not a skill to be mastered for their own sake, tools with which to exercise power over others in a public exhibition, or the instruments of revenge. They are a means to know the self through physical and spiritual education. Thus, despite defeating Kodama, Sanshiro's victory is of secondary importance to his complete metaphysical transformation into a humble individual, one who understands

the beauty of life and sees his own worth.

The humanism on display in *Sanshiro Sugata* is particularly prescient as it marks a distinct contrast with Japan's wartime rhetoric and actions. Instead of martial arts as explicit sources of national pride, Kurosawa reveals their essence as the search for inner peace on a very basic level. Galbraith (2001: 39-40) explains that Kurosawa was adamant that *Sanshiro Sugata*, adapted from the novel of the same name by Tsuneo Tomita, would be his debut as a director. He then set out planning each shot before production on the film began. During the intensification of globalization since his debut, martial-arts-as-national-pride has become a more familiar narrative framework for martial arts films. Hong Kong and Chinese co-productions such as Ronny Yu's *Fearless* (2006) (see below) and Wilson Yip's *Ip Man* films (2008, 2010) pit Chinese kung fu against Japanese karate and kendo as well as Western-style wrestling, boxing, and fencing. Thai new action films including Prachya Pinkaew's *Ong-bak: Muay thai warrior* (2003) and *Tom-yum-goong* (2005) similarly pit Tony Jaa's acrobatic muay thai against Korean taekwondo, Western-style wrestling and street-fighting, and even Brazilian capoeira.

One particular sequence in *Ong-Bak* finds Jaa's rural hero caught in an illegal boxing match in a Bangkok bar. After a particularly ugly Westerner shouts to everyone around him, 'Fuck muay thai!', Jaa levels him with a single powerful kick to the head. As Liu (2011: 5) notes, research that conflates martial arts narratives with national allegories tends to dominate academic discussion, and these and other films before and since certainly invite such readings, but such research is too provincial to contribute

to discussions on the larger impact of martial arts cinema. With *Sanshiro Sugata*, Kurosawa is limited to a Japanese setting, characters, and martial arts, so the confrontations between two fighters are not conflated with national conflicts just as the fighters themselves are not the personifications of national identities. He is therefore free to adopt a minimalist approach in distilling martial arts down to the essential human desire for inner peace, an approach that Johnnie To then adopted for *Throw Down*.



Fig. 2: from *Fearless* (2006)

Throw Down is a spiritual successor to *Sanshiro Sugata* as made clear by the various intertextual references, from the identical narrative arc to the mise-en-scène of the final fight to the tribute to Akira Kurosawa as the 'greatest filmmaker' before the end credits. It also references a later television adaptation of *Sanshiro Sugata* in its repeated use of that show's theme song, also titled 'Sanshiro Sugata', which accompanies most of the film's judo matches. However, *Throw Down* does not follow a character from his reckless beginnings to the moment of inner peace, but instead begins after his fall and chronicles his subsequent rebirth. The central character is former judo champion Szeto Bo (Louis Koo), now the manager of the After Hours night club in Hong Kong. Unlike Sanshiro, Szeto's failing trait is not one of hubris, but excess, specifically excessive drinking and gambling. So great are his excesses that he spends the first half of the film in

a constant state of drunkenness, losing enormous bundles of cash on reckless bets in gambling dens, and trying to rob small-time hustler Brother Savage (Cheung Siu-Fai) to feed his gambling addiction.

