

King Hu's Kung Fu Cinematic Art

King Hu's Kung Fu Cinematic Art:

An Interdisciplinary Discourse

Edited by

Ya-chen Chen

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I extend profound gratitude to Professors Chung Ling (鍾玲), Wen-chi Lin (林文淇), Yu-shan Huang (黃玉珊), Yong-jui Chen (陳勇瑞), Ting Ching Yu (游婷敬), Christine Chou (周岫琴), Joan Chang (張瓊惠), Chung-Tien Chou (周中天), Chang-hung Chou (周昌弘), Albert F. S. Pai (白豐碩), Keng-hsiung Chen (陳耿雄), Hui-chu Yu (余慧珠), Han-chung Huang (黃漢忠), Han-hseng Wang (王翰陞), Yu-ying Lee (李玉瑛), You-ching Lin (林有慶), Yung-hsun Chang (張永勳), Hung-jung Yen (顏宏融), Kang-fen Chen (陳康芬), and others for their invaluable contributions and

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PREFACE

It brings me immense delight to be informed today that the collection of academic papers from the 90th posthumous birthday seminar of the revered Director King Hu has successfully passed the review of Cambridge Scholars Publishing in the UK. With profound sentiments, I hereby pen down the following tribute:

Director King Hu stands out as one of the earliest figures in the Chinese film industry to achieve global recognition. Not only was he the first from the Chinese cinema realm to receive accolades at the Cannes Film Festival, but his oeuvre also pioneered a unique style in martial arts films. Such is his influence that renowned international Chinese filmmakers like Ang Lee, Tsui Hark, Wang Tung, and John Woo have been deeply impacted by his works.

Half a century ago, Director King Hu graciously mentored and elevated me, bestowing upon me the honor of the Asia-Pacific Film Best Actor Award. Following his passing, I initiated the establishment of the King Hu Film Culture Foundation, aiming to perpetuate his cinematic arts and allow more audiences to experience the master's filmmaking style and aesthetic presentation.

Director King Hu was a man who crafted epochs. His life narrative is deeply moving, and the trajectory of his artistry, shaped by his destiny of wandering during tumultuous times, is an enduring legacy. We will forever cherish him and imbibe the unwavering spirit with which he pursued cinematic arts.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Professor Ya-chen Chen for commemorating my mentor, Director King Hu, through the 90th posthumous birthday anniversary event in April 2022. The primary intent behind establishing the international foundation in honor of my teacher was to celebrate and promote his significant contributions to Chinese cinema, especially his iconic films, ensuring that future generations of Chinese cinema scholars recognize and learn from the versatile prowess of Director King Hu, spanning from screenplay writing, art design, shooting, storyboarding, and editing, to post-production. Originally, my vision was to commemorate King Hu primarily within the Chinese community. However, owing to Professor Ya-chen Chen's earnest dedication, King Hu's legacy now resonates more profoundly within the global film fraternity. My deepest appreciation goes out to Professor Chen.

Shih Chun 石隽 (Shi Jun)



序文

非常高興在今天知道恩師胡金銓導演 90 冥誕研討會論文彙整英文學術編書通過英國劍橋學者出版社審查通過。特別心有所感地寫下感言如下：

胡金銓是華人影壇最早享譽世界的電影大導演之一，也是華人影壇於坎城影展獲獎的第一人，他的作品不但開創了武俠電影的獨特風格，多位國際知名華人導演例如李安、徐克、王童及吳宇森等導演的作品都受其影響甚深。

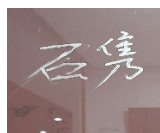
半世紀之前恩師胡金銓導演提拔我，並幸運的榮獲亞太影帝，在他過世後我也發起成立胡金銓電影文化基金會，長期發揚胡金銓電影藝術，讓更多的觀眾繼續可以看見大師拍攝電影的方式和電影美學的呈現。

胡金銓導演是個創造時代的人，他一生的生命故事非常感人，他在大時代下飄泊的宿命成為他作品的藝術軌跡，我們會永遠緬懷他，以及學習他追求電影藝術的那份執著精神。

感謝陳雅瀟教授為我的老師胡金銓導演在去年 90 冥誕英文為主的紀念活動，

我為老師國際簡單成立基金會就是為了紀念他推廣他對華語電影稍有貢獻的幾部經典作品讓後世華人電影學子認識胡金銓導演更能學習全能的胡導演(編劇美術設計拍攝分鏡剪接後製)；我本來只想以借助基金會在華人地區紀念胡導演；由於陳雅瀟教授的有心紀念導演更能使國際電影界認識胡金銓導演；深深的感謝陳雅瀟教授！。

石隼



CHAPTER ONE

WHO'S AFRAID OF KING HU? INTRODUCTION TO KING HU

YA-CHEN CHEN, PH.D.

