

# the pocket arts guide

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Tapas Sarkar

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# editor's letter

DEAR READERS,

The February 2012 issue of The Pocket Arts Guide (TPAG) looks back an interesting month as the burgeoning art scenes in Singapore and Hong Kong draw global attention. Art Stage Singapore this year offered convincing proof that Asia's fine artists are making generational leaps; and with originality showing through, it is possible to feel the confidence in the changing cultural landscape, one that appears to have blossomed rather than push itself through.

Writing about history while it is happening is no easy task, but it is easy to fall back on language that has described past breakthroughs. However, looking at the creative variations, the emergence of new mediums and the cultural context they are in, it seems that an umbrella term like 'contemporary' is perhaps no longer enough. The 21st century has new inspirations. Fine artists are using new materials and in interconnecting global cultures that blur the lines of national borders.

TPAG tries to avoid throwing up a load of art jargon. Our articles attempt to look at the underlying ideas and give voice to the artists instead of falling back on labels and preconceptions. Our journalistic values emphasise unique perspectives that guarantee interesting reading, and we haven't forgotten the importance of making the information practical to gallery owners and readers.

The articles in this issue address some of the ideas above and give coverage to the events. This month's *Frontiers* is about the need for new categories in Australian Aboriginal art. As well as reviewing Art Stage Singapore, we look forward to Art HK and its growing significance in Hong Kong. Hong Kong-based writer and producer Bey Logan also reminds us of a time when film posters were painted but still caught the energy of the moving image. As usual TPAG covers a wide range of topics in this issue and we wish you an insightful read that widens your perspective of the art world.



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**ON THE COVER**



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# PUTTING THE ART INTO THE MARTIAL:

The unsung brush strokes of kung fu cinema

*By Bey Logan*



The Big Boss: 1971



The Skyhawk: 1974



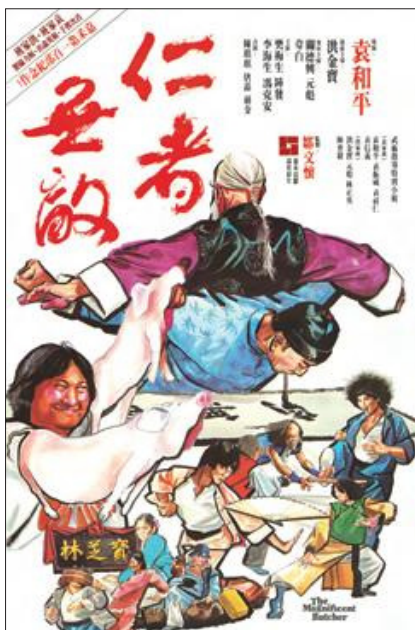
Fist of Fury: 1972

When screen legend Bruce Lee left Hong Kong for the United States, he was best-known as ‘Lee Siu Loong’, the cocky child star of a dozen or so black and white Cantonese dramas. When he returned as a high kicking martial arts master, his image was first defined for local audiences in the form of a brightly painted movie poster that blazed from the marquees of Hong Kong theatres. Local audiences saw the dragon redefined in art before they watched the martial artist on screen.

The men, who worked for hire to provide this uniquely stylised poster artwork, are some of the true unsung heroes of 70s action cinema. Their bold interpretations of that era’s action icons (Lee, Jimmy Wang Yu, Angela Mao Ying...) are now highly prized collectors’ items. These masterworks were created out of technical necessity rather than from artistic vision. At that time, Hong Kong production companies lacked the technology necessary to blow up a photo slide to the size of movie theatre one-sheet. They hired artists, usually youngsters trained in graphic design, to generate artwork that would create a visual impact matching that of the films themselves.

One of the surviving artists, Wong Chi — keung, remembers the process. “We would meet someone from the publicity department of the company concerned,” he recalls. “We seldom met producers and di-





The Magnificent Butcher: 1979



New Fist of Fury: 1976

rectors, and never the actors. They would give us slides and stills from the film, and we would be asked to present ideas for a poster design based on these elements. Sometimes the reference materials themselves weren't great quality, so we really had to use our imaginations to come up with something striking!"