Szeto is gradually motivated back into judo by diverse supporting characters. Brother Savage, an admirer of Szeto's and fellow judo practitioner, simply gives him the very money he is trying to steal, his teacher Master Cheng (Lo Hoi-Pang) attempts to recruit him to teach at his judo school, and the young judo hotshot Tony (Aaron Kwok), a fellow admirer of Szeto's, relentlessly begs him for a fight. Even Mona (Cherrie Ying), a celebrity wannabe who auditions at After Hours as a singer, encourages Szeto to transform his life for the better by doggedly pursuing her own dreams of becoming a star. Through his judo-led sobriety and recovery, we begin to piece together his backstory. Two years prior, Szeto failed to show up for his anticipated match with Kong (Tony Leung Ka-Fai), a formidable teacher at a competing judo school. Given Szeto's abysmal state during the first half of the film, we assume his addictions kept him from fighting. As it turns out, however, Szeto's downfall was not prompted by his excessive vices, but rather his vices were prompted by an acute case of glaucoma; the heavy drinking and gambling were merely meant to mask his true condition. Teo (2007: 172) refers to this tactic of To's as the film's bluff, which intentionally keeps the audience blind to the true nature of Szeto's decline until Szeto himself is ready to accept it. By the film's final fight between Szeto and Kong, Szeto is completely blind, yet he has gained the inner peace necessary to challenge Kong to a final match through his re-dedication to judo.

Throw Down's particular significance with regards to neoliberalism rests in the manner in which it updates Kurosawa's narrative to the hyper-capitalist global city of Hong Kong while retaining its most humanist qualities as a means to question the intense consumerism on display in the city. Commodification and consumption are the central tenets of neoliberalism, and they are positively spun as integral to an individual's freedom of expression (Harvey 2005: 41-42). Liu (2011: 4) notes how some researchers even read martial arts narratives as indicative of a culture's praiseworthy determination to rebound from colonial subjugation in their pursuit of capitalist political-economic restructuring. In contrast to this prevailing neoliberal rhetoric, Michaels (1987: 42) identifies commodity lust as a historically coercive condition of capitalism built on the ideals of dissatisfaction and perpetual desire, while Liu (2011: 5-6) argues that the neoliberal state constrains individuals within 'governmentality'.

To's appropriation of Kurosawa's humanist narrative allows him to critique neoliberal Hong Kong and its consumer-oriented inhabitants by proposing an inherent contradiction between judo as a humanist pursuit for inner peace and intense consumerism as an individual capitalist pursuit for ephemeral pleasure. This contradiction is at the core of the film, and it is first constructed in Szeto's general transformation from an alcoholic gambler to a man of peace and restraint. Just as Sanshiro's victory over Kodama leads to his self-actualization, Szeto's victory over Kong and simultaneous mastery of judo frees him from being tied to a lifestyle of excessive consumption. Neither film champions the hero for triumphing over another human being in a competitive sense, but

rather for spiritually transforming himself through his dedication to and mastery of judo. Transformation in the former sees Sanshiro's pride give way to humility, while in the latter, Szeto's urban depression has transformed into a feeling of peace.

Szeto's transformation is further significant because it is treated in the film as death and rebirth. In his excessive consumption of money, Szeto embodies the dark side of consumer society as unfulfilling and enslaving. His physical death seems almost inevitable given the nature of his vices, and indeed Michaels (1987: 55) hypothesizes that death is the true Other to commodity lust, for whereas capitalism cannot actually satiate desire, death is a '[fact] of physical life' that marks the end of desire. *Throw Down* takes a different path and proposes spiritual rebirth through judo following one's metaphorical death. As a drunk, a gambling addict, and a hopeless nightclub manager, Szeto stumbles through an unsustainable life. Master Cheng's death during a judo competition later in the film throws him further into a state of decline, culminating with his eventual and complete blindness – a metaphorical death.

Whereas Sanshiro matures into a good man, Szeto is completely reborn to the point where his continued spiritual education is all that matters amidst the raging urban chaos that surrounds him. He is not independent of capitalism, but neither is his entire being beholden to it. Rather, to use Liu's (2011: 6) language, Szeto becomes a stateless subject, concerned more with humanity and less with a society organized around private property. This goes beyond judo solely as a means to cope with one's surroundings in the Žižekian sense and

instead suggests that judo can potentially help one internalize an alternative lifestyle, a foreign territory within oneself that does not have to support the capitalist ideology. Teo (2007: 168) thus argues that *Throw Down* best exemplifies To's life philosophy of *jiji rensheng*, or 'life as a positive force'. To himself even admitted the film offers a simple narrative 'about taking a positive view of life' and that he made it to respond to the pervasive feeling of alienation among Hong Kong youth (Teo 2007: 240-241). Thus, if neoliberalism is meaningless on a global economic scale, then judo has the potential to be meaningful on a humanistic level.

