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Treading on the Tiger's Tail: Chinese Wuxia and Japanese Jidaigeki Action Films Reacting to State Censorship in the 1930s and 1940s

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the relationship between *wuxia* (martial heroes) and *jidaigeki* (period drama) action films and state censorship in the 1930s and 1940s. I first introduce readers to key East-Asian literary conventions that portray righteous warriors who incarnate their moral codes with swords. I then illustrate the political contexts in 1930s China and 1940s Japan which caused the popular film genres of *wuxia* and *jidaigeki* to become politically problematic and therefore strictly censored. I closely examine director Bu Wancang's 1931 *wuxia* film *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* and Kurosawa Akira's *jidaigeki* 1945 film *Treading on the Tiger's Tail*, investigating creative solutions each director found in order to release their respective films despite censorship pressures. There are three inventions both directors pioneered in their work, namely "ostensible exactness" in setting; "patriotic warriors" in characterization; and "swordless fights" in presenting spectacular action scenes. I argue that although these solutions failed to restore both genres back to their former popularity, Kurosawa's film paved the way for the success of his world-class *jidaigeki* in the 1950s, and Bu's *wuxia* led to the emergence of kung fu films in the 1960s. My critical analysis underscores the innovative creativity of Chinese *wuxia* and Japanese

jidaigeki films while calling attention to the artistic and cultural legacies of these two popular cinematic genres. The comparison demonstrates how film censorship may undermine or even destroy traditions that have a long history and deep cultural roots.

Detouring Censorship: Suppression, Creation, and Adaptation in Chinese Wuxia and Japanese Jidaigeki Films

Both Chinese *wuxia* and Japanese *jidaigeki* are subgenres of East Asian action cinema that achieved peerless domestic popularity in the late 1920s and early 30s, respectively. They generated success not only by portraying righteous warriors that embodied their moral codes with swords but also by catering to the general public's desire for justice and order in a turbulent time. However, these cinematic genres gradually lost their dominance in the domestic film industry during the 1930s. In 1931, the production of Chinese *wuxia* was prohibited by the Chinese nationalist government for promoting superstition and anarchy. Fearing the leftist elements in *jidaigeki*, the militaristic

government in Japan also began to suppress its production in the mid-1930s, and *jidaigeki* films were strictly censored during the U.S. occupation period (1945-1952).

Director Bu Wancang was a prolific Chinese director and screenwriter fully aware of the political hostility towards *wuxia*. He made substantial thematic and cinematographic changes to his *wuxia* film *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* 一剪梅 (Yi Jian Mei, 1931) so that it might pass state censorship. The renowned Japanese director Kurosawa Akira also adapted a kabuki play into an unconventional “swordless” *jidaigeki* *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger’s Tail* 虎の尾を踏む男達 (Tora No O Wo Fumu Otokotachi, 1945) in order to release the film despite enormous censorship pressure from both the militaristic Japanese government and the U.S. Civil Information and Education Section (CIE). Both directors experimented with creative solutions to circumvent state censorship while keeping the aesthetic values intact and the political message undistorted. In this article, I demonstrate how both filmmakers place the fictional narration in a real historical background to advocate nationalism, change the conventional depiction of combatants in *wuxia* and *jidaigeki* from anti-authoritarian rebels to conforming patriots, and present swordless action scenes to circumvent contemporary censorship laws. Although none of these attempts succeeded in reinstating either genre back to its heyday, I contend that they helped to preserve and innovate the generic conventions of *wuxia* and *jidaigeki*, allowing the two genres to survive suppression and rebirth in the 1950s and 1960s.

