

1 Dead or alive?

Martial arts and the forensic gaze

Vivienne Lo

The contemporary worldwide addiction to the forensic-medical gaze, the power to see both the patterns of brutality inscribed on a body and the moral truths about *whodunit*, how and why they did it, and sometimes with whom, took a fascinating turn in Peter Chan's (Chen Kexin 陳可辛) Chinese martial arts film *Dragon* (2011), hereafter referred to by its Chinese title *Wuxia* 武俠, 'Martial Chivalry'. In a brilliant twenty-first century appropriation of both ancient Chinese medical traditions and the much-loved forensic detective genre, *Wuxia* pushes the martial arts epic in a new direction with a minute visual analysis of the anatomy and physiology of the martial arts body. Throughout the film a series of slow-motion replays and fast-paced montages juxtapose martial arts action with stills that draw on images from China's medical past, and footage generated by modern medical imaging technologies. With this collage of perspectives, Chan participates in a twenty-first-century zeitgeist which disrupts the binary conventions that pit West against East; modernity against tradition; reductionism against holism; science against religion; objective anatomy against the subjective subtle body; and mind against body. In today's world, the global balance of power is changing and new forms of cross-cultural scientific knowledge and natural philosophy are required to keep up.

The critical value of this film for the Medical Humanities lies in the way it both reflects and delivers these larger cultural 'truths' about the nature of science and medicine for a general audience. Recent transcultural histories of anatomy and forensic science also undermine the pervasive politics of conventional medical histories. It is no longer tenable to situate the rise of anatomical science entirely in a modern Europe with all its attendant assumptions about Western progress and processions of great white men of superior learning and insight. As Peter Chan's film delivers its cinematic riposte to an unreconstructed Western narrative of scientific modernity, and instead outlines for us a unified and transcendent body of Chinese cultural genius, we are drawn in to a multi-faceted and compelling political vision, at once transnational in its production and intended audiences, and national in its powerful representation of an ethnically diverse one-China (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 195).

Chan's film draws on elements of both of the two main sub-genres of the martial arts film genre, the fast-action choreographed bare-fist fight of the *kungfu* film,

and the romance, chivalry, and running-up-walls, flying-through-the-air fantasy tales of martial errantry characteristic of the genre from which the film takes its Chinese name, *wuxia*. While the film draws on the aesthetics of both these cinematic traditions, the themes of honour and chivalry characteristic of the *wuxia* sub-genre are uniquely developed into an analysis of how martial arts moral philosophy is encoded in the living body itself (Teo 2009: 17–37).

The relationship that develops between the two main protagonists of this film, Xu Baijiu 徐百九 and Liu Jinxi 劉金喜 (formerly known as Tang Long), highlights a persistent modern Chinese dilemma about the nature of truth and individual responsibility, here revealed in anatomical expertise about living and dead bodies. On the one hand Xu Baijiu, the forensic detective, played by Taiwanese-Japanese superstar Takeshi Kaneshiro 金城武, subtly references the largely unacknowledged Japanese contribution to Chinese modernity, and particularly medicine, during the early twentieth century (Elman 2005: 396–8; Andrews 2014: 69–88). In his dogged determination to get to the bottom of the crimes Xu suspects Liu Jinxi (Donnie Yen) to have committed in an earlier phase of his life and under a different identity, we find in Xu's character the Chinese awakening to theories and practices of universal law, modern science and rationality, and concomitant notions of citizenship. For Xu, evidence is dispassionate and objective and there is only one, scientific version of the truth: 'only physiology and the law don't lie' (c.f. Elman 2005: 372–432).

On the other hand, we have Donnie Yen (Yan Zidan 甄子丹), famous for his portrayal of *Ip Man* (*Ye Men* 葉問 2008; sequels 2010, 2016), the gentle-mannered, educated originator of Wing Chun style *kungfu*. Xu Baijiu's forensic examination of Liu Jinxi's living body exalts and almost eroticises the martial arts body, its combination of suppleness and muscularity, calm acuity of the senses and glowing skin, but also clandestinely celebrates the way in which it embraces the lawless honour and justice code of the *jianghu* 江湖 (literally, 'rivers and lakes'), a Chinese equivalent of the Wild West (Teo 2009: 18–19). Liu Jinxi represents a traditional Buddhist understanding of the martial arts. For him, individual actions have multiple external causes (Wright 1959: 108–27). Personal redemption lies in transcending the karma of one's birth, in this case as heir to the chief of an exceptionally violent Xixia 西夏 (Tangut) clan known as the 72 Demons. But ultimately this can only be achieved through tremendous personal sacrifice in order to counter 'the fabric of existence [which] is controlled by a myriad of karmic threads, [in which] everything is connected, no one truly has free will, we are all accomplices'. In juxtaposing these various natural-philosophical and religious perspectives visually, as contrasting body cultures, the film challenges the singular Western anatomical 'gaze' and its claim to universal truth with a fascinating and uniquely Chinese relativism.

Two nationalistic impulses are held in dynamic tension throughout the film. The first is the drive to regenerate China as a modern, scientific nation that gained pace among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinese reformers and revolutionaries, for whom the image and objective investigation of the anatomical and forensic body were emblematic, just as they were in Europe and North America at

the time (Asen 2009; Elman 2005: 388–96, 400–3). The second is the persistent claim of Chinese particularity regarding the superhuman potential of the living body, epitomized by a subjective, traditional understanding of the body in movement: a kind of cultural genius that is embodied in the spectacular visual culture of martial arts performances and Chinese opera alike.

Wuxia offers a further opportunity to interrogate a new style of patriotic masculinity as expressed through the martial arts body. In the 1980s the iconic martial arts hero Bruce Lee embodied the transnational tensions of his time, ‘Lee as Hong Kong; Lee as cultural and/or diasporic China; Lee as Third World anti-imperialist; Lee as Asian American Champion’ (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 197–204). Thirty years on, China is in a much stronger and less equivocal position. After the economic miracle, the 1997 return of Hong Kong, and the inexorable growth of China’s power and international standing, *Wuxia* looks back to China’s earlier internal struggles and extols the power and beneficence of political unity for a multi-ethnic state. This political message is intertwined with notions of Chinese cultural superiority and is conveyed in the narrative of Liu Jinxi’s renunciation of his minority roots. Redeeming himself from a violent past among the Xixia people, he rejects the lawless autonomy of the nomads. Separatism, we are given to understand, is best transcended through peaceful elective membership of the majority by enlightened individuals (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 197–204).

