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Abstract

This paper explores the literary, historical, and political dimensions of Hong Kong action filmmaker Wilson Yip's biographical film series *Ip Man* (2008, 2010), which details the life and times of the titular wing chung kung fu master, who later became famous for mentoring martial arts legend Bruce Lee. The two films are particularly notable for the strongly nationalistic and postcolonial rhetoric that color the tenor of the narrative. The first installment in the duology takes place during the Japanese invasion of China in World War II, and revolves around the machinations of the Japanese general Miura and his interactions with the defiantly patriotic Ip Man. Similarly, the second installment takes place in British Hong Kong, and deals in large part with a rivalry between local Chinese martial artists and an English boxer. This paper will analyze how language and violence function in these narratives within the context of China's martial arts tradition, as well as the historical legacies of Japanese and British imperialism. Using a framework primarily informed by Franz Fanon's theories on postcolonial violence and Joseph Nye's concept of soft power in international relations, this paper ultimately concludes that Yip has reinvented Ip Man as an icon of Chinese power in the twenty-first century on both a national and global scale.
I. Introduction

Hong Kong action filmmaker Wilson Yip's Ip Man series (2008, 2010) presents a unique case study of the roles of nationalism and soft power in the twenty-first century Chinese martial arts film. Soft power in international relations refers to achieving ends through attraction and enticement, such as public diplomacy initiatives, rather than coercion, as through military or economic threats. In a modern day context, soft power often encompasses the might of media influence. Some political scientists – most notably Joseph Nye, who coined the term “soft power” in the late twentieth century – theorize that nations which produce the most popular and influential entertainment and media content – whether this takes the form of journalism, cinema, or television serials – gain stronger footholds in the global community through the combined strength of positive public opinion among the masses and the formidable financial support that often accompanies that popularity.

Yip's Ip Man series is a pair of movies that chronicle the fictionalized adventures of Bruce Lee’s eponymous master – first against Japanese imperialists in Fo Shan, and later against corrupt British authorities in Hong Kong. Although the films have received little scholarly attention in the academic world, they have nonetheless been the subject of much critical acclaim, winning Best Film, Best Director, and Best Actor – among other accolades – at the 28th Hong Kong Film Awards, in addition to Best Action Choreography at the 46th Golden Horse Film
Awards in Taiwan.\textsuperscript{1} Modern day action cinema, beginning with Wilson Yip’s movies, has constructed the real life Ip Man as something of a “legend behind the legend,” as his fame stems primarily from his status as master and mentor to Bruce Lee, arguably the world’s first true Chinese martial artist-turned-international action superstar. As such, Wilson Yip’s \textit{Ip Man} duology finds itself in a unique position in action cinema, as it capitalizes on the symbolic value – or soft power currency – of Bruce Lee, who is so often the face of Chinese martial arts in worldwide popular culture.

However, it is equally crucial to examine the narrative of the \textit{Ip Man} films through the historical lens of Japan and England’s histories of occupation and colonization in Greater China. In both installments of Wilson Yip’s series, the titular, highly idealized Ip Man presents Chinese martial arts as both a means of resistance against China’s conquerors, and – perhaps even more interestingly – the ultimate emblem of Chinese culture and identity. As such, the storylines of the \textit{Ip Man} movies acquire profound meaning through the critical lens of Franz Fanon’s postcolonial theories on the role of violence among the oppressed as outlined in \textit{The Wretched of the Earth}. In particular, Fanon argues that because conquests are made militarily, the colonized have no choice but to take up arms against the colonizers, because violence is literally the only language that their oppressors understand. In accordance with Fanon’s argument, both \textit{Ip Man} movies see our Chinese hero forced

\textsuperscript{1} “Welcome to the 29\textsuperscript{th} Hong Kong Film Awards.” \textit{Hong Kong Film Award}. Hong Kong Film Award Association, Ltd. \url{http://www.hkfaa.com/history/list_28.html}. 4 June 2010.
into a highly violent public confrontation with a much-decorated "colonizing" martial artist – and of course, our hero triumphs in the end.

On the other hand, one must note that while Yip’s movies make Chinese martial arts the symbolic key to resistance against China’s colonizers, the Ip Man character himself tells his pupils that Chinese martial arts are more than just a way of fighting – they are literally the “soul” of the people. And indeed, Ip Man’s sentiment rings true in the cultural context of works such as Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, one of the earliest philosophical bases of Chinese martial arts, for Ip emulates much of the theory espoused in the ancient treatise through his own martial practice. Thus the portrayal of Chinese martial arts in the *Ip Man* duology becomes more than just sensationalized violence against a popular national enemy; they link those arts back to their ancient cultural roots, creating a sense of heritage that exemplifies Ip’s in-film pep talks about taking pride in "being Chinese."

The *Ip Man* films serve as an effective focal point for analyzing the rise of the modern Chinese martial arts film as, on one level, a postcolonial narrative, and on another level, a form of soft power currency in a global economy where mass media and popular culture can shape and reshape national identities. China’s rich and storied martial arts tradition has molded its twenty-first century cinema culture on both a national and international level by creating a film genre that functions as both a vehicle of political commentary and a transnationally popular industry that retains Chinese culture and values at its core. In short, movies like *Ip Man*
successfully balance the preservation of China’s national heritage and history with the necessity of thriving in an increasingly globalized world.

II. The Cultural Significance of Chinese Martial Arts in History and Performance

In the context of Greater China, the martial arts are, on many levels, an ideal medium for a nationalistic narrative. China’s wushu tradition – or as it is more colloquially known, “kung fu” – is one of the oldest and most richly storied martial cultures in the world, having achieved renown both locally and internationally. Wushu permeates countless spheres of Chinese society, with its ancient historical links to the Shaolin monastery and the philosophical tenets espoused in works such as The Art of War and the I Ching, its military applications by both dynastic warlords of previous centuries and modern China’s own People’s Liberation Army, and of course, its long tradition of relevance to the performing arts – from its appearances in traditional Peking opera to playing center stage in the modern era’s multi-billion dollar action entertainment industry. In fact, the term “kung fu,” which has in today’s popular lexicon come to be synonymous with Chinese martial arts, originally referred to any achievement or skill, including decidedly non-martial pursuits such as calligraphy and painting.

