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## The Old School Kung Fu Fest

By Joseph Perry

### FILMMAKER IN FOCUS: JOSEPH KUO

The Old School Kung Fu Fest, co-presented by New York City's Museum of the Moving Image (MoMI) and Subway Cinema, returned December 6-13, 2021 for its ninth year with filmmaker Joseph Kuo honored as "Taiwan's ultimate independent filmmaker, [who] put his stamp on the '70s as his own boss, writing, producing, and directing dozens of movies through his production company, Hong Hwa International Films, which he founded in 1973." The Old School Kung Fu Fest showcased eight newly restored Kuo films and one classic Kuo fave, *The Old Master*. Receiving gala theatrical premieres of their new 2K restorations on the big screen at MoMI were *18 Bronzemen*, *Return of 18 Bronzemen*, *7 Grandmasters* and *36 Deadly Styles* along with *Mystery of Chess Boxing*.

**Martial Arts Mavens:** Kuo used a rotating cast of cast members, especially Carter Wong, Peng Tien, Jeanie Chang and Polly Ling-Feng Shang-Kuan—female action stars whose characters were sometimes initially mistaken for men, though they never looked very masculine in their disguises as Wen Chiang-lung, Li Yi-Min, Jack Long, and Mark Long. Kuo's choreographers included Corey Yuen, one of the Seven Little Fortunes, and Yuen Cheung-yan, brother of Yuen Wo-ping.

Let's kick things off with Kuo's *18 Bronzemen* (1976), one of my all-time favorite kung fu films, thanks in no small part to the initial group of the titular warriors who look like a cross between lower-budget versions of the original Marvel Iron Man and robots from a '30s black-and-white serial. To graduate from Shaolin Temple, where they have trained to be kung fu specialists since they were small children, Tang Siu-Lung (Tien) and his no-nonsense friend Brother Wan (Wong) must defeat the bronzemen without being killed and pass grueling, life-or-death tests. *18 Bronzemen* is filled with political and personal intrigue, as characters are out to avenge the death of family members and topple the evil Qing ruling body. And then there is Shang-Kuan as Miss Lu, a young woman skilled in kung fu who characters initially think is a man, despite her never really looking or sounding like one. This film is played much straighter than some of Kuo's other films showcased at the festival. A good time is guaranteed with *18 Bronzemen*, which has a much more imaginative plot than many revenge-focused kung fu films and puts its protagonists through much different wringers than the usual bigger-boss-level fights.



Courtesy of Mei Ah Entertainment Group Ltd.

Director Joseph Kuo, two from *7 Grandmasters* and the original *Drunken Master*, Jackie Chan.



Courtesy of Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute

Despite its title, *Return of the 18 Bronzemen* (1976) is not a direct sequel, though, as usual in many Kuo films, actors from his other films, including *18 Bronzemen*, return—Wong, Tien, and Shang-Kuan—but in this outing they play different characters. Wong is either an all-out villain or a 1970s antihero, depending on your perspective, playing Yong Zhen, an evil prince out to learn the secrets of the Shaolin temple, only so that he may topple it and its members. *Return of the 18 Bronzemen* is less concerned with drama and story than its predecessor, focusing more heavily on Yong Zhen's training sequences and showdown and throwdowns with the titular golden gladiators. If you're in the mood for straight-ahead action without as much grandeur as *18 Bronzemen* boasted, this sequel is a good time.

In *7 Grandmasters* (1977), Cheng Shang-Kuan (Jack Long) is all set to retire as the best kung fu practitioner in his region, complete with official banner, when some upstart delivers a note claiming that Long is not, in fact, the best. Long then goes on a quest across the land with his four

finest students. They are followed by Li (Hsia Hsiao-Ying) who starts off as an annoyance but eventually becomes a fifth student. When Long was a student, his master entrusted him with a pamphlet detailing the Paie Mei Twelve Strikes; three of its pages were stolen by a masked man. Intrigue galore comes into play once Li is deceived into believing that someone close to him murdered his parents, and the missing three strikes come into play. Long gets a fine showcase here displaying "his" martial arts skills, and the third act offers some fun surprises.

I didn't keep track of the actual number of kung fu styles in *36 Deadly Styles* (1982), but I'll take Kuo at his word for that. He certainly delivers a bevy of names for the various styles from the threatening to the downright hilarious. And that's how the story ranges too, as we witness everything from a goofy villain—who we can't wait to see get his—to the deaths of some characters. *36 Deadly Styles* may be the heaviest on comedy among this year's fest selections. Heck, we even get Henry Mancini's "The Pink Panther Theme" and one of the wackiest wigs in the kung fu genre to take the head scratching to a whole 'nother level! This film sees a group of Buddhist monks and some fellow protagonists fight it out against a gang of villains out to kill and it is an absolute blast. Wah Jee (Lik Chung) is rescued by a monk (Jack Long) when his uncle is killed during a fight with the evil Cheung Sze (Jang-Lee Hwang). Wah trains in the titular styles in an effort to get revenge.