Xixia was a medieval term for the kingdom or empire of the Buddhist Tangut people, who are not now included among China’s officially recognised ethnic minorities. The negative representation of this pre-modern group in the film does not, therefore, run the risk of offending any living community, but obliquely illustrates contemporary China’s ideal relationship with its 55 recognised ethnic minorities (the concept of the Han Chinese as a 56th category, self-identifying as a majority ethnicity). The historic Buddhism of the Xixia people (Gaowa 2007) is in fact a vehicle for one of the film’s dénouements, as the main character Liu Jinxi undergoes a radical lifestyle transformation in order to achieve a separation from his brutal father, foregoing a violent inheritance and professing a new, more enlightened form of Buddhism among the submissive ‘ethnic minority’ of the villagers (the men and boys of the village still wear their hair in the pigtailed that signify submission to the old Manchu dynasty, and also by implication to the new Chinese Republic represented in the film by Xu Baijiu and his police superior, and, by inference for the viewer, to Communist China itself).

There is also broader cultural significance to be found in the film through the multiple transnational processes at work at all levels of production. Peter Chan Ho-sun is himself a truly transnational director: born in Hong Kong and raised in Bangkok, he studied cinema in the United States at the UCLA film school before returning to Asia in the early 1980s. He began work in the Hong Kong film industry as second assistant director to John Woo in *Heroes Shed No Tears* (*Yingxiong wulei* 英雄無淚, 1986), and as a location manager to Jackie Chan in *Project A II* (*A jihua xuji* A計劃續集, 1987) and *Armour of God* (*Longxiong hudi* 龍兄虎弟, 1986), before moving on to producing and directing his own films in the late 1980s. Twenty movies later, he eventually joined Steven Spielberg at

Dreamworks. *Wuxia* marks the first film appearance in seventeen years of veteran *wuxia* film idol Jimmy Wang Yu (*One Armed Swordsman – Dubi dao* 獨臂刀, 1967, and *The Chinese Boxer (Longhu dou* 龍虎斗, 1970), who is widely regarded as the first authentic *kungfu* star. As we will see, in its final scenes, *Wuxia* pays direct homage to the *One Armed Swordsman*, whose loss of one arm has been linked not only to male castration anxieties and the homoerotic nature of the martial arts, but also to the theme of severing links with patriarchal obligation, a choice which is highlighted in the final scenes of this film (Zhang 2004: 178).

The interlinking transnationalities of the director and of the various genres of martial arts and forensic detective films that play out in *Wuxia* have produced a remarkable visual demonstration of cross-cultural body consciousness, which challenges many long-standing orientalist assumptions. The film calls into question Eurocentric biases about the history of the body and its care, and embodies a distinctively Chinese ethic of modernity and citizenship. For these reasons it is an excellent subject for the Medical and Health Humanities. It is important for its expression of Asian body and health-related beliefs and practices that have gone global in recent times. But it is even more significant in the context of this volume as a contemporary commentary on an old set of prejudices in the practice of medical history which for centuries have shaped perspectives on global power dynamics according to the now outdated binary opposition of East and West (Figure 1.1).

Set six years after the Xinhai revolution (1911), when imperial China has already come to a violent end, the action of the film takes place in the context of the troubled beginnings of the modern Chinese state. The authority of the new Republican government and the peace of communities in the hinterland of China are challenged by roaming bandits and local warlords on horseback. In a rural village in the far south-west of China (Yunnan), the plot of *Wuxia* unfolds as we discover that Liu Jinxi, a seemingly meek and law-abiding paper-maker, is actually Tang Long 唐龍, a notorious killer and beloved son of a much-feared chief of a Xixia clan known as the *qisher disha* 七十二地煞 (72 Demons). In an attempt to cast off his violent



Figure 1.1 Donnie Yen as Liu Jinxi in *Wuxia* (2011)

and vengeful past, Tang has absconded from his clan and married a local woman, Yu 玉 (Tang Wei 湯唯), from the Yunnan village where the film is set. Settled there, he takes the village clan's surname. Yu has been deserted by the father of her oldest son, and Tang, now Liu Jinxi, a model villager, has integrated himself into the idyllic life of the village as the saviour of the spurned woman. Together, by the start of the film, they have given birth to another son. Life is beautiful: cows graze on the roofs of the wooden huts, and the day moves to the gentle rhythm of the paper presses; while the warm browns, reds, and rich greens of the countryside lull the viewer into a false sense of security. Yu is a modest and beautiful adornment to the narrative, a natural product of her native lands, but after a promising start she largely fades into the background and her character is never well developed. The couple seem to be open and gentle with each other, and there are unmistakable suggestions of a strong physical bond between them, but no romance or passion is allowed to distract from the strange relationship that develops between the two male leads, since in traditional male-dominated *wuxia* films celibacy and male camaraderie are the homosocial norms (Figures 1.2a and b).



Figure 1.2 (a) and (b) Tang Long's new identity

On an otherwise normal day in this rural paradise, Liu gets into a fight with two notorious bandits and kills them both, in an apparently accidental sequence of events, while attempting to protect the elderly couple who run the village shop and inn. The rest of the film focuses on the investigation and eventual exposure of Liu Jinxi's false identity by Xu Baijiu, the detective, by means of an analysis of both the forensic evidence provided by the corpses of the villains themselves, and the unique qualities of the martial arts body. As Xu examines the battered cadavers of the bandits, peering through his 1920s-style spectacles and covering his nose delicately with a white handkerchief, all the political hierarchies embodied in the superior gaze of modern science and its claim to definitive knowledge are challenged by the camera as it follows the feeble, asthmatic, and neurotic figure of the detective. His furtive observation casts a veil of doubt, trespassing from all angles into the lives and bodies of Liu's family, disturbing and undermining the balance of the community, even intruding into their marital bed and day-to-day religious ceremonies. With this uncomfortable visual construction of the practices of science and modernity, the film begins to question the legitimacy of the concomitant eroticisation of a vanquished oriental 'Other' and its superstitions and fantasies (Marchetti 1993: 67–8 *et passim*; Shohat 1991: 57).

Xu Baijiu's nocturnal intrusions into the intimate workings of Liu's living body, his nausea-inducing examination of the criminals' lifeless bodies, the grotesque visions of decaying flesh crawling with flies, all impart a perverse eroticism to the processes involved in the discovery of objective truth and implicitly cast the viewer as voyeur. Xu's neurotic reflections on Liu's guilt are punctuated by brief but ghastly flashbacks of the Xixia clan's previous mass murders, disrupting the slow peaceful imagery of the village with fast intercut glimpses of bodies hung up like butchers' carcasses, and dangling corpses. With these nightmarish visions of Xu's single-minded pursuit of a morally superior universal justice, and his fixation with discovering an immutable truth, the film further suggests that the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultures of science and empiricism are as limited as Xu Baijiu's vision – a conclusion which resonates with contemporary studies of the rise of objectivity and the cultural histories of the scientific communities of the mid-nineteenth century that created modern notions of truth (Daston and Galison 2007).