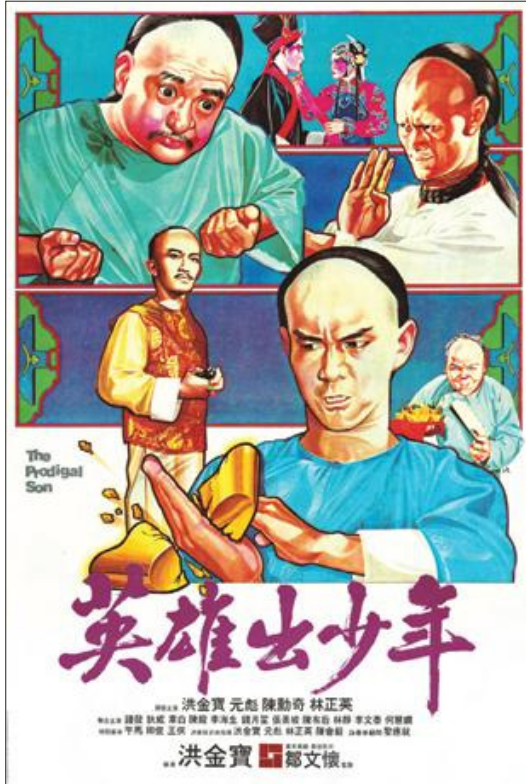
The biggest challenge was how to convey the sheer visceral energy of a Hong Kong kung fu movie on a two-dimensional static surface. Borrowing stylistic elements from Japanese manga comic books, the poster artists sought to show motion with broad 'energy' strokes of the brush, giving the impression that the figures concerned were captured for a split second as they leapt across the canvas.

A good example of early 70s poster art is that created for Bruce Lee's 'Fist of Fury'. Compared to the other actors depicted, Lee him-

The biggest challenge was how to convey the sheer visceral energy of a Hong Kong kung fu movie on a two-dimensional static surface.

self is, facially, barely recognizable. What matters is that he's caught in flight, his kick extended, against a backdrop the colour of Hong Kong movie studio blood. At the time, actresses were perceived to be a bigger draw than male stars, and so it's the visage of leading lady Nora Miao that dominates the bottom of the frame. The villainous Japanese are represented in a triptych of stylized sword-wielding samurai figures that in no way resemble the film's actual bad guy budoka. These were taken from the artwork of a Japanese chanbara movie and adapted to the design of the 'Fist of Fury' poster.

The 'Fist of Fury' poster is a good example of the 'firm line' ap-



The Prodigal Son: 1981



Warriors Two: 1978

Photos: A Gallery

proach, with its images conforming to the more established principles of graphic art as it tended to be applied in the advertising industry of the 60s and 70s. 1974's 'The Skyhawk' offers a more stylized approach, with its central character, kung fu legend Wong Fei-hung (as played by the venerable Kwan Tak-hing), depicted with a soft, watercolour effect as he wields his pole. It's almost an impressionistic approach: the image gives us the impression of the old warrior in motion, while only showing a specifically cropped area of his full body.

Though developments in enlargement technique meant that more photo posters were used, the Hong Kong action cinema of the 80s also kept various artists employed. Where the earlier efforts had been

a matter of necessity, now, in the era of kung fu comedy, companies chose to create an artwork poster to depict the often 'Looney Tunes'-esque aspect of their films, with one of the best examples of this being the one sheet from Golden Harvest's 'Warriors Two'. Where they were once dismissed as flashy ads for disposable films, these posters are now rightly regarded as a key element of Hong Kong's collective cultural heritage.

*A display of classic Hong Kong movie posters will be held in Hong Kong at Michael Leung's A Gallery in Mee Lun Street on the evening of Thursday, February 9. Posters, lobby cards and other classic Hong Kong movie memorabilia items are available from [www.reelast.com](http://www.reelast.com).*