Burning of the Sword: The *Wuxia* Tradition and Its Decline

The term “*wuxia*” is a noun consisting of two separate characters “wu” 武 denoting physical combat, and “xia” 侠, referring to morally righteous warrior figures. The initial mention of the term can be traced back to the mid-3rd century BCE (Ye, 1997). The eminent figure of the

legalist school of Chinese philosophy, Han Feizi, denounces *xia* for abusing their strength to transgress the law of the state in his eponymous work. Such criticism has “resonated among *wuxia* detractors through the ages,” including the Guomindang (GMD) or the Chinese Nationalist Party government (1928-1949) who perceived the genre as subversive and thus hampering the building of a legal society (Teo, 2009, p. 19). In the government’s view, warriors in *wuxia* are following their personal understanding of justice, which can inspire the common public to transgress government laws. Ultimately, this intrinsic incongruity contributed to the GMD government’s suppression of *wuxia* and its production in the 1930s (Zhang, 1999).

Beginning in the 20th century, filmmakers started to seek inspiration from the *wuxia* tradition, adapting popular *wuxia* novels onto the silver screen (Teo, 2009). They believed that adapting *wuxia* fictional tales into films would undoubtedly succeed since the audience loved to watch “picturized” action scenes. However, traditional criticisms of the genre reappeared. Intellectuals who opposed feudalism and supernaturalism vehemently detested *wuxia* films for their unrealistic depictions of “flying sword combat, escape by stealth and other means of subterfuge...” to satisfy popular tastes and entertain the often-undereducated audience (Kung, 1967, p. 157). The excessive use of special effects in *wuxia* films, therefore, placed *wuxia* in a controversial position when the intelligentsia was endeavoring to diminish the influence of superstitions in China.

Meanwhile, GMD noticed the affective power of *wuxia* films on the general public and began to legislate new laws to regulate their content. After uniting most of the nation in 1927, the nationalist government wanted to seek stability and control. Rather than being insufficiently revolutionary, the problem with these films was that they were overtly rebellious. See, for example, *The Mighty Hero Gan Fengchi* 大俠甘鳳池 (Da Xia Gan Fengchi, 1928). In one scene, the righteous protagonists directly condemn the villain as a “nasty officer” *gouguan* 狗官 to initiate a fight (Yang, 1928, 0:04:44). They further demand the

incompetent officer leave his post since a capable government official should protect the people instead of sacrificing their interests to meet his. This particular scene conveys the political message that commoners have the moral right to rise against corrupted government authorities. In January 1931, the Executive Yuan founded the Film Censorship Committee and finally grasped control of the Chinese film industry (Teo, 2009). Despite its popularity, the committee placed *wuxia* on the top of its list of banned genres while pushing major companies out of future production (Guo, 1934). Most large companies switched to so-called “soft” cinema, emphasizing more the form and aesthetics of a work, rather than content that could be politically controversial. Since then, the *wuxia* genre ceased to be the center of Chinese cinema and became a marginalized cinematic genre.

Double Suppression of Japanese *Jidaigeki*

The term *jidaigeki* or “period drama” has its roots in traditional kabuki performance. It refers to films that depict Japanese society before the Meiji Restoration, in contrast to *gendaigeki* or “modern drama” in which stories take place after 1868. The genre is known for featuring sword-carrying warriors and presenting spectacular sword-fighting scenes. Similar to *wuxia* films, *jidaigeki* reached their heyday in the late 1920s, when Japan was transitioning from feudalism to modernity (Gerow et al., 2012). Japanese people in that era were experiencing overwhelming anxiety as their daily lives were increasingly transformed by ongoing modernization (Yoshimoto, 2022). The introduction of monopoly capitalism, for instance, altered Japanese society fundamentally by placing the merchant class over the samurai class in the social hierarchy. Such a drastic change engendered a sense of dislocation not only for the samurai but also for the commoners, who used to look upon samurai moral codes as the bedrock of social order. Simultaneously, the ongoing urbanization process pushed millions of villagers to migrate to metropolitan cities, away from the close interpersonal relationships they

once enjoyed in rural life. Out of nostalgia and insecurity, they went to theaters to watch sword masters living their traditional ways of life in the idealized Edo Japan (Yoshimoto, 2022).