*World of Drunken Master* (1979) is one of several films that aimed to lure in viewers who loved the previous year's *Drunken Master* which pro-



**"I want to say to the audience, like after the fighting scene, "We could have tea together, not fight next time."**

Jackie Chan interview VS #19



pelled Jackie Chan to stardom. The plot goes the dual narrative route, with the opening and closing of the film featuring estranged former friends Beggar So (Li) and Tai Pei (Jack Long) invited by a mystery host to meet at an out-of-the-way, out-of-business restaurant. The two begin reminiscing and the film then goes down the flashbacks path, relating the tale of how the two met as young orphans, who were not above stealing grapes to try to make some fast cash. The vineyard owner catches them in the act and has them work to pay off their debt. Not without a heart, the man teaches them drunken boxing, and the pair eventually clashes with a local gang. A love triangle ensues involving Yu-Lu (Chang) and, of course, there is plenty of drunken-style fighting to entertain. There's nothing quite like the original **Drunken Master**--and there are plenty of knock-offs from which to choose with some better and others far worse than this entry--but Kuo knows how to keep things entertaining and certainly does so here.

Get the hankies out for **Shaolin Kung Fu** (1974). Although the title doesn't scream "emotional impact," the story delivers just that along with the expected swift-kicking action. Rickshaw operator Lin Fung (Chiang-Lung Wen) has promised his blind wife that he will not get into any more scrapes. However, when a rival company with plenty of boorish muscle on hand and some powerful behind-the-scenes ties oversteps

his boundaries--one of its goons gets physical with a child on the streets--Fung defends the child. This is bad news for all involved, as our hero must defend not only his wife but his workmates and company owners as well. Kuo eschews comedy in favor of going heavier on the dangers here, with the seemingly untouchable, highly placed baddies kidnapping Fung's wife and forcing him to watch them abuse her while he is tied up and unable to help. After his inevitable escape, he naturally goes on a quest for revenge. **Shaolin Kung Fu** has its strong points, but the plot is generic compared with other offerings in this year's Old School Kung Fu Fest. Wen is quite skilled, but the fight scenes are rather basic and his opponents usually not physically imposing. Also, there are no Shaolin references in the film other than the title.

Court intrigue abounds in **Shaolin Kids** (1975), which does have Shaolin warriors in it, though none young enough to be actual kids. One of the high points is a pair of conceited villains who, like any good professional wrestling tag team, have a signature finishing move, "Earth and Sky," which they call out just before administering it. Because the move is so devastating, one would think they would just use it to begin their fights and cut the skirmishes short, but no, they must revel in their kung fu prowess and dominance before offing their opponents. You would also think someone would figure out how to counter the move, but no. On to the story: Ex-minister Liu opposes power-hungry Premier Hu Wei Yung (Yuan Yi), who has plans to overthrow the emperor, and is poisoned. His daughter Liu Sin (Cheng) joins up with a band of fighters whose loyalty lies with the emperor and whose ranks include Lu Tung (Tien) and Shang Kuan Tung (Wong). In their mission to warn the emperor about Yung's nefarious plans, they encounter the premier's henchmen and allies, leading to plenty of skirmishes on the path to justice and revenge. There's much more swordplay here than in many of Kuo's other films screened at the fest which made for variety. It also beefs up the otherwise rather standard though skillful fight sequences.

Always leave 'em laughing when you say goodbye, as George M. Cohan once quipped, and we'll do just that by rounding out this festival wrap-up with **The Mystery of Chess Boxing** (aka **Ninja Checkmate**, 1979). This feature is sheer entertainment and one of the most fun kung fu flicks made, even though not the most original when it comes to plot. The film more than makes up for that with terrific fight scenes which are almost non-stop and often happen at the drop of a plate--a metal plate, that is, dealt out by the villainous Ghost Face Killer (Mark Long who played the character in the **36 Deadly Styles**), who was believed to be dead but is now hunting down old enemies. Don't expect much backstory on any of his potential victims, except

for young, somewhat naive Ah Pao (Li), whose father was killed by Ghost Face Killer, and Li's teacher Chi Siu Tien (Jack Long), a former kung fu expert who has gone incognito as a humble chess master. The film may lean heavily on revenge elements, but there are plenty of goofy shenanigans to bring smiles and laughter to the proceedings, especially some jaw-dropping antics involving rice bowls being juggled to feed some students but not others.

The Old School Kung Fu Fest's focus on Kuo showed that he was a master at his craft. Although his films sometimes had editing issues (probably in an effort to keep as close to a 90-minute running time as possible), resulting in some head-scratching moments, coupled with occasional derivative plot elements and heavy leaning on tropes, overall he knew how to deliver high-energy films with thrilling action, plus he had a fine group of martial artists as his core actors. His **18 Bronzemen** and **The Mystery of Chess Boxing** are classics, and **36 Deadly Styles** is close behind those two. ☿

## FIGHTING WORDS

"What more triumphant an end can there be than to be raked by the fiery rash of a hundred marksmen's cartridges, blistered, where I stand like bleeding shredded hamburger?"  
**Pit Fighter** (2005)

"Adios, you walking junkyard."  
**Eliminators** (1986)

"Didn't I tell you, Jade? I got a black belt in *shotgun!*" **Picasso Trigger** (1988)

"You don't seem to want to accept the fact you're dealing with an expert in guerilla warfare...A man who's been trained...to live off the land, to eat things that would make a billy goat puke." **First Blood** (1982)

"Enslave them? I want to exterminate them!" **Alien Agenda** (2007)

"Killing him wouldn't be murder. It would be like cleaning a cesspool."  
**Cold Sweat** (1970)

"Come on, come on, just do it. Come on, it's like the commercial, right? Be all you can be. Reach out and shoot someone. It's late. I'm starving."  
**Latin Dragon** (2004)

"Let me review the tactical situation for you...Boudreaux is wounded...He's an annoying little f\*cking insect, and I want him stepped on--*hard!* **Hard Target** (1993)

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