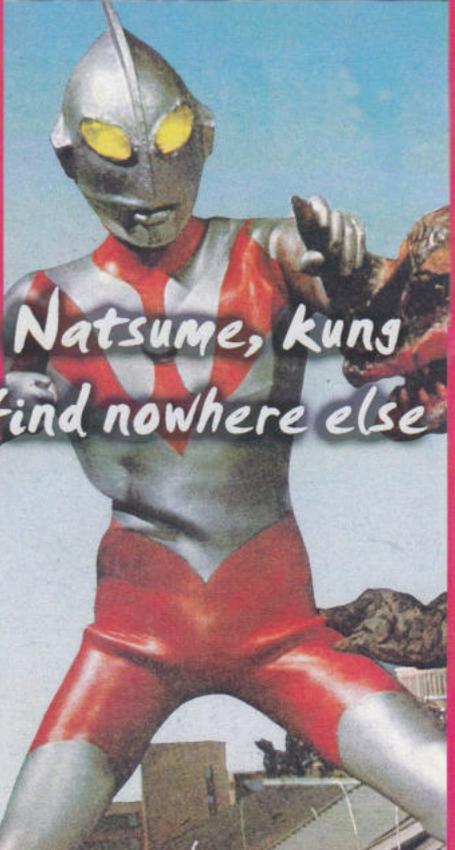


ORIENTAL CINEMA

#24

**Martial Arts
Choreographer
Yuen Wo Ping!
His life! His Art!
His Prolific Family!
His Films:
FIST OF LEGEND!
CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON!
KILL BILL!
THE MATRIX!
KUNG FU HUSTLE!
SHAOLIN DRUNKARD!
Rare oldies and more!**

**ALSO INSIDE:
GODZILLA FINAL WARS-
the debate continues!
ULTRAMAN's 40th Anniversary!
PLUS: Superheroes, anime, beautiful Rio Natsume, kung
fu, and obscure movies & TV shows you'll find nowhere else
(not even on the internet!)**





Yuen Wo Ping (left) with Ti Lung (right)



Ultraman

EDITORIAL

Here we go with another edition (my 39th issue!) of this irregular publication, Oriental Cinema. The main reason OC comes out so irregularly & infrequently is because printing costs an arm & a leg—I should be quadriplegic by now! Another problem is that I'm the one writing 90% of the reviews (any volunteers willing to submit articles & reviews?), but the real issue is the money. It takes at least 2 or 3 years to save a thousand-plus bucks, so naturally, things will never go back to the 1990s when OC could come out every year.

Granted, things are in disarray now, and it's not just money issues. People think I've dropped off the face of the Earth because my address changes frequently (back in the 1980s & 1990s I pretty much kept the same address). As mentioned before, my interests & hobbies started evolving once I reached middle-age. I still like the old movies & TV shows I grew up on, but in recent years I've expanded my passions and gotten out more, traveled and enjoyed life. I've decided that one can only do so much with movies & DVDs. My latest enlightening trip was to Australia, where I did environmental work for Fruit Bats (a vulnerable species). Working with acclaimed animal lover & noted environmentalist Jenny Maclean (seen on Animal Planet's JEFF CORWIN EXPERIENCE), we rescued Flying Foxes from certain death at the hands of farmers and barbed wire fences. I've not completely turned my back on my psychotronic phase, however: Shortly after returning from the Tolga Bat Hospital (Atherton, Australia), I got to work with another hero of mine, 1970s TV icon The Ghoul! This horror host is the man who first introduced me to GAMMERA THE INVINCIBLE (Daiei, 1966), so I was flattered to join him on stage for silliness at a local theater. But getting back to the "Damon dropped off the face of the Earth" comments, I've dropped even further because I'm not even in California now! For the first time in my life, I'm living in the Phoenix (AZ) vicinity—so all my previous postal mail addresses in CA are obsolete. I don't know how long I'll be in AZ, so your best bet for reaching me is still via email. Amazingly, I still know many people who don't have email accounts.

Thanks to the Internet and digital technology, the world of fanzines has changed into a world of websites. In the old days, my publisher (Draculina) could afford a lot of the expenses. None of us writers, editors & publishers can compete with the Internet, which has proven to be to zines what Walmart is to small businesses. So Draculina Publishing (much like OC) is dwindling and a mere shadow of what it was in the 1990s. Without Draculina & Hugh Gallagher to pay the expenses, it all comes out of my pocket. The Internet isn't the only thing to change OC's environment. Things like Digital technology, easily burned DVDs, Ebay, & Amazon.com have made foreign movies easily available to anybody with a credit card, allowing people to bypass reviews & zines completely. Everything is at an accelerated rate now and there's no going back. Cable TV now seems to have no shortage of Asian TV shows with English subtitles. Whether it's an assortment of cartoons on late night's "Adult Swim" (whatever the hell that means) or the many live action programs on Asian and/or International TV stations, it's impossible to keep up with all the new stuff! Ten or fifteen years ago, if I had access to a foreign series that had translation, I considered it precious and would actively seek it out. My, how times have changed.



Japan's Rio Natsume, see page 35

ORIENTAL CINEMA

THE YUEN WO PING ISSUE

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ORIENTAL CINEMA #24: The Yuen Wo Ping Issue (AKA OC #39) © 2007 by Damon Foster. No part of this magazine should be reprinted in whole or in part without the written permission of Damon Foster. This publication exists solely for critical review and assumes no rights over the productions depicted within. **GODZILLA: FINAL WARS** is © Toho, **BORN INVINCIBLE** is © Kong Kong International, **ULTRAMAN: THE NEXT** is © Tsuburaya Productions, **MAZINKAISER** is © Bandai Visual, **KAMEN RIDER: THE FIRST** is © Toei, **NINJA SCOPE** is © Toei, and so on. All other productions are the © of their respective companies.

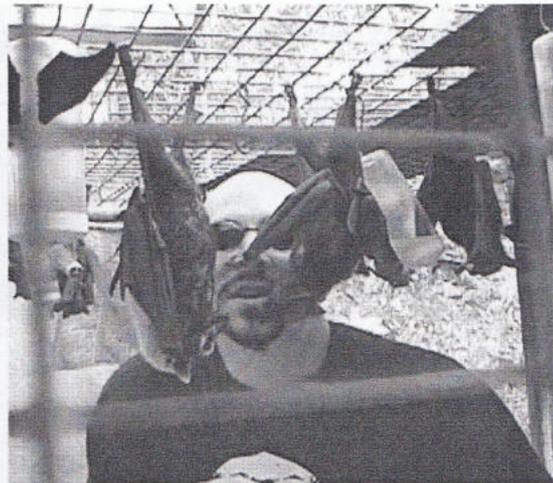
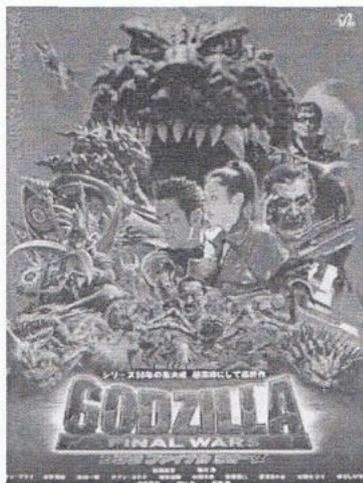
This issue focuses on the movies of Yuen Wo Ping. I've been watching his kung fu movies most of my life, but only recently was I able to put a face to the name. I began working on this issue (off and on) back around 2005, and had no idea what I was in for when I undertook this monumental task! This isn't like the last couple issues that mainly concentrated single films (GOJIRA and INFRAMAN), because martial arts choreographer Yuen Wo Ping worked on countless movies! I've really bitten off more than I can chew! I've compiled as many reviews as I could, anything from his mainstream hits (i.e. THE MATRIX) to the more obscure stuff like THE LIZARD and SHAOLIN DRUNKARD.

Although this here edition is considered "the 2007 issue", I don't plan on releasing it until 2010 (it takes THAT LONG to save up the money)! By then, I'm sure there will be a new form of O.C. on the Internet. By 2009 or 2010, there will be not only O.C.: The Myspace Page, but also, its upcoming version: O.C.: The Webcast. Since Youtube started in 2005, I've been an active presence in the world of webcasts, podcasts, vidcasts, etc. So it's inevitable that O.C. will eventually be viewable in live action form, with the usual movie reviews, humor, genre histories and more humor.

Needless to say, making this issue has been one hell of a challenge.

Sincerely, Damon Foster
 (damonfoster@earthlink.net)
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<http://www.facebook.com/people/Damon-Foster/>



ABOVE: Godzilla: Final Wars
 RIGHT: Damon out-goths the goths!
 Damon gets bitten by live bats, and you can't get more "vampiric" than that!
 BELOW: Damon meets long time hero The Ghoul.



LETTERS... or INFRAMAN revisted!

It's been a long time since OC has had a letters section, but last issue's big piece on INFRAMAN seems to have stirred up some interest. I thank Yoshikazu Ishii for sending more information on the late cameraman Tadashi Nishimoto (but this new info brings more questions), and wish I still had the letter that speculated on the existence of some rare, Filipino dai-kaiju movie called TOKYO 1970. Regardless, I've included side-bars on both (Tadashi Nishimoto and a Filipino movie which might not really exist) topics, for future reference. -Damon Foster

Hi Damon,

Just wanted to let you know I got 2006's O.C.: Inframan 30th Anniversary Issue today it's amazing. I've been plugging it on my website!

I also can help you out with one item-- The superhero on the Turkish INFRAMAN poster is actually "Solar" from Solar: Man of the Atom. He's from Gold key Comics, invented in the 1960s. The character had a successful revival

in the 90s as well. See, sometimes knowing comics pays off!

Great job!
 David McRobie
 Costa Mesa, CA
 <megaloman01@yahoo.com>

Well, well, well...

Damon Foster, back in the saddle again. I read the O.C.: The 30th Anniversary Issue (2006) cover to cover--within 24 hours of receiving it! INFRAMAN is one of my favorite movies.

Ironically, the artwork from that Turkish poster was (probably stolen) from an American Gold Key comic book called Doctor Solar: Man of the Atom. I hope I'm the first comic book geek to tell you that. *I Well, that all depends. I don't know if David McRobie considers himself a geek.* -DF/

Loved the reviews, laughed out loud at least a half-dozen times. Thanks for saying what had to

be said about GMK, and for reviewing movies like 3 DEV ADEM. And only you would review something like COMETO SAN. And what IS the deal with Lucy Liu? *I That's what I was trying to figure out when I wrote that disastrous article. I uncovered no answers.* -DF/ Is she the only English-speaking Asian actress in the world?

I still like Mexican wrestling, but between my English-dubbed version of LOS CAMPEONE JUSTICIEROS falling through, and NACHO LIBRE, I feel the way you did when CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN TIGER came out.

Anyway, thanks for re-connecting. Glad to see you're fighting the good fight, and (as far as OC is concerned), very little has changed.

Your pal,
 Steve Ross
 Temple City, CA
 <maskrado@gmail.com>

LETTERS continued on page 51

CONVENTION REVIEWS



Robert Scott Field, Kazuki Omori & Brett Homenick at G-Fest 13. Photo by Brett Homenick's camera

Here we go with another of OC's Convention Review sections! Because OC happens less frequently than the conventions themselves, we're including not one, but two G-Fests. I reviewed 2005's G-Fest 12, but Brett Homenick reviewed 2006's G-Fest 13. Since I too attended 2006's G-Fest 13, I think I'll add my two cents worth here.

Though I've never had so much fun at a convention (our on-stage antics had me laugh to the point of watery eyes and near suffocation), I can't help but reveal a gripe or two. Guest Robert Conte worked his ass off to get rare extra features for yet another series of Godzilla DVDs (as though we don't have enough of those). But then I heard the DVD releasers (Classic Media) later gave Conte's wealth of material the axe and instead re-hashed the same old Extra Features or audio-commentaries that appeared on some British release, or whatever. It's no big deal to me, because Godzilla movies have been available on VHS & DVD for years. Not wanting to have all his hard work (i.e. locating an actual 1955 ticket stub from a theater, when GODZILLA: KING OF THE MONSTERS was released to America!) to have been in vane, Robert Conte organized a presentation to show these unique, possibly priceless materials at G-Fest 13. But here's where it gets sketchy: I wasn't involved in Conte's ill-fated presentation, so I don't know the full truth. But it seems somebody involved in the Classic Media disks was there among us, and contacted Classic Media. I don't know what this son of a bitch said, but the individual supposedly told the company that Conte's presentation was going to be a trash-job on Classic Media and those involved in the disks, or some such bullshit. As I understand it, Conte received an intimidating message from the misinformed Classic Media mere hours before his eagerly anticipated presentation, and was more-or-less threatened with legal action if the presentation wasn't cancelled. I hear they also claimed they would have "monitors" planted in the audience.



Kikaida & Daisuke Ban at Wondercon. Photo: Damon Foster



GODZILLA VS. THE SMOG MONSTER director Yoshimitsu Banno with editor Damon Foster at G-Fest 12. Photo: Armand Vaquer

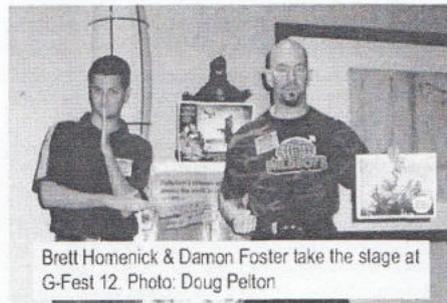
I don't know the full story, but last I heard, Conte did cancel his panel at the last minute—to the apparent disappointment of the fans. It's pretty pathetic that some jerk at G-Fest 13 considered Conte's panel to be "conflict of interest", because he deprived an eager audience of an enlightening presentation. Oh well, not that it really matters to me—like I said, Godzilla DVDs are a dime a dozen. I still have my old VHS tapes (grainy; part of their nostalgia!) recorded off TV in the 1980s, complete with vintage commercials—that makes my prints more valuable to me than any crap Classic Media can come up with!

Reading these negative rants of mine, you would think I hated G-Fest 13. Actually I loved the hell out of it (see the underground DVD "Super Hero Rarities" for my take on G-Fest 13), but some times bad things are more amusing to read than good things. Anyway, let's get on with the convention reviews! -Damon Foster

G-FEST XII – ALL MONSTERS ATTACK!

Dates: July 8-10, 2005
Location: Crown Plaza Hotel (Rosemont, Ill.)
by Damon Foster

Other than this being my first trip ever to Illinois and once I got there I sold enough Oriental Cinema back issues to break even, there's not much I can say about the event! Let's face it, G-Fests have been reviewed in OC before and the comments are always positive. What can I say? Yet again, I had an absolute blast at G-Fest. It was so cool to hang out with old friends like Danny Tokarz, Richard Pusateri, Kevin Frederick, Carl Craig, Armand Vaquer, Vince Cornelli, Joey McGough, and of course J.D. Lees himself. I also got to meet a lot of readers & friends in person for the first time, such as Lenell Bridges, Roy Ware, Kathy Corcoran and Jay Johnson. As I understand it, this was the



Brett Homenick & Damon Foster take the stage at G-Fest 12. Photo: Doug Pelton

biggest G-Fest to date, with plenty of activities to take part in: The obligatory huge dealers' room with enough mouth-watering merchandise to cause drools even from a non-collector like myself, Toho movies screening at the nearby Pickwick Theater (not known for its air-conditioning, it seems), guest presentations by director Yoshimitsu Banno and Carl Craig, and other rooms involving video, art, model display stuff, the costume contest, some sort of game-show & trivia thing, and Lenell Bridges' panel on the pros and cons of video collecting & tracing.

Despite snobbery & interference from some individuals, I really enjoyed G-Fest 12 and Brett Homenick were flattered to interview director Yoshimitsu Banno (GODZILLA VS. THE SMOG MONSTER) on stage. While the director didn't like having his bloopers (i.e. continuity errors in SMOG MONSTER) pointed out, the interview still managed to be educational and enlightening. Among other things, he said Godzilla's Ultraman imitation (in SMOG where he tries to catch a beam) was a deliberate in-joke! Those who want to see the whole interview can probably still find that underground, non-profit disk, "Godzilla Rarities" which made the rounds with bootleggers in the underground. -Damon Foster

THE FOURTH ANNUAL ASIAN FILM FESTIVAL OF DALLAS

Dates: August 18-26, 2005
Location: some place in Dallas, TX
by M. G. Keller

For the fourth summer in a row, a plethora of Asian cinema exploded across the screens of North Texas like a greasy burrito through George Bush's digestive system. Executive director Mye Hoang, who recently moved to New York City, made it back to town to join director Chiho Mori in the showing of 26 features and a variety of short subjects. The genres available for viewer consumption ran the gamut from drama to documentary, action to sci-fi, comedy to just plain weird.

Highlights included many southwest premieres, including GODZILLA: FINAL WARS, KAMI-KAZE GIRLS, SAVE THE GREEN PLANET and MEN SUDDENLY IN BLACK as well as Dallas premieres such as INFERNAL AFFAIRS I & II, CAVITE, BAD GUY and 2009: LOST MEMORIES. Well known directors were represented such as Johnnie To (THROW DOWN), Takashi Miike (GOZU), Wong Ka-Wai (DAYS OF BEING WILD) and Takeshi Kitano (DOLLS) side-by-side with newbies like Ramona Diaz (IMELDA) and Travis Klose (ARAKIMENTARI). Virtually every country in Asia got its due, even North Korea with the documentary A STATE OF MIND.

Though many of the movies shown were already available on Region 1 DVD, people should keep in mind that one of the main purposes of this (or any) film festival is to see films as they are meant to be seen - on the big screen, film prints rather than digital projections. Despite the lack of special guests, there could be little doubt that



this year's AFFD was the most smoothly run, entertaining, thought provoking and fulfilling event Mye and Chiho had yet pulled off; and there can be little doubt that future AFFDs will just continue to get better and better. —Mike Keller

WONDERCON 2005

Dates: Feb 26th- 28th, 2005
Location: Moscone Center (San Francisco, CA)
By Damon Foster

The impressive list of guests of this huge convention brings forth a question: What's the difference between "comicbook legend" (according to the program booklet) Neal Adams, John Cassaday and Amanda Conner? Well, the answer is that I once heard the name Neal Adams! I don't care about these other "celebrities" and only went to this event to see KIKAIDA's Daisuke Ban (whom by now I've met more than once) again. Hats off to JN Productions and/or www.generationkikaida.com for doing exactly what I accused them of not doing (they proved me wrong) in *O.C.: Gojira 50th Anniversary*.
Issue: "Bridging the gap between Hawaii's own unique pop culture and the Mainland's fandom."

Though KIKAIDA/KIKAIDER events in CA have happened more than once, Wondercon's KIKAIDA panel managed to be both amusing and informative. Translated by JoAnne Ninomura and moderated by August Ragone, the most interesting story was when KIKAIDA actor Daisuke Ban injured his forehead doing a stunt in the series! It happened when he jumped off a boat into unexpectedly shallow water. His head hit a rock so the next few episodes of JINZO NINGEN KIKAIDA (Toei; 1972) had him keep his white crash helmet on, to hide the bandages! The climax of the panel included some guy in a Kikaida suit or whatever.

For the record, Wondercon itself is a humongous event that, like the San Diego Comic Con, is too big to critique in its entirety. The remaining subject matter (standard, mainstream sci-fi/Hollywood crap) has no place in OC. I really hate conventions this big; something so crowded and impersonal. With its snobby Hollywood mentality, I couldn't wait to get the hell out of there. I made a hasty retreat once most of the KIKAIDA stuff was done. For what it's worth, other guests included Arnold Drake, Bob Wilkins, Mark Evanier, John Stanley, Adam Hughes, and Jimmy Palmiotti—whoever that is. —Damon Foster

ULTRAMANIA

Dates: August 26-27, 2005
Location: Castro Theater (San Francisco, CA)
By Damon Foster

Not one of the better conventions (not really even a convention, I suppose) I've attended, but I still condemn the many local fans that found convenient excuses not to attend! How often, in America do we have Ultraman events?! Just going to the theater to see the Ultraman statue standing above the theater's marquee made it worth the admission price, overpriced food at the concession stand, uncomfortably cramped rides on Muni, and (being San Francisco's infamous gay district) seeing dozens of young men determined to live up to a stereotype! I would rather they hold such an event at an area less crowded so that public transportation (before and after my Muni transfers, I waited an eternity to catch my BART trains) isn't necessary and parking isn't an issue. Though The Castro Theater is a big, nice place, it's not perfect for an event of this type. To be fair, people like Bob Johnson (of Bay Area Film Events) did a great job at organizing what was probably the first event of its type in Northern California. Kevin de'Antonio and everybody else involved in the organizing of Ultramania is to be commended.

However: Rumor has it that there was even some mini Ultraman stage-show where Ultraman fought a monster. But as the story goes, it was all thrown together at the last minute and an embarrassment to sit through. I don't know—I never saw it. Having choreographed many superhero stage-shows myself, it was absolutely insulting that nobody invited me to help develop this skit. I guess that's the price of not being in the BAFFE-clique. If they wanna' slap costumes onto random martial artists (who don't know a damn thing about Ultraman) and throw together some lame skit, that's their choice.

The guests included horror movie host Mr. Lobo, and from Japan: Costume-maker Shinichi Wakasa & Costume-designer Hiroshi Maruyama. Shinichi Wakasa worked on the Ultra-series since ULTRAMAN 1980 and has made suits for Godzilla and his monstrous foes from GODZILLA 2000 through the recent GODZILLA FINAL WARS. Maruyama is the designer of both Ultraman and his monstrous foes from 1996's ULTRAMAN TIGA through ULTRAMAN MAX. Both seemed to be interviewed (translated by Brad Warner) on stage more than once, but the only thing they had going for them was that



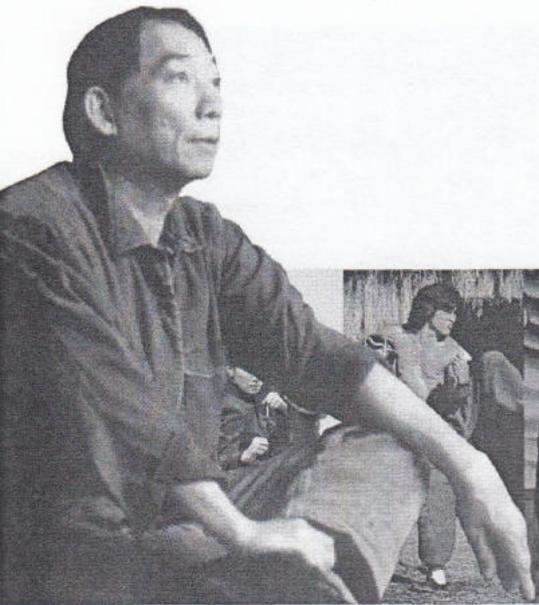
ABOVE LEFT: How often do you see "ULTRAMAN" ON A MARQUEE?! ABOVE: Hiroshi Maruyama, Damon Foster and Shinichi Wakasa at Ultramania. BELOW: Shinichi Wakasa, Hiroshi Maruyama, Brad Warner and Bob Johnson at Ultramania. WAY BELOW: Kikaida and Daisuke Ban at Wondercon



they were more interesting than the little kids who were brought up on stage to sing Ultraman theme songs and win prizes.

But my real gripe comes from the lack of audience respect when it came to the true classics of the Ultra series. The recent movie ULTRAMAN: THE NEXT got the biggest turn-out and most enthusiastic response from the audience. ULTRAMAN ZEARTH and ULTRAMAN MAX's first episode were also well received. In-between these typically CGI-reliant farces were occasional classics from the Golden Years of Japanese superheroes.