Because China’s martial arts entwine themselves with its national heritage and culture so inextricably, the wushu tradition has become an ideal rallying point for rousing nationalistic sentiment among modern day Chinese. At the same time, the explosion of global cinema as a platform for cultural exchange creates a unique
forum through which that nationalism can be translated beyond China’s borders. While writing on the Asian influence on Hollywood action cinema, Barna William Donovan notes that “…A clear connection exists between Chinese film and the very originators of the first martial arts fighting styles in the legendary Shaolin temple of the Hunan Province... The martial arts are a continuation of a tradition that is at the core of Chinese art as a whole. It is the continuation of a tradition that has as much chivalry, ethics, spirituality and philosophy as it has kicks, punches, sword-slaying and clashing armies of warriors.” Donovan is, of course, referring to the link between performance and application in wushu. Chinese history, after all, claims that Shaolin kung fu – arguably the most famous of the Chinese martial arts traditions – spread throughout Asia through performances of the art by Peking Opera troupes. Similarly, some of the very first Chinese films made during the early twentieth century were, in fact, martial arts movies. Moreover, the last generation of “classically-trained performers” of the Peking Opera school actually transitioned into the martial arts film industry, and included world famous names such as Jackie Chan. ³ Donovan also makes a point of noting the common stylistic points between the Peking Opera and early Chinese film:

Because the Opera based so much of its entertainment on ancient legends and folk tales, so too did a lot of early films, gravitating toward stories based on such larger-than-life, hyperbolic stories. These old stories would be joined by original productions that likewise used classical settings,

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³ Ibid, 61.
extravagant period costumes, swordplay action, solemn and traditional heroes, as well as stories of ghosts, demons, and magic.4

Indeed, as time progressed, these historic ties between the martial and performing arts took on a decidedly political slant in the form of the wuxia film. Derived from the term wushu itself, wuxia began as an ancient genre of action-adventure literature detailing the fantastical exploits of wandering warriors. With the advent of the film industry, the wildly popular genre soon found a home on the silver screen. However, even as trends in popular media shifted, so too did East Asia’s political climate. Near the end of the 1930s, the Kuomintang, or Chinese Nationalist Party – the then government of mainland China – banned the genre, believing it to be a promotion of violent anarchy.5

This shift in the production of wuxia allowed for two important changes within the genre to occur. First, the primary production of Chinese martial arts cinema obligingly shifted from the mainland to the then-British colony of Hong Kong, establishing the start of Hong Kong’s current reputation as a staple of action filmmaking. Secondly, the ban on the genre in the mainland implicitly suggested that martial arts media itself held an ingrained potential for social and political propaganda and commentary. In fact, a 1949 Hong Kong martial arts film by director Wu Pang called The True Story of Wong Fei Hung was arguably the first

production to put the industry back on the map after the tumultuous struggles of the first half of the twentieth century. It concerned the exploits of a man named Wong Fei Hung, a real life doctor and martial artist who allegedly helped defend his countrymen against China’s invaders. The film, Wu hoped, "would raise the spirits of moviegoers during difficult times. It would be a heroic action film, he decided, centered on a fierce, patriotic, and ethical hero who fought to right wrongs, fought for Chinese pride and helped the underdogs and victims of society. Best of all, the film would be based on a real person."6

Interestingly, the story and rationale behind The True Story of Wong Fei Hung bear a remarkable similarity to those of the Ip Man films that Wilson Yip would make more than half a century later. Like Wong Fei Hung, Ip Man personifies ethics, heroism, and of course, fierce patriotism. Also like Wong Fei Hung, the character of Ip Man has the advantage of being based on a man that actually existed in the real world. Director Wilson Yip explains in an interview, "We wanted to do this movie because Ip Man was a man who inspired the world and society as a whole. He was a man who believed in certain morals and principles, and we want to use this movie as a platform to convey those values to the audience. For me, that was the most important part of making this movie."7 And indeed, Yip makes a point of lending a highly fictionalized and sensationalized “biopic” as much “real life” credence as

6 Donovan, 64.
7 Cheang, Michael. "Donnie Yen Takes on the Biggest Role of His Life." The Star. ECentral.
possible, even going so far as to consult Ip Man’s own son Ip Chung on the latter’s father’s life.\textsuperscript{8}

The \textit{Ip Man} films also seem to make the point of emphasizing the cultural significance of \textit{wushu}. After all, the philosophical foundations of Chinese martial arts are intricately entwined with the nation’s own ancient classical canon. For instance, celebrated philosopher and military strategist Sun Tzu’s \textit{The Art of War} began as a military treatise, but also – according to a number of scholars – doubled as one of the earliest theoretical foundations of China’s martial arts tradition.\textsuperscript{9}

Ralph D. Sawyer says of the treatise: “For the last two thousand years, it remained the most important military treatise in Asia, where even the common people knew it by name”.\textsuperscript{10} Many of the text’s ideas center around the goal of avoiding direct conflict if at all possible – a goal shared by many of the Chinese martial arts. According to Sun Tzu, chaos must be confronted with control; the key to winning is to control the enemy’s movements without losing control over one’s own movements. And indeed, in the \textit{Ip Man} films, our hero Ip, despite his martial prowess, remains generally reluctant to confront his foes head-on – even when challenged to do so. Furthermore, when Ip Man does fight, the core strategy of Wing Chun kung fu, his signature style, echoes Sun Tzu’s principles of conserving energy

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Green, Thomas A. \textit{Martial Arts of the World: An Encyclopedia}. Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2001
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
by making offense and defense simultaneous, and specifically targeting the enemy's weak points.

Furthermore, in fictional portrayals, the figure of the martial artist has long played the role of the upholder of Confucian values. These frequently include unwavering loyalty to friends, family, and nation, the practice of patience and benevolence, and somewhat ironically, the pursuit of peace. Indeed, in the first of the Ip Man films, during his final confrontation with his great enemy the Japanese general, Ip himself claims of Chinese martial arts, “Although martial arts involves armed forces, Chinese martial arts is Confucian in spirit. The virtue of martial arts is benevolence. You Japanese will never understand the principle of treating other people as you would yourselves. Because you abuse military power, you turned it into violence to oppress others. You don’t deserve to learn Chinese martial arts.”