This chapter explores King Hu's (胡金銓) odyssey between cinematic illusions and cruel realities in his life. It seeks to unveil the life and legacy of King Hu, offering an introduction to him and serving as a guide to this interdisciplinary book, which focuses on academic discussions about King Hu's martial arts films. Renowned as an internationally award-winning filmmaker, King Hu devoted the golden age and most significant periods of his life to cinematic art, navigating the interplay between harsh reality and filmic illusion. He is a luminous figure in the world of cinema, with a name that resonates far beyond the confines of Chinese-language films. His status as an internationally acclaimed filmmaker is not only a testament to his technical skills and narrative expertise but also reflects the profound journey that marked the pivotal epochs of his life.

King Hu's cinematic era is aptly described as the "golden age," a time when he fully immersed himself in the art of filmmaking. His dedication and passion stemmed not merely from a love for the medium but from a complex interplay throughout his life, balancing the stark realities of life

against the malleable and alluring world of cinematic illusion.

The duality of King Hu's experience, oscillating between the tangible hardships of life and the ethereal domain of cinematic poetics, presents fascinating narratives. Through his films, one can discern the struggles he faced, the ambitions he harbored, and the vision he endeavored to impart to the world. This chapter aims to provide readers with a deeper understanding of King Hu by delving into the profound relationship between his personal journey and the cinematic masterpieces he left as his legacy.

Who's Afraid of King Hu and Virginia Woolf'?

When Edward Albee unveiled *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*² in 1962, he introduced audiences to a harrowing exploration of the stark dichotomies between reality and illusion. The play delves deep into the human psyche, unveiling how fabricated narratives can become intertwined with, and at times, overshadow, the truth. A notable parallel emerges between the thematic concerns of Edward Albee and the cinematic endeavors of King Hu, a distinguished figure in Chinese-language cinema. Like Edward Albee, King Hu's career was characterized by an intersection of tangible reality and the ethereal allure of the silver screen, a blend that defined their artistic legacies.

King Hu's filmic journey was an ongoing dance between the harsh realities of everyday life and the beguiling illusions offered by cinema. His films, often enshrouded in layers of narrative complexity and visual

splendor, provided audiences with an escape into fantastical worlds. Beneath the surface of his cinematic tales; however, King Hu subtly wove in reflections of real-world challenges, dilemmas, and cultural intricacies. This duality in his work mirrored the struggles faced by his characters, reminiscent of Edward Albee's protagonists, who grappled with their self-created illusions.

“Who's Afraid of King Hu” could be an apt title for an introduction to the filmmaker's life and work. Just as Edward Albee's³ title posed a provocative question about confronting uncomfortable truths, this reimagined title raises inquiries about King Hu's cinematic journey. Did King Hu use cinema as an escape from reality, or did he employ its illusory nature to illuminate it? In the narratives of both Edward Albee and King Hu, audiences are invited to delve beneath the surface, peeling back layers to distinguish between the presented narrative and the underlying reality.

In essence, the stories King Hu spun on the silver screen were not merely tales of fantasy; they served as mirrors reflecting life's complexities. Much like Edward Albee's exploration of the human psyche's fragility, King Hu's cinematic career stands as a testament to the ever-blurring lines between reality and imagination.

In the vast expanse of literary and cinematic exploration, the tension between reality and illusion has consistently captivated artists. Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, completed in 1962, is a monumental work in this realm. The play transcends a simple dichotomy; it

delves into the tortuous labyrinth of the human psyche, where reality and fiction intertwine, often blurring the lines between the two. In this intricate interplay, there exists a parallel in the illustrious cinematic journey of King Hu, a luminary in Chinese-language cinema. Similar to the characters in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, King Hu navigated the boundaries between harsh reality and cinematic illusion.

The Realities and Illusions of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*,⁴ Edward Albee's characters, George and Martha, inhabit a world where reality is not just malleable but is often a casualty of their own desires and fears. Their evening, filled with verbal duels and mental games, showcases how personal narratives can become distorted as means to cope with trauma, societal expectations, and unfulfilled dreams. The illusions they fabricate, sometimes out of desperation, serve as both a refuge and a prison. This dynamic reflects the complexities of human nature and the lengths to which individuals go to shield themselves from painful truths.