Continued on page 52



Yuen Wo Ping 袁和平



YUEN WO PING

(A.K.A. Woo-ping Yuen, Yuen Wu Ping, Master Yuen Wo Ping, Yuen Ho Ping, Heping Yuan, Wo Ping Yuan, Wo Ping Yuen, Woo Ping Yuen, Woo Yuen, Yuan Ho Ping, Yuen Her-ping)

Place of Birth: Guangzhan (AKA Guangzhou)

Year of Birth: 1945

by Damon Foster

Film historian/critic Leonard Maltin said that you can almost divide American action films into pre and post-MATRIX. The groundbreaking American sci-fi blockbuster inspired more movies than there are tattoos in a prison. It's no exaggeration to credit Yuen Wo Ping with helping to change the face of Hollywood action cinema. But before we talk about Yuen Wo Ping's more commercially successful work (i.e. THE MATRIX and CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON), let's get a little history in, and learn about Ping's upbringing and the Chinese film environment he grew up in. If you're just another simple-minded mainstreamer who only recently jumped on the Yuen Wo Ping band-wagon because of THE MATRIX, then read on; you might actually learn something. There are plenty of fans of generic mainstream action films; I've not seen this much widespread bad taste since David Hasselhoff had sell-out concerts in Germany. Anyway:

First of all, Hong Kong's kung fu movie scene has more cast & crewmembers named "Yuen" than there are hugs at a retard-convention, and this has caused a lot of confusion over the years; specifically to non-Chinese fans. HK showbiz has many different prolific families, and when the kung fu film industry has two distinctly different "Yuen clans", things get messy. What's amazing is that both Yuen groups feature a collection of prolific names that look like a "who's who" of kung fu superstardom. One group consists of former students of Yu Jim Yuen's (no relation) Chinese Opera school (AKA: "Zhonggou Xiju Xueyan") that included students like Jackie Chan, Mong Hoi & Samo Hung. But Yu Jim-Yuen's other famous movie-star students changed their names to Corey Yuen, Yuen

Biao and Yuen Wah to honor their inspirational teacher. Like I said, all these kung fu protégés are stars in their own right. You can find out about some of these upstarts by reading older OC's, like [O.C.: The Jackie Chan Issue](#) and [O.C.: The Samo Hung Issue](#).

Of more interest to this particular edition of OC is the other group: The offspring of actor Simon Yuen (but more on him later), the father of legendary Yuen Wo Ping. Even long time readers of OC might not recognize the name and face of Yuen Wo Ping, but the guy is as big a part of kung fu cinema as are more wellknown superstars like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Yuen Wo Ping was completely raised in the kung fu movie environment, in fact his father was none other than Simon Yuen (1912-1979), a veteran of the Peking Opera who's best known for the "Drunken Masters" he played in his later years in movies like SNAKE-FIST FIGHTER (1971) and of course DRUNKEN MASTER (1978) itself. Simon Yuen (AKA Yuen Hsiao-Tien, Yuan Hsiao Tien, Yuen Siu Tin, Simon Siu-tin Yuen, Siu Tin Yuen, Xiao-Tien Yuen, etc.) actually appeared in countless kung fu movies himself; a whole issue of OC could be written on him. Too bad it wouldn't sell. Anyway, Yuen Wo Ping was one of 12 children in the family, at least five of which would have careers in the movies: Yuen Wo Ping himself, Yuen Cheung Yan (who worked on CHARLIE'S ANGELS, wore drag in THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS and gets killed by Iron Robe Yim in ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA), the ugly Yuen Chun-Yeung (A.K.A. Yuen Sun-yi A.K.A. Sunny Yuen) starred in DANCE OF THE DRUNK MANTIS, and of course Yuen Yat Choh, A.K.A. Yuen Yat-chor (who appeared with Ping himself in 1983's SHAOLIN DRUNKARD and is also in POSTMAN FIGHTS BACK, LONG ARM OF THE LAW 2, LEGEND OF A FIGHTER and IN THE LINE OF DUTY 4: THE WITNESS). As for young PING, he started learning kung fu and Peking

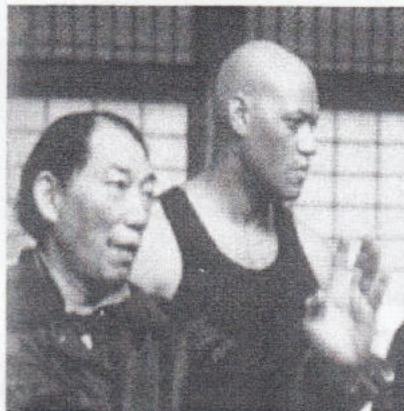
Opera at around 10 or 11 years old, from his illustrious father. Ironically, I heard a young Yuen Wo Ping and his brother Yuen Cheung-yun didn't just learn northern style kung fu and Peking Opera from their father; they also studied martial arts under Yu Jim Yuen (for one year), but left the school before Jackie Chan was sent there. But it was during this period when the two brothers first met classmate Samo Hung, and also a young Corey Yuen Kwai—years later they would collaborate on films (i.e. SEVEN GRAND MASTERS and CRYSTAL FIST).

Thanks to his dad's martial arts choreography, Yuen Wo Ping's first foray in film was in the 1950s, when father Simon would take his sons to movie sets for Kwan Tak Hing's old, B&W "Wong Fei Hung" movies (i.e. 1955's WONG FEI HUNG VIED FOR FIRECRACKERS AT HUADI or 1956's HOW WONG FEI HUNG VANQUISHED THE TWELVE DRAGONS). Occasionally, the producers would need extras, and hire the kids to play bit parts, on the spot. Ping's real involvement in cinema (at around 18 or 19 years old) was learning and doing minor work on 1960s movies, with some of the same producers he'd met when he appeared with his father. He improved and by the late 1960s, qualified for work at HK's then top film company, the Shaw Brothers. He had his foot in the door, as a kung fu extra and stuntman. He and his brothers learned on the set, about

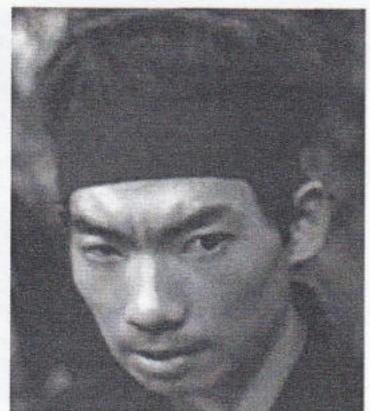




Wo Ping, Simon Yuen and Samo Hung



Wo Ping with Laurence Fishbourne



A young Wo Ping

camera angles, how to best organize physical conflict and how it's best conveyed via angles and views, and basically the science of kung fu choreography; something that had to be learned & experienced on the set, since there were no official classes on the topic. Like John Woo, Yuen Wo Ping worked under the famous director Chang Cheh and was more influenced by Cheh than anybody else. Ping was inspired by other directors in HK, China and other parts of Asia-- but nobody left quite the impression on him that Chang Cheh did. According to an interview at the website <http://www.iron-monkey.com/yuenwoping2.html>, the Shaw Brothers were HK's best filmmakers of the 1960s. Ping went on to say: "In the 1960's, if a film was from Shaw Brothers, its quality was a lot better because Shaw was a very big operation in Chinese cinema. So every day, they would do 1 to 2 shots (scenes), without rushing. And with the budget, we could afford the slow and good quality work. Because of the fact that there was more money to experiment - if something didn't work, we could redo it. Thus we could say it was more professional. On the other hand, when we worked for the small independent businesses, everything was very rushed and tightly budgeted, with no room for mistakes. Nowadays in Hong Kong, the movie production is very different from before. There's a lot of high quality work because of higher budgets."

Though he appeared in background shots (in movies like *TEMPLE OF RED LOTUS*, *ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN*, *VENGEANCE*, and *THE 12 DEADLY COINS*), his first major break was as an extra in Wang Yu's *THE CHINESE BOXER* (Shaw Bros.; 1970), where he got to work with assistant director Ng See Yuen (no relation). Though Yuen Wo Ping didn't continue to work with the Shaws a whole lot, his brief period with them did start his relationship with Ng See Yuen, and the two of them would go on to collaborate on many martial arts movies, including 1971's *THE MAD KILLER* (directed by Ng See Yuen and choreographed by Yuen Wo Ping), 1972's *THE BLOODY FISTS* (dir.: Ng See Yuen, Fighting Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping), and 1977's *SECRET RIVALS 2*. He also staged fights for other people, including Chu Yuan, in films like 1973's *THE BASTARD* and 1972's *THE LIZARD*. All this, plus some TV series called *THE PRACTICE*, which Yuen Wo Ping produced in 1976. So Yuen Wo Ping was the first of his siblings to get involved with martial arts choreography for movies-- but his brothers would soon follow.

The next major step in Yuen Wo Ping's career was in the late 1970s, when Ng See Yuen formed (with director Lo Wei) Seasonal Film Corp., better known as Seasonal Films. The new company started in 1975, and gave Ping his first job as director, on the Jackie Chan classic, *EAGLE'S SHADOW* (Seasonal Films; 1978)! In the terrific documentary *CINEMA OF VENGEANCE*, Ping said: "I remember Ng See Yuen and I were trying to decide on who should play the lead in our next film, *EAGLE'S SHADOW*. Since I had been involved in the movies for the better part of my life as a stuntman or choreographer, I knew all the actors' abilities in martial arts. I thought Jackie Chan would be a good choice to play the lead. My friends thought otherwise; they said not to use him on account that he had no box office value. But it was my first film as director, and I wanted an actor whom I was comfortable with. So I went with Jackie Chan, and the film was a hit." In 1977, Ping was arguably the best choreographer in Southeast Asia, and was offered many opportunities to direct. Feeling he wasn't ready, he remained humble and usually stuck to choreography until *EAGLE'S SHADOW* came along. At this time, many of his fellow choreographers were becoming directors, so he decided to catch up. At the time, all the kung fu films were brutal and bloody. He was quoted (in the April/May 1999 issue of *Kung Fu*) as saying: "If I became a director, what can I do to break out of that? What can I make refreshing for the audience? I thought, well, I'll do a comedy." Yuen Wo Ping went overtime on this movie; as he also did the martial arts choreography. Not only that, but Yuen Wo Ping was finally able to repay his influential father (Simon Yuen), by casting him in the role of the master who teaches Jackie Chan kung fu! Not only did the successful *EAGLE'S SHADOW* make the names Jackie Chan, Ng See Yuen and Yuen Wo Ping well-known, but finally, Simon Yuen was about to be an international face (before *EAGLE'S SHADOW*, none of his work was wellknown outside of Asia).

As is always the case in the world of cinema, success breeds imitations. One of the first *EAGLE'S SHADOW* follow-ups was made by the same crew, *DRUNKEN MASTER* (Seasonal Films; 1978). It featured Jackie Chan in his interpretation of legendary folk hero Wong Fei Hung (though dubbed "Freddie Wong" in the English print!!!). Basically a remake of *EAGLE'S SHADOW* (if a rival crew & production company

had made it, it could have been considered a "rip-off"), it too was a commercial success. One of Simon Yuen's last movies (he died in 1979, and therefore never lived to see the day when his son would change the face of Hollywood) was another Yuen Wo Ping directorial, *DANCE OF THE DRUNK MANTIS*, also from Seasonal Films. This time, however, the lead hero was Yuen Wo Ping's brother, Sunny Yuen. Though Simon Yuen appeared in a few other rip-offs (i.e. *WORLD OF DRUNKEN MASTER*) and was typecast for the remainder of his career, both Jackie Chan and Yuen Wo Ping were ready to move on. This did not stop countless imitation films (i.e. *THE KUNG FU COOK*, *THE WAYS OF KUNG FU*, *COWARD BASTARD*) from flooding theaters: The late 1970s and early 1980s are packed to the brim with low budget martial arts comedies involving excessive training scenes and "drunken masters". I swear, this has got to be the most repetitious genre in film history. The fact that so many rip-off companies made these movies that really caused this genre burn out, and made the originators themselves (*EAGLE'S SHADOW* and *DRUNKEN MASTER*) look bad when seen today. It was a severe case of overkill. Many of these movies appeared on American TV in the 1980s, having been dubbed by Vaughan Savidge and Sharon Noble (a voice we're all familiar with by now). Though many of these movies are considered classics by diehard kung fu fans, they were often scoffed at by the general public, and have long since disappeared from most American TV stations. It didn't help that the original films (i.e. *DRUNKEN MASTER*) became indistinguishable from the flood of rip-offs that hit TV stations simultaneously, and in some cases the rip-offs reached local channels before the originators.

By late 1979, Yuen Wo Ping was working for Golden Harvest on more "Freddie Wong" films like *MAGNIFICENT BUTCHER* and *DREADNOUGHT*. These two Wong Fei Hung movies brought old-timer Kwan Tak Hing back on board. Though too old to portray the main hero (lead characters were played by younger martial artists like Yuen Biao, Sammo Hung & Pai Ying), they gave the aging star a comeback (much like that of Simon Yuen a year before), allowing the character of Freddie Wong (now elderly) to at least take a backseat to most of the action. Kwan Tak Hing even appeared in the 1980 imitation *THE MAGNIFICENT KICK*, from a smaller company. In 1980, Ping formed his own company (Peace Film Production Company), where

he tried his hand at producing, resulting in Tsai Siu Ming's comedy BUDDHIST FIST, which Ping also choreographed. In the early 1980s, Ping and his brothers made a series of wild & crazy fantasies (EXCITING DRAGON, THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS, DRUNKEN TAI CHI, SHAOLIN DRUNKARD & TAOISM DRUNKARD) that I think represent their best work. Sadly, these over-the-top comedies weren't that successful or inspirational. At a time when old school kung fu movies were out of style, the Yuen Clan struggled to re-invent themselves by making Donnie Yen's breakdancing comedy, MIS-MATCHED COUPLES. When it bombed, the Yuen boys tried to cash-in on MR. VAMPIRE's successful horror genre, when they cranked out the disappointing Taiwanese stinker, CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE VAMPIRE. Man, if only their "anything goes" comedies (THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS, SHAOLIN DRUNKARD, etc.) had been more inspirational! Oh, what could have been!

Fortunately, it didn't take long for Yuen Wo Ping to catch on and cash-in on the urban action phase of HK cinema (spear-headed by the like of Sam Hui's ACES GO PLACES, and of course Jackie Chan's 1980s extravaganzas). Ping had been helpful to many careers (Jackie Chan, Kwan Tak Hing, Simon Yuen, Ng See Yuen, etc.), but none more so than a young Donnie Yen, his American-born protégé. By now, the Yuen brothers were getting too old to do a lot of fighting themselves, so they left that to people like Donnie Yen, Cynthia Khan, and later Jet Li. Donnie Yen would appear in a number of Ping's mid-1980s movies, such as: The zany DRUNKEN TAI CHI, TIGER CAGES 1 & 2, and IN THE LINE OF DUTY 4. Collaborations between the Yuens became less common because Ping was working with D&B Films while Chun-yeung (Brandy Yuen) signed a contract with Golden Harvest. Anyway: As always, the times depicted the type of action depicted in films. In the 1960s, it was basic swordplay. In the 1970s, it was empty-handed kung fu. In the 1980s, it was empty-handed street-fighting and kung fu trappings; not to mention incredible stunts. Ping excelled at all of these. Amazingly, the ever-resilient Ping would continue the rise in fame in the 1990s, when a whole new genre of martial arts film would arise:

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA was labeled a

"return" to the period films of the 1970s, simply because it lacks the modern urban setting common in so many 1980s films. Though the name "Wong Fei Hung" was back in vogue, I feel the 1990s movies are nothing like the 1970s thrillers. I won't go into my disdain for the overdone FX and heavy wire work of the 1990s (you've all read my bitter whining before), but I'm still amazed that Ping managed to conquer a whole new decade & genre (a genre largely the work of Tsui Hark & Ching Tsui Tung). Ping could adapt to fit the times, and direct the fight scenes in many different types of martial arts film, whether they utilized martial arts or fancy editing. Ping's 1990s credits include such commercial hits as DEADLY CHINA HERO, IRON MONKEY, WING CHUN and Jet Li's TAI CHI MASTER. TAI CHI MASTER is better known in America as TWIN DRAGONS, and I think it's one of the better wire & pulley farces. In his memoirs, Ping remembered his work on TAI CHI MASTER/TWIN DRAGONS: *"In HK, everybody was afraid of filming anything tai chi wise. Because it's hard, it's not the traditional thing, not easy to play with. But, I always want to come up with something new. I figured, okay, it may be hard, but I think I can do it. And do it well. It turned out to be a great hit."* Because tai chi is considered a softer, more "flowing" art than kung fu, Ping experimented with slow motion photography. In an issue of the magazine *Kung Fu*, Ping elaborated: *"The slow motion, I figured that should be the style, that should be the tone of the film because tai chi is a very floating, ascending move. I asked Jet Li to do it with real speed and real power, and we filmed it in slow motion to make it look like a flying form that fits with the style of wushi and taiji. Before I started shooting the movie, I knew I wanted to use slow motion, and use a lot of it. The reason that I improvised everything on the set is because we design on the set. It's just all there when I'm filming, not ahead of time. As I'm filming, I'm also editing in my head."* Shot in Beijing, the fight scenes themselves took a month, and the whole movie required just three months of filming.

Speaking of Jet Li: FIST OF LEGEND (which I admit to being a personal favorite), based on the same story & characters as in Bruce Lee's THE CHINESE CONNECTION (Golden Harvest; 1971) became Ping's most important film to date. As the story goes, actor Jet Li had an

injured leg, presumably caused by a stunt in one of the many ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA films. Because FIST OF LEGEND was intended as an actual kung fu film and not another historical fantasy, genuine martial arts were required, instead of the suspension wires, pulleys and tricky editing the 1990s were more commonly known for. Because of Jet Li's condition, heavy stunt-doubling, and very careful choreography was required. The result being one of the most exciting kung fu movies of the 1990s, and being one of the few Jet Li movies to get a five star (*****) rating in the pages of *Q.C.: The Jet Li Issue!* FIST OF LEGEND also was the first time the three choreographers (Yuen Wo Ping, Yuen Cheung-yan & Yuen Shun-ye) collaborated since the late 1980s.

FIST OF LEGEND turned out to be quite a legendary movie. It reached America in the late 1990s, at a time when the HK movie industry was in turmoil because of the approaching Communist take-over. HK filmmakers scrambled to work in America (many of the big names have been in Hollywood ever since). Fortunately for Yuen Wo Ping, he too was about to get the opportunity to come to America, because American filmmakers Larry & Andy Wachowski were so impressed by both FIST OF LEGEND and IRON MONKEY. And the rest is history. The Wachowski brothers had been fans of HK movies for years, and had wanted to incorporate that elaborate style of action FX into one of their own movies. Finally, just the right script was developed. According to an article by Martha Burr in the magazine *Kung Fu* (April/May 1999), Andy Wachowski explained: *"We began with the premise that every single thing we believe in today, and every single physical item is actually a total fabrication created by an electronic universe. Once you start dealing with an electronic reality you can really push the boundaries of what might be humanly possible. So if characters in THE MATRIX can have instantaneous information downloaded into their heads, they should, for example, be able to be as good a kung fu master as Jackie Chan"*. Though martial arts had been popular in American cinema for years, the far-fetched nature of THE MATRIX offered the perfect excuse to incorporate HK's more elaborate gimmicks & trickery. *"We've always wanted to bring HK fight sensibilities into our Western story ideas"*, they stated. *"This was the perfect opportunity"*. Ping's own condition was that the movie's directors guaranteed the cast would train long hours to learn the wire work and kung fu. According to Martha Burr's article, the brothers remarked, *"That's a big request. How do you tell an actor that they're going to have to spend months training & learning kung fu when they could make another movie in that same time? That's what impressed us about Keanu. He understood why it was necessary and the dedication it required. In fact, the whole cast has amazed us with their dedication to the training regime—it's been incredibly rigorous."* So Ping taught Australian actor Hugo Weaving, Carrie-Anne Moss, Laurence Fishburn & Keanu Reeves for four months, mainly in an obscure Burbank (CA) warehouse. While these movie stars took part in the rigorous training, wire techniques and viewing an occasional HK movie for inspiration, Ping was staging the action scenes, experimenting with angles and a video camera. During breaks, he would watch

BELOW: Wo Ping with Jet Li on the set of FEARLESS





the shots and fine tune them. Also in the article, Keanu Reeves stated something like: "I love working with Yuen Wo Ping. When we first started to do this, the Wachowski brothers gave me some tapes to watch—FIST OF LEGEND, TWIN WARRIORS, etc. So then when he came aboard, I'd seen what he could do. I've got a great respect not only for his fight choreography but also for his cinema. The way he shoots, and the editing of his fights is great. Woo Ping is very cognizant of what looks good and what looks bad and being able to teach that. His fight choreography is so inventive, and it's fun. But it's not silly, it looks like fights. He really wants an authenticity to his choreography". Laurence Fishburn added: "I think, speaking for myself and possibly Keanu and Carrie-Anne, we're probably in the best physical shape of our lives just as a result of the training we had to do with Wo Ping. And his choreography is second to none. He's a wonderful director, he's made a lot of movies himself and he brings that kind of experience to it too."

THE MATRIX made Ping part of Hollywood, and CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON made Ping big all over the world. Ever since THE MATRIX, Ping has been in demand. He's been busier than an ambulance driver in Israel! Anyway, CROUCHING TIGER pitted Yuen Wo Ping against Ang Lee, one of the world's most famous Chinese directors (perhaps he's second only to John Woo). Though he wasn't originally known for directing martial arts films, Ang was stubborn and determined to film the beautiful stunts & elaborate gimmicks he had dreamed of since childhood. Yuen, also a big part of CROUCHING TIGER, had to put his foot down more than once, as inevitable creative differences arose. "Ang would say he didn't want to shoot things Wo-ping's way because it was an Ang Lee movie," actor Chow Yun Fat later recalled. "But his ideas couldn't be worked out. Finally, he'd go to Yuen Wo Ping and say: 'Master, I'm wrong. Let's do it your way.'" Among other sequences, Ang Lee convinced Ping to utilize the big bamboo scene. "He liked the way the swaying limbs of the bamboo mimicked the postures of the actors as they fought," Ping said. "He was very insistent."

What follows are reviews of as many of Yuen Wo Ping's movies I had time for (it's taken several years to locate & review these flicks). Some of these movies are ones Ping appears in, and others are ones he worked on behind the scenes (you'll just have to read the reviews and credits to find out what his involvement was; I haven't the time to differentiate them).