In contrast to the cadavers, the living and comparatively robust and healthy qualities of the superhuman martial arts body are revealed cumulatively as the story unfolds and as Xu Baijiu slowly gathers evidence to indict Liu. These unique qualities are particularly vividly displayed in a replay of the initial fight scene where, in a fiction within the fiction, the figure of the bespectacled detective himself is introduced into the frames in order to direct the viewer's gaze to the minutiae of the action. In this way Xu deconstructs the double homicide scene, proving that Liu was not an innocent victim of the thugs, but a highly skilled fighter, and that his body is a well-trained and disciplined killing machine. Supple and gymnastic, light, and devoid of ordinary corporeal density, it can be controlled at will through *qinggong* 輕功 (body lightening *kungfu*).

As Liu's true identity is revealed, he suddenly undergoes a cinematographic metamorphosis. Gone is the modest village papermaker, whose self-effacing loyalty to the village community and his family has previously been built up first in long shots of the luscious landscape; then in medium shots from the side, as he engages with his family, from above, as he cowers beneath the shop counter agonising about whether to reveal his secret martial strength; and finally, pinned down beneath the villain's body, apparently the victim of a vicious attack. Instead, for the first time, he stares directly into the camera, striking a powerful and alert 'horse stance', arms and hands squarely ready for combat, his eyes ablaze and intent upon his opponents. With that iconic Donnie Yen image, and others which follow later depicting his father's and the Xixia clan's physical prowess, Xu demonstrates a unique and persistent Chinese belief that the true martial artist:

- has extraordinary control of the breath: he 'breathes once every ten counts to collect *qi* at the core';
- 'can control the flow of his *qi* and his mental state';
- is protected by a field of power and 'radiates *qi* that repels even flies';
- has enhanced body *qi*, which promotes superhuman healing of wounds;
- has a body hardened like diamond that blades bounce off, as in the Vajrapāni (*Jingang shen* 金剛神) martial traditions (Shahar 2012).

More than anything else, the martial artist has a sophisticated knowledge of the anatomy of death. By juxtaposing modern hi-tech and classical Chinese anatomical and physiological images, the film encourages the viewer to imagine that Chinese people have always visualised the internal bodily organs, the musculature, and the skeleton, as being in a natural relationship with the subtle body of *qi*, the non-material power behind life and generation. The opening titles are framed by images of the blood circulation seen from inside the body that were in fact unknown anywhere in the pre-modern world, with floating platelets and shots from inside the arteries and capillaries. Startling visions of the corporeal then punctuate the film throughout. From the introductory sequence, which involves a painful if comic scene of Liu's son having a tooth extracted by his older stepbrother, through much of the subsequent action, the loss of a tooth becomes a recurring motif. The location of one of the villain's displaced teeth, which has torpedoed into a medicinal wine jar, leaving a neat circular hole, demonstrates the speed and accuracy of Liu's blows (Figure 1.3).

Central to the visual narrative are modern interpretations and maps of Chinese subtle and corporeal anatomy represented in black outline on sepia background, which rather unobtrusively reference pre-modern medical manuscripts. They interrupt the flow of the story as the detective relates how the main protagonist has killed the thugs in the village shop professionally and made it look accidental to those standing by: Liu Jinxi, he demonstrates, has superior knowledge of the circulation of *qi*, the acupuncture point system, and the death points of the martial



Figure 1.3 Xu Baijiu examining the corpse of one of the villains

arts. Throughout, the language of twentieth-century anatomy is inserted into traditional explanations. Here are just a few of Xu Baijiu's explanations of what lies beneath the surface:

- The death of Villain 1: It is major trauma to the vagus nerve that actually caused his death; Liu Jinxi had punched the *Taiyang* 太陽 acupoint on the villain's temple.
- The death of Villain 2: Liu Jinxi delivered a blow to the *Yunmen* 雲門 point which 'caused a blood clot blocking the blood flow, resulting in congestion of the arteries and cardiac arrest'.
- The constitution of Villain 2: The propensity to cardiac arrest was caused by a level of gluttony that impaired his *qi*. This gluttony was the result of 'an over-developed *Renying* 人迎 point, because normally the *Renying* point controls hunger'.
- Antidote to poison: One must treat bodily and personality flaws together using acupuncture. In Xu Baijiu's case this meant treating his own inappropriate 'empathy' for a child who, it transpires, was a pathological serial poisoner, who had killed his own parents and poisoned Xu himself. Xu used the acupoint *Danzhong* 膻中, to 'cure' his own misplaced empathy and treated the poisoning itself with the acupoint *Tiantu* 天突.
- As the two protagonists ultimately join forces against the chief of the 72 Demons, Xu induces the apparent death of Liu Jinxi/Tang Long, and then brings him back to life before it is too late – unfortunately, in the middle of the wake, as his *jianghu* warrior brothers circle his not-quite-dead-corpse on horseback. In the process of Liu's living death, Xu describes the stages he passes through: the brink, degeneration, and the final death; all can be induced by acupuncture, and acupressure to the vagus nerve.

Xu's explanations are accompanied by images of the beating heart, nerves, blood splattering, and scans of the skeletal structure, interspersed with modern charts of acupuncture. The images disrupt the narrative with a sense of urgency, and contrast with the portrayal of the weak and troubled detective using images shot in darkness and from oblique downward angles that emphasise his psychologically traumatised condition. In contrast, Liu Jinxi's concealed mastery of the anatomy of death is subtle and subjective; his control of his own robust and living body is deployed only to protect the vulnerable villagers. The camera gazes upwards at him, as if at an invulnerable hero. Captivated by Donnie Yen's physical beauty and prowess, his ability to fly through the air, and pivot his body effortlessly against walls, the audience chooses to forget the violence of Liu Jinxi's past and believes in the possibility of redemption – not only the redemption of Liu's past, but also of a Chinese past full of superstition and magic as negatively perceived and portrayed by early twentieth-century reformers, a view further reinforced by the banning of martial arts films in China in 1931 and then again in the People's Republic for being 'superstitious' and 'feudal' (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 225).

Our self-divided heroes, it transpires, share a past full of guilt. Liu's violent past is matched by Xu Baijiu's obsession with rationality and the unwavering rule of law which stems from his mistaken trust for the poisoner-child and its consequences. We discover that in recompense for his youthful mistake, he accused his own father-in-law of selling fake drugs, a family betrayal which led to the old man's suicide. The subsequent estrangement from his wife is filmed in a dark, cold light, and when contrasted to the warmth and colour of the Liu family's rural life, it feels as bleak and joyless as the corpses of the dead villains themselves. In the course of the film, the corruption of local government and the dire consequences of Xu's obsession with bringing Liu to justice, which ultimately triggers the near destruction of the village by the Xixia clan, call seriously into question the idea of a fair, universal, and benevolent rule of law. But to understand how all these modern and ancient currents blend so easily together requires an introduction to the history and historiography of anatomy and forensic medicine in China, and also to the transnational history of the detective novel and film.