The militaristic Japanese government, however, did not share the public’s zest but regarded *jidaigeki* as a politically problematic genre that undermined the prosperity of the nation. As the Great Depression hit Japan severely in 1930, resulting in countless youth enthusiastically embracing socialism, nationalist government officials did not want *jidaigeki* to inspire more people to join political radicalism, given that the “most innovative *jidaigeki* filmmakers were themselves radical youth” (Yoshimoto, 2022, pp. 220–221). Moreover, the militaristic government prohibited *jidaigeki* for another distinctive reason: it attacked the genre for containing “Anglo-American” elements, by which the censors meant kissing scenes and extensive use of Hollywood-style filming techniques in *jidaigeki*, such as fast editing and close-ups (Hirano, 1994). As the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, the militaristic Japanese government further deemed *jidaigeki* not only a problematic genre leaning toward the “Western enemies” but also a useless medium in terms of disseminating propagandist ideas to support the war effort (Yoshimoto, 2022, pp. 222–224). The golden era of *jidaigeki* eventually drew to an end in the mid-1930s.

While the production of *jidaigeki* came to a halt during the war period, many Japanese filmmakers hoped to revive the genre when the Asia-Pacific War was over. Yet this anticipation proved improbable when the U.S. occupation government took over the country and announced its full control of the Japanese film industry in 1945. On September 22, CIE declared its ultimate purpose of “helping reconstruct Japan positively” by regulating the country’s film production (Hirano, 1994, p. 37). Since *jidaigeki* was known for presenting feudal Japan and violent sword-fighting scenes, it inevitably challenged CIE’s thematic prohibition of “celebrating feudalism,” which was based on the understanding of feudalistic sentiments as responsible for ultranationalism and militarism

(Yoshimoto, 2022, p. 223). Simultaneously, the Occupation government deemed sword-fighting scenes, in which the sword connects Shintoism with Japanese nationalism, as hampering the country to embrace a peaceful future. In the indigenous belief system, the sword is a sacred object that followers may offer to *kami* or the god in Shinto rituals (BBC, 2009). This relationship led the American censors to misinterpret *jidaigeki* as employing sword fights to advocate feudalism and militarism. In sum, *jidaigeki* was a scapegoat, suffering a double suppression from both the wartime Japanese government and the Occupation government after Japan's defeat; a suppression that was not based on a rational ground but unreasonable fear (Yoshimoto, 2022).

Treading on the Tiger's Tail: Bu Wancang and His Wuxia Film

The creation of the film *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* (1931) inevitably involved making conscious decisions to sidestep censorship laws and enable this *wuxia* adaptation of Shakespeare's comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* to reach the general audience. The initial change director Bu made was placing the story in a real Chinese city—Guangzhou (Bu, 1931, 19:21). Since *wuxia* typically deals with a fictional setting or *jianghu*, this particularity seemingly rules the film out of the genre. Moreover, the city of Guangzhou carries a strong political connotation as it is one of the major military bases for the nationalist government. Here, director Bu linked his film with nationalism so that it would not fall into the derogatory category of “fantasy films” like most *wuxia* films of the period. Had the film staged the story in a mythical mountain or a remote village, it would foreseeably suffer from accusations of promoting superstition or escapism and would likely not have passed the censorship board.

While most *wuxia* films tend to depict rebellious warriors posing threats on social stability, *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* challenges this controversial convention by repainting the male

protagonist Valentine as an ambitious graduate from Republic of China Military Academy (00:01:56). This choice creates a firm connection between Valentine and the authority while endorsing his identity as a member of the existing system rather than an external threat. Meanwhile, it explains where Valentine's sophistication in martial arts comes from. To prevent potential attacks, director Bu cannot let Valentine learn combat skills from a mysterious manual as most protagonists in *wuxia* films do. Otherwise, the film may approach the dangerous zone of promoting supernaturalism and superstition. Linking Valentine to GMD's National Army thus imbues the film with a practical meaning as it might encourage young viewers to realize that joining military training is another way to become a martial arts master.