I'm not the only one reviewing these movies, but I warn everybody that like all humans, I have an opinion. Some readers will no doubt scoff at my taste, for giving high praise to Ping's earlier stuff, which includes the 1970s chop sockey farces (which many people look down on), and yet I'll mercilessly trash the so-called "classics" of his later years, such as the many wire & pulley fantasies of the 1990s. I hope all readers will have an open mind as they read my reviews, and take them with a grain of salt. Keep in mind that I actually studied martial arts in the 1970s and early 1980s—I would go to my classes (at Hayward's The House of Karate and Castro Valley's East-West Bok Fu) on week nights, and then on the weekends, I'd head over to Chinatown's theaters and/or videostores, to see other martial artists in action, and to dream that I would one day be good enough to fight like them. It was great when the "1970s kung fu films" evolved into the "1980s action films", but as the 1980s came to a close, the 1990s ushered in the "1990s wire & pulley films". No kung fu instructor ever taught me how to fly over a pagoda, levitate inanimate objects or make a tree explode, so I became disillusioned with HK's martial arts cinema. If I want that sort of silliness, I'll watch period fantasies like LION MARU or WATARI THE CONQUEROR. Naturally I have a bias against the 1990s fantasies (and beyond). My hope is that younger film-buffs who read these reviews will think for themselves. As for fans of suspension wires & high-speed edits, they'll realize that if I trash a film, it must be a masterpiece in their eyes—and they should check it out. Hopefully, these jaded newcomers will have the curiosity to check out the innovative films (i.e. THE CHINESE BOXER or THE ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN) that made it all possible. I should also warn you of the inevitable confusion over titles—this happens every time I review a large selection of foreign films. From country to country, titles are changed, re-released & re-translated, so at different times, both TWIN WARRIORS and DRUNKEN TAI CHI have been called TAI CHI MASTER. I won't waste time debating the merit of what's the "original" title, because right now I really need to go take a dump. —Damon Foster

YUEN WO PING; A PARTIAL FILMOGRAPHY.....

By Damon Foster, Garo Nigoghossian, Jeff Goodhart, John Grace & Brian Camp

BANQUET, THE - Yuen Wo Ping as a man in some dinner scene in this "all-star comedy". But

there's nothing really funny in it, and THE BANQUET was made as a charity film for some. It basically stars Eric Tsang as some guy who tries to become friends with his father to win some new deal or something. Most of the star cameos come during a dream sequence, or was I dreaming when I fell asleep during this very boring, unfunny comedy? I did laugh twice though: 1. Simon Yam plays a gay prostitute. And 2. A scene between Steven Chow and Michael Hui fight over a chicken ass at the dinner table. All in all, avoid. AKA: "Haomen yeyan", Ho moon ye yin", "Party of a Wealthy Family". Co-Director: Sammo Hung, Cast: Eric Tsang, Simon Yam, Steven Chow, Michael Hui, Samo Hung, Yuen Wo Ping. * -Garo Nigoghossian



BANQUET, THE - As the DVD's subtitles explain, the setting is the Tang Dynasty (not to be confused with the Orange Juice Dynasty), which lasted from June 18, 618 to June 4th, 907.

I don't usually go for these slow, talky, confusing, pretentious epics. Masterful writing and stupendous cinematography don't matter to me. So I should have absolutely hated this big-shot movie. But despite romance, irritating music and tedious slow-motion 'moodiness' ("get on with it!" I said more than once), THE BANQUET was at least somewhat tolerable. The doomed, gloomy character Wu Luan (Daniel Wu) was likable, and there were interesting scenes throughout. Yuen Wu Ping's martial arts choreography was a little under-used, but since it still consists of the usual artsy-fartsy gimmicks and suspension wires, I'm glad this Chinese variation on

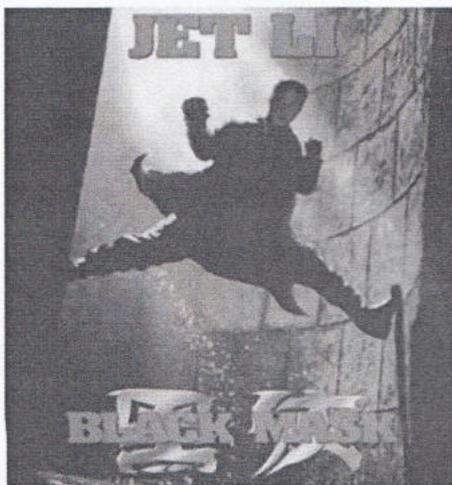
HAMLET (well, almost) concentrated more on story and characters with depth & believability....not to mention symbolic masks. But even as a historic drama, THE BANQUET has its flaws. My real gripe is that more than once, I just didn't get it. At the end, the conniving Empress Dowager (Ziyi Zhang) gets a knife in her back. But unless I missed something, it's never clear who the hell threw the knife. Chinese title: "Ye yan", 2006. Directed by Xiaogang Feng, Writing credits: Gangjian Qiu, Heyu Sheng, Action Coordinator: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Zhang Ziyi, Daniel Wu, Xun Zhou, You Ge, Jingwu Ma, Xiaoming Huang. ** -Damon Foster

BASTARD, THE- It has the usual hero (a naïve young man with kung fu skill who faces the larger world for the first time), but his female companion is the more interesting & flamboyant character. It also places greater emphasis on characters and relationships and offers so few fights that the film cannot technically be called a kung fu film. It's a simple story which moves at a brisk pace and includes a rousing kung fu finale. The action direction is by Yuen Wo Ping and Yuen Cheung. Overall, the film is well shot and staged but is best seen as a showcase for the acting talents of Lily Li. Normally seen in kung fu films, Lily doesn't get to fight here, although she acts up a storm as the spunky, childlike urchin who aggressively pursues our hero's interests. Chung Wa, however, makes less of an impression in the hero's role and was better off in supporting roles. As the sexy cousin, Kong Ling (an actress previously unfamiliar to this reviewer) is quite a lovely performer and adds a distinct romantic-erotic quality to the seduction scene. The hero (played by Chung Wa/also spelled Tsung Hua) has no name and is dubbed by a passing merchant, "Little Bastard". Lily Li plays "Little Beggar," and she latches onto Little Bastard and helps him find food and lodging as he searches for the parents who abandoned him as an infant 18 years earlier. He eventually finds his real father, a powerful and wealthy local (Cheng Miu), and is taken in by him and his family. In the course of acclimating to his new family, Little Bastard is seduced by his attractive cousin Kong Ling, making Lily Li very jealous indeed. However, the seduction and family welcome are all part of a nefarious plan by the father that is better left undescribed here. Lily gets wind of this and tries to save our hero. Shaw Bros.; 1973, AKA: "Xiao za zhong". Martial Arts Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Tsung Hua, Lily Li, Cheng Mui, Kong Ling, Sha Fei Au Yeung, Hei Chan, Lau Chan, Shen Chan, Mars, Yan Yuen Cheng, Sunny Yuen, Yuen Wo Ping. *** -Brian Camp

BLACK CITY (1999) [actor]- Not available for review.

BLACK MASK (1996)- Semi-futuristic fantasy that reminded me of SAVIOR OF THE SOUL, HEROIC TRIO, BLADE RUNNER, James Bond flicks, and even THE GREEN HORNET. BLACK MASK, being based on a comic-book, should have been a really fun superhero movie. But it's dark, dimly lit, and gloomy; not my idea of fun. Yuen Wo Ping's martial arts choreography at least makes this typical 1990s movie tolerable at times, but the wire-work and fancy editing keep the action scenes well within the range of 'tolerable', as opposed to 'great' or even 'good'. 20 years later, them Chinese superhero makers still

can't top INFRAMAN! Charismatic Lau Ching-Wan plays a cop out to thwart a gang of genetically altered super villains (remember Ricardo 'Kahn' Montalban's squad in the STAR TREK episode, "The Space Seed"?). Fortunately, one of these evil super fighters turns out to be not so evil after all, because he's played by Jet Li. When Jet Li's character isn't engaging in dumb antics at his day-job (a library), he's wearing a Kato-like mask to help the cops defeat the bad guys. 1996, Dir.: Daniel Lee Yan-Kong, Action Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Jet Li, Lau Ching-Wan, Karen Morri, Francoise Yip Fong-Wah, Patrick Lung Kong. * -DF



BLACK MASK 2: CITY OF MASKS- More mutant fighters, but this colorful movie is more like THE X-MEN (2000), HELLBOY (2004), and/or FANTASTIC FOUR (2005). Very comic-book inspired, and with an international feel (some scenes shot in Thailand, one scene is in Japanese, and most actors are Americans like Traci Lords). BLACK MASK 2: CITY OF MASKS is a sequel-in-name-only, to the inferior BLACK MASK. I guess I was remotely amused (not that I put much thought into it) by BLACK MASK 2: CITY OF MASKS, despite the bad acting and painfully naïve script. I'm not a fan of Tsui Hark's directorials, but in the context of a dumb sci-fi/superhero farce with monsters, the suspension wires and CGI reliance seem to work. Yuen Wo Ping directed the action scenes, for what it's worth. I don't know if this means he was there to choreograph the few genuine martial arts fights, tell extras the best way to grip a suspension cable, or if Ping himself was somehow 'choreographing' the computer technicians who generated the fake flips & stunts (perhaps saying: Press these computer keys to make it look like he's really jumping!). Anyway, the story has something to do with animal-human hybrids that fight fellow mutant Andy On. They do seek some top-secret formula at some point, but the script can basically be broken down like this: Some martial artists are genetically altered evil mutants, but not the one who wears a Kato-like mask. Toss in some colorful wrestlers and gals in skirts, and you get a serious film that should have been a comedy. Watch for the bad acting of some of the Thai extras in the crowd scenes. Also, note that none of the bystanders seem shocked when their favorite wrestler suddenly morphs into a marauding reptile. Dir.: Tsui Hark, 1999 (released: 2001 and/or 2002). A.K.A.: "Hak hap 2" (Cantonese title) and "Hei

xia 2" (Mandarin). Writers: Jeff Black, Charles Cain, Martial Arts Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Andy On, Traci Lords, Teresa Herrera, Tobin Bell, Jo Polito, Tyler Mane. ** -DF

BLOODY FISTS- Even for somebody like me, who enjoys crude old kung fu films, this typical rip-off of Wang Yu's THE CHINESE BOXER (Shaw Brothers; 1970) did nothing for me. BLOODY FISTS (one of at least three movies with that same name!) is a kung fu flick so average that it's below average; if that makes any sense! It has a number of familiar faces, has the same old dubbing as those who always say "But still", a brief training shot, revenge, a rape scene, evil Japanese, not-so-evil Chinese, one evil Chinese, and whatever else kung fu cheapies are known for. Chan Sing plays a former criminal trying to go hetero- I mean, to go straight. But he finds out that a Chinese traitor who was exiled to Japan is back. The villain now knows Japanese karate, and so does the Japanese sensei, played by Chen Kuan Tai, in a rare, villainous role. But "Chen Kuan Tai" spends most of his time wearing a mask, so that another actor can double for him. I thought he had insisted on doubles because he was embarrassed to be seen in a movie so far below his talents, but I read elsewhere that he was a "Contract Actor" at the time (working for various film companies) and couldn't spend too much time on the set of BLOODY FISTS-- I'm sure the Shaw Brothers paid more than whoever the hell made BLOODY FISTS. But he and his samurai followers fail to obtain a village's "Dragon Herb", because it's needed to cure Chinese villages of some plague. At the end of the movie, the Chens Kuan Tai and Sing (no relation, at least I don't think so) battle to the death; both of theirs. 1972, Prod.: Jimmy L., Dir. Ng See Yuen, Editing: Cho Teng Hong, Fighting Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Starring: Chan Sing, Chan Kuan Tai, Liu Ta Chuan, Henry Yu Young. AKA: "Deadly Buddhist Raiders", "the Bloody Fist", "Death Beach". * -DF

BOGUS COPS- Other than Yuen Wo Ping playing a sleeping cop and that the 1993 movie's Chinese title is "Zou lao wei long", little is known about it. This Veronica Yip vehicle was unavailable for review. -DF

BORN INVINCIBLE- In *The Encyclopedia of Martial Arts Movies*, they said "beautiful costumes, above average acting, good fight scenes and an interesting & different story line makes this one of Carter Huang's best films." BORN INVINCIBLE got similar praise at the Internet Movie Data-Base: "This is the movie full of fighting but it uses a good story line to keep you wondering just how they will defeat them." Ever the rebel, I'll go against the flow again! BORN INVINCIBLE has a painfully simple (not mentally stimulating in the slightest) plot that goes like this: The villains are bad, and the kung fu school is righteous, resulting in one pointless vendetta after another. There are constant challenges, swordfights, fist-fights, a scene where the villains tear down the sign from the martial arts school, wooden-men training scenes, acupuncture-statue training scenes (ala Chen Kuan Tai's EXECUTIONERS OF DEATH), a 'house of traps' type gimmick w/ bamboo & ropes, and weapons which have secret moving parts & clamps (ala ONE-ARMED SWORDS-

MAN). Don't the characters in this story have lives? How is it they can afford to eat and clothe themselves when all they do is practice kung fu, hide in caves and fight for revenge? I admit the fights (they're plentiful and very long) are great, but I really think BORN INVINCIBLE is a typically stupid movie from the late 1970s. But I did not hate BORN INVINCIBLE. It succeeds as an unintended comedy, from the starting credit that reads: "Produced and directed by Joseph Kuo" (that's right, "anh"! Oh how my Spell-check must hate me!). Carter Huang/Wong/Wang, as an evil, indestructible Tai-Chi Taoist, is dubbed in a funny, high-pitched voice. There's a scene where a dying hero bites his finger so he can write a final message in blood, but when his finger went into his mouth, I thought he was trying to puke! BORN INVINCIBLE is dead-serious, except for a funny ending when Carter finally suffers defeat. Kong Kong International; 1978, AKA: "Tai ji qi gong", Dir.: Joseph Kuo, Action Director: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Carter Wong, Jack Long, Mark Long (Yo Ming Tu), Fei Lung, Lo Lih, Corey Yuen, Shun Yee Yuen. ** -Damon Foster

BROKEN OATH- In Q.C.: The Sammo Hung Issue, John Grace gave this average 1970s kung fu movie a four star (****) rating, while The Encyclopedia of Martial Arts Movies only rated it two and a half (**1/2). My opinion of BROKEN OATH falls somewhere in-between. Yuen Wo Ping's fight choreography is great, but the movie gets off to such a slow start that I was beginning to wonder if this was really a martial arts movie. Anyway, what starts off as a women-in-prison story set during the Ching Dynasty quickly becomes a fairly routine tale of Angela Mao raised at Shaolin Temple (by nuns with shaved heads, not the usual male monks) so she can avenge the death of her father. She doesn't kill villainous leader Chen Hui Man right away, because of all the gambling, pickpockets, sexual harassment, prostitution, delivering a secret message, an antidote to poison, and other chop sockey clichés we have come to expect. There are interesting characters through out, and some complex, mysterious ones. There are a couple beautiful sets, and I was tickled by Mao's pets: Scorpions! I love scorpions, and the fact that she uses these poisonous arachnids as helpers to defeat the bandits & Manchus is worth a star on its own. Golden Harvest; 1977, Dir.: Cheng Chang-ho, Pro.: Raymond Chow, Martial Arts Instructor: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Angela Mao, Shih Tien, Chen Hui Man, Bruce Liang, Han Ying-chieh, Sammo Hung, Casanova Wong, Dean Shek, Lam Ching Ying. *** -DF

BUDDHIST SHAOLIN AVENGERS- No Shaolin, and no Buddha in this typical 1970s romp set in 1920s Shanghai or whatever. Movies like this are more common than beards in a mosque. Some of the acting sucks, melodramatics get sappy at times, there are boring brothel scenes, and both villains and hookers seem to have gingivitis. But the kung fu spats are quite enjoyable, as righteous Shiue Jia Ian singlehandedly takes on a triad lead by knife-thrower Tien Feng. I've seen better, but it's a tolerable saga made all the more amusing by nifty music highlighting a bicycle chase scene (the bicyclist played by the cabby in A BETTER TOMORROW, I think), and two "but still"s dubbed in. Distributors: Saturn Productions Inc. & Oak Lee Movie Pictures,

Pro.: Ho Man Kueng, Action Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping ("Yuan Her Pyng") & Yuan Shyang Ren, Dir.: Fang Long Shiang, Cast: Shiue Jia Ian, Ou Yang Pey Shan, Tyan Feng, Menq Lih, Fung Hak On, Yun Wah, Chien Yuet Sun. ** -Damon Foster

BUDDHIST FIST, THE- It's the first flick from the production company Peace Film Production. Sources list this silly little film as being from 1980, but since actor Simon Yuen (who plays an eccentric Buddhist) died in 1979, this is doubtful. THE BUDDHIST FIST is obviously one of his final roles, and I suspect that it was released or maybe completed in 1980. Three "but still"s, bad dubbing, horrible comedy, a little revenge, and a jade Buddha statue stolen from a temple—and yet THE BUDDHIST FIST isn't your typical late 1970s kung fu comedy. There are unexpected plot twists, breath-taking fights and enough innovative kung fu tricks (utilizing anything from bamboo sticks to barber chairs) to make it consistently amusing. Familiar faces pop up here and there, such as protagonist Sunny Yuen in a rare heroic role, Mui Sang Fan (AKA Fen Mei Shun; the fat ugly guy from WHEN TAE KWON DO STRIKES), and that strange-looking fellow with the uneven eyebrows Dai Sai-Aan (villainous wizard in KUNG FU FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE, background extra in ENTER THE DRAGON). But despite all it has going for it, THE BUDDHIST FIST is pretty damn stupid and didn't do much for me. There are a few colorful characters (i.e. a ghostly hunchback), and this movie looks like a prelude to the zany fantasies (i.e. EXCITING DRAGON, SHAOLIN DRUNKARD and MIRACLE FIGHTERS) that were right around the corner. Peace Film Production; 1979. A.K.A.: "Fo Zhang Luo han quan" Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Pro.: Leung Wing Yin, Cast: Yuen Shun I, Tsui Siu Ming, Simon Yuen, Fan Mui Sung (SHANGHAI EXPRESS, WHEN TAE KWON DO STRIKES), Chan Siu Pang, Lung Chan, Lee Hoi Sung, David Wu, Yuen Cheung Yan, Yuen Chun Wai. ** -DF

CAGE, THE (1988) [director] - Not available for review.

CHAMPIONS, THE (1983) [producer] - Not available for review.

CINEMA OF VENGEANCE- The title of this documentary should not confuse it with the 1970s book of the same name. This is one hell of a documentary! This enlightening, educational epic tells you everything you need to know about HK movies; it's quite captivating! I've watched it at least four times, and it still amazes me just how many HK superstars (new and old) they managed to interview. Some of these guys speak decent English, while others are subtitled; but regardless, if you're a fan of martial arts films, you've just gotta' see this immensely thorough movie. This incredible salute has everybody: Jimmy Wang Yu, Chen Hui Min, Gordon Liu Chia Hui, Simon Yam, Steve James, John Woo, Cynthia Rothrock, Bruce Li, Lau Kar Leung and more. Obviously, Yuen Wo Ping is interviewed too, or this movie wouldn't be included here. Sadly, Yuen Wo Ping's interview is very short. I would rather they chop out the interviews with Gary Daniels & Don "The Dragon" Wilson and make Ping's interview longer, since he must have a lot of interesting stories to tell. Worse yet, Ping only talks about Jackie Chan!

But that's a small complaint for an otherwise superb movie. 1994; Dir.: Toby Russel, Pro.: George Tan, Exec. Pro.: Roy McAree. ***** -DF

CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE VAMPIRE, THE- Another late 1980s "gyonsi" (hopping vampire) movie. This Taiwanese stinker is one of the genre's worst. There are decent FX we can't see because it was filmed even darker than my future! This suspenseful non-martial arts comedy reminded me of superior Taiwanese stuff like RAI RAI KYONSHIZU and HELLO! DRACULAR. This desperate attempt at success was the last time the Yuen family's three actors (Yuen Yai-chor, Sunny Yuen, and Yuen Cheung-yan) would appear together. Strangely, Yuen Cheung-yan didn't give up on the gyonsi genre right away and directed other flicks in the genre from 1989 to 1992—when the topic was dead. Liang Chia Jen plays the only dude in town who's aware than a gyonsi is on the rampage. While the adult bloodsucker hops after victims, acrobatic kids befriend another innocent corpse boy. As for the frightening villainous hopper, you'll be relieved to know he gets blown to kingdom come by a lightning bolt. The only martial arts is Liang Chia Jen delivering a single back knuckle fist to an annoying Taoist (Yuen Shun-Yee), that's it! Yuen Wo Ping directed this stinker. I never want to sit through CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE VAMPIRE again— I'd rather be an Israeli bus-driver! 1986, A.K.A.: "Jiang shi pa pa", "Dragon vs. Vampire", "Oriental Voodoo". Exec. Pro.: Tsui Sung Lian & Shan Che Wu, Pro.: Chou Ling Kong, Co-Producer: Yuen Wo Ping, Martial Arts Dir.: Yuen's Clan, Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Liang Chia Jen, Yuen Shun-Yee, Chris Yen. -DF



CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON- My god, can you say over rated!?!? I never knew the definition of "over rated" until I sat through this artsy-fartsy, pretentious, boring, talky flick (mind you, it's an amusing artsy-fartsy, pretentious, boring, talky flick)! The damn thing is the most successful foreign movie of all time, and has grossed over \$115 million, which is indeed pretty gross! I deliberately avoided CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON for many months before I finally stepped into a theater to view it. I had gotten sick of this damn movie even before it got released to America, and from the looks of available photos, it looked like just another "flying-swordsmen-in-the-forest art film", and since I've already seen this under such titles as BUTTERFLY AND SWORD, SWORDSMAN, SWORDSMAN 2 (one of my all-time least favorite movies), A CHINESE GHOST STORY (the one I kinda' liked), and/or THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR, I felt no urge to sit through it again under the title CROUCH-

ING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON-- or any title, for that matter. To be absolutely honest though, I feel CROUCHING TIGER isn't a terrible movie. I did enjoy many of the high speed, spinning swordfights, and it's definitely a comeback for both Chow Yun Fat and Michelle Yeoh. Chow's American movies (THE REPLACEMENT KILLERS, THE CORRUPTOR and ANNA AND THE KING) didn't do much for me, though I thought Yeoh's TOMORROW NEVER DIES was okay. CROUCHING TIGER is pretty okay too! A.K.A.: "Wo hu cang long". Sony Pictures: 2000, Prod.: Li-Kong Hsu, James Schamus, William Kong & Ang Lee, Dir.: Ang Lee, Associate Prod.: Po Chu Chui, Phillip Lee, Based on the book ("Sleeping Tiger Hidden Dragon") by Lu Wang (AKA Want Tu-lu), Screenplay: Hui-Ling Wang, James Schamus, Kuo Jung Tsai, Cast: Chow Yun Fat, Ziyi Zhang, Michelle Yeoh, Chen Chang, Sihung Lung, Cheng Pei Pei, Fazeng Li, Xiao Gao, Yan Hai, Deming Wang. **1/2 -DF



DANCE OF THE DRUNK MANTIS- Direct sequel to Jackie Chan's ground-breaking (and bone breaking) hit DRUNKEN MASTER. Yuen Cong-yi's martial arts choreography is inventive and incredible, and really highlights this typically late 1970s "drunken comedy". The agility, talent and limberness of fighters like Sunny Yuen (in a rare heroic role) and Huang Cheng Li (in a not-so-rare villainous role) are the only reason to sit through DANCE OF THE DRUNKEN MANTIS. Though acclaimed for its superb kung fu intricacy, I was mildly disappointed because so much of this weird movie is based on exotic Chinese cultures (i.e. the lyrical dialogue and the 'sick' martial arts master?! Huh?!) which made little sense to me. Also, the various styles ("drunken style", "mantis style", etc.) look so artificial and formulaic that we lose the 'action adventure' thrill of combat which was so prominent before this whole 'training scene' genre came along. It's really just a series of challenges and people basically saying: "If he uses that technique, then I'll use this technique". Where's the mayhem? The good old days of Jimmy Wang Yu or Bruce Lee taking on the world?! Oh well. Despite the acrobatic antics (playing off of furniture, ropes, coffins, wine cups, etc.) and tedious goofiness, DANCE is recommended, if only to diehard fans of late 1970s drunken comedies. It's not a bad tale of the further adventures of "Sam Seed" (Simon Yuen), who gets challenged by villainous Huang Cheng Li, in the usual villainous white long hair. Sam Seed's adopted son (Shun Yee Yuen) learns kung fu not just from Sam Seed, but some ill martial artist who sleeps in a coffin, much like a vampire. I don't get it, but the sick guy (Yen Si Kuan, AKA Yan Sai-kune) teaches

our hero enough comical fighting that he can finally defeat a spear-wielding Corey Yuen and kill Huang Cheng Li before the DVD's previews (RED FIST and DEAD TARGET). Seasonal; 1979. AKA "Nan bei zui quan", "Drunken Master Part 2". Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Martial Arts Instructors: Yuen Cong-yi & Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Shun Yee Yuen (Sunny Yuen), Simon Yuen, Linda Lin (Lin Ying), Jang Lee Hwang (Huang Cheng Li), Corey Yuen, Dean Shek, Sai Kun Yam (Yen Si Kuan), Chien Yuet Sun. *** -DF