Revealing neoliberal inhumanity through judo

Neoliberalism in Hong Kong is disguised as economic freedom yet manifest in intense social inequality (Lui & Boehler 2012), which was exacerbated by events such as the East Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and the Global Economic Recession of 2008. Against this backdrop of capitalist-led institutional failures, the depiction of judo acts as a way for the film to foreground capitalist inhumanity while offering individuals a way to internalize dissent. Judo matches in the film are often framed by the musical accompaniment of 'Sanshiro Sugata' as sung a capella in Japanese by a supporting character named Jing (Calvin Choi), Master Cheng's mentally disabled son who is obsessed with the original film. The use of the song in *Throw Down* underlines its depiction of judo as built on three principles first established by Kurosawa in his debut film: persistence, patience, and strength. Through this comprehensive portrait of judo as a humanist endeavor juxtaposed against intense neoliberalization, the latter is

problematized as antithetical to the basic human needs of spiritual redemption and inner peace, which further strengthens the power of Szeto's transformation.

The first verse of the song translates to: 'You can do it / If you are a man, try again when you fail / If you regret what you've done, you can cry / You can cry, but look forward to the future, Sanshiro / This is called competing with yourself. This quality of persistence is embodied in Szeto's journey from a marginalized drunk to a reborn man. Throughout much of the film, he is in a complete state of decline and uses his addictions to mask his impending blindness. After a scuffle with Tony at After Hours, wherein Tony outed the truth of Szeto's condition, Szeto stumbles out of the bar soundly defeated, but the sensation of the fight is not lost on him. Although appearing to stroll aimlessly through the empty streets at night, practicing his footwork and throwing motions as he goes, he ends up at his deceased master's judo school as though guided by the hand of fate. As he caresses the mat and relives his training, a worried Jing wanders in looking for his father. Szeto offers him a word of comfort and then warmly embraces him, a symbolic gesture meaning that he will now care for his master's son. Returning to After Hours, Szeto then challenges Tony to a good-natured match right then and there. In the following montage, Szeto fights Tony in After Hours, Brother Savage in an alley, and his boss on a rooftop (see below), thereby disrupting the consumerist uses of public space as structured by capitalist demands and transforming the city into a personalized judo training ground.

Liu (2011: 6) writes that Chinese fantasy martial arts novels are set in the

mythical *jianghu* (literally 'rivers and lakes'), 'a public sphere unconnected to the sovereign power of the state'. This allows them to focus on the human subject in relation to other humans, not as a product of the state. *Throw Down* may take place in what is identifiably Hong Kong, but it is more fantasy than reality; everyone appears to know judo, and they challenge each other to friendly matches in the unlikeliest of places in their quest for perfection even as the state dictates how that public space should actually be used. The city itself is thus de-emphasized as the spiritual relationship between the men becomes a motivating factor for Szeto's transformation.



Fig. 3: From *Throw Down* (2004)

Szeto's persistence in challenging each man with complete humility is matched only by their elation that he has finally awoken from his two-year stupor. Brother Savage's response once Szeto approaches him is, 'You son of a bitch, now you recognize me'. Once Szeto defeats Kong in their long overdue match, his persistence has effectively erased his two-year decline into alcoholism and gambling, for he is now dedicated completely to his spiritual growth and his connection to other men through judo. Just as Kurosawa depicted judo as a means to know the self, Szeto's persistent journey toward self-reflection and inner peace in Hong Kong could only be accomplished through judo, for capitalism's promise of self-realization is filtered through the lens of consumption as a means of individual expression. This

consumerist ideology, however, only trapped Szeto in a state of drunkenness and decline.