Thus the Chinese martial arts link themselves not only to morality, but also specifically to Confucian morality. In this speech by Ip, he does not simply say that Chinese martial artists have the moral upper hand over their enemies. His deeper implication is this: Chinese martial artists have the moral upper hand over their enemies because their Chinese heritage has imbued them with those values.

Chinese martial artists are good because they are Chinese.

Moreover, the Chinese martial arts enjoy a certain status as the ancestor of many of the other traditional East Asian martial arts. For instance, karate – which

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alongside kung fu, is perhaps the most famous representative of Asian combat styles – originated in Okinawa in part as an adaptation of Southern Chinese martial arts. According to Martial Arts of the World: An Encyclopedia of History and Innovation, “Until the 1920s, Okinawans generally described karate using the word todi. Todi means “Tang Hand,” and alludes to the art’s roots in the martial arts of Southern China. (Scrolls brushed during Tang Dynasty, 618-907 CE, contain some of the first known literary references to Okinawa. Thus, the name gives karate roots in Chinese antiquity.)”¹² Chinese action superstar Bruce Lee compares kung fu unfavorably to karate, claiming in an interview with Twentieth Century Fox studio, “Well, gung fu originated in China. It is the ancestor of karate and jujitsu. It’s more of a complete system and it’s more fluid... (What’s the difference between a gung fu punch and a karate punch?) A karate punch is like an iron bar – ‘whack!’ A gung fu punch is like an iron chain with an iron ball attached to the end, and it go[es] ’wang!’ and it hurt[s] inside”.¹³ Lee’s statement implies a certain belief in the superiority of Chinese martial arts – that as the ancient originator of other styles, kung fu automatically belongs at the top of the combat art hierarchy.

The tradition of martial arts is, on many levels, the ultimate medium through which to launch a campaign of nationalism throughout Greater China. It touches almost every sphere of Chinese life, including philosophy, religion, and perhaps

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¹² Martial Arts, 124.
most significantly, the theatre. It functions not only as a real world self defense system, but as a performance – something that can carry a message to an audience. Moreover, its long and influential history on the Asian continent grants it a fundamental prestige that makes films like *Ip Man* a natural means for inspiring pride and patriotism.

**III. Nationalism, Soft Power, and the Significance of the Biopic: The Iconic Ip Man**

How does one country's nationalism achieve popularity among foreigners who don’t share the same historic heritage? Political scientist Joseph Nye wrote at length about the concept of “soft power” – or the capacity for a nation to achieve its ends in the international arena through attraction and enticement. The basis of soft power functions off the idea that in international relations, projecting a certain “image” or reputation by way of media and marketing can gain a country as much – or even more – influence over other countries than military or economic strength. And indeed, this elusive idea of soft power holds a natural appeal to the China of the twenty-first century. Jiang Wang argues in his introduction to *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication* that “China believes it not only has a story to tell to the world, but it is imperative for the country to do so more effectively...

It’s a question of their collective identity, prestige and, arguably, China's face
(mianzi) in the increasingly connected global society."\textsuperscript{14} Chinese culture’s stringent emphasis on maintaining “face” makes Nye’s theory of soft power – with its fundamental dependence on image above all else – an ideal diplomatic strategy.

Moreover, according to Robert Gries, “The zero-sum nature of face and China’s history of victimization at the hands of the West combine to make many contemporary Chinese view diplomacy as a fierce competition between leaders who win or lose face for the nations they embody."\textsuperscript{15} As such, in terms of attitude, China is well situated to approach the game of soft power with an eye toward “one upping” the former imperialist powers that had subjugated China in previous eras. Thus we see the emergence of the twenty-first century Chinese martial arts film: marketable, culturally relevant, and filled to the brim with shamelessly nationalistic rhetoric walking hand in hand with violent postcolonial commentary.

If soft power bases itself on the construction of image, then arguably, the most obvious starting point is the image itself: in other words, the creation of an icon. The ideal icon, if it is to win soft power currency for the country it represents, must therefore command massive popular appeal across different nations and cultures while simultaneously embodying the culture and values of its own country, a sort of easily translatable patriotism. Better yet is a living icon – someone human

and relatable, but nonetheless capable of being a role model and idol to the populace.

Enter Ip Man – also known as Yip Kai-Man – the old master who most famously taught the world renowned Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee as an actor and martial artist represents the bridge between East and West; his performances are undoubtedly a product of Chinese cultural traditions, yet he has also achieved an iconic status in Western nations, having perhaps the biggest hand in remaking American action cinema in the image of the Chinese martial arts genre. He has, in short, come to represent the image of a strong and positive China that nonetheless retains favor among non-Chinese. Bruce Lee the man may have died in the 1970s, but his legend remains alive even in the midst of the twenty-first century – and is therefore still ripe for soft power cultivation.

However, a fresh take on that legend would, of course, be necessary to court audiences – and Bruce Lee’s old master Ip Man represented exciting and untouched territory. No director before Wilson Yip had chosen to tell Ip’s story, which would grant it a new angle on the tried and true Hong Kong action film genre, even while retaining the all-important connection to Bruce Lee. Indeed, promotional posters for the film most frequently advertise the movie as “the story of Bruce Lee’s legendary master.” However, Ip Man himself also carries a unique potential for popular appeal. Donnie Yen, who portrays the fictionalized Ip in the films, claims in an interview, “I think people only knew him as the teacher of Bruce Lee, so you only
saw the character in films about him, kind of a supporting character. When you learn more about Ip Man, you realize that he had a really incredible life, and a huge influence on the martial arts world, in his own right. Maybe the right combination of elements didn't come together until now to tell his story.\textsuperscript{16} Yen’s statement highlights the ripeness of Ip Man’s potential as a compelling hero, and paints Ip as an ideal symbol for Chinese wushu.