DEADLY CHINA HERO- Jet Li plays Wong Fei Hung again. As far as this outlandish stupidity goes, I admit that I got a chuckle out of the obligatory lion-dance scenes. Rival martial artists get involved, but are attired as a giant centipede! This monstrous prop is amusing, giving this lame excuse for comedy a permanent place under the category of "the PLAN 9 FROM OUTERSPACE of kung fu movies!" Yes, these sequences are so bad they're good. The centipede (several men inside, with KILL BILL's Gordon Liu at the head) has sharp arms that can cut flesh. But for every silly scene involving a fiberglass centipede, there are several more of talking, lame foolery, more talking, suspension wires, and of course—even more talking. I feel 75% of these dialogue scenes are useless, doing nothing to enhance the plot. It's just a way to stretch out the movie with seemingly endless rambling about some brothel next to the kung fu school. This embarrassing wire-fu movie features Cheung Man, whose sister gets kidnapped by monks (similar to 1966's KNIGHT OF KNIGHTS). Fortunately, Jet Li fights to rescue her—but first he must deal with corrupt Manchu soldiers, evil Caucasians and a stupid script. In-between chop-edit crap and wirework, it's evident that Yuen Wo Ping did manage to direct a few good kicks & stunts. DEADLY CHINA HERO let me down, leaving me more disappointed than an entrapped pedophile meeting Chris Wallace on an episode of DATELINE! Win's Motion Pictures; 1993. A.K.A.: "Wong Fei-hung chi tit gai dau neung gung" (Cantonese), "Claws of Steel", "Wong Fei-hung zhi tie ji dou wu gong" (Mandarin), "Iron Rooster vs. the Centipede", "Last Hero in China", "Tie Ji dou wu gong", "Wong Fei Hong's Iron Rooster vs. Centipede". Dir.: Wong Jing & Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Jet Li, Cheung Man, Dicky Cheung, Chung Shun Chu, Fat Chung, Tiet Wo Chu. * -Damon Foster

DREADNAUGHT- Most of this over-rated, surprisingly popular film is bad comedy, & ridiculous over-acting. Being one of Kwan Tak Hing's "Wong Fei Hung" films, there are well-done lion dances (but I dozed during one of them because it was so long). Despite his age, Kwan still looked pretty energetic, and at times, he's more fun than his younger co-stars like Liang Chia Jen and Yuen Biao. If I can praise one thing about DREADNAUGHT, it's the unique approach: No major training scenes to speak of, and although the setting & voices resemble 1970s chop sockey, the setting is all its own. The main villain, for once, is a crazed serial killer. At times, the story is more like a whodunnit than a martial arts film. This is a story that hasn't been told a lot, but perhaps that's a good thing. The villain is played by an over-acting Sunny Yuen. He does manage to play a really disgusting character, and considering

that the script allows him to tear off the head of a live bug, and then do the same to a chicken, the only thing more tasteless than the villain is DREADNAUGHT's writer. Yuen Biao's swinging of wet towels seemed to impress Americans enough so that they would later rip it off, using it in one of the "Batman" capers of the 1990s. Plot: Dr. Wong Fei Hung has weird cures (i.e. fire & kung fu) for his patients. Other amusing antics (as opposed to "fights") look like Jackie Chan hand-me-downs, minus the impressive stunts. So anyway, the script roles along, with bumbling students Liang Chia Jen & Yuen Biao making asses of themselves while some homicidal maniac (on the lamb) wears make-up so he can take refuge in a Peking opera troupe. One of the more interesting fights has Liang Chia Jen battle the long tongued (one guy is black, one is white) wizard/demons of Chinese mythology, but shortly afterwards, Liang is killed by the savage murderer, still wearing make-up. So Yuen Biao & Kwan Tak Hing vow revenge. I must say, the final battle (perhaps the only real fight in the movie) is the best in the film. We finally get a good look at Biao's energy, agility and limberness. His fight with White Tiger (the killer kung fu psycho) is far more thrilling than the brief spattering of acrobatic antics that happened throughout the movie. Biao kills the bad guy, and is quite proud of himself. Now he's finally got confidence (oh, did I forget to mention that all through the farce, he had low-self-esteem and was a coward? Well, now you know). Golden Harvest; 1981, A.K.A.: "Yong zhe wu ju" "Dreadnaught". Dir.: Yuen Woo Ping, Action Choreography: Yuen Woo Ping & the Yuen Group, Production Supervisor: Louis Sit, Story: Wong Ching, Cast: Yuen Biao, Lian Chia Jen, Kwan Tak Hing, Yuen Shun I, Kao Fei, Li Li-li, Fan Mei Sheng, Kam Ka-fung, Feng Ko-an, Yuen Chung Yan, Chow Yuen-kin, Tang Ching, Lau Wing, Fung Hak On. * -Damon Foster



DRUNKEN MASTER- Now that I'm old and mellow, I think I was a little hard on DRUNKEN MASTER when I reviewed it many years ago in Q.C.: The Jackie Chan Issue. I still think the movie has stupid moments and is oh-so-typical of the whole "drunken training" genre of kung fu movies, but the truth of the matter is that DRUNKEN MASTER is largely responsible for

creating that whole sub-genre. It's interesting to note that Jackie's character is that of a young, obnoxious Wong Fei Hung; but this English dubbing calls him "Dragon Nose" and (get this!) Freddy Wong! Wow, so now we know that Wong Fei Hung had an English alias he was completely unaware of: Freddy Wong! Now I think all them ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA movies, which are called "Wong Fei Hung" this & that in Chinese need to be renamed FREDDY WONG 1, FREDDY WONG 2, FREDDY WONG 3, FREDDY WONG 4, and so on! Not only that, but Freddy Wong's (Jackie Chan) father was none other than "Robert Wong", one of the legendary ten tigers of Kwantung! So now I think the late 1970s Shaw movie TEN TIGERS OF KWANTUNG should be called FREDDY WONG AND THE OTHER SIX TIGERS! But enough of my clowning around, and back to Yuen Wo Ping's clowning around: This silly comedy starts off with young Freddy Wong ogling a girl in the marketplace and later his father and her mother call each other names like "brother" and "sister", so it seems Freddy/Jackie has a crush on his own cousin! But no inbreeding takes place, because Jackie Chan is too busy learning drunken style kung fu from a drunken bum with the unlikely name, "Sam Seed" (AKA "Same the Seed"). The training scenes are both strenuous to take part in and tedious to watch, but it does help Jackie/Freddy to finally defeat Huang Cheng Li, who again plays the main villain ("Thunder Foot"). The comedy is almost as bad as the dubbing, but the martial arts of this otherwise standard flick are terrific. I think this was the last time Jackie worked with villain actor Huang Cheng Li. It seems that during a fight scene, one of Huang's devastating kicks put Jackie in the hospital and he never got over it. I read Jackie was angry that Yuen Wo Ping didn't fire Huang Cheng Li. As Jackie's popularity increased, he still had a grudge against Huang Cheng Li. Seasonal Films; 1978, Action Dir. & Kung Fu Instructors: Yuen Wo Ping & Hsu Hsia, Directed by Yuen Wo Ping, Prod.: Ng See Yuen, Exec. Prod.: Chen Chuan, Cast: Jackie Chan, Simon Yuen, Huang Cheng Li,

Shih Tien, Dean Shek, Hsu Hsia, Lin Ching, Lin Chiao. Cameos: Yuen Shun-ye & Yuen Wo Ping. AKA: "Zui quan", "Challenge", Drunken Monkey in the Tiger's Eyes", Eagle-Claw Snake-Fist Cat's-Paw Part 2", "The Story of Drunken Master". *** -DF

DRUNKEN TAI CHI- After Donnie Yen's kata during the opening credits, I expected yet another rip-off of DRUNKEN MASTER and its ilk. Yes, DRUNKEN TAI CHI has excess clowning around, revenge, and a drunken old guy teaching kung fu to a young hero. But the similarities end there! DRUNKEN TAI CHI is inventive, lively, cartoon-like, energetic, and recommendable to fans of THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS and SHAOLIN DRUNKARD! A young Donnie Yen goes all-out and does some really impressive kung fu, not to mention "paintbrush fu"! In one scene, Yen portrays one of them clown ghosts (AKA "Hell Police"), performing the typical Michael Jackson style "moon walking" that these living dolls became known for. Being from 1984, I suspect this depiction is the first time these odd characters had such movements. But I think Donnie Yen's performance is less impressive than that of Yuen Cheung-Yan, who once again plays a buck-toothed geezer. His expressive character is a puppeteer, which allows for extra amusement. If you can stomach the embarrassing humor involving some fat lady (Lydia Shum), you'll get a big kick out of this slapstick comedy. In it, Donnie Yen gets involved in a typical marketplace scuffle, and ultimately it leads to revenge. Wang Tao, in a fake mustache meant to make him seem older, plays a rare villainous role. In one of the battles (pitting Donnie Yen & Yat Chor Yuen against some bumbling thugs), centipedes constructed from firecrackers are used! Eventually, Yen does get Tai Chi training from the toothy old guy (Yuen Cheung-Yan), but with zany gimmicks & comically improbable props, it never gets dull. For the finale, Donnie defeats the ever-psychotic Yuen Shun-Yee ("Killer Bird"), but at least this time, this mute villain gets to have depth (something to do with raising a kid). 1984. A.K.A.: "Laughing Tai Chi", Xiao tai ji", "Tai Chi Master", "Laughing Tai Chi". Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Donnie Yen, Yuen Cheung-Yan, Shun-Yee Yuen, Yat Chor Yuen, Mandy Chan, Don Wong (Wang Tao), Lydia Sum. **** -DF

colorful cowboy hats, etc.) are laughable. On the whole, this stupid story of long lost brothers is too sappy to take seriously. But when our two heroes finally take on Ku Feng's huge gang of crooked Thai Boxers, watch out! These aren't the best kicks I've seen, but the dynamic duo takes on all-comers before the happy ending (that is, until its sequel, AN ANGRY GUEST). All in all, it's a dumb yet entertaining flick. AKA: "Quan ji", Kuen gik" (Fist Attack), "The Striking Fist". Shaw Bros.; 1971. Dir.: Chang Cheh. Cast: Ti Lung, David Chiang, Ku Feng, Chen Sing.***- Damon Foster

DYNAMO- A Bruce Li film, about Bruce Lee. Yes, we've seen these before. But DYNAMO is a weird one; it swipes footage from other films (i.e. Danny Lee in BRUCE LEE: HIS LAST DAYS, and Bruce Li's THE THREE AVENGERS) while trying to maintain a coherent story! It's amazing that back in the late 1970s, all these HK exploitation movies were ripping each other off. I guess the HK filmmakers didn't get serious about copyrights until the 1980s. DYNAMO would appear to be about the over-rated life of a Bruce Lee imitator, and Bruce Li should be an expert on this topic. I guess Li more-or-less plays himself. Again we see footage of Bruce Lee's funeral, but they claim Lee died at age 34. The fights are pretty good, thanks to Yuen Wo Ping's choreography. Anyway, a greedy corporation hires Bruce Li's character to become "the new Bruce Lee". Li does training (involving one of those "electric-shock" thingies seen in BRUCE LEE: THE MAN, THE MYTH and SOUL OF BRUCE LEE), and tours Japan, Korea and America. He fights assassins along the way. Seems a rival corporation wants him dead, so that his merchandise will sell better (it's no secret that "Bruce Lee mania", and "Elvis Presley mania" became more profitable when the title celebrity perished). The unclimactic climax has Li in a Chicago karate tournament, wearing a GAME OF DEATH-ish tracksuit with racing stripes. He's the film's hero, so he wins and gets the girl. Eternal; 1978. AKA: "Bu ze shou duan". Dir.: Hwa I Hung & Yi Hua Hsi, Martial Arts Instructors: Yuen Wo Ping & Liang Shao Sung, Cast: Bruce Li, Chiang Tao, Mary Han. ** -DF

Drunken Tai Chi



TAI-CHI MASTER

"Tai-Chi Master" stars Donnie Yen, a new young martial arts star with brilliant athleticism and technical skill. A young man eludes the killer who murdered his father and brother, meets an eccentric showman/master of Tai-Chi and his fighting 250lbs wife. In the end faces the enemies out to kill him in a series of showdown fights. The action's thrilling some-times while it's hilarious too. Stunts are choreographed in the style of an Indiana Jones adventure. This new film is a must for the kung fu lover and action-movie fan.

STARRING: DONNIE YEN
WANG TAD
YUANG FAMILY
SHEN TAN-SHEAY

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DUEL, THE (1970) (actor) - Not available for review.

DUEL OF FISTS- Yuen Wo Ping's role as a background character leaves him even less recognizable than his brothers (Sunny Yuen & Yuen Cheung Han), both of whom I spotted as villainous henchmen. Ditto Fung Hok On and Wong Ching (star of EAGLE FIST FIGHTER). Being an early 1970s Shaw movie, DUEL OF FISTS' real stars are of course David Chiang & Ti Lung. Though the climactic free-for-all is a lot of fun, the martial arts quality is so crude that both heroes look clumsy (in a gritty, Jimmy Wang Yu sort of way). The first half of DUEL OF FISTS is so full of cliché's and annoying romance that I was ready to trash this movie about Thai Boxing in Bangkok. The pacing is painfully slow, it looks like a Thailand travelogue and I was never excited by bouts in the ring. Even for the 1970s, David Chiang's gaudy outfits (ruffled silk shirts,



EAGLE'S SHADOW- I know this over-rated movie has gone down in history as being Jackie Chan's big break into success; but when seen today, is EAGLE'S SHADOW really all that good? Granted, this mega-hit groundbreaker inspired a whole new genre of ripoffs and imitations, so I tend to lump this originator in with the rest (some of the imitators strike me as being "successors"; more entertaining than the real deal). The only thing that makes EAGLE'S SHADOW different from its wannabes is a sinister-sounding voice that narrates the beginning

of the flick. Back in 1978, I guess EAGLE'S SHADOW was pretty funny, but today I think its antics come off as stupid. Mind you, I don't actually dislike this movie. For Yuen Wo Ping's first directorial, he did an excellent job, and his martial arts choreography is great. Storywise, this average chop sockey movie starts off with villainous Eagle Claw stylist Huang Cheng Li defeating Snakefist stylist Chau Chi Chi; who's played by Fung Hak On in a rare (for him) non-villainous role. As the story goes, its set was plagued by the same tensions as in DRUNKEN MASTER: villainous Hwang Jang-lee kicked one of Jackie's teeth out during filming. Chan unsuccessfully tried getting Hwang fired from the movie, because he felt the actor kicked him that hard on purpose. Anyway: Jackie Chan is a janitor and/or human punching bag who's looked down on by everyone (including the leader, played by Dean Shek) at the local kung fu school. Speaking of kung fu school, there are of course rival schools and challenges. Fortunately, Jackie gets secret training from master Pai Chang Tin (Simon Yuen), who's going under cover as a bum to keep the local

villains (i.e. Huang Cheng Li & Roy Horan) from finding him. The training scenes (Simon Yuen teaches Snake Style to Jackie Chan) might be long, but they're grueling-- the scene of Yuen sitting on Jackie's stomach made my stomach muscles ache from just watching it! I imagine audiences in 1978 were shocked to see this physical torture, and none of it was faked! Eventually, Jackie combines the Snake style with his own system, "Cat's Claw", and the bad guys are all defeated. "But still" is uttered twice. A.K.A.: "She xing diao shou", "Bruce vs. Snake in the Eagle's Shadow", "Snake in the Eagle's Shadow". Seasonal Films; 1978, Producer: Ng See Yuen, Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Action Dir.: Yuen Chun-yeung, Cast: Jackie Chan, Huang Cheng Li, Simon Yuen, Shih Tien, Philip Ko, Wang Chiang, Chu Chi Ling, Roy Horan, Chen Hsia..** -DF

EASTERN CONDORS- One of Yuen Wo Ping's bigger roles as an actor (though he gets killed in the middle of this unpleasantly depressing movie). Over the years, I've read a lot of praise for this grim film. I watched it back in the 1980s

(and only remembered the gross scene where Joyce Godenzi shoves a knife up her opponent's ass) when it was new. Then I watched it again in the 1990s (disappointed that charismatic Lam Ching Ying got killed off). Wondering if I missed something, I double-checked the reviews (new and old). My most recent viewing of this war movie was in 2006, and yet again, I had the same reaction: Over-rated! The comedy & audio-dubbing are pretty bad, and the soft ballad at the end is nausea-inducing! So is the gratuitous scene of Yuen Biao tearing a real snake in half for no reason! Joyce Godenzi kicks a door open, but the door begins to move before her foot touches it. EASTERN CONDORS is anti-American, but it's anti-Vietcong too--so at least it's equal-opportunity bias. The script is hard to swallow: Asian American prisoners are sent to the Vietnam jungles to battle a professional army, and our heroes come out ahead. Sure, almost everybody (good and bad) dies, but any time some street thugs can use sticks, twigs & leaves to wipe out soldiers who've been trained in that jungle, it's vital that we suspend our disbelief. Granted, it's a HK film from the

SIMON YUEN (father)
(AKA Yuen Siu Tin)
1912-1979



袁小田

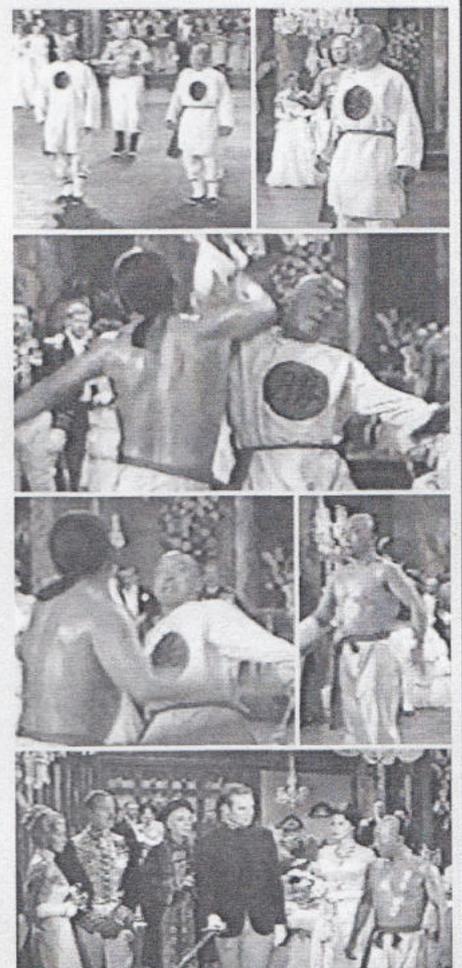
Yuen Sui-tin was apparently born in Mainland China in 1912, though there are conflicting reports that say he was born in 1911 (and supposedly died in 1980). To international audiences, he's the prototypical "Drunken Master" of numerous films, but this role just barely dented the final years of the kung fu chop-sockey genre, as it died in the late 1970s. Today, we consider Simon Yuen to be famous for that role, but all through the early-to-mid 1970s, he was an unknown-- at least in the international sense.

In his earlier years, Simon Yuen Sui-tin was well known for his stage plays in the Peking opera (performed in Peking & Shanghai), where he made a name for himself using his acting, northern style kung fu and acrobatic abilities. At that same time, the Cantonese Opera generally didn't have "fight-scenes" as defined today. The plays used Southern Style of kung fu that had less impressive fights. So Cantonese Opera producers looked north, to see the type of thrills that were being done in the Peking Opera. They hired Simon Yuen and some other Peking actors to go to the Canton vicinity and show the Southerners how it's done.

In the 1950s, he also acted in villainous parts in many lesser-known films (the majority are believed to have deteriorated by now), because at that same time, HK's movie industry was still growing. Yuen and his whole troupe were hired to organize the action scenes in old B/W movies. Though occasional martial arts-inspired fights had been present in Chinese cinema since the silent period, Simon made choreography an art.

Amazingly, he demonstrated some Northern Shaolin kung fu in the American blockbuster, FIFTY-FIVE DAYS AT PEKING (Samuel Bronston Pictures; 1963), starring Charlton Heston and David Niven. See review of the movie in O.C. Asia Pulp Cinema. (AKA "O.C. #20"). As the story goes, other Chinese actors were resentful that he took part in the movie. FIFTY-FIVE DAYS AT PEKING was a biased slap in the face to Chinese people everywhere, and probably didn't help Simon Yuen's career. It seems he wouldn't get a major role until sixteen years later, when his son cast him in a ground-breaking Jackie Chan hit.

Partial filmography:
FIFTY-FIVE DAYS AT PEKING
SNAKE-FIST FIGHTER
EAGLE'S CLAW
DRUNKEN MASTER
SLEEPING FIST
CRYSTAL FIST
STORY OF DRUNKEN MASTER
WORLD OF DRUNKEN MASTER



55 DAYS AT PEKING: Simon Yuen appears with David Niven & Charlton Heston. However, not even the most alert & analytical kung fu fans can agree as to which boxer Yuen plays! Michael Quebec insists its the shirtless man confronting Heston in the bottom photo. But Damon Foster suspects Simon is in the top right corner, wearing a white shirt with a big dot on the chest. The truth may never be known!