Chinese anatomy and surgery

Dissection and anatomy as medical practices have frequently been associated with the divergence of Greek and Asian medicine (Kuriyama 1999). A European visual style beginning with Renaissance illustrations of the internal organs and the skeletal body is commonly cited as marking the birth of modern medical science, and dissection and anatomy have become emblematic of a Western civilisation with unique claims to fostering modernity and progress (Kemp and Wallace 2001: 158). In contrast to the Western anatomical gaze, medical historians writing about China have tended to suggest that the supposed body view of Chinese tradition focuses on a physiology of yin and yang in dynamic transformation, unified by *qi*,

a view that emphasises the subjective and imaginary realm where the human body is subordinate both to the state and to the larger forces of the cosmos.

This historical divergence, I will argue, has been seriously overstated in a misrepresentation of history which downplays the transnational development of anatomical ideas, and devalues the astro-medical tradition in both European and Arabic medicine (Goody 2006; Akasoy *et al.* (eds.) 2008). A new wave of scholarship has begun to challenge the orthodox view prevalent in both Euro-American and modern Chinese history of medicine that historically, the Chinese did not ‘do anatomy’ (Despeux 2005; Wang 2018; Hu 2018; Chen 2007; Wang and Fuentes 2018; Berlekamp *et al.* 2015; Li Jianmin, *forthcoming*). We can see in these studies an increasing amount of evidence that medicine in imperial China, like medicine in Greece and Rome, was concerned with the musculature and sinews, both healthy and diseased, damaged, and dead – and that skin-deep surgery and sometimes even deep surgical procedures are scattered throughout historical medical records (Harper 1998: 97–8).

Increasingly, the anatomised body and the truths it reveals are a research topic for contemporary historians of Chinese medicine. The earliest recorded dissections occurred as early as 16 CE, in the Han dynasty, when we have details of how the executed bodies of criminals were disembowelled and their organs weighed, measured, and reflected upon (Despeux 2005: 57; *Huangdi neijing Lingshu* 12). However, ancient Chinese physicians could no more carry out deep abdominal surgery based on this information than could physicians in ancient Greece and Rome. In 1041 CE, there was another famous dissection, this time of the abdomen of the executed rebel Ou Xifan 歐希範. Artists published drawings of his internal organs. A similar set of drawings called after their artist, Yanluozi 煙蘿子 (fl. 936–941 CE), are a direct source for two illustrations contained in Li Jiong’s 李駒 commentary on *The Canon of Eighty-One Problems* (*Bashi yi nan jing* 八十一難經) of 1269 (Despeux 2005; Berlekamp *et al.* 2015; Lo and Barrett 2018) (Figure 1.4).

The Yanluozi images are explicitly concerned with the forms of the internal organs upon which adepts would meditate in inner alchemy in the pursuit of transcendence and enlightenment. In this illustrated medical genre, we can see how anatomical images sit side-by-side with descriptions of a body made up of many spirits and body gods from medieval Chinese medical and Daoist traditions. But by including the Yanluozi images in his sequence, Li Jiong also related them to the pulse and to *qi* circulation, and suggested the permeable boundaries between medicine and religion, the anatomical and the subtle body, in the tradition of inner alchemy. Most of the Yanluozi images were copied in a 1313 Persian study of Chinese Medicine called *The Treasure Book of the Ilkhans on the Branches of the Chinese Sciences* (*Tānsūqnāma-i Īlkhān dar funūn-i ‘ulūm-i Khatā’ī*). Under the direction of the scholar-physician Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318), images of the internal organs were included, but without anything to identify their original connection to Daoist inner alchemy or cosmology (Berlekamp *et al.* 2015) (Figure 1.5).

Most likely, these images of the internal organs found a place in the *Tānsūqnāma* not because of what they signified about Chinese medicine or alchemy, but because