The second verse of the song translates to: 'Is it wrong to be touched by flowers / You are going through a difficult time, but take care / You are a man, Sanshiro / This is called discipline'. The use of 'flower' is a clear reference to Sanshiro's realization upon seeing the lotus blossom while in the frozen pond, but patience and discipline are anathema to neoliberalism, which instead emphasizes the here and now implicit in the adage 'time is money'. Harvey (1989: 147) refers to this condition as time-space compression, or the simultaneous speeding-up of life to where the present is all that matters (especially to one's bottom line) and the shattering of spatial barriers via global networks. Žižek (2001: 116) also notes how neoliberalism compels one to accept change, to not remain stationary for fear of being branded archaic and outdated, no matter if that change is the loss of job or health insurance.

Patience and discipline are best observed in *Throw Down* in those depictions of judo that de-emphasize the capitalist preoccupation with time and space. In the first scene, Master Cheng is practicing his judo form in a field of tall grass at night while Jing sings 'Sanshiro Sugata'. Looming high-rises in the background frame Master Cheng as an archaic outsider in his judogi, but his separation from that unseen yet assumed urban chaos as well as the minimalist mise-en-scène compel us to dwell on the elegance of his form. As he performs each move with slow deliberation, he projects patience and dedication. The climactic duel between Szeto and Kong, occurring in the same field outside the city, likewise

foregrounds the patience and discipline absent from the urban jungle. Both fighters slowly enter the field, Kong having blindfolded himself out of respect for Szeto (and even closing his eyes when he loses his blindfold during the match), slow-motion cinematography emphasizes individual moves and strategic countermoves, and both men are occasionally out of focus in the background or not even in the frame while Jing, in focus in the foreground, sings away. Both scenes could only have occurred outside the city, for the nostalgic qualities attached to the field and the hand-to-hand combat, while not arguing for a return to the past, imagine an unrealized peace that questions the temporal and spatial demands of capitalism dangerously at work in the city.

The final verse of the song is translated as: 'You will never give up / When you decide to do something, go for it / Go for it until you see the light / This is called life'. The qualities of strength and dedication in the film are exemplified in those instances where judo allows characters to overcome physical disabilities. When we first meet Tony, he arrives at After Hours on his scooter and approaches the much larger bouncer who is seated outside eating a hamburger. While not completely intimidating, the bouncer is at the very least a large man. Tony asks him how much he weighs, laughing when the bouncer replies '300 pounds' and telling him that he can best him in a judo match. After placing a HKD \$100 note on the table, the bouncer matches it, and as the fight begins, Tony expertly rushes the much slower bouncer, rolls him over his right shoulder, and tosses him to the ground. Later, an elaborate, multi-layered conversation sequence at After Hours involving Szeto, his boss, and Master

Cheng, Tony and Brother Savage, and Mona and her sleazy agent breaks out into a judo battle royale that spills out into the parking lot while Jing, seeing the club's now empty stage, grabs the microphone and begins singing 'Sanshiro Sugata'. Kong, who was sitting silently in the club, joins in the brawl and uses a single move to injure all but Tony and Master Cheng by dislocating their arms. Even after witnessing Kong's strength, Tony challenges him to a match only to have the veteran dislocate his arm as well. Yet, Tony's injury illustrates the other of two examples in which one's physical disability is overcome in the pursuit of spiritual growth, the first being Szeto's blindness. With his arm in a sling, Tony practices a new one-armed technique, and when he returns to After Hours to again challenge the bouncer, he again throws him to the ground with ease (see below). His satisfaction is not for the money he has just earned, but for surmounting a physical disadvantage.