Samo Hung in EASTERN CONDORS



Jet Li as Ho Yuen Jia in FEARLESS



Jet as Ho Yuen Jia's student in FIST OF LEGEND

1980s, so naturally it's going to have some great stunts and high-speed kicks (what else do you expect from '80s HK?). EASTERN CONDORS is no exception. There's gunplay a plenty, and gore & explosions. The climactic fist fight is excellent, pitting heroes (Samo Hung, Yuen Biao, Joyce Godenzi) against villains like Yuen Wah, Billy Chow and Yasuaki Kurata. This ending fight warrants the three stars (***) I'm giving it—without this climax, it wouldn't deserve a single star. So on the whole, I think EASTERN CONDORS is just a slightly above average action film, and I do recommend it despite being disappointed. The story takes place shortly after the end of the war in Vietnam. But a munitions dump was left behind, and so it's up to some mercenaries (Samo Hung, Yuen Wo Ping, Charlie Chin and others) to sneak into Vietnam and blow up the base. The few survivors do succeed, but only after a great fist-fight in the top secret base. Golden Harvest; 1987, In association with Boho Films; 1986. AKA: "Dong fong luk ying" (Cantonese), "Dong fang tu ying" (Mandarin), & "Eastern Bald Eagles" (literal). Dir.: Sammo Hung. Cast: Samo Hung, Yuen Biao, James Tien, Wu Ma, Kao Fei, Dick Wei, Yo Hua, Billy Lau, Lam Ching Ying, Hsiao Ho, Joyce Godenzi, Yasuaki Kurata, Melvin Wong, Yuen Wo Ping, Liu Chia Yung. *** -DF

EXCITING DRAGON- If I had seen a translated version of this rare prelude to MIRACLE FIGHTERS and SHAOLIN DRUNKARD, then I would have enjoyed it even more and not had to use the Scan button so much. Even so, EXCITING DRAGON is one over-the-top fantasy which had me laughing out-loud more than once; just imagine how much I'd have enjoyed this Cantonese-language print if it were English-language friendly! This zany comedy's time-period predates a lot of the fancy gadgets (which reminded me of the unlikely contraptions the Professor used in GILLIGAN'S ISLAND) that the script bombards us with. It spoofs the "drunken training" genre of the late 1970s, and since those movies were satirical already, you can imagine just how wacky, colorful, slapstick-filled and cartoon-like EXCITING DRAGON is! The martial arts and acrobatic antics are all excellent, though I did notice a minor flaw toward the end: The main villain gets kicked in the face, but it's obviously a fake leg because the foot is dangling so much I thought it would fall off. Though I'm Chinese-language impaired, this wild & crazy romp would appear to be about some evil wizards seeking some treasure, and at some point they're pitted against a family of martial artists who's elderly matriarch is obviously an actor (Chiang Sheng

of KID WITH THE GOLDEN ARMS and FIVE DEADLY VENOMS) in drag. It's a warm-up for MIRACLE FIGHTERS, which would have a lot of different cast members though. Unfortunately, EXCITING DRAGON is somewhat of a 'mystery' in Yuen Wo Ping's filmography. Numerous sources call it a Yuen Wo Ping directorial, which may be true. However, the print of the movie I saw lists Chao Chung Sin as the director. Worse yet, my version of it seems to completely lack Ping's name in the credits! Perhaps the full truth of this obscure oddity will never be known, but EXCITING DRAGON does resemble SHAOLIN DRUNKARD and its ilk. 1981, A.K.A.: "Lung fa wei", Dir.: Chao Chung Sin, Planning: Lin Tie Ru & Lan Hau R., Supervised by: Jwan Tin Rien. Cast: Chiang Sheng, Liang Chia Jen (Leung Kar-yan), Kao Fei (Philip Kao Fei). *** -Damon Foster

FEARLESS- Yet another ponytail kung fu film with Jet Li as a historical character. This time, he's "Hua Yuanjia" because I saw the Mandarin version. But this legendary folk hero is better known by his Cantonese name Fok Yuen-gap (depicted by other actors in LEGEND OF A FIGHTER and BRUCE LEE THE INVINCIBLE). FEARLESS is also known as LET LI'S FEARLESS—which I very much doubt. Fear is an emotion that everybody, including Jet Li, has. But seriously: It's a decent movie with high speed kicks & punches, and the fights are entertaining even with the inevitable CGI enhancements and occasional wires which suspend the actors and our disbelief. No complaints on the sets or cinematography. Unfortunately, the writing crams in enough predictability, cliché's and stereotypes to tarnish the dead serious, if not pretentious approach. Frequent challenges & tournaments, and the ever-bigoted depiction of all Caucasians as either greedy manipulators or brutish oafs. This stupid (yet amusing) movie would have been better off as a comedy. It's a fictionalized account of martial arts instructor Fok Yuen-gap (also pronounced "Hua Yuanjia") back around 1910. In-between duels, we get flashbacks to his childhood, some father-daughter bonding and a truly reckless hero who's not very likable at first. He regrets killing an opponent, goes into seclusion and takes refuge with a bunch of rice farmers. He falls for some blind girl before finally going to Shanghai to take place in a martial arts duel with them invading foreign devils. Anybody who's seen FIST OF FURY already knows how he dies: The Japanese poison him. Interesting to note that the character's real-life grandson (82 year old Hou Shoujin) filed a lawsuit against Jet Li &

FEARLESS's filmmakers because the depiction of the hero was damaging to the family's reputation. Especially that part about the famed martial artist's misconduct as causing the death of his mother & daughter. But Hou lost the court battle because FEARLESS, like all kung fu films, is a fictitious account. Beijing Film Studio; 2006. In Association with: China Film Group Corporation. AKA: "Huo Yuan Jia". Dir.: Ronny Yu; Action Choreography: Yuen Wo-ping; Written by Chris Chow, Cast: Jet Li, Betty Sun Li, Shido Nakamura, Yong Dong, Hee Ching Paw. **1/2 -DF.

FIRE DRAGON- Yuen Wo Ping directed this one, but I don't care who directed it. FIRE DRAGON is a dull, pretentious movie that depends on every cliché that 1990's HK had to offer. Endless cuts & edits abound, as do the suspension wires. I like Ping's earlier fantasy/comedy directorials (i.e. SHAOLIN DRUNKARD and THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS); movies which emphasized fun, not glossy cinematography. Most of the "action" happens at the beginning and end, but the middle is padded out by Sandra Ng's comedy. She's not a bad actress, and manages to be remotely funny at times—but she can't save this typical Brigitte Lin exercise in mystical tedium. The script seems to be about some spoiled, corrupt politician called Prince Six. Since we know he's suppose to be a bad guy (though he's not given enough evil things to do, so the viewer doesn't loathe him enough to care what happens), they should have just killed him off at the beginning of FIRE DRAGON, so as not to waste my time. But instead, this villain has two female assassins, one of which is the 'Fire Dragon' (Brigitte Lin) who has a change of heart later and kills him. But before we get to this long overdue end, we have to stomach editing that's so fast we can't tell who's fighting who, love triangles, comedic filler, martial artists flying through forests, explosions, and the occasional burning tree. I've trashed these films before; it's a question of taste. There are plenty of people who enjoy these types of fantasies. If you're content with the fact that most HK film-makers in the 1990s wanted to be Tsui Hark, then you'll enjoy FIRE DRAGON. My favorite thing in the film is a line right after a hero flies through the air like Superman and claims he was "going for a walk", or words to that affect. Brigitte Lin asks him then, why he 'dropped down from the sky'. He replies: "Air is fresh up there". Regal Films; 1994. AKA: "The Fiery Dragon Kid", "Fiery Romance", "Huo yun chuang qi", "Fo wan jun kei". Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Siu Chung Mok, Brigitte Lin, Sandra Ng (Ng Kwan Yue), Lap-Man Sin, Chuang Chen Yeh. -DF

FIST OF LEGEND- I took to this movie like a pedophile takes to Myspace.com! Not only is this masterpiece my favorite Jet Li movie, but I also think it's the greatest martial arts movie of the 1990s! It's nowhere near as lacky or grim as Bruce Lee's **THE CHINESE CONNECTION** (its inspiration), and features some of the best martial arts staging Yuen Wo Ping has ever done! Though Jet Li uses a stunt-double, it's not real obvious unless you're trying to spot the double, which is what I kept doing. Jet Li is pretty charismatic in **FIST OF LEGEND**, but my favorite stars are in supporting roles: The underused Chin Siu Ho and the venerable oldtimer himself, Yasuaki Kurata. If anybody is "legendary" in this classic, it's Kurata! Everybody in **FIST OF LEGEND** performs well, and there are strong characters throughout. Even the Japanese villains have depth. Even the English voice-dubbing is decent, and in no way detracts any impact (I watched the English subtitled version years ago and that was good too). If you watch only one 1990s kung fu movie in your life, make it this story of the Ching Wu kung fu school, and how they overcome the problems faced by invading Japanese (post-Boxer Rebellion) back around 1900-1910 or so. The villains have fatally poisoned the Ching Wu school's teacher (whom Jet later played in **FEARLESS**), and it's up to Jet Li and co-hero Chin Siu Ho to get to the bottom of things. It gets tricky because of Jet Li's Japanese girlfriend (for once, Political Correctness improves a movie!) and rival Chinese martial artists who keep challenging

each other, but so long as the fights are good, who cares about such complex characters?! The fights are full-on kung fu, with occasional acrobatic flips, stunts, broken windows and wire-enhancements. Golden Harvest, 1994, A.K.A.: "Jing wu ying xiong". Director: Gordon Ka-Seung, Action Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping & Yuen Cheung-Yan & Yuen Shun-ye, Cast: Jet Li, Shinobu Nakayama, Chin Siu Ho, Billy Chau, Yasuaki Kurata, Paul Chiang, Ada Choi, Yuen Cheung Yan. ***** -DF

FIST TO FIST- Since Yuen Wo Ping did choreograph some of the action (stock-footage from 1970s films), I can see why some ignorant website included this horrible exploitation movie in their Ping filmography, and inadvertently tricked me into purchasing it. I thought the era of Bruce Lee rip-off movies ended in the late 1970s, but this 1999 act of theft proves there are still a lot of dated slime-balls out there. It presents itself as a documentary, and its box boasts of digitally meshing Jackie Chan & Bruce Lee (both in their prime) together. This digital cropping only lasts for a few seconds, and the whole movie is stock-footage from movies like **CHINESE CONNECTION**, **DRUNKEN MASTER** and **TWIN DRAGONS**. Worse yet, techno music is added into the editing, to try and turn it into a music video. The only "documentation" which almost gives this piece of crud the illusion of being a legitimate documentary is commentary by Bruce Lee taken from that old B/W British interview that we've also seen elsewhere. **FIST TO FIST** is absolute garbage which makes the videotape itself worth less than if it were blank!!! Presented by The Dragon Group. Westlake; 1999. In Association with FireTongue Productions. -Damon Foster

FISTS OF THE DOUBLE K- Not available for review.

FORBIDDEN KINGDOM, THE-

This movie pairs Jackie Chan and Jet Li together for the first time in a retelling/ reworking of the classic Monkey King story with fight choreography by Yuen Wo Ping. let's get the plot out of the way first. A Young American boy who loves Kung Fu movies and is bullied by local thugs gets magically transported back to ancient China. He is in possession of the Monkey King's staff which must be returned to the trapped-in-stone Monkey King in order to revive him and stop the evil Jade Emperor. Besides the unknown (to me) American lead actor, the rest of the cast is made up of well known Chinese actors. Besides Chan and Li, you have Collin Chou (AKA Ngai Sing), Li Bingbing and Liu Yufei. Jet Li plays the Monkey King and a monk who joins our heroes on their quest. Jet was very good as the Monkey King, very playful and charismatic. He would be great to see in a real Monkey King movie. Maybe this film will help that become a reality. Jackie plays a drunken master, who along with Jet, teaches the lead actor (Michael Angarano) Kung Fu. Of course Jackie and Jet end up fighting which was the big draw for this movie. And while the movie is okay for a "kid's movie", the fight scenes fall short from what you would expect from the people involved. Don't get me wrong, Yuen Wo Ping has done a fine job with the fights. They just lack that extra touch that could have made this movie incredible. I think what is missing is the little

bits of showy-ness you see in Hong Kong films. Like the triple butterfly kick in "Fist of Legend" or the 360 arial kick Jackie (or his double) used to finish Benny Urquidez in "Dragons Forever" These little pieces of flash are missing and this makes the fights look more inline with "The Matrix" movies. The difference being, most of the people in "The Matrix" films couldn't pull off fancy moves. The actors in this movie could, but didn't get the chance. Heck, this movie even reunites Jet Li with Ngai Sing, who both had an incredible fight at the end of "Bodyguard from Beijing" (fights by Yuen Kwai). But like all of the other fights in Forbidden Kingdom, it could have been better. The special effects are good and one high point, for me at least, was the fight sound effects. Wow, these were great. Probably some of the best I've ever heard. For the most part, there are two camps of fight sound effects. American and Chinese. American style has enhanced impact sounds that are usually pretty good. But the problem is with the sounds they use for arm and leg movements. In real life, when you kick or punch you would hear the sound of cloth moving rapidly (unless you didn't have clothes on). American movies use artificial "swooshing" sounds. Check out "The Matrix" and even American re-releases of Jackie Chan movies. It sounds so unreal that it pulls me out of the movie. Chinese movies use cloth sounds and good impact sounds, but they use the same sounds over and over. It gets repetitive. This movie takes the best of both worlds and has good sounds that are supplemented to make impacts extra powerful. And they don't have the "swishy", Power Rangers style of swinging sounds. Overall, if you don't set your expectations too high this movie is enjoyable. Your kids will probably love it though. Director: Rob Minkoff. Fight choreography: Yuen Wo Ping. Cast: Michael Angarano, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Morgan Benoit, Li Bingbing, Jack Posobiec, Li Yifei, Collin Chou. ** 1/2 - Louie Ambriz

FROM CHINA WITH DEATH- Sleep-inducing comedy starring Henry Yue Young and Wu Ma as comen. Shih Kien (Han in **ENTER THE DRAGON**) plays the main villainous mobster, but since our two protagonists are criminals themselves, there's nobody to root for. So **FROM CHINA WITH DEATH** is an uninvolved, meandering, talky drama that put me to sleep more than once. The fights are okay (whether Young & Ma are fighting each other or gangsters), but some sort of audio difficulty eliminates most voices during the fights (even in a crowded casino where you'd expect at least one of the many fighters to gasp, scream or yell), and sometimes there aren't even the sounds of foot-steps. I counted four "but still's in the dubbing. If you like crafty scoundrels or seeing Wu Ma run around naked (he was young then), you might want to see this routine gambler movie just for the scene where the camera zooms in on his ass. The story has our bumbling heroes gambling, robbing gold from a bank, and dodging both police & Wu Ma's girlfriend Mimi (she's cute and I don't know what she sees in an ugly little man like Wu Ma). 1974, AKA: "Lang bei wei jian", "Conman and the kung fu kid", "Dirty Partners", "Wits to Wits" Pro.: Cony B. Sargay Action Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Planning: Felix Chan, Cast: Henry Yu Young, Wu Ma, Sucey Mang, Tang Ching, Siak Kin, Fung Kin, Wang Sun, Kiang Na, Lee Chiu, Yam Sai Kuu, Yuen Sun

YUEN YAH-CHOR (brother)

袁日初

Born: 9/29/53
(AKA Yuen Yat Choh, Yuen Yat Chor, Yat Chor Yuen, Yuen Yat Chok, Simon Yuen Jr., and so on)



Yuen Wo Ping's younger brother. He proved to be an excellent martial artist in each film he appeared in, and apparently retired in 1989. It's been said that he left the Yuen clan projects to devote his life to Taoism in the early 1990s. Ironically, he played Taoist characters in a number of early 1980s farces.

- Partial Filmography:
LEGEND OF A FIGHTER
LONG ARM OF THE LAW II
THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS
IN THE LINE OF DUTY IV
SHAOLIN DRUNKARD
TAOISM DRUNKARD
DRUNKEN TAI-CHI

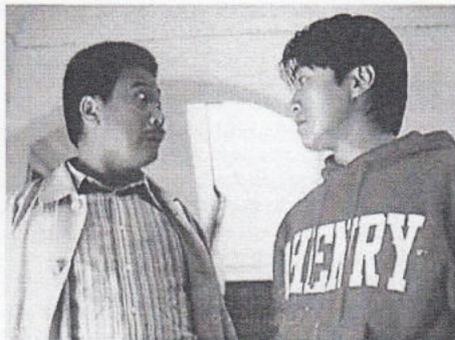


The cast of HOUSE OF FURY

Ye, Ma Chien Ta, Fung Hak On. * -DF

GAMEBOY KIDS- Yuen Wo Ping gets one of his meatier roles as Master Dragon, one of several gangsters in this comedy. I don't normally like romantic comedies, but somehow, the characters won me over, and so did the DVD's subtitles ("*Brother, you're younger than me expected*" and "*Am I look good?*"). Lead star Andy Lau is delightful in his role as Kow Wai, because the character reminds me of Chow Yun Fat in *GOD OF GAMBLERS*, and also Steve Carell's performance in *THE 40 YEAR OLD VIRGIN*. As a Yuen Wo Ping movie, *GAMEBOY KIDS* has little to offer because he just stands around and talks. But as a comedy-drama, it's pretty funny at times. Though there are a few kicks and a shoot-out or two, it's not an action film. It does poke fun at gangster movies, but so long as you're not expecting thrills, you can still be entertained by a cute little movie that had me laugh out loud more than once. I just regret that we see so little of Andy Lau's 'dwarf alter-ego': It's a scene near the beginning where Lau plays dual roles, and the scene of him as a dwarf (accomplished by camera angles and a short person made up to resemble Lau) evading cops is as amusing as Rosamund Kwan's skirt is hot. Anyway, the script has Andy Lau in the wrong place at the right time. Or maybe the right place at the right time. The point is, his idiotic, innocent character, who sleeps wearing a Batman mask and has milk & ice-cream for breakfast, one day finds himself impersonating a mobster. He inadvertently joins a triad, bangs Master Dragon's (Yuen Wo Ping) attractive leather-clad daughter (Rosamund Kwan), and the laughs pile up. If you can wade passed the romantic subplot, talky approach, slow-pacing and the ever-loud Sandra Ng's over-acting, *GAMEBOY KIDS* manages to entertain. Teamwork Production House Ltd.; 1992, AKA: "Game Kids", "Ji Boy xiao zi zhi zhen jia wai long". Dir.: Gordon Chan, Pro.: David Lai & Chan Pui Wah, Cast: Andy Lau, Aaron Kwok, Rosamund Kwan, Ng Man Tat, Sandra Ng, Yuen Wo Ping. *** -Damon Foster

GAME OF DEATH 2- Just what were they thinking?! I think this otherwise poor film (bad writing, bad acting, worse dubbing, overdone music & horrendous cinematography) has some of the greatest fight-scenes I've ever seen!! The kicks alone are worth five stars (*****)! But other than the kung fu and acrobatic stunts, what do I think of it as a whole? Well, how's this: It's bizarre! I can't figure this one out. Though intended to cash in on Bruce Lee's half-assed movie *GAME OF DEATH*, this "sequel" is nothing



Ng Man Tat and Steven Chow in GOD OF GAMBLERS 3: Back to Shanghai

like *GAME OF DEATH* (fortunately!), and is not like any Bruce Lee movie I've ever seen! Once again, there's stock footage & brief clips of Lee taken from other movies. Yet the cast consists largely of familiar faces (Huang Cheng Li, Roy Horan, Lee Hoi San, & Casanova Wong all appear!) from HK's "B grade" movies of the late '70s! I'm shocked this is an actual Golden Harvest movie! Who would have thought that Bruce Lee appears in a movie with Casanova Wong?! But this wacky romp deviates from the typical Bruce Lee exploitation film. One thing is sure about *GAME OF DEATH 2*: Unintended comedy abounds!!! There's a lot of other really strange stuff going on here. I could spend a whole issue trying to figure out and describe this unconventional movie, so instead I'll get to the plot and leave it at that. The setting is Japan, and it starts off with the continuing adventures of Billy Lo (Bruce Lee and his double, Kim Tai-chung). His dealings with shady drug-trafficers played by Roy Horan & Huang Cheng Li indirectly leads to his odd death at a funeral, so it's up to his brother (played by Kim Tai-chung, A.K.A.: "Tong Lung") to avenge him at the dreaded "Palace of Death". Roy Horan plays his most interesting character to date: He's brutal & savage, and yet likable! The guy eats raw meat and drinks blood! Later, heroic Kim Tai-chung is attacked by both a nude blonde chick and then the fakest (and how!) lion I ever saw!! How, just how did they get away with this unbelievably cheap, unrealistic lion in a movie which considers itself "serious"?! Anyway, Kim does finally get to the bottom of things, and finds himself in a sci-fi set looking like something from *STAR TREK*! All of the sudden he's fighting all these martial artists (wearing silver jumpsuits!) among high-tech computers with flashing lights! Then out of nowhere comes some guy dressed as a caveman! Kim kills them all, including lead villain Huang Cheng Li. For many of the wrong reasons, it's an immensely entertaining movie!!!! Bruce Lee would turn over in his grave if he knew about this guilty pleasure! A.K.A.: "Tower of Death", "Si wang ta". Golden Harvest; 1981, Dir.: Ng Se Yuen, Prod.: Raymond Chow, Martial Arts Choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping, Stuntmen: Chan Wui Ngai, Yuen Bao, Chung Nam Fat, Chan Lung, Mars, Edmond Fang, Cast: Kim Tai-chung, Bruce Lee, Huang Cheng Li, Roy Horan, Li Hai Sheng, Chang Cheng Wu, Roy Chiao, Wang Cheng-Wu Miranda Austin, Tu Wai-woo, Casanova Wong, Hao Li, Yuen Biao/Bao. *** -DF

GOD OF GAMBLERS 3: BACK TO SHANGHAI- Other than choosing to publish a magazine instead of living the good life, I've never been



Wo Ping on the set of THE MATRIX

into gambling. As such, gambling movies don't do much for me. But *GOD OF GAMBLERS 3: BACK TO SHANGHAI* is the exception! Not just my favorite gambler movie, but one of my favorite Steven Chow comedies. Yuen Wo Ping is the assistant director under noted comedy director Wong Jing, in this entertaining combination of gambling, comedy, drama, fantasy, romance, more comedy, gunplay, & martial arts. The comedic antics, be they Steven Chows energetic slapstick, or the surreal inserts which briefly spoof other hit HK movies (clips which wouldn't impress those unfamiliar with the targets) had me laughing out loud. Granted, the climactic card game bored me a little and there's so much fast-paced dialogue that I didn't get all the jokes, but that's okay. I was also impressed by the writing; the characters all struck me as interesting, important or likable. The script involves magical gamblers, who's misuse of their inherent powers creates a timewarp which sends them back to that world of axe-wielding gangs, Shanghai 1937! Despite protagonist Steven Chow's mugging for the camera, a funny fight with a snake and other gags such as an enjoyable musical tribute to fast-food, there is in fact a story here: Vietnamese actor Ray Lui plays a nice gangster who's at risk of losing his casino to Japanese invaders (Wan Si Wong, Billy Chow), depending on who wins a fate-altering card game. Although Steve Chow spends a lot of time trying to romance Mainland China actress Gong Li (her first HK film roles; she plays twin sisters), he also uses his magic to help the good guys thwart evil kingpin Jimmy Lee (in *GOD OF GAMBLERS*, also in the American ninja movie *WHITE PHANTOM*) and win the admittedly long card game at the finale. Once his spells defeat the bad guys and save the casino, a timewarp sends him back to HK 1991—just in time for Cheung Man's cameo as a girl in a skirt. Win's Motion Pictures; 1991. AKA: "Du xia li zhi Shang Hai tan du sheng", "Saint of Gamblers Pt. 2". Dir.: Wong Jing, Asst. Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Written by Wong Jing, Cast: Steven Chow, Ng Man Tat, Ray Lui, John Ching, Jimmy Lee, Wan-Si Wong, Gong Li. **** -Damon Foster

GOOD AND THE BAD (1972) M/A Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping AKA: "E hu kung long", "Kung Fu: The Invincible Fist". -Not available for review.

HANDS OF SHANG-CHI (2005) Action Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping. Based on the Marvel comic. -Not available for review.

HEROES AMONG HEROES- I don't care who directed this typical rip off of *ONCE UPON A*

YUEN SHUN-YEE (brother)
 (AKA: Shun-Yee Yuen, Sunny, Sunny Yuen, Armstrong Yuen, Yuen Shun-yi, Yuen Eagle Shun Yi, Sunny Yuen Hsin Yee, etc.)
 Born: 2/24/53



Though this ugly guy is best known for his villainous roles (i.e. "Sorcerer Bat" in **THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS**), he did play the good guys in **DANCE OF THE DRUNKEN MANTIS**, **THE BUDDHIST FIST & LEGEND OF A FIGHTER**, and also went on to be quite a superb choreographer; there are those who would go so far as to say he's better than his brother (Yuen Wo Ping himself). He staged fights with Ka Huen-chin in **IRON MONKEY** (1993) and **ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA II** (1992), not to mention **POSTMAN FIGHTS BACK** and other Ping flicks. According to a piece in Clyde Gentry's [Hong Kong Film Connection](#), Yuen Shun-Yee's

wife was Bidy Yu-- who answered phones at Peace Films (then a Yuen Clan production company). He himself didn't direct a lot of movies, but did direct martial arts for numerous TV shows.