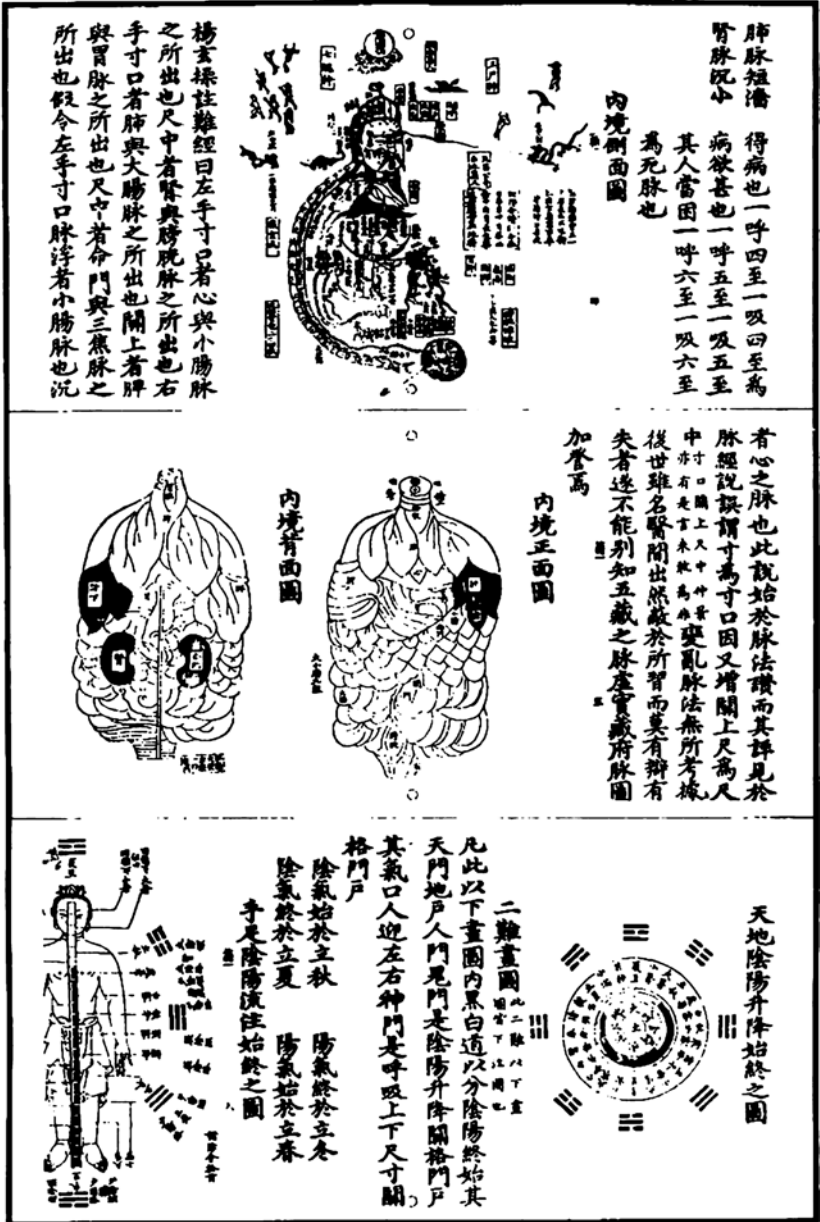


Figure 1.4 The Canon of Eighty-One Problems – originally edited by Li Jiong 1269

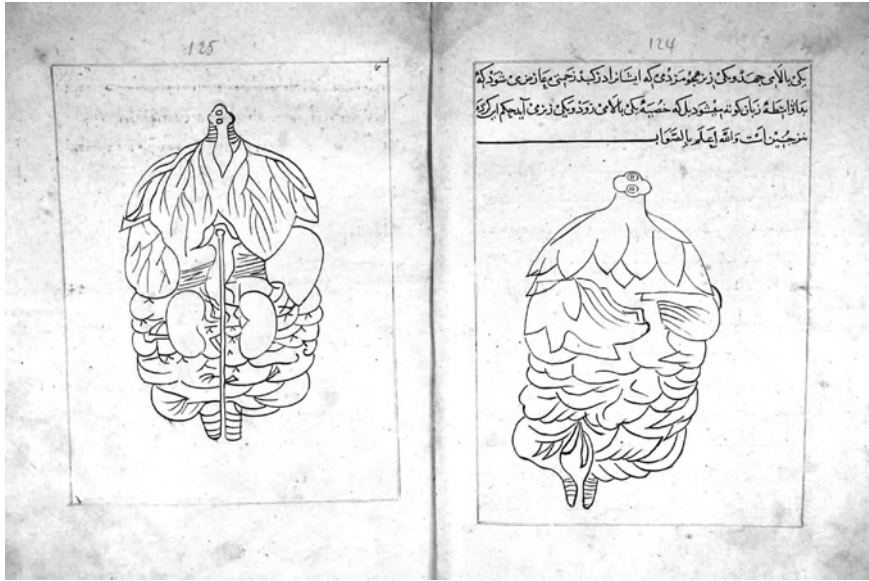


Figure 1.5 *Tansūqnāma-i Ilkhān dar funūn-i ‘ulūm-i Khatā’ī* compiled by Rashid al Din 1313

they resonated with what Persian physicians already knew, namely, the attention which Galenic medicine had already paid to the relationship between anatomy and astrology-astronomy. Indeed, within the history of Galenic medicine, there may have been a resurgent interest in the illustration of anatomy in this period, as a Latin manuscript of 1292 in which blood vessels are diagrammatically positioned within the outline of the whole body suggests (Oxford, Bodleian MS Ashmole 399, fol. 19r.). By the end of the fourteenth century, similar diagrams were also part of the Perso-Islamic trajectory of Galenic medical tradition, when they appeared in the work of Mansur b. Ahmad b. Yusuf b. Ilyas (fl. c. 1390) (Savage-Smith 1997).

While the Persian evidence offers a tantalising glimpse of what might be done in future to enhance our understanding of the late medieval transcultural study of anatomy, it is far from clear how influential the Chinese anatomical images were. The alchemical charts were printed in the Ming Daoist Canon. In Persia they again took manuscript form and the accompanying textual knowledge was the subject of academic debate by physicians from as far West as the Byzantine empire (Terzioğlu 1974: 288–96). These works were not intended for popular consumption, and to this day this transnational history of anatomy is not well known. I do not, therefore, offer this abbreviated history of anatomy in China in order to suggest that the writers and directors of *Wuxia* were consciously engaging in propaganda about the priority of Chinese scientific knowledge. Rather, I hope

that it will help to redress the bias of influential histories of medicine in the last centuries and highlight the political issues at stake in the illustration of anatomy. However, in *Wuxia*, the representation of the anatomy of dead bodies emerges through different transnational processes that have shaped literary and film versions of the forensic detective story.

The forensic detective in Chinese literature and film

Historical evidence for a genre of forensic case histories demonstrates that a lively tradition of Chinese forensic medicine dates back over two thousand years to pre-imperial times. Two cases recorded in a manuscript from the Shuihudi 睡虎地 burial site (closed c. 217 BCE), the *Fengzhen shi* 封診式 (Models for Sealing and Physical Examinations), are of particular interest in this regard. Protocols labelled *xun yu* 訊獄 (interrogating in legal trials) and *zhi yu* 治獄 (the conduct of legal trials) in the text set out the requirements of officials in trying legal cases, and reflect the practical administration of one aspect of early Chinese law.

Among cases of livestock theft, robbery, and avoiding conscription, there are descriptions of the official inspection of injured and dead bodies, very similar to those depicted in *Wuxia*. Details of one ‘death by injury’ were recorded as being investigated by the *lingshi* 令史 (Magistrates’ Clerk) and tell of the direction and manner in which the body of a man was lying, the tears in the victim’s clothing, the blade wounds on the left temple and on his back, measurements of the wounds, and the nature of the blood seepage, as well as the approximate time of death and circumstances in the neighbourhood at the time of the death (Hulsewé 1985: 00):

Death by injury: Statement of a Criminal Investigation:

X’s head had a blade wound in one place on the left temple and in two places on the back running lengthways/perpendicular, each (wound) measuring four *cun* 寸 (Chinese inches, an adaptable measurement geared to individual body sizes), in each case one *cun* wide like clefts made with an axe; the corners of the brain at the temple were both seeping blood, and the head, back and ground were all soiled and the size [of what?] cannot be determined. The remaining (body) was all intact.

Another record is of ‘death by hanging’, and describes the position of the hanged man and the thickness and placement of the rope in order to ascertain whether the hanging was the result of suicide or murder. Establishing motives for suicide was also an essential part of the investigation. It records:

Death by hanging: Statement of a criminal investigation:

A and B were ordered to take Bing’s corpse to the court of (forensic) examination. On examination it was necessary to first look carefully at the marks and personally visit the place of death; to look immediately at the rope and

bindings, whether there were still marks where the ties were; to look at whether the tongue protruded or not, what was the drop from the head and feet to the ground; was there loss of urine?

(*Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian* 睡虎地秦墓漢簡 1990: 147–63)

In this case murder was suspected because the tongue did not protrude, the mouth and nose did not sigh, the marks from the rope did not bruise, and the rope was tight and could not be removed. This is the earliest extant record of forensic-medical investigation in China and perhaps anywhere in the world.

Better known than these ancient-world case histories, which have only been discovered in tombs in the twentieth century, are the many commented editions of Song Ci's 宋慈 (1186–1249) instructions to coroners, *Xiyuan jilu* 洗冤集錄 (A Collection of Records on the Washing Away of Wrongs) (McKnight 1982). Here is one of a set of images from the *Xiyuan jilu* as they were printed in the 1856 edition, *Xiyuan lu xiangyi* 洗冤錄詳義 (A Collection of Records on the Washing Away of Wrongs with Detailed Explanations), with a detailed commentary by Xu Lian 許橰 (1787–1862) (Figure 1.6).