The director also reshapes the characteristics of the loyal and spirited Silvia (Shi Luohua). He presents her with a higher sense of subjectivity and shrewdness, resembling the heroine in many Chinese *wuxia* films depicting *nüxia* or female warriors. The term *xia* is gender-neutral, though it is often translated into “knight-errant.” What happened between the 1920s and 1930s was a proliferation of *wuxia* films celebrating valiant female warriors, such as *Red Heroine* 紅俠 (*Hong Xia*, 1929) and *Woman Warrior White Rose* 女俠白玫瑰 (*Nüxia Bai Meigui*, 1929). In one scene, we see how Bu helps to substantiate the argument here. After realizing Proteus (Bai Lede) might be the slanderer, Silvia tricks him into believing that there has always been a real affection between them (Bu, 1931, 1:32:00–33:04). This unexpected expression of love surprises Proteus, causing him to boastfully confess that he is the actual culprit behind Valentine's banishment. Now the secret is revealed. Silvia suddenly changes from a warm smile into a bitter gaze, condemning Proteus as a despicable betrayer (1:32:55). No matter how Proteus endeavors to persuade her to keep the secret, Silvia firmly rejects his apologies and slaps him twice in the face. This inventive scene director Bu added manifests Silvia's subjectivity as the heroine of the story. Her shrewdness, courage, and righteousness all demonstrate that she can meet the standards of an outstanding female

warrior. In this sense, the audience may appreciate how director Bu manages to portray two heroic *xia* without necessarily annoying the censors.

Since swordplay is no longer an option, director Bu employs a realistic style of filming to present action scenes. The fight between Proteus (Bai Lede) and Thurio (Diao Li'ao) is entirely hand-to-hand combat devoid of any special effects (1:34:45-35:32). There is no more teleportation, flying swords, or any of the fascinating tricks normally found in conventional *wuxia* films; instead, we see “down-to-earth” fistfights and wrestling. Bu inserts several close-ups to intensify the combat, worrying that the audience may not appreciate this plain style of performance. Right before the quarrel escalates into a brutal fight, Bu provides a point-of-view shot of Silvia who is witnessing the whole event (1:34:49). From her terrified visage, the audience can instantly sense the tension pervading the atmosphere. When the fight reaches a climax, director Bu plays the same trick again with a POV shot of Proteus, inviting the audience to substitute themselves into his perspective (1:35:19). This time, the audience is playing the role of a fighter directly involved in the ongoing battle. From Proteus's eyes, the audience watch Thurio squarely staring in their direction with furrowed brows and pursed lips. Then he moves closer and closer to the camera until his blurred face occupies the entire frame (1:35:22). Although the scene does not involve any use of weapons, the audience can unmistakably understand that this is a life-and-death fight as intense as one between two sword-carrying warriors. This exemplary action scene proves that a *wuxia* film can present breathtaking action scenes without relying on special effects, providing a potential direction future *wuxia* directors can take when the conventional way of illustrating martial arts skills is prohibited.

Continue on without Rest: Kurosawa Akira's Solutions to Bypass Censorship

While Bu Wanchang decided to bring *wuxia* to contemporary society, Kurosawa Akira chose to place the story in an earlier historical period to bypass censorship. The *Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* is a film adaptation of a classic kabuki story named *Kanjinchō* 勧進帳. The adaptation is significant as the narrative takes place in the late Heian period (794-1185), which is distinct from many *jidaigeki* that are based in Edo Japan (1603-1867). Although this choice differs from Bu's solution, it serves the same purpose of painting the film with nationalistic implications. Yoshitsune's escape journey as a real historical event evokes a stronger sense of “Japaneseness” in the viewers compared to fictional Edo legends since it comprises a part of Japanese national consciousness. The creation and maintenance of such consciousness require inventing a collective memory and reiterating it so that every citizen shares a collective identity. By celebrating Yoshitsune's legendary escape and his loyal retainers, Kurosawa selected a story that was present in the collective memory of the people of Japan. This concession he made to abide by the Japanese censorship board simultaneously allowed the film to participate in reinforcing the collective identity and contribute to promoting the government's militaristic agenda in the mid-1940s.