Very Partial Filmography:
THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS
DANCE OF THE DRUNKEN MANTIS
THE BUDDHIST FIST
SHAOLIN DRUNKARD
TAOISM DRUNKARD
IN THE LINE OF DUTY 4: THE WITNESS
CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE VAMPIRE

TIME IN CHINA, the movie didn't do much for me. Though there were a few nods to 1970s chop sockey (drunken beggar technique, a "But still" in the dubbing, and a challenge from a Korean martial artist), **HEROES AMONG HEROES** is so predictably average for early 1990s crap that I was alternately bored and frustrated. As a 1990s movie, it's got all the same clichés: Excessive wirework, a scene of a character running on the shoulders of several standing men, flying women from another lotus sect, bad comedy, and heavy solid objects suddenly becoming weightless. There are a few nice kicks and high-speed arm-blocks, but not enough to make the fights very exciting. This one has heroic Wong Fei Hung (Yuk Wong) teaming up with Donnie Yen so they can rid China of the foreign-introduced opium scourge. So far, so good. But the odds of one of these 1990s movies lacking subplots (about Western influence and comic relief) are as likely as Fox News reporting on crimes against ugly women! Fennie Yuen plays the token Chinese girl in western attire (but don't worry, she realizes the evil of her ways and dresses Chinese by the time it ends), and the only thing more annoying than Ng Man Dat's slapstick is his over-acting wife's (Sheila Chan) overbite. Golden Sun; 1993. AKA: "Hero Among Heroes", "Su qi er", Dir.: Yuen W. Ping. Cast: Donnie Yen, Xin Xin Xiong, Yuk Wong, Fong Pao, Man Tat Ng, Hoi-Shan Kwan, Sheila Chan. * -DF

HEROIC ONES, THE (1970) (actor) -Not available for review.

Donnie Yen as Wong Kay Ying in **IRON MONKEY**



HOUSE OF FURY- I would say it reminds me of **SPY KIDS**, but I'd be lying (again) because I've never seen **SPY KIDS**. I will say that **HOUSE OF FURY** is a predictable crime-drama with elements of 'touchy feely' family bonding (i.e. a widower taking care of two spoiled, bratty teenyboppers) to help slow down the pace and make us role our eyes in embarrassment. There's bad comedy that's out of place, like otherwise serious fistfights where bystanders suddenly run away in high-speed (ala Benny Hill, Keystone Cops oldies, etc.). The DVD has both optional English dubbing and/or English subtitles--so I played both. Both are different and it seems that in the Chinese version, characters are speaking two different languages. I liked comparing the dubbing with the inferior subtitles.... "He'll be the best snack around here that the sharks have ever tasted" (dubbed), vs. "He will be the best little snack your dolphins ever tasted!" (subtitles). It's not a horrible movie though, and Yuen Woo Ping's martial arts direction is first rate for 2005. The inevitable wirework isn't too intrusive, and Jake Strickland (a little white boy who swings a mean staff!) particularly impressed me. Michael Wong's villain confused me: The character is an ex-soldier trying to get revenge against some agent (Wu Ma) who helped murderous terrorists, and yet again Wong is relegated to the 'bad guy' role. Could it be that the writer condones Muslim extremism? Not that politics or social statements matter in popcorn-fodder like this. Getting back to Michael Wong, he's got an electric wheelchair and shaved head this time, making him a lot like the villains in James Bond-type films. I was hoping Wong would ham

it up, since he reminded me of Austin Powers' "Dr. Evil" character. Anyway, this so-so actioner has Anthony Wong & Wu Ma as former secret agents and although both these oldtimers fight well, it's clear that the real stars are a bunch of teen idols (Stephen Fung, Gillian Chung & Daniel Wu) and their stunt-doubles. To be fair, they all fight well at the end when they take on Michael Wong's cronies in order to rescue their father from suffocating in a hyperbaric chamber. Emperor Motion Pictures; 2005. AKA: "Jing mo gaa ting". Dir.: Stephen Fung, Writers: Stephen Fung, Yiu Lai Fo, Martial Arts Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping. Cast: Anthony Wong, Stephen Fung, Michael Wong, Gillian Chung, Daniel Wu, Josie Ho, Wu Ma, Jacob Strickland. ** -DF

INSTANT KUNG FU MAN, THE- Terrific martial arts and tumbling, thanks to Yuen Wo Ping's choreography! I also got a laugh at how our bumbling hero (Yip Fei Yang) defeated those unlikely robots, the Shaolin Wooden Men (they've been in other movies, most notably Jackie Chan's **SHAOLIN WOODEN MEN**, of course). As always, it's never explained what these 'creatures' are. The hero must complete his Shaolin training by escaping these beings, and so he secretly infects these wooden automations with termites! Other wit highlights the whole movie. Being an over-the-top kung fu comedy, the whole thing seems like a series of gags & misadventures until finally Yip Fei Yang takes on villainous Jang Lee Hwang. Though I enjoyed this farce a great deal, I was a little frustrated because Yip Fei Yang plays dual roles as twins. Though one twin is a ruthless thief and the other is a Shaolin drop-out, it's difficult to differentiate between them because they're poorly defined. This confuses matters and tarnishes the gags, which deal largely with mistaken identity. AKA: "Kung Fu Man", "Sha yan gong fu", "Saap aan gung foo", Fortuna Film Co.; 1977. U.S. Release: 1984. Dir.: Dung Gam-Woo (AKA: Chin Woo Tung), Martial Arts Choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping & Yuen Cheung-yan, Cast: Yip Fei-Yang (Fang-Yeh Yip), Yuen Yat-Choh, John Liu Chung-Liang, Hwang Jang-Lee (Jang Lee Hwang), Corey Yuen Kwai.*** -DF

IN THE LINE OF DUTY 4: THE WITNESS- Hell yeah! The action-packed decade goes out with a bang with this outstanding urban actioner! There's gunplay, motorcycle chases, and car stuff, but it's clear that kung fu is the real star. Despite the blatantly anti-American stance and DVD subtitles which say things like 'funful', 'okey', and "Black all the exits", this is a fun, exciting movie! They just don't make 'em like



Uma learns kung fu from Gordon Liu in Quentin Tarantino's KILL BILL.

this any more! The script starts off in Seattle and involves Yat Chor Yuen as a hapless victim who was in the wrong place at the wrong time; and hence he's "The Witness" of the title. I won't waste space writing about the corrupt CIA agents or the incriminating negative, because it's nothing we haven't seen in dozens of other crime-dramas & spy farces over the years. It's really just an excuse to get our heroes (Yat Chor Yuen, and cops Cynthia Khan & Donnie Yen) into all these stunt-laden fights and innovative action scenes, as they go up against bad guys like Shun-Yee Yuen, Michael Wong, Wing Cho, and some of the ugliest Americans I've ever seen. I loved IN THE LINE OF DUTY 4 when I first saw it in '89, and it still holds up after all these years—especially since HK cinema has gone down hill since then. This is one of those 1980s thrillers where your jaw drops because you're wondering how many stuntmen were injured, crippled or killed on the set! D&B Films; (1989). AKA: "Huang jia shi jie zhi IV: Zhi ji zheng ren", "Yes Madam 4". Director & Action Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping. Written by Anthony Wong Chau-Sang. Cast: Cynthia Khan, Donnie Yen, Yat Chor Yuen, Michael Wong, Shun-Yee Yuen, Farid Dordar, Farlie Ruth Kordica, Blaine Lamoureux, Kai Chi Liu. ***** -Damon Foster

INVINCIBLE ARMOUR- Not available for review.

IRON MONKEY- Not to be confused with the 1970s Chen Kuan Tai movie (perhaps the better of the two) of the same name. I think I liked this IRON MONKEY more when I saw it back in 1993 at some Chinatown Theater. But as I watched the 2001 DVD release from Blockbuster, I came away disappointed. I don't know, maybe I was expecting more actual martial arts this time around, instead of the usual flying tables and confusing editing that most HK 1990s movies (and beyond) are afflicted with. Despite the distracting approach and the fact that the fighters look more like trapeze artists than martial artists, this successful tale of a ninja-like Robinhood character in 1858 still manages to be somewhat entertaining. Donnie Yen is likeable as one of the legendary Ten Tigers of Kwantung, and Yu Rong Guang plays his part well as the noble doctor who's secret alter-ego is that of the renegade title hero who steals from the rich bastards and gives to the poor peasants. Though there are tables a flying and umbrellas a swinging, there are also some great kung fu kicks in this Yuen Wo Ping directorial. If you want to find out more about this over-rated (but not bad) film, I'm sure there are plenty of fanboys, late



Wo Ping takes an interest in Cantonese Dim Sum dishes

comers, couch potatoes, newsgroups, chat-rooms and websites which are happy to tell you all about it while also telling you what an idiot I am for not worshipping this profitable movie. So please, no letters reminding me of things I "forgot" to mention (i.e. a little girl portrays a young Wong Fei Hung, etc.), because you can find out that stuff anywhere, and I didn't "forget" to mention anything-- I simply chose not to. Golden Harvest; 1993, In Association with Star TV Entertainment & Media Asia Distribution, not to mention Long Shong Pictures Ltd. Film Work Shop blah blah blah, A.K.A.: "Siunin Wong Fei-hung tsi fitmalau", "Iron Monkey: The young Wong Fei Hung", Shao nian Huang Fei-Hong Zhi tie ma liu", Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Pro.: Tsui Hark, Written by: Tsui Hark, Elsa Tang, Lau Tai Mok, Exec. Pro.: Raymond Chow & Wang Ying Hsiang, Co-Producer: Raymond Lee, Martial Arts Choreographers: Yuen Cheung Yan, Yuen Shun Yi, Ku Huen Chiu, Cast: Yu Rong Guang, Donnie Yen, Jean Wang, Tsang Sze Man, Yuen Shun Yi (AKA Shun Yee, Armstrong Yuen, and "Sorcerer Bat" in THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS), James Wong, Yen Yee Kwan. ** 1/2. -DF

JUST HEROES- Yuen Wo Ping as a Triad member in this average actioner. JUST HEROES has a number of decent, gory gun battles (what

YUEN CHEUNG-YAN (brother)

Born: 2/2/47

(AKA: Cheung-Yan Yuen, Yuan Chang-ren, Michael Chu, Yuan Hsiang, and the list goes on)



This brother went on to achieve success as a choreographer quite early, having worked with partner Corey Yuen Kwai (no relation) and at the Shaw Brothers Studios. He was also the stunt coordinator for last issue's INFRAMAN (Shaw Bros; 1975), working with Tang Chia. Yuen Cheung-Yan (Yuan Hsiang) tends to play a lot of silly characters, like the pipe smoker in LEGEND OF A FIGHTER's ridiculous boat

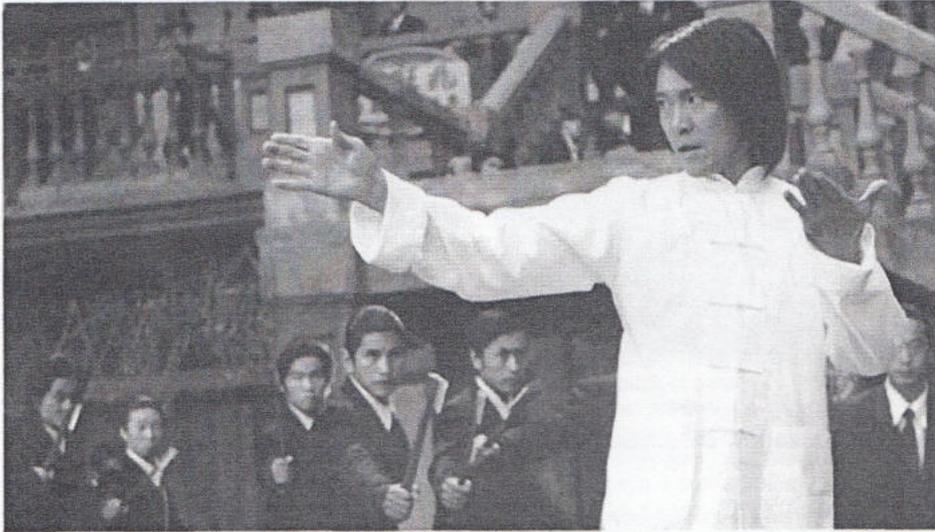
scene, and old ladies in THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS and SHAOLIN DRUNKARD (where he also plays a buck-toothed wizard!). A familiar face, he can also be spotted in small earlier roles, such as a nunchaku-swinging thug in Betty Ting Pei's BRUCE LEE: HIS LAST DAYS (Shaw Bros.; 1975). In more recent years, he's been involved in Hollywood crap like the CHARLIE'S ANGELS movies.

Partial Filmography (be it acting, directing or whatever):

- WING CHUN
- TAI-CHI MASTER
- DRUNKEN TAI CHI
- DREADNAUGHT
- FIST OF LEGEND
- BRUCE LEE: HIS LAST DAYS
- SHAOLIN DRUNKARD
- TAOISM DRUNKARD
- LEGEND OF A FIGHTER
- THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS



LEFT TO RIGHT: Chien Yuet Sun, Betty Ting Pei & Yuen Cheung Yan in BRUCE LEE: HIS LAST DAYS



Steven Chow fights off the Axe gang in KUNG FU HUSTLE

do you expect from a John Woo directorial?), but the characters aren't strong enough to make this routine crime drama actually matter, and we end up with a movie that's unremarkable. It didn't hate it, but wasn't on the edge of my seat either. Even when heroic Danny Lee is introduced into the first gun battle when he comes to the rescue riding on a motorboat (it made more sense than a white horse), it's still not as exciting as it could have been. As I understand it, JUST HEROES was made to raise money for John Woo's mentor Chang Cheh (director of swordplay classics from Shaw Bros.), sort of a 'retirement present'. Or something like that. Steven Chow plays an early, serious role as one of the mobsters who regrets the assassination of his respected kingpin. It's a who-dunnit; we're supposed to care or at least wonder which double-crossing gangster killed the guy. The villain turns out to be Chen Kuan Tai. Heroes Danny Lee and David Chiang set about wasting Tai's henchmen and Tai's person. Amazingly, both heroes survive the finale! That's odd; finding a John Woo HK gangster movie with such a happy ending is even harder than finding a 17-year old Catholic Hispanic girl who's only given birth once! Magnum; 1987, AKA: "Yi dan qun ying", "Tragic Heroes". Dir.: John Woo & Woo Ma, Pro.: Tsui Hark. Cast: Danny Lee, Chan Kuan Tai, Wu Ma, Steven Chow Kelly Chu. ** -Damon Foster

KILL BILL VOLUMES 1 & 2- Though acclaimed director Quentin Tarantino has often made references to Asian martial arts films in his own movies, KILL BILL is his first actual martial arts film. As far as mainstream Hollywood directors go, Tarantino is still my favorite, and that was before I saw this superb homage to Far Eastern action movies and Italian spaghetti westerns! It's so full of in-jokes (i.e. GREEN HORNET theme music, none-too-subtle Shaw Bros. tributes, nods to both KAGE NO GUNDAN and THE YAGYU CONSPIRACY, etc.) that there's no way to list them all. How often do we get to see Kamen Rider ZX (Shun Sugata), The Street Fighter (Sonny Chiba), Space Sheriff Gavan (Kenji Ohba) and The Master Killer (Gordon Liu) all in one film?!?! KILL BILL crosses barriers and breaks new grounds, even if the script is absolutely typical (revenge, need I say more?), reminding me of Japan's ZERO WOMAN mov-

ies. I love how Tarantino brings in such unique elements (i.e. an anime flashback, Japanese all-girl musical trio the 5.6.7.8s, who play 1960s style rockabilly) based on his own personal whims. KILL BILL was initially trashed by a lot of critics because of its gore and violence, but those idiotic critics obviously haven't seen a lot of samurai films. I wouldn't say the martial arts and swordfighting are Yuen Wo Ping's best work, but they're all pretty fun and gory. Miramax; 2003, Dir.: Quentin Tarantino, Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Uma Thurman, Sonny Chiba, David Carradine, Daryl Hanna, Kenji Ohba, Lucy Liu, Gordon Liu.*** -DF

KING EAGLE (1971)[actor] -Not available for review.

KING OF BEGGARS- Unfortunately for the poor soul writing this filmography, Yuen Wo Ping cameos as beggar Hung Yat-San. So I sat through this worthless combination of drama, comedy, fantasy, romance and martial arts- only to write this review. KING OF BEGGARS is another of Steven Chow's boring, talky movies, and as such, is only worthwhile to people so fluent in Cantonese so they understand his one-liners and spoofs. This long, dull movie had enough white backgrounds to make the subtitles illegible, and I've no knowledge of the real legendary figure, So-Hat-Yi, a.k.a the "King of Beggars"—so I didn't get the jokes. It's slow-paced and uninteresting to the uninitiated, but I admit that I chuckled once or twice. That's not good enough to warrant a good review, but people reared on 1990s drama/fantasies (i.e. THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR and all that other garbage) might see the fun in this. This meandering, uninvolved story has something to do with a rich scholar who takes part in some martial arts tournament, but is disqualified as a fraud when it's revealed he can't write his own name. Are you laughing yet? Anyway, this character (So-Hat-Yi, played by Steven Chow) somehow ends up losing everything he owns, so he and his father become beggars. Some how, they get involved with a sect of revolutionaries, determined to overthrow some Ching Dynasty politician and discover some sort of conspiracy (of more cult-like sects)—resulting in the same type of flying projectiles, magic, suspension

wires and bad kung fu that the 1990s were known for. AKA: "Miu chong yuen so hat ngai", 1992; Dir.: Gordon Chan, Cast: Stephen Chow, Ng Man Dat, Cheung Man, Norman Chu, Wai Lam, Peter Lai, King Yan Tuen, Yuen Wo Ping. -DF

KUNG FU GRANNY (2005) (dir. & action dir.) -Not available for review.

KUNG FU HUSTLE- Stephen Chow Sing Chi's big international hit from 2004. It was his first movie to get major theatrical release in American theaters, and for at least a few weeks, it was all rented out at Blockbuster. Critical acclaim seemed generally positive. But all I can say is: I don't get it! I enjoyed a lot of Stephen Chow's older comedies, and naturally I've seen enough HK kung fu movies to know what's being spoofed. Yet somehow, I just didn't get the jokes in KUNG FU HUSTLE. Many will disagree, but I think the comedy falls flat when translated into English, and so instead we get a bunch of scenes that are amusing, or silly at best. It's just one nonsensical scene after another, which left me scratching my head. I didn't like KUNG FU HUSTLE, but I didn't hate it either. It's a stylish movie with beautiful cinematography (by Hang Sang Poon). The CGI gimmicks actually enhance the martial arts fights instead of replace them (the latter is usually the case, unfortunately). Some scenes are grim, while others are just weird, and made no sense to me. Steve Chow's fights are entertaining, as are those of old-timers like Bruce Liang and Chi Ling Chiu. Story wise, Chow plays an unsuccessful conman who deals with a 1930s (or 1940s?) gang called The Axe Gang. But some time after the middle of the movie, it's revealed that all along, Chow knew some technique called the Buddha Palm, so he does finally beat up the bad guys. I think the premise was done better in GOD OF GAMBLERS 3. AKA: "Kung Fu", "Gong Fu", "Gung Fu". 2004; Pro., Written & Dir.: Stephen Chow. Writers: Stephen Chow & Tsang Kan Cheong. Action Choreographers: Yuen Wo Ping, & Shun Yee Yuen. Cast: Stephen Chow, Xiaogang Feng, Bruce Liang (Siu Lung Leung), Yun Wah, Zhi Hua Dong, Kwok Kuen Chan, Fung Hak On, Chi Chung Lam. *1/2 -DF

LEGEND OF A FIGHTER- Though many people have enjoyed & watched this stupid movie for years, I only now finally sat through it. In order to know what I was up against, I did some research, and read the flick's review in [The Encyclopedia of Martial Arts](#). The book wasn't much help, because they think Donnie Yen is the star, and he's not in the film at all! Anyway, LEGEND OF A FIGHTER struck me as just another bad "training film" movie, but with the typically racist bias against Caucasians and Japanese. It's typically pro-Chinese, in a very naive sort of way (were I Chinese, the movie wouldn't make me proud; it would embarrass me), and it all comes off as unintentionally laughable. A few times (i.e. an absolutely ridiculous confrontation on a ship), they actually try to be funny, and I found it very stupid and nonsensical. The most entertaining part is the voice dubbing, because of all the obscenities. But some of the time, I can't tell if they're being vulgar, or trying to say the hero's name: 'Fok Yun Gap' sounded like "Fuck you guys" once or

twice. In one scene, I could have sworn a villain says: "Fucking cunt face!? You had enough?" The rating of a single star (*) goes to the fight scenes, which are quite entertaining. Some of the animal stances look artificial & staged, but otherwise, all the battles are good. **LEGEND** starts off with student Fok Yun Gap (Yuen Yat-chor), also spelled Fok Yuen-gap, learning from teacher Yasuaki Kurata. Finally, it looked as though Kurata was getting a much-deserved role as a good guy, and the bonding between them gave me high expectations. The hero's father (Ko Fei) is also a martial arts instructor, but the character is such an asshole that I hoped he, not the charismatic Kurata would die at the end. Anyway, the male bonding between Yasuaki and his young student ends at about the middle of the film because the student grows up to become Liang Chia Jen! That's right, two different adult actors (Yuen Yat-chor and Liang Chia Jen) play the same guy! Neither actor looks like the other, and the inconsistency is very distracting! By this time, I had lost interest in the film, and our hero's (now Liang Chia Jen) challenges against foreigners, including a western boxer who's obviously some random white guy that's in no shape to box. This dumb movie continues to be amusing though, even at the climax where Liang Chia Jen kills Yasuaki Kurata, thereby removing the only likable character in **LEGEND OF A FIGHTER**. Interesting to note that the fact-based hero Fok Yuen-gap (1852-1909) of Chinese history also appears in **JET LI'S FEARLESS**, **BRUCE LEE THE INVINCIBLE** and **FIST OF FURY/CHINESE CONNECTION** (in fact he's the dead teacher). His name has also been spelled Ho Yuen Chia. Whatever. A.K.A.: "Hou Yuan-Jia". Seasonal Films Corp.; 1982, Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Yuen Yat-chor, Liang Chia Jen, Yasuaki Kurata, Ko Fei, Fung Hak-On, Brady Yuen. * -DF

LEGEND OF ZU, THE- Tsui Hark remakes his own **ZU: WARRIORS OF THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN** (Golden Harvest; 1983), with Sammo Hung again playing the wizard with the long, magical eyebrows. As you can imagine, **THE LEGEND OF ZU** is a serious case of cartoon-like over-kill. I wasn't particularly impressed by the 1983 fantasy, but now I can appreciate it more. The original had great special effects for its time, and Hark's crew had to be innovative and resourceful in order to generate that non-stop onslaught of imagination. But for this 2001 version, we have computer-generated regurgitation. I won't deny that **THE LEGEND OF ZU** is colorful and creative, but CGI is a cop out! Movies like this are a dime a dozen these days! Where's the groundbreaking, innovative spirit of the original?! In-

novation isn't needed, so long as Tsui Hark can pay people to sit behind their computers for an eternity. Granted, as an over-the-top fantasy, **THE LEGEND OF ZU** hits the mark. There's beautiful cinematography and the giant, flying skull face (it reminded me of images in Brendan Fraser's 1999 movie **THE MUMMY**) is kinda' neat. I guess somewhere between Heaven & Earth is the mythical Zu's mountain range, inhabited by the Omei wizards, little red fairies and high-flying swordsmen who don't need to do a lot of swordfighting—after all, they can fly. Despite their unlimited magic abilities, they all still manage to find time to talk a lot. Characters come and go with minimal introduction or explanation. But it's not all fun & games: They're being threatened by some magical force called "Amnesia". The name makes sense, because I just watched this confusing, irritating, dead-serious (lighten up, I thought fantasies were suppose to be fun!) film, and already I've lost my memory of it. I do remember that Yuen Wo Ping is credited as directing the decent martial arts, but the thrills of these wushu martial artists are diminished because of all the distractions: Constant colors, gimmicks and CGI-dependent FX. It's headache-inducing. Film Workshop; 2001, A.K.A.: "Shu Shan Zheng Chuan", "Zu Warriors". Dir.: Tsui Hark, Cast: Ekin Cheng, Cecilia Cheung, Louis Koo, Patrick Tam. *-DF

LIZARD, THE- Sometimes them Shaws are better at making large sets than kung fu movies, as **THE LIZARD** reminded me—more than once. If you think seeing a fat lady go cross-eyed is state-of-the-art comedy (even for 1972), or if you haven't seen enough crooked casinos get exposed, then **THE LIZARD** is your cup of tea. Granted, **THE LIZARD** is offbeat and the inventiveness of our heroes has its moments. But the title hero is Yue Hua, and the main villain is Lo Lieh. So you can imagine how bad the martial arts are! The hidden trampolines, reverse-film jumps, occasional bloodshed and Yuen Cheung Yan's martial arts direction at least make the battles entertaining. On the whole, **THE LIZARD** is slow-paced and pointless enough that it won't make converts out of non-fans. But if you're a diehard kung fu completist who can't get enough of the classy Shaw Brothers chop-sockeys of the 1970s and want to see a movie that avoids much of the genre's more typical clichés then maybe you can buy this DVD from me before I list it on Ebay. The setting appears to be 1930s Shanghai, and Yue Hua plays a "Chinese Robinhood" called The Lizard, who steals from the rich (which includes rich foreigners like the Caucasian couple having sex at the beginning) and gives to the poor.