These early studies reveal over a millennium of consistent activity in recording the observations of civil servants working with the judiciary in the investigation of dead bodies. They deal with a set of problems at the heart of forensic-medical examinations that differentiate the accidental from the deliberate or self-inflicted

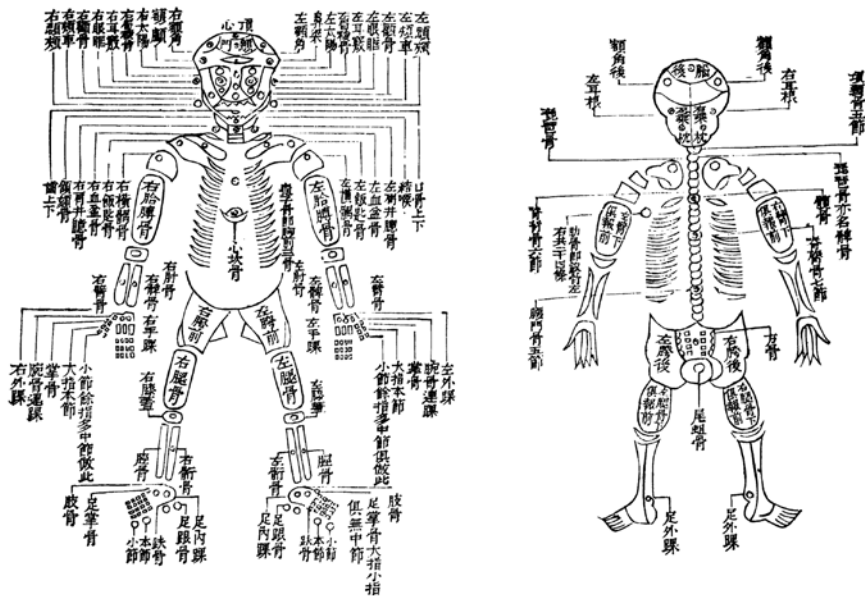


Figure 1.6 *Xiyuan lu xiangyi*, commentary by Xu Lian (1787–1862)

wound, suicide from murder, pre- from post-mortem wounds, and natural or accidental from unnatural death, exposing those like Liu Jinxi who try to make culpable homicide appear accidental, and those who try to make suicide look like murder in order to incriminate their enemies. These texts reveal a Chinese body that is very far from the classical Chinese medical body essentialised by historians and anthropologists, a physical body that even in death can tell revealing stories about the true circumstances of life.

More germane to historical influences on the production of *Wuxia*, we can find antecedents to the figure of Xu Baijiu and his gaze on the bandits' bodies in the forensic detectives of popular literature. Charting the changing cultural manifestations of the forensic detective story, which has taken one form or another in China since the sixteenth century, would be a major undertaking, so I will just sketch the bare bones of this transnational history as they relate to the themes of this chapter.

The most popular of the characters we will meet is Di Renjie 狄仁杰, in English, Judge Dee, loosely based on a magistrate and official of the Tang court of that name.

Di Renjie the historical figure (c. 630–c. 700) was born to a lineage of prefects and rose to prominence in the Tang court under Emperor Gaozong 唐高宗. He was much favoured by the extraordinary Wu Zetian 武則天, Gaozong's empress and the only woman to have ruled in her own right as emperor, whom he served as a close confidante and adviser. An influential military general (Fifth Commander against the Turks) and Secretary General to the Supreme Court, Di was a member of the Imperial Censorate, with a well-known tendency to challenge authority. There is, however, scant evidence that he ever carried out the kind of forensic investigation that he was celebrated for in the eighteenth-century detective novel written in his name, *Di Gong'an* 狄公案 (Cases of Judge Dee). While he is recorded as having remonstrated at court on behalf of people who had been unfairly convicted, the only court case which he presided over for which we have any precise details involved him bringing a ghost to trial and sentencing it to be burnt (*Taiping guangji* 298/3; MacMullen 1993).

The more credible real-life detective hero who has captured the imaginations of four centuries of Chinese readers is the Song dynasty Judge Bao 包公, Bao Zheng 包拯 (999–1062). Two examples of *gong'an* 公案 (crime case fiction) written in the form of novels about him date from an earlier time than those attributed to Di Renjie, having been published in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644):

- *Cases of A Hundred Families Judged by Dragon-Design Bao* (*Bao longtu baijia gong'an* 包龍圖百家公案) written by An Yushi (安遇時) in 1594.
- *Cases Judged by the Dragon-Design* (*Longtu gong'an* 龍圖公案), an anonymous account including several chapters from the previous book.

Both of these historical figures, Bao Zheng and Di Renjie, have been periodically reinvented, in order to cater for a popular Chinese appetite for murder mysteries

laced with gruesome details. During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this appetite has been further stimulated by diverse transnational influences such as the professionalisation of forensic medicine and science, Victorian gothic horror stories, and Hollywood's hugely successful *Crime Scene Investigation* series (2000–2015). Dr Edmond Locard (1877–1966), the 'Sherlock Holmes of France', set up the first police scientific laboratory for investigating crime and criminals in Lyon in 1910, and codified the principles of modern forensic-scientific practice in his *Traité de Criminalistique* (7 Vols., 1931–35). For Locard, modern forensic science was the silent witness which could be interrogated to reveal the truth about past crimes, based on his so-called 'Exchange Principle' that 'every contact leaves a trace' (Kirk 1953). These scientific developments did not go unnoticed in China, where interest in forensic science fitted neatly into the twentieth-century negotiation between traditional Chinese forensic methods, largely legal in context, and the emergence of new medico-legal and forensic-scientific specialisms in Europe and America (Freidson 1970; Svarverud 2011; Asen 2012).

In 1896, less than ten years after their first publication, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's (1859–1930) first detective stories were translated into classical Chinese to great acclaim, followed in 1916 by *The Complete Stories of Sherlock Holmes* in 44 stories. The success of the translation was further assured by the favourable reaction of such giants of the Chinese literary world as Cheng Xiaoqing 程小青 (1893–1976), who went on to mimic Holmes and Watson's rational scepticism and penetration of the deeper truths of life in his own Shanghai-style short stories (Wong 2007).

In the same years that Sherlock Holmes was taking root in China, the popular depiction of the Chinese detective in American B movies was, at first sight, not so complimentary, particularly since both Bela Lugosi (*Count Dracula*, 1931) and Boris Karloff (*Frankenstein* 1931) were sometime *yellowfaces* in the *Mysterious Detective*, innumerable *Mr Wong* (1935) movies, and *Charlie Chan at the Opera* (1936). Karloff had also played the evil Dr Fu Manchu (*The Mask of Fu Manchu*, 1932), and there are certain formal elements, such as the laboratory setting, that are common to both the depiction of the evil oriental genius and the Hawaii-based detective. But the character of the Chinese detective was both conventional and unique and broke the famously negative depiction of the threatening and often sickly oriental in US movies (Fuller 1996: 56). No doubt the more sinister aspects of the oriental villain bled across genres, but the archetypal Chinese screen detective was a generally good-natured character endowed with 'enigmatic traits such as psychic abilities, highly developed powers of observation and razor-sharp deductions that dazzle and amaze other characters' (Fuller 1997: 151). Their shared laboratory settings associate these characters with the science of detection, and while still partaking of the oriental 'other', the Chinese detective in America was an agent of the state, a patriotic and heroic oriental who was 'without exception, depicted as a loyal servant of any number of chosen institutions of Western authority' (*ibid.*: 86). 'Strangely conversant with the criminal mind, yet equally at home among the cultivated, rich and powerful' (*ibid.*: 151),

the oriental detective's 'subtle discrediting of the West, this constant insistence on the superior finesse of the yellow races in the presence of homicide, is something which every red-blooded American should resent' (Review of *Mr Wong in Chinatown*, *New York Times* 31 July 1939.9). The Euro-American characterisation of the Chinese detective therefore remained ambivalent until the arrival in English literature of Di Renjie.