King Hu's Cinematic Landscape: Where Realities Blur

In the vibrant tapestry of King Hu's films, audiences are consistently drawn into realms of grandeur, mythology, and profound cultural resonance. On the surface, these tales transport viewers to worlds of martial arts legends,

historical epics, and fantastical adventures. However, closer examinations reveal King Hu's intricate dance between the stark realities of everyday life and the cinematic illusions he masterfully crafts. Both King Hu's work and Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" focus on the profound and unvarnished realities that underpin daily existence, juxtaposed against the meticulously woven tapestries of filmic fantasy that he adeptly conjures and refines.

King Hu's characters, much like Edward Albee's George and Martha, grapple with their own realities, be they societal expectations, moral dilemmas, or personal ambitions. But, instead of the confined setting of a living room, King Hu's protagonists traverse vast landscapes, ancient temples, and majestic palaces. These settings, while visually stunning, are more than mere backdrops. They amplify the internal conflicts faced by the characters, grounding the fantastical elements in a foundation of emotional and cultural authenticity.

The Dualism of King Hu's Craft: Reflecting and Escaping Reality

King Hu's genius lay in his ability to use cinema as both a mirror and a window. His films not only reflected societal issues, ranging from class struggles to the clash between tradition and modernity, but also provided an escape into worlds where the ordinary became extraordinary. This was particularly evident in his portrayal of traditional Chinese-heritage women,

who, despite suffering from severe chauvinism and patriarchal oppression in harsh realities, transformed into potent superwomen with unparalleled martial arts skills or supernatural powers. This dualism in his cinematic works resonates with Edward Albee's exploration of the human psyche's fragility. As artists, both King Hu and Edward Albee challenged audiences to question the narratives presented, encouraging them to peel back layers and confront underlying truths.

In the realm of martial arts cinema, few directors are as revered and influential as King Hu. His films are not mere displays of martial prowess but are deeply philosophical, often reflecting broader themes of human existence, aspiration, and societal constructs.

A key aspect of his cinematic artistry is the recurring visual motif of martial artists defying gravity, effortlessly soaring through the skies or gliding atop water. While these scenes are immediately captivating, they carry deep thematic resonance, offering layers of meaning that elevate King Hu's work from mere action spectacle to profound philosophical discourse.

Defying gravity in Director King Hu's films can be seen as a representation of humanity's age-old quest to overcome limitations. This theme encompasses not only physical constraints but also the broader struggles of the human spirit against societal norms, expectations, and self-imposed boundaries. In a world that seeks to tether individuals to certain roles or destinies, the very act of flight symbolizes the indomitable spirit's ability to break free and forge its own path.

This transcendence is not just about individual freedom but also reflects societal aspirations. Set against times of societal upheaval or oppressive regimes, King Hu's characters' gravity-defying acts gain even more significance. They represent not only personal liberation but also the collective yearning of a society for change, justice, and progress.

Furthermore, Director King Hu's utilization of nature in his films amplifies these themes. By setting many gravity-defying sequences amidst breathtaking landscapes, such as lush forests, towering mountains, or serene lakes, he draws a parallel between human aspirations and the boundless beauty of nature. Just as nature remains untamed, the human spirit seeks to be unrestrained.

Lastly, the traditions and philosophies that inform King Hu's work, particularly Taoist and Buddhist principles, emphasize harmony, balance, and transcending the physical for spiritual enlightenment. The characters' airborne movements are a dance between Yin and Yang, symbolizing the harmonious interplay of opposing forces, leading to equilibrium and, ultimately, transcendence.

While Director King Hu's wuxia⁵ films can undoubtedly be enjoyed for their thrilling martial arts sequences, their true brilliance lies in the deeper philosophical underpinnings. The ability of his characters to defy gravity is more than cinematic magic. It represents a powerful metaphor for the eternal quest for freedom, enlightenment, and transcendence, despite various constraints.

