

Abstract

The Birth of the Dragon—Bruce Lee as a cultural icon and a cross-cultural translator/ adaptor

Bruce Lee has been considered a cultural icon with the enduring charm for people all over the world. It is true that he did make things different with tremendous impact on film fight choreography, popular culture, the new representation of an Asian man, movie industry, development of martial arts, or say, all aspects of our life, and I believe shall continue his influence for the generations to come. However, Lee's personal representation as a mystical and philosophical oriental wise man that was frequently seen on screen, TV, media, personal manuscripts and articles on magazines seems to complicate his image as not being merely an undefeatable martial artist or a super hero on the screen but also a preacher of oriental philosophy. His rebellious attitude toward the traditional martial arts institution at the time and the invention of a new fighting style—*Jeet Kune do*, or the intercepting fist, based on his philosophy of “formless form” or “a style without a style” has made his role more complicated and hard to decipher. Should we call him a founder of a new martial art style? Was he a person detached of his times or ahead of his times? What did he really invent? According to Bolelli (2003), although “Lee's philosophy may have been his greatest contribution,” it is nevertheless the case that “Lee did not come up with any original ideas. The entire philosophy so passionately espoused by Lee derives from the writings of other people” (157). Indeed, Lee benefited a lot from his reading and adaptations of Nietzsche, Krishnamurti, Alan Watts, Buddhism, Taoism, Western philosophy, and even Confucianism. However, his invention of a “new” fighting style was an instrumental gateway to express his radical theory towards the traditionalists. We may argue that he was always in a dialogue with the tradition, and his interpretation and adaptation of these great thinkers were still connected with the history. Bolelli proposes that Bruce Lee ought to be regarded as having “made great philosophical contributions even though he clearly did not commit to paper a single original philosophical idea” (p.158). In this account, as Paul Bowman succinctly puts, “Lee is to be regarded as an interlocutor, a transformative articulating link, or a cultural translator from one realm, culture or context to another. His ‘originality’ takes the form of the success of ‘his’ intervention” (2010:180). It is not unlike what Hutcheon (2006) summarizes Benjamin's idea that “translation is not a rendering of

some fixed nontextual meaning to be copied or paraphrased or reproduced; rather, it is an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in different ways.”

(p.16) Bruce Lee as a cultural translator in this sense is closer to an adaptor who liberates the source text from its original sign system to another as well as a creator who interprets and creates something new. (Hutcheon 2006) It is in this sense we find Lee’s role interesting and certainly worthy of our investigation.

Key words: Bruce Lee, cross-cultural translator/ adaptor, *jeet kune do*