Di Renjie took some time to re-emerge in the twentieth century, coming to Europe by a circuitous route via Japan, but by the 1960s he had achieved global renown. The apparently insatiable appetite of the British for the exotic and salacious mysteries of the Orient took a new and murderous turn with Robert van Gulik's (1910–67) hugely successful 24 mystery detective stories. Van Gulik based his original fiction on his own translation of the eighteenth-century cases of Di Renjie, which were published as *The Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* in 1949. The series was completed (between 1957 and 1968) while van Gulik was working in the Dutch Foreign service in Asia. Van Gulik's potent mixture of sex (during the same years he published an influential book of erotic coloured prints of uncertain provenance) (van Gulik 1951) and murder is exemplified in the *Chinese Bell Murders* (van Gulik 1958). In this story, a young butcher's daughter, the lover of a hapless candidate for the imperial examiners, is raped and murdered by an irredeemable thug who poses as a mendicant monk.

All these productions have formed the basis for what I suggest is a massive late-twentieth- to twenty-first-century revival of interest in forensic medicine and science, stimulated by the international success of van Gulik's Judge Dee stories, the arrival of American and British TV series and films in China in the last 15 years, together with a pride and familiarity in the antiquity of the forensic science detective novel in China. In Hong Kong, the hugely popular 22-part *Xiyuan lu* 洗冤錄 series, which began in 1999, draws on Song Ci's 宋慈 twelfth-century instructions to coroners, mixed in with the cases of Judge Bao.

There have been five Central China TV television seasons featuring Judge Dee (Fu *et al.* 2004–18) and recent films include Tsui Hark's award-winning *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (*Di Renjie zhi tongtian diguo* 狄仁傑之通天帝國 2010) and *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon* (*Di Renjie zhi shen zhi shendou long wang* 狄仁傑之神都龍王 2013).

There is no doubt that *Wuxia* owes much to this twentieth-century cross-fertilisation of the forensic detective genre between London, Shanghai, Hollywood, and Hong Kong. It would therefore be wrong to conclude that the forensic detective in *Wuxia* is unattractive to a Chinese audience. Read against the backdrop of the racial stereotyping of American and UK genres of the inter-war period, the figure of the Chinese detective had many positive qualities of intelligence, commitment, and flexibility. Xu Baijiu's craving for a *truth* that reveals itself through forensic examination lies precisely within this negotiation between the depiction of traditional and modern professional forensic frameworks. For him, culpability and responsibility are definitively located in bare facts, the more naked and stripped of cultural meaning the better. But

according to our film, this is a worldview that requires a contemporary moderation that scientises Chinese tradition.

In many respects, both main protagonists are troubled heroes who embody old Chinese stereotypes of masculinity, the *wen* 文 (literary scholar) and the *wu* 武 (martial warrior), and yin-yang polar opposites (and represent the kinds of sons and heirs that all traditional Chinese mothers have apparently aspired to produce). But in Chinese tradition both are essential to the health of each other, as two sides of the same phenomenon. The Chinese scholar, pale from his mental exertions in the study, and delicate in constitution from lack of exercise, is reinvented here as a representative of rationality, science, and modernity, and the transcending of emotion. In recent years Chinese passion for similar fictional characters in modern adaptations of the Holmes (*Fuermosi* 福尔摩斯) story has intensified with a craze for forensic science novels, TV documentaries, and movies. *Crime Scene Investigation* is a nationwide hit, and so is Benedict Cumberbatch, the most determinedly asexual actor to be voted ‘Sexiest Man Alive’ (*Daily Mail* 2 October, 2013). His interpretation of Sherlock Holmes makes him the latest clean-shaven effete scholarly figure to have taken young Chinese girls by storm, just like their UK counterparts (BBC China blog 2 January, 2014).

The other clean-shaven, delicate forensic scientist with hairless creamy skin who has stirred the passions of many young Chinese girls in cyberspace is the inimitable Johnny Depp, now known for his rather more hirsute role as Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series (dir. Verbinski, Marshall, Ronning and Sandberg 2003, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2017). Compare his vulnerable forensic gaze in Tim Burton’s *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) with the nervous, intense gaze of Xu Baijiu. Like Xu Baijiu, the *Sleepy Hollow* detective Ichabod Crane has trouble with a father figure, who has killed his mother for her practice of witchcraft and superstition. Both characters are therefore victims of paternal traumas that have disfigured their lives, and both have to battle with and overcome what is represented as a pathological patriarchal principle in the course of their respective films (Figure 1.7a and b).

We can vouch for this fascination with the forensic detective genre and its cross-cultural genius among our students, for as one recent UCL graduate tells me about the latest in the Judge Bao genre:

Apart from *Zhong’an liuzu* 重案六组 (Special Detective Squad) my favourite one is *Shaonian bao qingtian* 少年包青天, especially the first series. I was fascinated by this TV series as a little girl largely because I was drawn to its mysterious enchantment in relation to traditional Chinese culture. It has made detective narratives a way of informing me about Chinese ethnicity, myth, folklore, ghost stories, as well as traditional medicine practices (and a lot more). Yet it also seeks a fairly good balance between so-called supernatural beliefs and apparently scientific and logical explanations at the end of each case. In a word, it made me feel an urge to belong to a culture that is both mysterious and cool.

(personal communication with Lulu Wang,
UCL 2015)

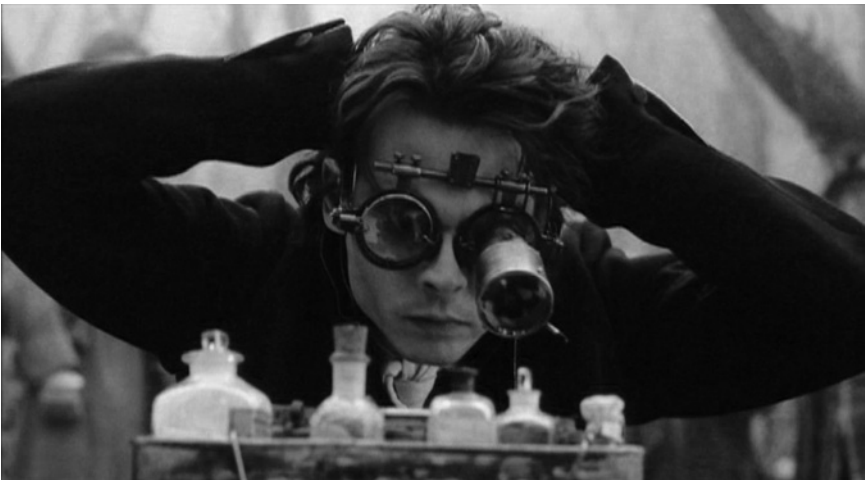


Figure 1.7 (a) and (b) Medicine bottles and the forensic gaze. Depp and Takeshi get to the bottom of things . . .