The aesthetic presentation of Ip’s character on screen also carries weight, for the film opens with Ip dressed in traditional garb, practicing wushu alone in his studio, rather than battling enemies outside. The scene then pans into his stately Chinese home, which is decorated in a mixture of Chinese and western furnishings that were typical of educated elites during the Republican period. In his interactions with other people, Ip is soft-spoken and courteous – indeed, the very first scene of the film sees him inviting a rival and challenger to join his family for supper and tea. This opening serves as a character establishing moment, showcasing not only Ip’s class and wealth – for instance, the very fact that he can even afford to feed unexpected guests a good meal whenever he pleases – but also his generosity of spirit, in that he does share his wealth gladly, and puts on no airs about it. Ip, in essence, performs as the epitome of a traditional Chinese gentleman. Furthermore, early in the film, he mentions a number of times that he “does not work,” having inherited old money from his highly placed family, which cements his place in

\textsuperscript{16} Cheang
society as an established member of the Chinese upper crust. He represents a
traditional image of China – and more specifically, China’s prized gentry class. Like
real life folk heroes before him, such as the scholarly doctor and warrior Wong Fei
Hung, Ip Man combines the image of wealth, class, and high culture with the reality
of dangerous proficiency in battle. He performs as a paragon of Confucian virtue,
the best of all that China’s ancient intellectual and physical traditions have to offer.
Such a juxtaposition allows the character of Ip Man to assume a role as a figurehead
that combines the most desirable and impressive elements of Chinese identity while
remaining accessible and likable to the audience.

Moreover, the real life Ip came of age in southern China at the crux of the
Japanese occupation, building in automatic villains for the would-be hero to face.
According to Yen, “Ip Man did fight these challenges matches, he did have to survive
in Foshan during the Japanese occupation, and he did move to Hong Kong to
establish Wing Chun there. I think we did justice to him, and to his real story”. The
real life Ip gains automatic credibility for living through relatively recent and
traumatic events in China’s modern history, which means that the fictional Ip can in
turn build his legend off a veritable treasure trove of culturally and politically
relevant material. An Ip Man biopic therefore already has all the makings of a recipe
for popular appeal both in and out of China. Thus, the stage is set for the film to tell
its story to the world: a story that promotes the image of a China that can transcend

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17 Ip Man
23 January 2011, 2.
19 Cheang
the colonial humiliations suffered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Ip Man*, through one man’s narrative, tells the story of a China that, simply put, fights back, and fights back with dignity.

**III. The Language of Violence in Ip Man**

The martial arts at the core of the *Ip Man* storyline present a powerful reaction against the cultural legacies of colonialism in Greater China; the various modes of violence in the films articulate not only a pride in the essence of being Chinese, but a condemnation of the nation’s historic oppressors. Postcolonialist Franz Fanon writes in his opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth* that “Violence is man recreating himself.”

Fanon characterizes the phenomenon of violence in colonial and postcolonial settings as the medium through which the oppressed and the oppressed engage in conversation, the only common language between them. As stated in the introduction to *Performances of Violence*, “Violence communicates. Through its effects it informs us of danger, power, weakness, strength. But it is also performative in a sense that is not unrelated to how language itself performs... the passionate, in its articulation, can lead to violent acts, especially when the means to voice the passion are thwarted or suppressed.”

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words, in lieu of any other choice, a colonized people will take up arms against their conquerors in order to articulate the reclamation of autonomy.

Therefore, in a film about the presence of foreign imperialists on Chinese land, martial arts naturally function as the primary language of the narrative. The first Ip Man installment centers around the Japanese invasion of China during the early twentieth century, focusing on the character of Ip Man, a Chinese martial arts master and expert in the Southern style of Wing Chun. Yet contrary to what an audience might expect in such a story, his first serious fight occurs before the Japanese even appear on screen. In fact, Ip Man’s first foe is a fellow Chinese, a choice that may seem initially odd for a movie so purportedly fueled by nationalistic sentiment. However, according to Fanon, “The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people. This is the period when the niggers beat each other up, and the police and magistrates do not know which way to turn when faced with the astonishing waves of crime...”

Before the colonized can confront their colonizer, they must first deal with one another.

Thus, the film gives its audience a scene that uses an outsider – but not a complete foreigner – to tease out the idea of how the film’s protagonists might deal with the unknown. This first antagonist, a bandit called Jin Shanzhao, happens to be a Northerner to Ip’s Southern background, and a Mandarin speaker to Ip’s Cantonese. While Ip and his fellow townsmen speak to Jin in Cantonese, the bandit

22 Fanon, 50.
insistently replies in Mandarin. Although both characters seem to understand one another’s dialects well enough to at least engage in spoken conversation, neither is willing to actually speak his enemy’s mother tongue. Thus, we see certain regional rivalries emerge – and indeed, the first time that Ip defeats Jin, the latter laments that his “Northern fist” has been defeated by a “Southern” one. Jin represents a pale shade of what is to come – he speaks a strange language, but one that is still understandable. He bullies the townspeople, but not with any great success. His character embodies much of what will later code the Japanese as villains – the threat of the unknown, as well as casual arrogance and propensity for bullying – but to such a minor degree that the later atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese army will stand in stark contrast.

After all, the early fights between Jin and Ip are unmistakably lighthearted in nature. Jin arrives at Ip’s house to challenge him, and although he poses little challenge to Ip in terms of actual skill, he does succeed in accidentally breaking several of Ip’s more expensive material possessions. Each time he smashes a vase or cracks a table, he sheepishly insists that he will pay after the fight, lending the scene a comedic tone, which is further highlighted when Ip’s young son interrupts both combatants by cheekily informing his father, “Mother says that if you don’t start fighting seriously, everything in the house will break!” Moreover, Ip eventually triumphs over Jin by using his wife’s feather duster as an improvised weapon, at one

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23 *Ip Man*

24 Ibid, 23:50 minutes.
point stuffing Jin’s mouth full of feathers. For all that Jin is meant to play the villain in this scene, he is nonetheless a buffoon, most certainly not to be taken seriously.

It isn’t until the invasion of the Japanese imperial army that we see the Chinese characters begin uniting, for regional differences presumably seem insignificant in the face of a truly insidious – and truly foreign – threat.