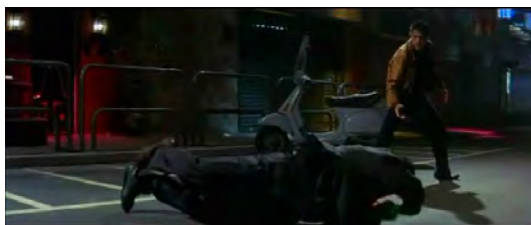


Fig. 4: from Throw Down (2004)

This three-tiered construction of judo as built on Kurosawa's humanist principles offers a way to construct or find meaning and worth in the individual by first juxtaposing itself with Hong Kong's intense consumerism, which values an individual only in proportion to their consumption. The characters all live in the historically capitalist consumer paradise of Hong Kong, and this consumerism is evinced in the film by the visibility of advertisements, banks, and physical money throughout the city. Yet, characters are either trapped in a

daily, monotonous routine (Szeto, Brother Savage) or, if they do project more confidence (Tony, Kong), they have clearly reached that point through their adherence to judo, not through moneyed endeavors. In the first proper judo match of the film, Tony duels with Szeto's saxophonist in an alley outside of After Hours directly underneath a large, lighted advertisement featuring a glamorous young woman. In wide shots, the advertisement is the dominant visual element in the shot by virtue of the colors and lighting, yet we are more invested in the physicality of the figures beneath it. The advertisement merely highlights a product while judo as the men practice it foregrounds the innate human qualities of discipline and determination. Likewise, the film is bookended by scenes of Master Cheng and Szeto distributing flyers to passersby outside a Bank of China branch to persuade them to learn judo. The passersby are either oblivious to their existence or simply throw the flyer away, but the stark contrast between those proselytizing for humanism through judo and the bank, with its practices of financial speculation and predatory lending, casts the latter as anti-human by default.

Another important visual juxtaposition in the film is the rejection of physical money in favor of judo, which is used in two key scenes: first to establish Tony's sincerity and second as a sign of Szeto's awakening. Upon meeting Szeto, Tony requests a duel, which Szeto promises after he and Mona help him rob Brother Savage. Afterward, Szeto repays them with a cut of the earnings, which the materialistic Mona immediately pockets. In contrast, Tony simply says to him, 'You promised to fight me', before throwing him to the ground, forsaking the money as it gets blown around in the wind.

Later, with Mona in tow, Szeto loses a large amount of money on a risky bet in a gambling den. As he starts for the exit without a single word, Mona hungrily stares at the pile of cash he just lost, grabs it, and quickly breaks for the door. While she is running, money flies from her arms and litters the street (see below). Szeto, who is running behind her, watches the money fly about and begins to smile for the first time in the film. This is his lotus blossom epiphany – the realization that money and the excessive consumption it enables are unable to bring about inner peace. Thus, consumerism is rendered both ephemeral and problematic when juxtaposed with judo's humanist approach to long-term spiritual growth.

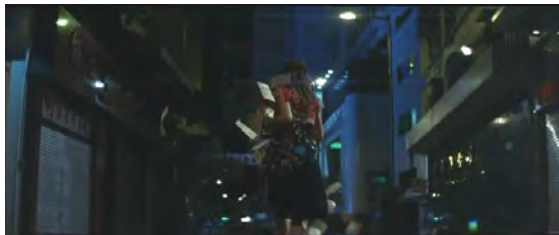


Fig. 5: from *Throw Down* (2004)

Secondly, the qualities attached to judo in the film are in dialectical opposition to the simultaneous depiction of urban routinization. As passersby ignore Master Cheng and Szeto while they pass out flyers in the opening and closing scenes, respectively, they appear to be navigating the city without thinking as opposed to with purpose, as though afraid to deviate from their expected route. Szeto's job as nightclub manager is also clearly unrewarding, and, as his boss reminds him, his primary responsibility is to the club's investors. Even gangsters are not immune to this urban malaise. Brother Savage spends his time challenging arcade patrons to video game matches. When two young men arrive at the arcade late with money owed, he pulls out an exacto blade and casually slices