King Hu's genius lay in his ability to use cinema as both a mirror and a window into the human condition. While his films reflected societal issues, from class struggles to the clash between tradition and modernity, they also offered an escape into worlds where the ordinary could become extraordinary. This was especially true for traditional Chinese-heritage women, who, despite suffering from severe chauvinism and patriarchal oppression in reality, transformed into potent superwomen with unequaled martial arts skills or supernatural power in his films. This dualism in his cinematic works echoes Edward Albee's exploration of the fragility in human psyche, as both artists prompt audiences to question the narratives presented and confront the underlying truths.

At the forefront of his cinematic artistry is the recurring visual motif of martial artists defying gravity, effortlessly soaring through the skies or gliding atop water. While these scenes are immediately captivating, their thematic resonance runs deep, offering layers of meaning that elevate King Hu's cinematic works from mere action spectacle to profound philosophical discourse.

The act of defying gravity in Director King Hu's films can be seen as a representation of humanity's age-old quest to overcome limitations. This isn't merely about physical constraints but also speaks to the broader struggles of the human spirit against societal norms, expectations, and self-imposed boundaries. In a world that constantly seeks to tether individuals to certain roles or destinies, the very act of flight symbolizes the indomitable

spirit's ability to break free and carve its own path.

This transcendence is not solely about individual freedom but can also be seen as a reflection of societal aspirations. Many of King Hu's narratives are set in times of societal upheaval or against the backdrop of oppressive regimes. Here, the gravity-defying acts of his characters become even more significant. They do not just represent personal liberation but also become emblematic of a society's collective yearning for change, justice, and progress.

One must also consider the traditions and philosophies that inform King Hu's filmic masterpieces. Drawing from Taoist and Buddhist principles, there is a clear emphasis on harmony, balance, and the idea of transcending the physical to achieve spiritual enlightenment.

Montage,⁶ in King Hu's films is utilized not merely as a tool for continuity but as a narrative device that contributes significantly to thematic depth and character development. Director King Hu's approach to editing is akin to sculpture, carefully chiseling away at the raw footage to reveal the essence of the story. Through his visionary montage, he crafts sequences that juxtapose serenity with chaos and spirituality with the earthly. In doing so, he paints a multifaceted portrait of the struggle between good and evil, and between earthly desires and spiritual enlightenment.

Film-editing in King Hu's movies plays a crucial role in building tensions and emotions. He possesses an innate talent for knowing precisely when to hold a shot and when to cut, mastering the art of timing essential in

pacing his action sequences, as well as in the delicate unfolding of the more contemplative scenes in his narratives. The emotional impact of these carefully timed cuts can elevate a scene from mundane to monumental, often leaving a lasting impression on the viewer.

King Hu's editorial skills are particularly evident in his use of parallel editing. By cutting between two concurrent lines of action, he amplifies the dramatic tension, often culminating in a convergence that delivers a powerful narrative impact. In Director King Hu's hands, this technique is not just a method of storytelling but becomes a thematic statement on the interconnectedness of events and characters within his cinematic worlds.

Reflecting on King Hu's montage techniques, David Bordwell commented on the director's distinctive approach, characterizing it as a nuanced interplay between clarity and obfuscation. David Bordwell observed that King Hu utilizes "constructive editing," a technique traditionally aimed at presenting action coherently and comprehensibly. However, King Hu subverts this clarity by deliberately introducing elements that complicate and "sabotage" the straightforward interpretation of the scene.⁷

King Hu's cinematic language introduced a dazzling new stylistic expression that seamlessly blended meticulously researched historical accuracy with a deep connection to northern cultural traditions, alongside a distinctive montage technique characterized by its abrupt and fragmented nature. His characters, warriors wielding swords, inhabit a realm teetering

on the edge of the otherworldly. With movements that defy gravity, enabled by off-camera trampolines, they leap with the ease of space travelers. Their swift and sharply cut movements create a cinematic lexicon that is as much about the art of film as it is about portraying unearthly abilities. These characters are largely defined by their ethereal lightness, lacking the weight and imperfections of human form. As Sek Kei notes, martial arts in King Hu's vision begin in the tangible world and ascend to a sublime state of intangible, spiritual existence. They are a journey that mirrors the ultimate aspiration of Chinese culture towards metaphysical apotheosis.⁸

This cinematic editorial tactic engages the audience deeply with the unfolding action, challenging viewers to piece together the narrative from Hu's strategically disjointed edits. Such an approach not only showcases Hu's mastery over filmic language but also reflects his intent to create a dynamic and interactive viewing experience. Here, the audience becomes an active participant in constructing the story's meaning.