Furthermore, as Jin’s violence against the townspeople of Foshan escalates, it changes tenor from the lighthearted sparring with Ip during the first half of the film to something more serious. Even as this shift occurs, Jin’s violence becomes less an expression of his own foolish but ultimately harmless arrogance, and painted more obviously as a byproduct of Japanese imperial rule in China – once again reemphasizing the idea that the true villains of the piece are the Japanese, not fellow Chinese. After his initial defeat at the hands of Ip, Jin returns a second time to attack a cotton mill, where he demands monetary tribute. When Ip steps in to defend the factory workers, Jin furiously asks, “Ip Man, have you ever been hungry? ... The first day I came to Foshan, I told myself that I would never be hungry again. I will never be hungry again!”\(^{25}\) Ip’s measured response to Jin’s rant is simply that “Everyone is hungry these days,” which alludes to the widespread poverty that has taken hold of the country in the wake of the Japanese invasion. However, Jin persists in attacking, refusing to back down until Ip has forcibly beaten him down a second time. Jin’s second attack represents the “astonishing waves of crime” that Fanon describes in

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
*The Wretched of the Earth,* yet another incarnation of the violence that the colonized find themselves perpetuating because of the presence of the colonizers.

The arrival of Japanese soldiers in China is furthermore heralded by a series of sparring matches between the Chinese martial artists of Foshan and the karate practitioners of the Japanese army. In order to win rice to feed their families, the Chinese fighters must defeat Japanese opponents at martial arts matches in the ring. In a situation where food, money, and paying work are scarce, these organized combat games quickly become popular among the Chinese kung fu masters. These games are the very embodiment of Fanon’s theory: violence begets violence, and in this case, the undisputed root of it is the invading Japanese army, for they are the ones who impose such brutal means for mere survival in the new world they have created.

However, Ip soon turns violence to agency. Provoked by the death of a fellow Chinese in the ring, Ip asks to fight ten of the Japanese karate black belts. Previously, Ip’s fighting style had – true to the character’s own morals and personality – remained relatively pacifistic, with Ip often holding back from from any truly vicious or aggressive attacks, regardless of provocation. This scene, in stark contrast, sees Ip unleashing a merciless beatdown on all ten of his opponents. True to the core of his martial philosophy, he still refrains from ever making the first attack; however, when attacked, he parries with uncharacteristic brutality. The soundtrack to this section of the film contains almost nothing except the smack of
fists against flesh, aborted cries of pain, and even the telltale crunch and twist of bones snapping. Near the conclusion of the scene, only one Japanese karate fighter remains standing; he is noticeably younger than many of his fallen peers, and is shaking, terrified of Ip Man. As Ip slowly makes his way over to the boy, the latter begins to tremble, before throwing a sloppy kick that Ip easily counters. Neither the boy’s youth nor his obvious fear earn any mercy from Ip, who proceeds to knock the lone karateka to the floor and beat him across the head until blood streams down his face. This scene pans almost immediately to a close-up of Ip’s own swollen and blood-stained hands, which curl into fists. The merciless, almost mechanical brutality of this act on the protagonist's part, punctuated by the literal blood on his hands at the end, represents a somber departure from Ip Man’s established characterization as a gentle man prone to showing kindness and courtesy to even his most dogged opponents. As such, this shift in Ip’s behavior also suggests the beginnings of a shift in tone for the film’s narrative as a whole.

Sound is tremendously important to setting that tone. In earlier portions of the movie where Ip spars his fellow Chinese, he merely “mimes” his more devastating techniques, such as the “chain punch,” where an opponent is literally pummelled to the ground by a blur of full force, rapidfire punches. In this sequence, however, Ip unleashes the full force of the chain punch – which sounds like nothing so much as the shots fired from a soldier’s gattling gun, and accompanied by audible blood spatter to boot. By evoking the noise of a real battlefield, this moment serves as a reminder to the audience that the film has reached its turning point: this is no
longer merely a martial arts adventure story, but a war movie. Similarly, the sheer level of violence portrayed in this scene – through both its visual and audio components – represents a shift in the narrative, for where martial arts was previously a game of sorts, a matter of winning or losing personal acclaim, it has now become something far more significant. From this scene onward, fights between martial artists are fights not only for survival of the individual, but survival for a nation itself.

In keeping with that theme, the film culminates in a final exhibition match between Ip and the main villain of the piece, the Japanese general and karate expert Miura. As was the case of Ip’s fights with the bandit Jin, language once again plays an important symbolic role, this time during the conversation between Ip and Miura prior to their fateful duel. Ip has been arrested by Japanese soldiers, and Miura has offered him a bargain: he will spare Ip’s life in exchange for Ip’s cooperation in teaching his prodigious martial arts techniques to the Japanese army. “I’ll give you one chance to be loyal to the Japanese emperor,” says Miura, speaking in Japanese.26 He does not phrase his offer not as a method to curry favor with the general or his soldiers, but as a service to the emperor of Japan, the human representation of the nation itself. Miura, with his phrasing, makes his bargain one rife with questions of nationalism – for he is effectively asking Ip Man to use something Chinese in origin to serve China’s conquerors, the Japanese.

26 Ibid.
When the translator conveys the offer to Ip, the latter refuses immediately, responding in his native Chinese, “If you want to see me fight, I’ll fight with you.”

The two next meet at Ip’s prison cell. No translator is present, and the two men are alone, but as Miura seats himself across from Ip, he says, still in Japanese, “I want you to teach us instead of killing you because I appreciate your talent. But I don’t think that Chinese martial arts can surpass Japanese martial arts. So, you and I will fight in front of everybody. That’s why we need a tournament.”

Once again, Miura makes the subject of martial arts emblematic of the relationship between two nations. Miura believes that Ip Man, for all his potential usefulness to the Japanese army, can never defeat the general himself; along similar lines, Miura implicitly believes that China may provide certain resources for the Japanese empire, but remains fundamentally inferior. The tournament therefore becomes far more than a match between two men; it is a clash of nations, ideologies, and cultures. For Miura, it is a chance to justify Japanese imperialism. For Ip Man, it is a chance to avenge his countrymen – and indeed, for his entire nation in a single symbolic gesture.

And indeed, Ip answers in Chinese, “You invaded our country and killed our people... Stop being hypocritical.”

The behavior of the two men in the absence of a translator force the audience to remember that Ip and Miura most likely do not

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
actually understand one another’s words. When read through that lens, their conversation is not a conversation at all – rather they are two separate statements, each meant to embody their respective national alliances. The language barrier further emphasizes the disparity between the Japanese viewpoint and the reality of the Chinese situation.