one across the chest before returning to his game. Even doling out punishment has become a boring routine. Unlike the flamboyant and hardened gangsters in the films of John Woo or Ringo Lam, he instead echoes Sam Lee's police officer in *Beast Cops* (1998), who says in a direct address to the camera that he does not even know why he would rather play games than work. The cinematic depiction of Hong Kong urban life therefore seems to preclude intentional and meaningful action. As for the city of Hong Kong itself, Ng (2009: 77) argues that city narratives and posted regulations inculcate a particular capitalist logic in citizens, one that encourages them to do no harm to the city or its image and instead enjoy any number of leisure and consumer activities. The counterargument in *Throw Down* is that judo offers an alternative to an obsession with the consumerist present. Daily life is no longer spent with the end goal of increasing capital or acquiring the newest products, but instead with looking inward to improve the self, which then allows for a daily life influenced by coincidence, variability, intention, and meaning.

Judo in *Throw Down* is more than simply bodily movement; it is a state of mind that offers a direct alternative to the routinization of capitalism. Thus, events that may appear offbeat in a film about martial arts reveal themselves to be quite revelatory in their simplicity. Later in the film, Szeto happens upon Mona one night as she is tossing a water bottle up into a tree to dislodge a red balloon. The water bottle breaks, so Szeto carries Mona on his shoulders as she reaches above her with a broom, but she still cannot free the balloon. Tony then appears and supports Szeto and Mona, and Mona is finally able to grab the balloon and release it into the night sky.

To criticize those who assume that such quirky scenes are indicative of his shooting the film without a script, claiming to the contrary that life and relationships are built on little details and seemingly insignificant moments (Teo 2007: 241). Indeed, the scene works in the context of the film's critique of routinized consumption precisely because it challenges conventional narrative structure. The three characters spend two and a half minutes of screentime on something insignificant and with no dialogue or impact on the plot, reminding us of the spontaneity of life that capitalism attempts to eliminate through routinization and intense consumerism.

Finally, the power of judo as a humanist force in the film is such that Szeto is not only able to practice judo again despite going blind, but that he is able to live a life of dignity in a capitalist haven such as Hong Kong. As with other global cities, Hong Kong is commercially constructed to be looked at. Its most popular tourist attractions, including Victoria Peak, the Peak Tram, and Victoria Harbor Ferry, are designed to showcase the city's breathtakingly vertical physical appearance from the most attractive perspectives. The Symphony of Lights, a nightly laser light show emanating from the tops of the tallest buildings on Hong Kong Island and Kowloon Peninsula, goes further in giving the city a rich visual texture of energy and excitement. Yet, this friendly consumerist narrative of Hong Kong as 'Asia's World City', a slogan that decorates everything from airplanes to park benches, effectively eliminates an individual such as Szeto because he is physically unable to partake in the city as spectacle. Through judo, however, the city as spectacle, and more specifically as a consumerist heaven, becomes irrelevant.

Humanity above all

Žižek is resolute in his distaste for Leftist discourse (Western Buddhisms, multiculturalism, cultural studies, identity politics, etc.), because he argues it is purely ideological; but his inflexibility is rather disheartening. If everything we thought to be progressive is merely blinding us to the overwhelming power of that which we attempt to resist (i.e., global capitalism), then resistance is perhaps futile. However, even if we accept that, yes, martial arts may be a coping strategy to navigate contemporary chaos, it does not follow that it cannot also be a means to internalize a more progressive humanism. As Bowman (2007: 71) states, 'finding ways to cope with the contexts into which one is flung and within which one finds oneself is not only a necessary but also a good thing'. Szeto begins the film as a pathetic individual stuck in a routine of drinking and gambling and who is also crippled by his impending blindness only to be reborn through judo. Likewise, those around Szeto rediscover the unbridled joy of judo in the spirit of brotherhood, for it is the truest way to forge meaningful human connections. Even the stone-faced Kong reengages his humanity when dueling with Szeto, graciously proclaiming him the winner after being thrown rather than continuing the fight in anger. It is no wonder that Teo (2007: 175) singles out *Throw Down* as the clearest testament of To's own life philosophy, noting how it centers on the characters' humanism in the face of an unforgiving and exceptionally competitive Hong Kong.