Besides the creative strategy regarding setting, Kurosawa adds a slapstick comedian into his adaptation, who shifts the narration from a third-person point of view to a first-person perspective and thus connects the film to nationalistic sentiments. In the original play, viewers are merely spectators who cannot participate in the story nor substitute themselves into any of the characters; they watch the entire story from a detached third-person perspective. They may sympathize with Yoshitsune's party or admire Benkei's quick-wittedness but are unable to feel galvanized and relate the narrative to the

ongoing war. Incorporating the porter into the narrative enhances the narrator's intimate first-person perspective. In this sense, the viewers are now watching the story through the porter's eyes as if they are accompanying Yoshitsune's party at the scene. To reinforce this effect, Kurosawa frequently employs POV shots of the porter, nudging the audience to accept him as the narrator. Meanwhile, the director allows the porter to demonstrate hyperbolic and hilarious facial expressions based on the potential reaction of the audience. He grins, sweats, or sobs at the exact moment when the audience is supposed to demonstrate the desired emotion. He kneels before Benkei to stop him from beating his master Yoshitsune when the audience cannot take this outrageous act anymore (Kurosawa, 1945, 43:04). He externalizes the audience's emotional journey, which again intensifies the illusion that the porter is the narrator. As soon as the audience accepts this illusion, they may ponder what the porter can do to save Yoshitsune's imperiled life.

Subsequently, they might begin to deliberate what a commoner can do to save Japan from losing the war. Kurosawa innovated the porter's role to incorporate a propagandistic element into the film, hoping it might accommodate the censors' political demand for mass mobilization.

Because swordplay was prohibited under the U.S. occupation government's reign starting from September 1945, Kurosawa preserved the sword as a key prop, but he ensured that neither physical contact nor actual combat ever occurred. To maintain the intensity of the action scenes, he employed fast cutting when demonstrating the conflicts between Yoshitsune's party and the barrier guards. A rapid cutting of close-ups occurs when Togashi's advisor tries to check whether Benkei is reading from a real subscription list (34:16-27). Within eleven seconds, the film presents nine close-ups of Yoshitsune's retainers and how they react to the advisor's approach. Such a series of shots intensifies the tension in the atmosphere since the advisor may arrest Yoshitsune's party once he realizes that Benkei is reading from a blank scroll. Although the audience is watching mostly

facial expressions, the viewer can recognize how imperiled the situation is for Yoshitsune and his men. Simultaneously, the use of fast cutting contrasts other characters with Benkei's composure before potential death, encouraging the audience to again appreciate his heroism. Though this particular scene is as abstract and theatrical as a kabuki dance devoid of any actual combat, it is nothing less intense and thrilling than a conventional sword fight with Benkei nothing less heroic than an authentic warrior. In a word, this cutting technique envisions a swordless form of action scenes, which helps the film abide by the governmental banning of the sword.

Rising From the Ashes: Chinese *Wuxia* and Japanese *Jidaigeki* in the 1950s-60s

Having closely examined the two films, the question that arises is whether the creative solutions each director used helped each genre to survive and remain popular in subsequent decades. The release of *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* in 1931 hardly attracted the GMD censors' attention. It was generally received as an innocuous romance despite its resemblance with another well-known *wuxia* film, *Woman Warrior White Rose* (Bao, 2005). Bu's innovative attempt, however, could not save the *wuxia* genre from declining. As the suppression continued, *wuxia* films disappeared from Chinese cinema between 1933-1938 and remained a marginal genre until 1949. For the next three decades, *wuxia* films were totally banned in mainland China since the film industry was being nationalized into a political tool for promoting communism (Chen, 2005). As a result, Bu Wancang moved to Hong Kong in 1948 along with many other *wuxia* directors. Their arrival coincided with the early exploration of a new action genre, kung fu. In a way, director Bu's experimental representation of action scenes in *A Spray of Plum Blossoms* established a distinct set of aesthetic standards free from extensive special effects, which