King Hu's films are a masterclass in the art of montage and film editing. His editorial decisions are as deliberate as they are poetic, elevating the visual narrative to a realm where every cut, transition, and juxtaposition becomes an integral thread in the intricate tapestry of his storytelling. His films are not merely watched; they are experienced, with each edit guiding the audience through the ebbs and flows of the narrative's current. King Hu remains a paragon of film-editorial craft, inspiring generations of

filmmakers to view the editing suite as a crucible of alchemy where raw footage is transformed into cinematic gold.

Who's Afraid of Confronting Truths?

The reimagined title "Who's Afraid of King Hu" is not just a nod to Edward Albee's masterpiece, but also a provocative inquiry into King Hu's cinematic philosophy. Did King Hu regard cinema as a sanctuary from reality, or did he perceive its illusory nature as a tool to both illuminate and challenge it? Similarly, Edward Albee's title can be interpreted as an invitation, or perhaps a challenge, to confront our own constructed realities.

Throughout his career, King Hu appears to respond to this question by further blurring the lines, creating films that are reflections and distortions of both harsh realities and cinematic illusions. He invites audiences into a special martial arts dance, where the distinction between what is real and what is imagined is fluid and often indistinguishable.

In the works of both Edward Albee and King Hu, the world is not depicted in mere black and white. Their narratives flourish in the gray areas, where realities are subjective and often pliable. As artists, they challenge us to question, to probe, and to reflect, leaving legacies that continue to inspire and provoke thought.

In an era increasingly characterized by curated realities, particularly in the digital media landscape, the works of Edward Albee and King Hu remain timeless, reminding audience members of the complex interplay

between reality and illusion. Their artistry shines as a beacon, guiding future artists and audiences alike to navigate the intricate dance between the real and the imagined with both caution and curiosity.

King Hu's Lifelong Devotion to Cinematic Art

King Hu was born in Beijing on April 29, 1932. His father, Hu Yuanshen (胡源深), was a graduate of the Department of Mining and Metallurgy at Kyoto Imperial University in Japan. After returning to China, Hu Yuanshen worked as a technician at a mine in Hebei and later ran a flour mill. King Hu's mother, Liu Qingyun (劉慶雲), was an expert in Chinese paintings in the realistic style. His granduncle, Jing Gui (景桂), served as a high-ranking official (御史) in the Qing Dynasty. Following the occupation of the northeastern provinces of Mainland China by Japan, the Hu family's fortunes declined. They moved back to Beijing after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937. King Hu, having been interested in ancient Chinese essays and painting since childhood, studied at Huiwen Middle School (匯文中學) in Beijing.

In 1950, due to the rise of the Chinese Communist Party in Mainland China, King Hu left Beijing for Hong Kong, where he worked as a proofreader in a printing company. The following year, Jiang Guangchao (蔣光超) introduced him to Fei Mu's (費穆) Longma Film Company (龍馬電影公司), where he worked as an art designer for posters, sets, and billboards. King Hu later joined the Great Wall Film Studio (長城電影公

司) as a set decorator, earning the strong appreciation of Wan Guzhan (萬古蟾). In 1952, he began working as an actor and assistant director at Yonghua Motion Picture Company (永華影業公司), where he also wrote stories and scripts, though they were not accepted. In 1953, King Hu made his acting debut in a motion picture titled *Humiliation for Sale* (吃耳光的人/笑聲淚痕), directed by Yan Jun (嚴俊). He also worked as a broadcaster at Radio Rediffusion (麗的呼聲有線電台) and created scripts for radio programs. During this time, King Hu lived at 107 Boundary Street, Kowloon, with Feng Yi (馮毅), Li Hanxiang (李翰祥), Jiang Guangchao (蔣光超), Ma Li (馬力), Shen Zhong (沈重), and Song Cunshou (宋存壽), forming a group known as “the seven brothers.” In 1954, he edited Mandarin Chinese language programs for the Voice of America. From 1956 to 1964, King Hu acted in the following feature films:

Golden Phoenix (金鳳) in 1956,

Blood in Snow (雪裡) in 1956,

The Long Lane (長巷) in 1956,

The Three Sisters (三姐妹) in 1957,

Love Fiesta (春色無邊) in 1957,

Lady Qiaqia (恰恰姑娘) in 1957,

Riots at the Studio (兩傻大鬧攝影場) in 1957,

Little Angels of the Streets (馬路小天使) in 1957,

The Magic Touch (妙手回春) in 1958,