Throw Down's use of Kurosawa's humanism within the confines of 'Asia's World City' remakes Szeto into what Liu (2011) terms a stateless subject through his rejection of neoliberalism's consum-

erist ideology, and this in turn gives the film a wider significance beyond Hong Kong, both because of the nature of the term 'stateless' as well as the global proliferation of capitalism. Szeto's emancipation through his internalization of humanism is therefore instructive in the contrast it builds between judo and neoliberalism at large, particularly when juxtaposed against Mona, who moves in the opposite direction to Szeto in her desire to become a globally successful singer. Having failed to make it in Hong Kong, she decides to go to Japan against the wishes of her father. As her arc runs parallel to Szeto's, it invites a reading of the film as encouraging people to follow their dreams no matter the difficulties, but her arc is instead entirely compatible with neoliberal rhetoric. Szeto finishes the film having attained inner peace, while Mona's resolution is ambiguous. We do not know for certain whether or not she becomes successful in the intensely commercial realm of global popular music, but given her dissatisfaction with her lack of stardom throughout the movie as well as her genuine lack of vocal talent, the film implies in her directionless flight away from her father that she may never be satisfied. Mona embodies that global desire to succeed, but that success and satisfaction can only ever be ephemeral. The film does not condemn her for her actions, but neither does it pretend that she will attain that which she desires.

Further contextualizing Szeto is the inevitability of his blindness, which places his reaction in greater focus. Teo (2007: 116) notes how To's films are marked by fatalism, meaning that a character's 'will is conditioned by death' as opposed to being an expression of individual choice, and it takes on three iterations. Heroic fatalism is so named because the hero is accepting of his or

her death, mechanical fatalism occurs when a series of related events envelops the character regardless of his or her actions, and magical fatalism is couched in narrative and character ambiguity (Teo 2007: 106). *Throw Down* is in the mold of heroic fatalism, with Szeto's blindness serving as metaphorical death for the fighter who cannot see his opponent. As To himself says, though, 'going blind isn't important because it's already determined' (Teo 2007: 240-241). Thus, in contrast to prevailing neoliberal rhetoric at work in Hong Kong, *Throw Down* suggests that one's situation in life should be weighed in terms of their humanity in the face of a dehumanizing logic that values consumption by any means necessary. Standing resolutely outside the Bank of China (see below) in the film's final scene, Szeto is completely blind, and while he remains stationary, the city and its inhabitants appear to be on the move. Having attained inner peace through judo, he models a certain defiance in the face of neoliberal capitalism as he hands out flyers, hoping to pass on the value of judo to his fellow citizens. Their behavior, however, has not changed; some accept a flyer out of politeness only to throw it away or toss it on the ground after walking a few steps, but most simply ignore his existence altogether. Furthermore, as with Mona, for all their motion, their destination is perilously unknown. Thus, although Szeto may be blind, the people around him who so adhere to the temporal and spatial demands of capitalism are the ones who fail to see.



Fig. 6: from *Throw Down* (2004)

Throw Down is not an anarchic film, and it does not advocate violent rebellion against capitalism. After all, both Szeto and Tony urge Mona to follow her dreams. The outcome of its critical intertextual relationship with *Sanshiro Sugata* is a nuanced reading of the human condition under neoliberalism in one of the world's most financialized spaces and the foregrounding of judo as a means to internalize resistance. *Throw Down* is therefore not a film about judo

per se, nor is it even a simple tribute to Kurosawa despite the dedication to him at the end of the film and the numerous references to his philosophy and his debut film. It is a film about the power of Kurosawa's humanist philosophy as realized through martial arts cinema in contemporary Hong Kong, and it sets the stage for martial arts cinema as a potentially progressive cinema in the context of intensifying neoliberalization.

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