contributed to the development of the new genre. Kung fu distinguishes itself from *wuxia* due to its emphasis on “real fighting” while inheriting the righteous nature and rebellious spirit of *wuxia* (Teo, 2009, p. 58). The rise of kung fu films in the 1960s Hong Kong and their reception by the international audience, therefore, demonstrates the vitality and resilience of the *wuxia* tradition. Even though this tradition of celebrating righteous warriors has been suffering from criticism and censorship since the beginning, it can always adapt to various political environments and continue to play a significant part in defining Chinese culture.

On the other hand, the prohibition of Kurosawa’s *Treading on the Tiger’s Tail* persisted until 1952, seven years after its production. Even though Kurosawa endeavored to sidestep political concerns, the film still received strong criticism from Japanese censors for interrogating the feudal tradition instead of supporting it and from American censors for “excessively promot[ing] old-fashioned Japanese values” (Watson, 2020). Due to this double suppression, Kurosawa edited the film several times and the extant version of this originally feature-length film is only 59 minutes long. Ultimately, his artistic inventions failed to facilitate the film to overthrow the suppression of *jidaigeki*. The radical reconceptualization of modern Japanese history also demanded postwar Japanese cinema to concentrate on the “immediate past and contemporary chaos,” which further accelerated the decline of the historical genre (Yoshimoto, 2022).

Nevertheless, the creative solutions Kurosawa used to circumvent censorship paved the way for his later more successful *jidaigeki* such as *Rashomon* 羅生門 (1950) and *Seven Samurai* 七人の侍 (*Shichinin No Samurai*, 1954). The prohibition of filming *jidaigeki* got lifted after the U.S. occupation government handed over the control of the country back to the Japanese people in the early 1950s. Nonetheless, the experience of copying censorship triggered Kurosawa to reexamine this genre, realizing that a first-class action film should not only portray grand actions but also human psychology

(Yoshimoto, 2022). In *Seven Samurai*, for instance, he used tracking shots to present the breath-taking duel between the sword master Kyuzo and his challenger (Kurosawa, 1954, 48:42-49:18). The camera stays static when the two swordsmen are confronting but starts to shift horizontally following the back and forth of their strikes. The tracking shots allow the audience to watch the fast-rhythm duel as if they are at the scene, which in turn engages the audience to comprehend the agitation of the challenger and the composure of the master. This combination of spectacular actions and deep human psychology became an indelible trademark of Kurosawa’s *jidaigeki*, which won him and the genre recognition on the world stage in the 1950s.

With their ingenuity and courage, Bu Wancang and Kurosawa Akira saved the *wuxia* and samurai tradition from state suppression, preserving the integrity of the East-Asian cultural heritage. *Wuxia* and *jidaigeki* films today are still recounting legends of righteous warriors waving their swords to oppose mighty oppressors, although the generic conventions have been changed while the content of the stories altered. The comparison is essential to illustrate that film censorship has the potential to distort or even destroy cultural traditions despite their differences in political or social climate, in this case, the warrior tradition in China and Japan. Even though *wuxia* and *jidaigeki* did not share the same historical context, they could not escape from political suppression and thus had to amend themselves to abide by censorship rules. Truly, Bu and Kurosawa are heroes who dared to tread on the tiger’s tail and resembled the *wuxia* and samurai spirit of undauntedly opposing unjust treatment under threats and pressure.

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Biography:

I'm a senior student majoring in world literature and culture, minoring in Japanese studies. I'm also a contributing writer in the Prospect Journal at UCSD. In my spare time, I enjoy reading, cross country running, and snowboarding. My future goal is to become a scholar in comparative literature, facilitating intercultural communications that are essential in today's world. I'm currently researching on East-Asian literature and cinema and I hope my work will help to represent the underrepresented Asian American community in California.

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***Diversity is essential to happiness,
and in Utopia there is hardly any.
-- Bertrand Russell***