Conclusion

I will leave further reflections on the apparent fascination of young Chinese women with homoerotic male relationships to another occasion. But Lulu's fascination with the 'cool' and ethnically seductive Chinese detective genre and the way it strikes a 'balance between so-called supernatural beliefs and seeming scientific and logical explanations' neatly brings this chapter to a conclusion. We have come a long way from the kind of analysis that contrasts the cosmologised Chinese body with the anatomised Greek body. Historians like Li Jianmin (*forthcoming*) and Catherine Despeux (2005) have given us new histories of anatomy, dissection, and surgery for China, and Asen and Wu of the modern Chinese

forensic body of the official handbooks, a tradition which we know has its origins in second-century BCE China. The legendary Bao Gong and Di Renjie have been recreated for a modern China that claims at least an equivalent expertise to the West in the discovery of moral truths through reading the inanimate body. As Xu Baijiu sides with Liu Jinxi and comes to his aid in the counter-attack on Tang Long (Liu)'s father with an acupuncture needle jabbed into the foot close to the acupoint *Yongquan* 湧泉, and some more at the back of his neck, heaven comes to their aid as a bolt of lightning connects the needles to form a deadly circuit. The Xixia chief is electrocuted, and a violent separatist past is finished off in a triumph of cross-cultural cooperation, traditional medicine, electricity, and self-sacrifice.

Tang Long's journey to become Liu Jinxi has involved a complete rejection of the separatist violence of his forefathers. In a bizarre twist that confirms the new order that is contemporary China, he cuts himself off from his violent heritage, slicing off his own arm – an ironic homage to *The One Armed Swordsman*, since Liu's estranged Xixia father is played by the one-armed swordsman himself, Jimmy Wang Yu. But this final act also subverts the pre-modern trope of the severing of flesh as an act of Confucian altruism to feed the ailing body of one's parents. In *Wuxia*, Liu Jinxi severs his lineage and sacrifices his blood tie to his father in a filial act to the more forward-looking, multicultural China that he has chosen to join.

In the negotiation of truth between these two men it becomes clear that they are in fact two complementary and interdependent aspects of the same struggle for survival. Together, they represent a uniquely Chinese brilliance, one able to resolve the tensions between anatomical science and cultural heritage that had embodied the longstanding nineteenth- and twentieth-century national spiritual crisis. In contrast to Liu Jinxi's seamless ability to deal with complex and fluid social and moral situations, and the flexibility of his living body, Xu Baijiu's voyeuristic anatomical gaze and his obsession with objectifying both living and dead bodies does not engage with real people, but rather appears quasi-pornographic and immoral. His insights can only be made meaningful through a collage of modern and traditional knowledge wherein the boundaries between life and death can ultimately be negotiated through Traditional Chinese Medicine. Liu's flexibility is physiologised: a mastery, at once scientific and anatomical yet simultaneously supernatural, of the martial arts body, a body that, phoenix-like, revives from the dead as Liu and Xu come together for a single common purpose. Together, the two protagonists embody a new national pride, keen to represent multicultural genius, a strong body of the people, with a long synthetic history. This ideal is one that embraces the past with a fluid, relative science and morality that is more than fit for the challenges of the future – both dead and alive, empathetic, emotional, but simultaneously rational and ready for whatever the future may bring. Despite the failure of the bodies of the Boxers to ward off European bullets with their bare hands in 1901, and countless less than totally convincing attempts to prove the Chinese martial arts in physical contests, despite the failure to identify corporeal counterparts to *qi* or the channels of acupuncture, the magic of *Wuxia* lives on. In the spirit of China's nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century

reception of European science, more than a hundred years later the martial artists are still ‘doing it on their own terms’ (Elman 2005), flying through the air, running up walls, and leaping over rooftops to re-balance global dynamics for the twenty-first century.

Filmography

- American Dreams in China (Zhongguo hehuo ren 中國合伙人)*, dir. Peter Chan (Chen Kexin 陳可辛), 2013.
- Armour of God (Longxiong hudi 龍兄虎弟)*, dir. Jackie Chan (Cheng Long 成龍), 1986.
- Charlie Chan at the Opera*, dir. H. Bruce Humberstone, 1936.
- The Chinese Boxer (Longhu dou 龍虎斗)*, dir. Jimmy Wong Yu (Wang Yu 王羽), 1970.
- Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame (Di Renjie zhi tongtian diguo 狄仁傑之通天帝國)*, dir. Tsui Hark (Xu Ke 徐克), 2010.
- Dracula*, dir. Tod Browning, 1931.
- Dragon (Wuxia 武俠)*, dir. Peter Chan (Chen Kexin 陳可辛), 2011.
- Frankenstein*, dir. James Whale, 1931.
- Heroes Shed No Tears (Yingxiong wulei 英雄無淚)*, dir. John Woo (Wu Yusen 吳宇森), 1986.
- Ip Man (Ye Men 葉問)*, dir. Wilson Yip (Ye Weixin 葉偉信), 2008, and sequels 2010, 2016.
- The Mask of Fu Manchu*, dir. Charles Brabin, 1932.
- The Mysterious Detective, Mr Wang*, dir. William Nigh, 1935.
- One Armed Swordsman (Dubi dao 獨臂刀)*, dir. Jimmy Wang Yu, 1967.
- Pirates of the Caribbean*, dir. Verbinski, G., Marshall, R., Ronning J. and Sandberg E. 2003; sequels 2006, 2007, 2011, 2017.
- Project A II (A jihua xuji A 計劃續集)*, dir. Jackie Chan, 1987.
- Sleepy Hollow*, dir. Tim Burton, 1999.
- Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon (Di Renjie zhi shen dou longwang 狄仁傑之神都龍王)*, dir. Tsui Hark, 2013.

TV series

- Crime Scene Investigation*, Zuicker, A.E. et al. 15 Seasons, 2000–15.
- Detective Di Renjie (Shentan Di Renjie 神探狄仁杰)* Series 1–6, dir. Qiang Yanqiu 钱雁秋, 2004.

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- zhengli xiaozu 睡虎地秦墓整理小組 (1990) *Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian* 睡虎地秦墓竹簡, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe.
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