Ultimately, of course, Ip Man triumphs over Miura. As the two fight one another on a raised platform before a crowd of both Chinese and Japanese spectators, the film juxtaposes the actual events of their match with Ip’s memories of practice sessions with a wooden training dummy. As Ip begins to gain the upper hand over Miura, he literally reimagines the Japanese general as the training dummy; each blow he lands on Miura echoes a blow he landed during a training session at home. By equating his great enemy with a mere training exercise, Ip effectively brings his great moment of nationalistic bravado back down to the simplest origins of his passion. In fighting Miura, he remembers the serenity and unassuming joy of his art in the days before the Japanese invasion twisted martial arts into an instrument of war. The film furthermore couples this juxtaposition with Ip’s declaration that the Japanese with their “abuse of military power, turn[ing] [martial arts] into violence to suppress others” will never understand the “benevolent” spirit of Chinese martial arts. These factors converge in a moment that symbolizes the driving message of the film: that Chinese martial culture – and by extension, “Chinese-ness” as a whole – stands stalwart and uncorrupted in the face
of any obstacle. When Ip defeats Miura, the former “talks back” to the latter; he
reclaims pride, nation, and agency through the conversation of literal physical
combat. The film itself highlights that moment in its epilogue, which declares in the
narration that China ultimately defeated Japan after many long years – of course
never bothering to mention the involvement of the other Allied nations. After all,
the function of the film is not to give a particularly detailed – or even a particularly
accurate – account of history; the function of the film is to use Ip Man and his
Chinese martial arts to make a statement about China’s enduring strength and spirit.
The action of the film is, simply put, a function of nationalism.

The second installment in the Ip Man series presents the audience with a
very similar sort of narrative. This time, the villains of the day are the British
imperialists in Hong Kong, where Ip and his family have fled in the aftermath of the
Japanese occupation on the mainland. Here, Ip Man’s great foe is none other than a
crass, openly racist Englishman – who happens to be an acclaimed Western-style
boxer who goes by the stage name “Twister.” As in the first Ip Man installment, the
second film concludes with a “boxing match” between Ip and Twister, this time
attended by Chinese and British alike. This scene, like Ip’s fight with Miura,
juxtaposes the actual match with a flashback sequence – this time with Ip’s
memories of the Chinese kung fu master that Twister had previously beaten to
death in the ring.
This fight, then, is arguably a moment of vengeance for Ip Man, but it is also one of the longest and most difficult battles depicted on screen. The audience has previously seen Ip Man spar other kung fu masters, take on multiple opponents, and defeat heavily armed aggressors with nothing but bare hands and the occasional improvised weapon – and through it all, Ip barely suffers so much as a scratch. Yet in a sanctioned, weaponless fight in the ring with one man, Ip visibly struggles for the first time; even his final fight with Miura in the first film was relatively clean and simple in comparison to this one, where we see Ip knocked out time and time again, overwhelmed by a physically larger and stronger opponent. In addition, just as Ip began to gain the upper hand, the watching judges – all British, of course – deny him the use of kicks, which are typically as much a part of traditional Chinese kung fu as punches. Although Ip Man ultimately triumphs over Twister, as the narrative demands that he must, he must earn his victory through an onslaught of unfair rules and overwhelming, unfamiliar physical force previously unseen in the series. The boxing match between Ip and Twister represents a moment of vengeance on the part of the Chinese, a reclaiming of pride, and by extension, symbolic sovereignty – but within the microcosm of that single fight, the film also depicts the superior forces, unequal treaties, and blatant racism visited upon the Chinese by the British in an unflinching symbolic representation.

Interestingly, in comparison to the first film, the second film involved a much heavier focus on fights between Ip Man and his fellow Chinese kung fu masters. In fact, his only fight with a foreigner is his match against Twister – which of course,
does not occur until the climax and conclusion of the film. Until Twister appears, much of the action instead centers around Ip Man’s unintentional rivalries with the masters of the other Hong Kong martial arts schools, and the in-fighting between their respective disciples. That said, these are fights almost entirely initiated by the opposing parties rather than Ip himself. Unlike Ip, Hong Kong’s kung fu masters – not unlike Foshan’s kung fu masters – seem to view martial arts primarily through the lens of pride and ego, and thus have a great deal more tunnel vision in regard to the importance of victory. One of Ip’s first and most loyal disciples initially refuses to study under him until Ip has defeated the young man in combat. Ip’s fellow masters attempt to block the opening of his wing chun school – and moreover, refuse to acknowledge him as a true master – until Ip defeats each of them in succession.

Perhaps most significantly, we have the character of Master Hung – the most prominent of the Hong Kong masters prior to Ip’s arrival, and their apparent ringleader. Arrogant, quick to anger, and immediately and obviously threatened by Ip Man’s presence in Hong Kong, Hung serves to a large extent as a foil for Ip. Unlike Ip, Hung also makes a distinct habit of hobnobbing with foreigners – specifically the Englishmen – in order to keep the British authorities off the backs of the Chinese kung fu masters. In the face of Ip’s disapproval, Hung insists that his associations with the British are but a means to an end. Yet ironically, the way Hung ultimately meets his demise is in the fighting ring with none other than British boxer Twister. Moreover, the moment of his death is undoubtedly a moment of martyrdom. Hung, despite taking several devastating blows from Twister, refuses to back down from
the fight, insisting that he will not sully “the honor of Chinese martial arts” – and thus dies from his injuries in the ring. Hung’s character is defined by pride, in the end – a pride that drives him to dangerous associations and dealmaking with the British imperialists, but also a pride that keeps him fighting against a British man at all costs, placing the sanctity of kung fu above all else, including his own life and welfare. He and Ip Man are opposites, yet represent two different sides of the same coin, bound by love and loyalty to the Chinese martial traditions they practice – and by extension, China itself. Where Ip symbolizes a rising China, the quiet and dignified Confucian ideal that ultimately triumphs, Hung represents the ailing China of old – impulsive in its arrogance and victim to foreign conquest, yet still somehow noble in spite of it all.