This black-hooded vigilante is pursued by corrupt cop Lo Lieh, who would rather run fixed casinos and sell women into prostitution. If you look closely, you can spot background henchmen played by Fung Hak On and Yuen Wo Ping himself. Anyway, after **The Lizard** robs a few people and prowls around on some roofs, people keep framing each other, and then Yue Hua & girlfriend Connie Chan (her last film before retirement) take on and defeat Lo Lieh and his helpers—despite the latter's use of knives and guns. Shaw Bros.; 1972, AKA: "Bi Hu". Dir.: Chor Yuen, Martial Arts Dir.: Yuen Cheung Yan & Yuen Wo Ping. Cast: Yue Hua, Connie Chan, Lo Lieh, Wu Ma. *1/2 -Damon Foster

MADAM CITY HUNTER

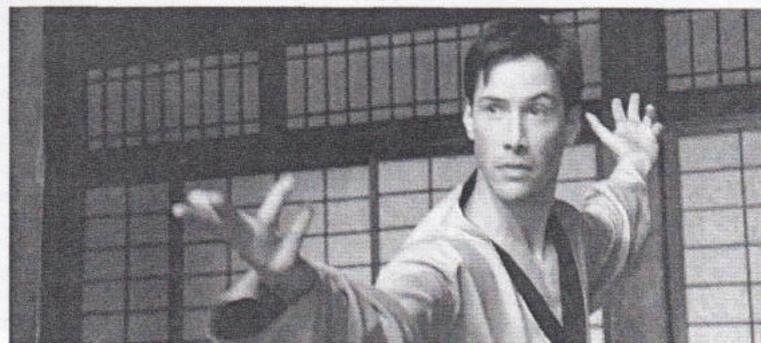
1993; Pro.: Yuen Wo Ping, Dir.: Yuen Cheung-yan, Cast: Cynthia Khan, Anthony Wong. —Not available for review.

MAD KILLER, THE- Yuen Wu Ping's first film as martial arts instructor is action-packed (mostly swordfighting, and it's all rather typical of other 1970s chop sockey stuff, complete with the occasional acrobatics and high-flying bounds). There's easily recognizable music galore, like blatant Akira Ifukube tunes taken from **MAJIN: MONSTER OF TERROR** (Daiei; 1966) as well as music I heard in **ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN** (Shaw Bros.; 1967). On the whole, **THE MAD KILLER** is a fun little effort from Shaw-splinter group Star Scope. Though basically a typical swordplay adventure, there's a vague element of horror, like when the main villain explores a haunted cave. In this cave he finds what appears to be a magic sword, although the subtitles neglected to make this point clear. Anyway, the guy is mad at everybody: His father, his classmates at the swordfighting school, local politicians, and even his half-sister—whom he had a crush on until he found out they were related. He also hallucinates and goes insane once or twice, so the title, **THE MAD KILLER** has more meanings than one. Eventually, the fellow gets hired by villainous Wu Ma to go kill a righteous judge who's trying to relieve a famine & torture-plagued village. This alliance results in even more swordfighting of course, and using his magic sword, he even wipes out four mighty soldiers who wear gold, and are called something like "Hell's Convoy". But the bad guy killed his own father, so his angry sister outsmarts him and manages to stab him to death; or something like that. Whatever, look— I saw it in a dark theater and couldn't take notes; and besides, plots don't matter in movies like this. Just enjoy **THE MAD KILLER** for its action. Star Scope; 1971, U.S. release: 1974,

Hugo Weaving and Keanu Reeves do battle in **THE MATRIX**



Keanu strikes the familiar Wong Fei Hong pose



AKA: "Feng kuang sha shou" Dir.: Zhen Luo, (AKA Chun Law) & See Yuen Ng, Martial Arts Director: Yuen Woo Ping, Directed by Ng See Yuen, Starring: Shui-Fan Fung, Yuan Gao, Pui-san Ouyang, Wu Ma & Hao Li Ren (Cantonese: Kok Lee-Yan). *** -DF

MAGNIFICENT BUTCHER- Over-rated romp, which, when seen dubbed in English, comes off as just another of the late 1970s Jackie Chan rip-off movies, only this time, it's Samo Hung who gets training from some annoying old drunken bum (Fen Mei Tun, AKA Fen Mei Sheng). A lot of people seemed to love this stupid farce, despite plenty of unfunny comedy and embarrassing slapstick. Don't get me wrong, I liked MAGNIFICENT BUTCHER to a certain extent; the characters are likable, and there's plenty of kung fu action. The choreography and occasional acrobatics are pretty fun, for typical "patty cake kung fu" (a.k.a. "swingy-arm"), that type of fighting where it looks like the Chinese have learned 300 different ways to "high five" each other. So MAGNIFICENT BUTCHER, on the whole, is okay; I really think the best fight is between Samo and a really agile, acrobatic Chung Fa (who uses an energetic, over-acted "cat" style). The whole cast is good; Fong Hark-On plays the conniving main villain, and old-timer Kwan Tak Hing shows he can still do some kung fu while reprising his role as Wong Fei Hung. There are plenty of other familiar faces on hand as Samo plays "Butcher Wing", a bumbling fool dubbed to sound like a British Yogi Bear, who keeps getting involved in all these misunderstandings until finally he duels with Lee Hai Sheng. Golden Harvest: 1979. AKA: "Lin Shi rong", "Ren zhe wu di". Martial Arts Instructors: Yuen Woo Ping, Samo Hung. Presented by Raymond Chow, A Leonard Ho Production, Cast: Samo Hung, Fong Hark-On, Fen Mei Tun, Lee Hai Sheng, Kwan Tak Hing, Wei Pai (AKA Wei Pei), Yuen Biao, Chung Fat, Lam Ching Ying. **1/2 -D.Foster

MATRIX, THE- Not bad for a semi-martial arts/pseudo-superhero/post-Tim Burton/descendent of cyberpunk fantasy that's similar to Japan's GHOST IN THE SHELL. Yuen Wo Ping's choreography (in what's probably his first American movie) is pretty good; it's not easy making Lawrence Fishburn and Keanu Reeves look like great fighters. Of course, THE MATRIX is notorious for its over-used CGI effects, which really diminish the power & validity of the martial arts. But I still enjoyed THE MATRIX because I was intrigued by this story of human bodies generating electricity for monstrous machines, or whatever. Unfortunately, they couldn't leave well enough alone, and made crappy sequels. Warner Bros.; 1998. Written & Dir.: Larry & Andy Wachowski, Pro.: Joe Silver. Cast: Keanu Reeves, Laurence Fishburn, Carrie-Anne Moss, Joe Pantoliano, Hugo Weaving. **1/2 -DF

MATRIX RELOADED, THE- For a bigshot Hollywood blockbuster, it's amazing how the DVD had the unforgivable problem of low-volume! In order to hear what the devastatingly uninteresting characters were mumbling, I had to turn the TV's volume up all the way. But then the sound effects just blasted out of the TV and hurt my ears. I still couldn't hear the incoherent whispers (AKA dialogue), so I had to activate the DVD's subtitles! As a result, I finally learned

that Keanu Reeves' character is actually "Neo" and not "Neal". But it doesn't matter, because MATRIX REGURGITATED is a boring, confusing fantasy about humans vs. machines (it was done better in Schwarzenegger's TERMINATOR movies), and the quest for "The Oracle", and then "The Keymaker". The religious overtones didn't entertain me in the slightest. The martial arts fights, with their CGI-reliance, suspension wires and stunt-doubles, are entertaining at times. But all through this dead-serious, nonsensical piece of tedious garbage, I just kept saying: "What the hell are they talking about?!" There are plenty of computer geeks and diehard MATRIX fans that paid attention, but I'm not one of them. I saw no rationale, no interesting characters, no continuity, and no reason to watch THE MATRIX: RELOADED (other than to write a comprehensive filmography). Warner Bros.; 2003, Dir.: Andy Wachowski, Written by: Larry Wachowski, Action Choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping. Cast: Keanu Reeves, Lawrence Fishburn, Carrie Anne Moss, Ray Anthony, Christine Anu. -DF

MATRIX REVISITED, THE- Fortunately, this thorough documentary only briefly discusses the two worthless sequels, and concentrates on the making of the movie that made cinematic history (for better or worse). I found this ego-enhancer for the Wachowski brothers informative and borderline interesting, but diehard fans of THE MATRIX will find it excellent. From its comic-book roots, to Carrie Anne Moss's videotaped ankle injury on the set, to the various FX techniques used, to candid interviews of the actors on the set, every aspect of the blockbuster is covered. The Yuen Wo Ping stuff is particularly interesting, and not how I envisioned his involvement. I realize he's passed his prime, but I initially envisioned him speaking English and single-handedly teaching the actors the ropes—I use "ropes" in both contexts. In reality, he speaks little or no English and relies on translators and younger Chinese martial artists to do most of the work. I'm sure he's the master of these puppets and was actively directing the action, but his most interesting shots are dialogue. As the subtitles explained, he originally told the Wachowski Brothers he thought he could teach the actors kung fu tactics in just two months. But his optimism quickly faded on the first day when he saw how bad they all were! Needless to say, it took much longer than two months to whip them into shape. All in all, I found THE MATRIX REVISITED to be okay. But that's because I'm not the world's biggest MATRIX fan to begin with. 2002; Directed by Josh Oreck, Featuring: Yuen Wo Ping (martial arts choreographer), Kym Barrett (costume designer), Jason Bentley (Music Supervisor), Geof Darrow (Conceptual Designer), Hugo Weaving (actor), Keanu Reeves (actor), Laurence Fishburn (actor...and an ugly one at that), Carrie-Anne Moss (actress). ** -Damon Foster

MATRIX REVOLUTIONS, THE- All through this artsy-fartsy, pretentious, tedious hunk-of-junk, our heroes are asking questions ("Where am I?", "What must we do now?"). Unfortunately, nobody gets a straight answer (frustrating me all the more) in this over-rated, confusing mess. One minute, Laurence Fishburn is chasing some old man in a subway station, and later,

Keanu Reeves again asks questions from some old lady called "The Oracle". Unfortunately, he doesn't get any answers, just more questions. All we get is a talky story about things with names like "The Architect", "The Train man", "The Logos", "The Hammer", and "The Meringean" (or something like that). Despite all these new phrases, the word of choice seems to be "shit"—it's what our heroes say when robo-squids suddenly appear. I again disagree with popular opinion and found both follow-ups to THE MATRIX to be wastes of time. There's not as much martial arts in this hopefully final installment of the old "humans vs. machines" story (remember GUNHEAD?), but there's plenty of tear-jerking romance and endless CGI battles pitting Transformer-like robots against flying octopus thingies. Warner Bros.; 2003, Dir.: Andy Wachowski, Written by: Larry Wachowski, Action Choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping. Cast: Keanu Reeves, Lawrence Fishburn, Carrie Anne Moss. -DF

MERRY CHRISTMAS (1984) [actor] - Not available for review.

MIRACLE FIGHTERS, THE- A successor to the previous year's EXCITING DRAGON, but with a new cast; Liang Chia Jen is one of the few to reprise his role as a silly old man. Many Yuen clan members worked on this bizarre, over-the-top comedy! I loved it, but admit it's probably too exotic for most round-eyes. There's so much in this entertaining farce that it's a hard movie to critique; lotsa' gags, gimmicks and unexpected in-jokes in this zany combination of fantasy, comedy and martial arts. Hell, even the clan's father, Simon Yuen makes a cameo (in the hilarious form of a still shot) depicting a Taoist wizard, even though he was dead when the movie itself was made. Though known for the many Yuens involved, I think the best actors are Liang Chia Jen and Eddie Kou Sheng--in fact this is one of Kou Sheng's (AKA Kou Hung) more charismatic roles. He plays a 17th century Manchu chief whose life was shattered forever because he dared to marry a lower-class "Han". Eddie Kou Sheng is finally given a chance to fight well; he shows more energy & sword skill in THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS than I thought he was capable of. As a movie, THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS is bizarre, but it's very, very fun! If nothing else, it's a one-of-a-kind, unconventional take on the old "teacher & student" movies. This fantasy has both martial arts scenes and imaginative special effects for its many fantasy elements. Again, I won't go into detail on each and every strange idea they crammed in, but I will elaborate on the white-faced demons I used to call "Barrel Boys". I've seen these pasty make-up clowns in other films, and although I don't completely understand old Chinese mythology, I take it that these doll-like critters are in some way related to the Hell Police (best described as white-faced dolls in wisdom caps; and they come to life to battle ghosts) seen in the movies of the late 1980s. The Barrel Boy (Brandy Yuen) in this movie doesn't have the same mechanical, doll-like moves of the Hell Police, and instead waddles around hilariously as this cartoon-like character does battle. The character's origin is described (for once) in this dialogue from THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS: Yuen Yat-chor asks: "How can one survive in an urn?" Yuen Cheung-yan replies: "That's

practiced by evil sorcerers. They kidnap kids and corrode their skin. They are kept inside a spectacular urn. And be fed on drug which control their minds. They will grow up in the urns". But getting back to the story, **THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS** concludes with a demented championship of sorcerers, where our hero (Yuen Yat-chor) defeats villains like a vampire-like wizard called Sorcerer Bat (Yuen Shun-ye). AKA: "Qi men dun jia", Peace Film Production Co.; 1982, Writer & Action choreographer/director: Yuen Wo Ping, Written by Yuen Wo Ping & Ronnie Yu, Cast: Yuen Yat-chor, Yuen Shun-ye, Yuen Cheung-yan, Liang Chia Jen, Eddie Kou Sheng (AKA Kou Hung), Brandy Yuen. ***** -DF

MISMATCHED COUPLES (1985) Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Featuring Yuen Wo Ping as "Mini" A.K.A.: "Quing feng di shou". -Not available for review.

MY HERO-Yuen Wo Ping appears as Master Yi. Stephen Chow stars in this heroic bloodshed film that was marketed as one Chow's crazy comedies. Chow is a waiter who helps save a triad boss who is about to be assassinated in the restaurant that he works. To reward him, they hire Chow to work with two other assassins and then violence and no laughter ensues. When you get right down to it, **MY HERO** isn't a bad film but it's not really a good film either. It's got some decent violence and the cool twist of having a midget hitman being the main heavy but there were a ton of better films of this ilk being released in Hong Kong at the time. If you're looking for a Stephen Chow film to watch, skip this one and watch something like **TRICKY BRAINS** or **LOVE ON DELIVERY** instead. 1990, AKA: "Yi ben man hua zou tian ya" (Mandarin), "Yak boon maan we jau tin ai" (Cantonese). ** 1/2 -Garro Nigoghossian

THE NINJA WARLORD- See **RAGE OF WIND**.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA- Produced in 1990 and probably released in 1991, this movie is important historically: A new decade hastens the end of the martial arts film and the beginning of the wire & pulley fantasy. Others love this stuff, proving I keep missing something. Granted, some of the swordfights are amusing,



and the scene of Peking-opera assassins (killers under cover, during a stage play) lashing out at observer Jet Li ignites an okay battle. But on the whole, these FX and chop-edil shenanigans just don't do anything for me. The story & characters are interesting, in a fictional (and how!) tale of legendary folk hero Wong Fei Hung getting blamed by market racketeers, and hassled by foreigners, Chinese kidnapers and "imperial dogs" (as Kent Cheng calls them). Whatever. Give me the good old days when kung fu movies were simple and they relied on imagination—not suspension cables. A.K.A.: "Wong Fei Hung"; 1991. Action Directors: Yuen Cheung Yan, Yuen Wo Ping & Yuen Sun Yi, Dir.: Tsui Hark. Theme sung by Jackie Chan, Cast: Jet Li, Rosamund Kwan, Yuen Biao, Kent Cheng, Jackie Cheung, Jimmy Wang Yu, Wu Ma ** -DF

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA 2- With the first **ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA** being such a hit, production began in 1991 to make this successor. The story interested me more than the first one did, and the characters are well defined & complex. The majestic scenes of the legion of martial artists doing katas in the sunset (on a beach) are still as awe-inspiring as ever. Plus, the kung fu is slightly more realistic & less wire-dependent—though the flying stacks of balanced tables is every bit as stupid as the original's "ladder fight". A complex story like this is best viewed in English, even though the dubbing is rushed and Jet's line: "Let cousin Li go now!" sounded like "Let cousin ego, now!" In another scene, some guy says he has "urgent business", and I thought he said "virgin busi-

ness!" Anyway, the plot involves the continued adventures of Jet Li's version of Wong Fei Hung. This time, he's battling a fanatical sect called "White Lotus" (well, who hasn't fought a fanatical sect called White Lotus?), that misuses its pugilism to combat all foreigners; the script is similar to **LEGENDARY WEAPONS OF KUNG FU** (Shaw Bros.; 1982). Toss in a little naïve romance, irritating ogler Foon (Wong Fei Hung's trusty assistant), and a disappointing, endless duel between Donnie Yen & Jet Li, and behold, this review of a somewhat decent movie is complete. 1992, A.K.A.: "Wong Fei Hung ji yi: Naam yi dong ji keung" (Cantonese), "Huang Fei-hong zhi er nan er dang zi qiang" (Mandarin). Dir.: Tsui Hark, Martial Arts choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping, Running Time: 92 Min., Cast: Jet Li, Donnie Yen, David Chiang (AKA "John" Chiang), Xiong Xin Xin, Cheung Tit Lam, Paul Fonoroff, Rosamund Kwan. *** -DF

POSTMAN STRIKES BACK- It may lack the fast-pace, high speed kicks and awesome thrills that HK 1980s thrillers are known for, but this slow-paced adventure is pretty nice. The main hero (and sole surviving character) is Liang Chia Jen, but even Chow Yun Fat takes on a nunchaku-swinging assassin (set against a classic kung fu movie theme song heard in **ONE-ARMED SWORDSMAN** and countless other flicks), only to be killed later on by ninja Kou Sheng. I must say, trying to make Chow Yun Fat look good in martial arts scenes must have been quite a challenge! On the whole, it's a decent adventure/drama set in the wilderness, and since my tape came from the DVD in wide-screen, the subtitles ("Be careful! It's slippy!") are very clear. There are boring moments, and unnecessary plot twists, but I still rather enjoyed this story of 1940's adventurers hired to escort some valuable boxes through a wilderness known for its bandits, machine-gun slingers, revolutionaries, and even assassins on ice-skates! Ice-skates?? Yes, ice-skates; I never said this movie was even. Golden Harvest; 1981, AKA: "Patrol Horse", "Patrol of Horses", "The Postman Fights Back", "Xun cheng ma" (Cantonese), Pro.: Raymond Chow, Production Manager: Yuen Wo Ping, Set Designs: Yuen Wo Ping. Dir.: Ronny Yu, Martial Arts Choreog-

YUEN CHUN-YEUNG (brother)

(AKA Brandy Yuen, Chun-Wei Yuen, Yuan Zhenyang, Yuen Chung Yan, Brandy Yuen Chun Wei and other variations we can't pronounce) Born: 1952, Hong Kong

Brandy Yuen started acting by the time he was 12 or 13 years old, and by the time he turned 19, he was an assistant fight choreographer. He was a full-fledge martial arts director by 1978 and by 1982, had starred in **DUEL OF THE MASTERS**. He became a director though, and one of his first movies was **THE CHAMPIONS** (1983), a Yuen Biao soccer movie that had a successful theatrical run in Japan in 1985. By this time, he had begun working with Sammo Hung, taking part in the choreography for movies like **PEDICAB DRIVER** and **SLICKERS VS. KILLERS**. He also has the distinction (for better or worse) of playing the "Barrel Boy" (!) in **THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS**, and was given freckles & buckteeth for more

stupidity in **LEGEND OF A FIGHTER**. In the mid 1980s, he signed a contract with Golden Harvest, assisting with choreography on Samo Hung movies and Jackie Chan movies (i.e. **ARMOUR OF GOD**).

Partial Filmography (whether in front of or behind the camera):

- THE CHAMPIONS
- DUEL OF THE MASTERS
- PEDICAB DRIVER
- MIRACLE FIGHTERS
- SLICKERS VS. KILLERS
- SHAOLIN DRUNKARD
- LEGEND OF A FIGHTER

ABOVE RIGHT: Yuen Chun-Yeung & Eddie Ko Sheng in **THE MIRACLE FIGHTERS**. BELOW: Yuen Chun Yeung in **LEGEND OF A FIGHTER**.