The true language of the Ip Man series is neither Cantonese nor Mandarin, neither Japanese nor English; the language of these films exists in the physical act of combat. This becomes particularly obvious through the treatment – or lack thereof – of linguistic translation. For instance, despite the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin dialects, the Foshan residents and the bandits from the North appear to have no need for an interpreter at all. Even more notably, when the Japanese army arrives in Foshan during the first film, they hire a local Chinese man as an interpreter. The film then makes a point of characterizing this newly hired interpreter as a coward, and a potential traitor to his fellow Chinese. Ip himself confronts the interpreter in a moment of fury and disgust, condemning the former as a dog of the hated Japanese invaders, while the interpreter half-heartedly
protests that he simply “needs to make a living.” In the second film, English-Mandarin interpreters barely appear at all, and when they do, they receive little characterization of their own. Thus, the act of linguistic translation in the *Ip Man* series tends to receive one of two treatments: those who perform it are either criticized as people of mixed loyalties, or they are nonentities, fading into the background to make room for the true conversation of the text, which is the physical combat. *Ip Man* as a text deliberately renders interpretation and translation irrelevant; the spoken dialogue of the text may span four different languages, but the cast as a whole, with its kaleidoscope mix of nationalities and mother tongues, falls under a single umbrella of communication: the language of martial arts. The teaching, perpetuation, and act of fighting convey what words fail to; they articulate individual triumph, loyalty versus betrayal, and ultimately, the culture and autonomy of a nation.

However, this “language of martial arts” goes beyond Fanon’s theory of a “language of violence” by which brutality merely perpetuates brutality, ad infinitum. Within a Chinese cultural context, violence cannot be the ultimate ends of a truly moral man who abides by the tenets of Confucianism. As Ip himself points out at the end of the first film, for all that Chinese martial arts tie themselves inextricably to combat situations, in their most fundamental form, they also arise from a “Confucian spirit [of] benevolence.” In short, martial arts – particularly the Chinese martial arts – do not always automatically equate to violence. Allan Back and Daeshik Kim write in “Pacifism and the Eastern Martial Arts” that “There are two main grounds on
which engaging in an Eastern martial art... is particularly suitable for a pacifist seeking to learn how to fight. The first is that the training aids in the sublimation of aggressive impulsives; the second is that one may become detached, in a peculiar way, from aggressive impulses altogether."  

They argue, in essence, that the East Asian martial traditions, such as Chinese kung fu, in fact cultivate restraint – and thus a degree of pacifism – in their most honest practitioners.

While *The Wretched of the Earth* primarily frames the language of violence as a one-dimensional phenomenon by which an oppressed people articulate resistance against their colonizers by the only means available to them, the *Ip Man* series complicates that language through the filter of China’s martial arts tradition, turning it from mere resistance or learned violence into a declaration of identity. For instance, despite Ip’s occasional forays into a more vicious form of combat – as seen in his fights with the Japanese and the British – he nonetheless refrains from unprovoked attacks, cheap shots, and most notably, deadly force. In fact, Ip’s most obvious moments of anger in the series occur in response to the deaths of his fellow martial artists in the ring – and though he retaliates against the killers, he himself never crosses the line into murder, not even against Miura or Twister. That degree of control, and the unwillingness to stoop to his enemy's level, set him apart from the villains of the film, for no matter the situation, he never loses sight of the “spirit of benevolence” at the core of his own martial philosophy. In his pacifistic practice

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of kung fu, he declares his own identity and that of his people; those who follow Ip
Man’s art practice the true Chinese way, the way that, at its core, promotes peace
over violence.

**IV. Legacies of Imperialism: Comparing Japan and Great Britain as Villains**

The *Ip Man* films are undoubtedly a postcolonial work, and as such,
examining the real life colonial legacies of the Japanese and British empires in
Greater China is crucial to placing the Ip Man narrative within its proper context.

According to Li Narangoa and Robert Cribb in their introduction to the essay
collection *Imperial Japan and National Identities in Asia, 1895 – 1945*, Japan
embarked on a quest to build an empire for itself not only through pure force of
arms, but also through an appeal to common cultural identities. Narangoa and Cribb
state:

> Japan created its empire by force of arms, but like most
> imperial powers it aimed to give its dominion a more
> enduring basis than mere military might. The Japanese
> sought to convince their new subjects that they really
> belonged in the new order they had created. In part, they
> tried to have people believe that Japanese rule was
> materially better than any of the alternatives. They also
> sought, however, to recruit their subjects' sense of identity to
> the imperial cause.\(^{31}\)

Such goals led to the concept of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, through
which all East Asian nations, including China, would unite as a self-sufficient bloc of
territory free from Western imperialism – and, naturally, led by Japan.

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\(^{31}\) Narangoa, Li, and R B. Cribb. *Imperial Japan and National Identities in Asia, 1895-
General Miura’s character is, in essence, a fully rounded anthropomorism of the Empire of Japan. The context of wartorn China allows him to play an unquestioned villain, as he spearheads Japanese conquest on Chinese territory. Marjorie Dryburgh points out in her chapter of Imperial Japan, “The Problem of Identity and the Japanese Engagement in North China” that “By the 1930s, Japanese encroachment in the north was perceived by Chinese nationalists as the greatest challenge yet seen to China’s unity, independence and sense of nationhood.“32 That sentiment, among many, allows Japan – especially by evoking its era of conquest and colonization – an enduring legacy as a fear mongering threat to China’s sovereignty. Yet Miura also represents some of the more unusual aspects of Japan’s colonial aims. After all, Naronga and Cribb write that “... [sometimes] the [Japanese] empire was presented as an expression of a common Asian culture, of which Japanese culture was the highest, but not the only, form. In this discourse, the Japanese prized some aspects of other Asian cultures while marking other aspects for improvement or elimination”.33

Consequently, the film shows Miura performing certain actions that express at least a certain degree of admiration for elements of Chinese culture – such as ordering Ip Man to teach Chinese kung fu to the Japanese troops, having witnessed Ip’s effectiveness in combat. On the other hand, he also informs Ip that he does not “truly” believe that Chinese kung fu can overcome Japanese karate, thus continuing

32 Dryburgh, 201.
33 Narangoa, 2.
to assert his belief in Japanese cultural dominance even as he recognizes, respects, and seeks to acquire the advantages of Chinese fighting techniques. Moreover, the first *Ip Man* film arguably makes a point of painting Miura as a sort of “noble villain.” Despite the devastation his troops wreak on the Chinese nation, as well as his own arrogant belief in Japan’s right to dominion over China, Miura himself clearly abides by a strict code of honor. He rebukes one of his underlings for shooting a Chinese man in the Japanese combat sport ring, telling him that this is a “space for martial arts,” with no room for guns. When he has *Ip Man* arrested, he delivers the latter’s meal personally, and bows before he leaves – a clear gesture of respect and courtesy.

Miura is, in short, a far more sympathetic villain than the antagonist of the second film, the white British boxer Twister. In contrast to Miura, Twister arguably displays no redeeming qualities, nor any particular moral compass. He beats a man to death in the boxing ring, displays no apparent remorse even as he evades all consequences for his actions, and shows his opponents no respect. Moreover, the film plays up his obvious racism and contempt for the Chinese, as he refers to one of the Chinese kung fu masters as “a yellow piece of fat,” and sneers at a Chinese kung fu demonstration as a laughable “pantomime” of real fighting.34 His brash mannerisms and indiscriminate violence make him, in some ways, Miura’s polar opposite: a chaotic threat versus a controlled one, coded as a barbarian to Miura’s

civilized man. If Twister represents Western imperialism the same way Miura represents the Empire of Japan and Ip represents China, then the film paints the threat of Western colonialism as something even more alien and barbaric than the Japanese invasion. Indeed, as non-Asians, Westerners seem to provoke even more wariness on the part of the Chinese.

However, where Miura was clearly the most rounded and sympathetic of a cast of Japanese villains, Twister does exist alongside more likable British characters. For instance, the authorities who arrive at the end of the film to crack down on abuses of police power in Hong Kong are white British officials – though they remain nameless, and serve more as plot device than actual character. That said, after defeating Twister, Ip delivers the following speech to the waiting crowd of both British and Chinese spectators:

I did not fight here today to prove which is better, Chinese or Western boxing. Although people have different status in life, I don’t believe that one person’s integrity is worth more than another’s. I hope that from today onward, we can begin learning to respect one another. That’s all. Thank you.35

Ip’s words express a desire to mutual cooperation across cultures – specifically between the Westerners and the Chinese. This presents a notable contrast to his speech during the fight with Miura in the first film, in which he declared that the Japanese would “never understand” Chinese ways. Thus, while the narrative seems, in certain ways, more comfortable with the Japanese antagonists than the British, it

35 Ibid.
also articulates a desire to understand and cooperate with Westerners that is largely
absent in the plotline concerning the Japanese.

In addition, Ip’s final battles with both Miura and Twister employ the
juxtaposition with flashbacks to previous scenes in the respective installments. Ip’s
fight with Miura – the shorter and cleaner of the two – uses Ip’s memories of
training sessions with his wooden dummies. On the other hand, Ip’s fight with
Twister – perhaps the only fight where the audience sees the great Ip Man truly
struggle to overcome his adversary – uses Ip’s memories of Master Hung’s fateful
duel with Twister, and Twister’s brutal, merciless beatdown on the Chinese master.
These two very different treatments suggest, on a symbolic level, different attitudes
towards the imperial powers that the two antagonists represent. By essentially
equating Miura to something inanimate, the first film also renders the Japanese
empire lifeless, something without passion or humanity. In contrast, by using
memories of Twister’s prior crimes to fuel a fight against him, the second film paints
the British empire as something perhaps even crueler and more menacing than the
Japanese – but also something more alive, and therefore more worthy of notice.
Where the Japanese antagonist represents a familiar entity that has, in the simplest
terms, merely forgotten its rightful place in the world order, the British antagonist
represents something more alien – something that presents us with perhaps the
greater challenge of the two.

The Ip Man duology is an postcolonial narrative that uses the Japanese and
British colonial legacies two express different strains of anti-colonial reactions. The
Japanese antagonists, perhaps less alien to Chinese audiences – in part because of
the Japanese empire’s desire to capitalize on the commonalities in culture and heritage between East Asian nations – make an easy target for a more traditional type of anti-colonial narrative. The Japanese have overstepped their boundaries, and are duly punished. The British antagonists, however, bring the film into murkier territory. While Twister too embodies the villainous colonizer – and does so on a more barbaric and one-dimensional level than Miura – the narrative seems reluctant to alienate Western audiences. Therefore, Ip makes his speech at the end of his fight with Twister, calling for cross-cultural cooperation, even as the “good” British authorities rush in to help the Chinese subdue the “bad” British authorities. So while Miura is allowed to have some noble qualities to offset his villainy, Japan itself is more roundly condemned than Great Britain – which is allowed to occupy a more ambiguous grey area. Thus the film presents its audience with a film that is both nationalistic and anti-imperialistic, but also more nuanced in its treatment of various aspects of the general phenomenon of colonialism.

V. Conclusion

Wilson Yip’s Ip Man duology emblematizes a postcolonial Greater China that overcomes its adversaries and emerges stronger than ever. Here, the martial arts of the film play a crucial role in driving a narrative that both promotes the rhetoric of nationalism within China and projects the image of a strong and admirable China to the global community. As Ip himself says, Chinese martial arts by their very nature
and conception, find most of their practical application in combat – and therefore in a postcolonial narrative becomes an expression of Fanon’s so-called language of violence.

Where Wilson Yip’s duology begins to complicate the theories espoused in Wretched of the Earth is in the characterization of attitudes, methods, and the cultural significance in the performance of Chinese martial arts. Ip Man’s kung fu is not mere violence; it is an art and a set of actions rooted in a philosophy of graciousness to all. Thus the film conceives of Ip as a brand new folk hero in the same vein as classic warriors and fictionalized champions of Chinese nationalism such as Wong Fei-hung. Ip is an icon rooted in truth, based as he is on a man who really lived, and what is more, as a martial artist he performs the ideal blend of self-sufficiency on the battlefield and morality in his daily life. He represents an ideal: the peace-loving man who will nonetheless fight – and fight with awe-inspiring effectiveness – when the situation calls for it.

As such, the film successfully carried over its postcolonial and nationalist rhetoric into the arena of soft power in the global media industry. Ip Man is a face of China that can garner support both within and outside of China’s borders, serving as a perpetual signifier of a China that can overcome, while remaining benevolent in the face of enemies. His story as presented through Wilson Yip’s duology is representative of the ways in which the old and prevailing genre of martial arts fiction in the Chinese canon has evolved and reinvented itself to serve the needs of a modern day China.
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