ミラクル・ファイター



rapher: Shun-Yee, Cast: Liang Chia Jen (AKA Leung Kar yan), Chow Yun Fat, Yuen Yat-chor, Eddie Kou Sheng (AKA Kao Hung), and Fen Mei Sheng (the fat, ugly guy from SHANGHAI EXPRESS, WHEN TAE KWON DO STRIKES, THE BUDDHIST FIST and DREADNAUGHT).. *** -DF

RAGE OF WIND- It's unusual for a lead hero (Chen Sing) to have an American wife, but otherwise this movie about Japanese occupation (during WWII) of a Chinese fishing village is pretty average. Yasuaki Kurata again plays an evil Japanese, and once or twice, the villains seem to have depth and personality—but most of the time, "the Japs" are depicted as so ridiculously mean that it's—well, ridiculous. In-between the "but still"s, there's torture and lynching. Though Kurata's nunchaku work is dead-slow, his kicks & punches are great, and he obviously could have defeated the vastly inferior Chen Sing if their climactic beach duel had been a real fight. There are VHS tapes and DVDs available of its original theatrical title (RAGE OF WIND) which are quite tattered & scratchy. Far cleaner is the TV re-release called THE NINJA WARLORD. I recorded this version back in 1983, and my VHS tape is still way better than most prints I've seen of RAGE OF WIND. I only rated it two stars (***) in O.C.: The Ninja Issue, but that might be because it has no ninjas. Besides, I've gotten old, mellow & forgiving—and enjoyed it more this time. I also like the theme song (the movie's music score is patched-together from all sorts of other soundtracks including Isaac Hayes' SHAFT and heaping helpings of Ennio Morricone). Eternal; 1973. AKA: "Meng hu xia shan", The Ninja Warlord & "Rage of Wind". Dir.: Ng See-yuen, Pro.: Pal Ming, Martial Arts Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping & Liang Shao-sung, Cast: Chen Sing, Yasuaki Kurata, Irene Ryder, Hao Li. *** -DF

RED WOLF- Stories of terrorists hijacking cruise liners have been told before, but this Yuen Wo Ping directorial is still well-written & suspenseful. The fights, full of great kicks, jumps & stunts, are exciting; but the shootouts get confusing because of a high body count; all these gun-toting hench-villains jump from around corners with guns a blasting. Because this endless horde of cannon-fodder bad guys all seem to have infiltrated the ship by impersonating waiters, they're all dressed the same. So I couldn't tell if the same guys kept coming back to life or what. Most crew members seem to be villains—and they've no aim, their bullets rarely hit our acrobatic hero (Kenny Ho) even at close range. The DVD's (distributed by Golden Asia Network Ltd., English packaging & design by Tokyo Shock) English dubbing & English subtitles are so different, it's like two separate stories: Dubbing says: "plutonium", and subtitles say: "uranium", for example. There's over-acting, continuity problems, and leading lady Christy Cheung's annoying attempts at humor. But on the whole, I was entertained by this average crime drama where thieves (like some black guy who looks like Arsenio Hall with a bad haircut) hijack a cruise ship. Villains like the sexy Elaine Lui certainly are dastardly, and we can't wait for heroic Kenny Ho to kill them. Unfortunately, Ho gets framed by the hijackers, and spends much of the film on the run. The innovative hero can always improvise (creatively changing nearby objects into

weapons) to get out of a tight spot. Fortunately, he eventually wipes out all the bad guys, and Christy Cheung defeats Elaine Lui by setting her on fire. Sharp Productions; 1995. Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Assoc. Pro.: Ricky Ng, Danny Lam. Cast: Kenny Ho, Christy Cheung, Ngai Sing, Elaine Lui, Cho Wing. **1/2 - Damon Foster

SECRET RIVALS 2- I never saw Part 1, but I find this sequel (filmed in Korea, which many kung fu movies were) to be one overkilled caricature after another; from the white haired villain (Huang Ching-li, of course) to the hero's leading lady and her pigtails. Though dubbed in English, the talky scenes toward the beginning consist largely of character names and it gets confusing and disinteresting. They also talk a lot about their kung fu (who's better, and so on). The training scenes are impressive (and some are too long), and I was relieved that there are absolutely no drunken bums or other annoying old men as teachers. In fact, I could detect no comedy relief characters in this dead-serious movie. Although the character development is nil and the story is uninteresting, the fight scenes are absolutely astonishing. Sure, serious critics and/or film buffs would see SECRET RIVALS 2 as just another low-budget, routine chop-sockey romp, but nobody can deny that the fist fights, swinging swords & spears, and mid-air flips are superb. The only flaw I saw was at the end, when John Liu is giving villainous Huang Cheng-li some speedy kicks to the face, in rapid succession. In one brief shot, Huang Cheng-li reacts a fraction of a second too early and his head already seems knocked to the side before the foot makes contact. Even so, this is a fairly good film, with a not-so-very-good script: A looming tournament attracts many martial artists, good and otherwise, to Tan Village. So there are inevitable conflicts, especially when both good and bad guys have brothers' deaths to avenge. There's also some boring subplot about silver and/or a message hidden in some guy's shoe, but I think the over-all mood of this action-packed farce can be summed up by quoting John Liu's classic line in SECRET RIVALS 2: "You don't even say hello- you just start fighting. That's great." Truer words were seldom dubbed. Seasonal Films; 1977. AKA: "Nan quan bei tui dou jin hu", "Silver Fox Rivals 2", "Bruce Lee Wir Rachen Dich", Producer: Shaw Sui-Tang, Action Dir. & Martial Arts Choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping Dir.: Ng See Yuen, Cast: John Liu, Huang Cheng Li, Wang Ziang, Chen Yao Lin, Yuan Kui, Xu Ha, Yu Sung Chao, Huang Guozhu, Sham Tsin Po, Shen Ting, Kang Kang. **1/2 -Brian Camp

SHAOLIN DRUNKARD- I love this movie!!! Any kung fu comedy where our heroes battle a giant toad is a masterpiece, by my standards! Despite the title, there's hardly any Shaolin in this imaginative sequel to MIRACLE FIGHTERS! Instead, we've got nonstop slapstick comedy, over-the-top fantasy, two "But still"s in the English dubbed version, improbable gadgets, cartoon-like antics galore, gags involving puppets, and witty kung fu! A lot of the comedy is dumb, but since the comedy is almost constant, SHAOLIN DRUNKARD still had me laughing it up! Yuen Yat-choh plays a Taoist whose fiancé's family is actually involved with some vampire-like wizard (Yuen Shun-Yi again) who sucks the blood of virgins. So he teams

up with an outrageously buck-toothed, drunken scoundrel (don't worry, there are no tedious training scenes!) to battle the evil wizard, his helpers and even a poisonous, human-sized toad! Zany antics abound in this colorful movie! First Films; 1983, A.K.A.: "Tian shi zhuang xie", "Wu Tang Master", "Shaolin Drunkards", "Wu Tang Drunkard" Dir: Yuen Wo-ping, Prod: Wong Hoi, Action Dir: The Yuen Clan, Writers: Yuen Wo-ping, Chiu Chung-hing, Cinematographer(s): Michael K.W. Ma, Cast: Yuen Yat-choh, Yuen Shun-yi, Yuen Cheung-yan, Brandy Yuen Jan-yeung, Eddy Ko Hung (AKA Kou Sheng), Yeung Hoi-yi, Yuen Wo-ping. **** -DF

SINGING KILLER, THE (1970) (actor) - Not available for review.

SNOW AND THE 7 (2005) (director, action director) - Not available for review

SNUFF BOTTLE CONNECTION- What's weird isn't that John Liu plays a hero, but that he plays a Manchu hero! The villains this time are actually Russians, one of which is played by a badly dubbed Roy Horan. I guess these are supposed to be Russian accents, but they're unintelligible and on the whole, SNUFF BOTTLE CONNECTION's dubbing struck me as being worse than average. Hell, even a villain's pet parrot is 'dubbed' wrong; the bird was given what sounds like the screech of a chimpanzee! I don't know; maybe the bird is deliberately imitating a chimp. I tend to think that the director was in the dubbing studio and saw the parrot move, and said: "Get me a stock sound of an animal, and make it snappy!" It's a good thing the technician didn't grab a tape of an alligator's growl! Anyway, this movie can't be taken seriously because it's so damn stupid, but in an amusing way. SNUFF BOTTLE CONNECTION qualifies as both a Golden Turkey and an unintended comedy. I really enjoyed this dumb, typical tale of corruption in the Ching Dynasty, and how them awful Manchurian oppressors are in cahoots with invading Russians. If you can wade past the outrageously cruel Russians (comparable to the Japanese in HAPKIDO), the obligatory restaurant brawl, the young pickpocket, the marketplace fortune-teller, the infantile comedy, familiar stock-music, the gambling, and the lion dance, you'll see that there's actually plot about a map hidden inside a snuff-bottle. The battles between the Chinese and the Manchurians, and the Chinese and the Russians, and the Manchurians and the Russians, are all very good. These fights aren't necessarily Yuen Wo Ping's very best, but I found them to be consistently entertaining. Little kid Huang I-lung is amazingly limber and John Liu is a great kicker, but Roy Horan seems under used. The movie ends after villains Roy Horan and Huang Cheng-li (swinging a fan and having white hair-- again) suffer defeat, but so does a co-hero known for throwing knives he calls "darts". AKA: "Shen tui tie shan gong". Fortuna Film Co.; 1977, Dir.: Tung Chin Hu, Lily Liu, Pro.: Philotes Lee, Ex. Pro.: Ng Se Yuen, Action Dir. & Martial Arts Choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping & John Liu. Cast: John Liu, Huang Cheng-li, Huang I-lung, Roy Horan, Kao Fei, Chien Yueh sheng. *** -DF

SPOOKY SPOOKY- Yuen Wo Ping makes a cameo in this decent horror/comedy (which starts off as a JAWS rip off and ends as an EVIL

DEAD clone). A few laughs (I counted three) and some good scary makeup, but it could have used more martial arts. Joyce Godenzi is particularly enjoyable. Golden Harvest; 1988, Dir.: Sammo Hung. Cast: Sammo Hung, Joyce Godenzi, Yo Hua, Corey Yuen Kwai, Alfred Cheung, Wu Ma, Mars (AKA Fwa Sing). *** -Jeff Goodhartz

TAI CHI FIST- Another 1990s "ponytail" kung fu film made in the wake of ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA. It's a charming action-comedy with enough great kung fu and acrobatic stunts to satisfy both the oldtimer purists and the trendy art-fags who won't watch a martial arts movie unless a whole crew was paid to pull suspension wires. In one shot, the wires were clearly visible in TAI CHI FIST, but it didn't detract from the thrill of the action. Despite the romance (I hate chick-flick mentality!) and 'cute' elements, I was surprised to find that I somehow liked all the characters involved, and did my share of laughing. Mainland martial artist Jacky Wu originally studied at the Beijing Wushu Academy, and was later discovered by Yuen Wo Ping himself, who cast him in TAI CHI FIST (his first film). This cute movie offers another story of pre-Boxer Rebellion China, as European countries continue to introduce the [sometimes reluctant] Chinese to new stuff: Western clothes, western music, and western dancing. Unfortunately, along with this culture come bullets, corruption, smuggling, occupation, opium addiction, and another butt-ugly Caucasian [over]-actor to play the main villain. Luckily, righteous Jacky Wu, his cousin, ponytail whips (overdone in the fights), and fiancé Christy Cheung defeat all the villains before their wedding. Film Can Production; 1995. Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping A.K.A.: "Tai ji quan", "Tai Chi 2", "Tai Chi Boxer". Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Jacky Wu, Christy Chung, Mark Cheng, Cheun-Hua Chi, Taam Chiu, Billy Chow, Sibelle Hu, Shun Lau, Darren Shahlavi. *** -DF

THREE AGAINST THE WORLD- Not available for review. 1988, Cast: Andy Lau, Norman Chu, Teddy Robin Kwan, Rosamund Kwan, Dean Shek, Chin Kar Lok. Cameo: Yuen Wo Ping.

TIGER CAGE- Despite the inaccurate title, there are no tigers or cages in this routine crime drama about corrupt cops & drug traffickers. TIGER CAGE is just an average movie, with predictable clichés, a little romance, gunplay, some dumb comedy here and there, and a couple fist-fights which aren't bad. I gotta' give director Yuen Wo Ping credit for making the cast look like great fighters when they're not. The exception is Donnie Yen, but he gets killed off in the middle of the movie, shortly after his fight with real-life friend Michael Woods (the black guy in IN THE LINE OF DUTY 4). The DVD's subtitles have their share of typos ("Be smart and let me go or we'll both perish"), as always. It's not a bad film, but nothing to write home (or anywhere else) about. Notable only for being Ping's first foray into modern action. There are some tense moments involving an incriminating videotape, and Jackie Cheung getting framed by double-crossers Ng Man Dat and Simon Yam. It's also pretty grim: Irene Wen is thrown to her death, from a skyscraper window. D&B Films; 1988. A.K.A.: "Sure Fire", "Te jing tu long" Prod.: Stephen Sin, Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping. Cast: Jackie Cheung, Do Do Cheng, Simon Yam,

Liang Chia Jen, Donnie Yen, Irene Wen, Wang Lung Wei, Vincent Lynn, Michael Woods, Yuen Cheung-Yan, Stephen Berwick. ** -DF

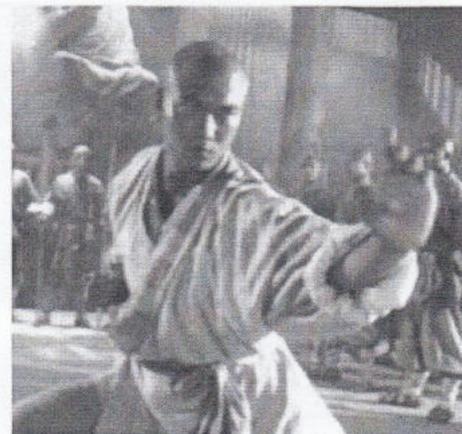
TIGER CAGE 2- Both the dubbed and subtitled versions have different end fights. After the success of the first TIGER CAGE, Yuen Wo Ping was hired to make a sequel. Having nothing to do with the first film, it still manages to surpass the original. Unlike the first one, this was a box office failure. I like to think of this movie as one big brawl as the fights are amazing, exciting & plentiful. This one even tops Yuen Wo Ping's own IN THE LINE OF DUTY 4: THE WITNESS. The plot again is simple: Donnie Yen & Rosamund Kwan are framed for murder. They then must enlist the aid of an overseas triad who's just trying to get the truth of the murderer and find a missing briefcase full of cash. D&B Films; 1990. A.K.A.: "Xi hei qian", "Tiger Cage" (British release because this sequel reached England before the original), "Washing Dirty Money". Pro.: Dickson Poon, Cast: Donnie Yen, Rosamund Kwan, Lo Lieh, Dodo Cheng. ***** -Garro Nigoghossian

TIGER CAGE 3 (1991) Dir.: Yuen Wo Ping A.K.A.: "Leng mian ju ji shou". -Not available for review.

TOUGH GUY (1972) [action coordinator] -Not available for review.

TWIN DRAGONS- An amusing little comedy, but both Yuen Wo Ping (here credited as "Yuan Wo Ping") and Jackie Chan have done better. Being the work of the HK Film Director's Guild (Ringo Lam, John Woo, Tsui Hark and others all directed and made cameos), it's a case of too many cooks spoiling the spaghetti, or however that old phrase goes. Maggie Cheung and Nina Li Chi (for once I was checking out Li Chi's legs, instead of her breasts) are both a couple stunning beauties, and serve as Chan's romantic leads (Jackie plays telepathic twins). The most inventive things about TWIN DRAGONS aren't the fights or the stunts, but rather the camera tricks and digital effects (some are crude, however) that give the illusion of two Jackie Chans. This alright action/comedy has something to do with two long lost brothers (one plays the piano, one knows kung fu) who get reunited, and they end up fighting against some thugs. Though the heavy clowning around deals largely with comical mix-ups with adult situations (on the THREE'S COMPANY level), Jackie Chan does take part in a halfway decent motorboat chase, and the climactic battle with veteran villain Wang Lung Wei is pretty good. AKA: "Shuang long hui", "Brother vs. Brother", "Double Dragon", "Duel of Dragons", "The Twin Dragons", "When Dragons Collide", Media Asia Distribution; 1992, Prod.: Teddy Robin, Dir.: Tsui Hark & Ringo Lam, Stunt Coordinators: Yuan Wo Ping, Jackie Chan, & Ching Siu Tung, Cast: Jackie Chan, Maggie Cheung, Teddy Robin Kwan, Nina Li Chi, Anthony Chan, Wong Lung Wai, Philip Chan, Sylvia Chang, Alfred Cheung, Jacob Cheung, Cheung Tung Jo, Chor Yuen, John Keung, Ringo Lam, Lau Ka Leung, Lai Ying Chow, Jamie Luk, Pa Shan, Ng Sze Yuen, John Woo, Eric Tsang, Tsui Hark, Tsiu Siu Ming, James Wong, Kirk Wong, David Wu, Mars. ** -DF

TWIN WARRIORS- Finding a 1990s HK movie



Chin Siu Ho in Twin Warriors

which lacks wirework is like finding an Abe Vigoda porno movie. But the wires aren't overdone this time. For example, there are a couple appropriate scenes of our heroes (Jet Li & Michelle Yeoh) achieving flight: They're flying toward the villainous eunuch, establishing their presence at the beginning of a fierce battle. Once the fights start, director Yuen Wo Ping lets us see a great deal of real kung fu and swordplay. For every scene of a person flying through the air like a football, there are twice as many slick kicks, cool punches, enjoyable stunts and masterful swordswings. Jet Li looks great, but Michelle Yeoh is disappointing (her gravity defying 'table fight' in the restaurant is stupid), and so is the under-rated Chin Siu Ho. He gets off to a good start, but gets relegated to villain when his character goes bad. There are technical flaws too, like visible wires and a scene where Jet Li throws a ball at a wall; and the wall starts to break before the impact! But otherwise, I highly recommend this fun movie, whether you watch its Chinese version ("The Tai Chi Master"), or the misleading American release ("Twin Warriors") which shows modern pictures of Li & Yeoh on the DVD cover. This possible remake of William Holden's TEXAS (Columbia; 1941) tells us about two trouble-makers at Shaolin Temple. One of them (Chin Siu Ho) makes even more trouble—in fact he joins up with enough corrupt soldiers to make Jet Li (as legendary folk hero Zhang San Feng) learn Tai Chi to defeat him. Golden Harvest; 1993. AKA: "Tai ji Zhang San Feng", "Tai Chi", "The Tai Chi Master". Dir & Martial Arts Choreographer: Yuen Wo Ping, Cast: Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, Chin Siu Ho, Fennie Yuen, Yuen Cheung Yan. ****1/2 -DF

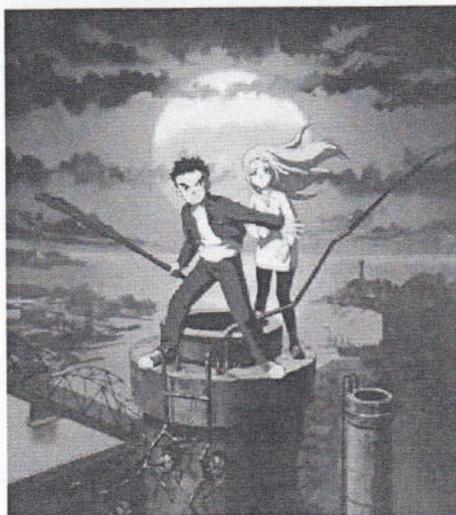
UNLEASHED- Routine actioner with Jet Li involved in some sort of mob-related underground fighting tournaments and a completely unoriginal plot. I sat through this predictable movie on a 12-hour plane flight, and UNLEASHED made the flight seem even longer. The over all script reminded me of many movies, including GLADIATOR. Also coming to mind is the STAR TREK episode "The Gamesters of Triskelion", because of the captive combatants—right down to the neck collars! Come to think of it, this whole premise (captive combatants, neck collars) was also in Japan's BATTLE ROYALE III! But the majority of this talky drama concerns Jet's (as Danny) escape and attempts to fit in with society, a family, and playing the piano. Eventually,

continued on page 50



Japanese Sci-Fi Section:

TERROR YAKI



NOW AND THEN, HERE AND THERE:

(A.K.A.: "Now and Then, Here and There: Discord and Doom") Tarty; 1999, Dir.: Akitaroh Daichi, Asst. Editors: Nagisa Miyazaki, Makoto Sokuza, Series Coordination: Hideyuki Kurata, Character Design: Atsushi Ohizumi, Storyboards: Rei Nishino, Prod.: A.I.C., Pioneer LDC, Executive Prod. of English Version: John O'Donnell, Prod. of English Version: Stephanie Shalofsky, Dubbing Supervisor: Tom Wayland, English Language Audio Post-Production: Taj Productions, English Language Art Dir.: Anthony Salerno, Translation: Katsuho Shimoharu, Distributed by Central Park Media at www.animeone.com, Running Time: 120 Min., Reviewed by Damon Foster

It almost worked for me.....almost. As suspenseful science fiction, this animated videotape (presumably the first in the series, this introductory tape is called "Discord and Doom") damn near hit the mark. This English dubbed videotape consists of four, maybe five episodes of a tolerable, yet less-than-perfect cartoon TV show. The artwork and animation are no different than that of any other modern cartoon, but the story struck me as being slightly better than average. From start to finish, this example of Japanimation kept me consistently interested. Yes, interested. I was not thrilled, amazed or enthralled, but I was able to give the TV my full, undivided attention. Perhaps later episodes of this series are even better than these first ones.

But too much in the story is left unexplained. I watched this here anime without really looking at the videobox or the flyer. So I pressed "Play" not knowing what to expect. I think I should have first read the description on the back of the box, which I later discovered to have read: "Dragged through a time warp by a giant machine, Shu is thrust into a hellish future of slavery and war. There he is captured by an army of kidnapped children. Caught between reluctant soldiers and the madman who has stolen their innocence, Shu fights to save the future. Can

one child stop a war?" This explains more than the videotape itself. On the flyer for NOW AND THEN, HERE AND THERE, it says quite simply: "An apocalyptic vision of the future!" Okay, now I think I finally understand what the hell is going on in this story by Akitaroh Daichi (also the director of JUBEI-CHAN THE NINJA GIRL, and ELF PRINCESS RANE). But I should not have to go find text to read the story on a videotape I just sat through! This is where NOW AND THEN, HERE AND THERE fails. I can tolerate the slow pacing, and found all the characters to be pretty interesting. But so much about the story is unclear, and left me in the dark.

It's about some kendo student called Shuzo Matsutani, who goes through a timewarp one day while he was climbing a smokestack. The reason I know it's a timewarp is because of the narrative written to the lower left (while watching the tape I had assumed he somehow got transferred into an alternate dimension) in the previous paragraph. Once he makes the transition to this strange new world, the tone of this uneven TV program changes. When he was a schoolboy living in the Tokyo suburbs, it was all pretty light-hearted and comical. But once Shuzo enters this nightmarish world where water is scarce & precious, the tone gets gloomy & grim-- at times it's even powerful. There's violence, torture and plenty of bloodshed. An absolutely insane, paranoid king is forcing his soldiers to wage war with rebels (I assume the rebels are the good guys, but on this tape, we never get a good look at them). The tension between the soldiers is interesting, as are their giant war vehicles (looking like mechanical snakes and space-ships). Unfortunately, Shuzo has a crush on some blue-haired girl named Lala-Ru, and it's nearly all he talks about. Though she has some significance to the script (she's got some magic powers, and a valuable pendant which holds the key to ending a famine), I think lead hero Shuzo spends too much time trying to find her, instead of helping to roll the story along and get to the bottom of things. Worse yet, there's another whimpering female character called Sarah. She's some sort of prisoner taken from modern America and brought into this evil future to be what appears to be a sex-slave. It's really hard to tell; we don't see any actual rapes, but Sarah and Lala-Ru spend so much time being locked up and then the evil men get awfully abusive to them. Both female characters are supposed to be minors, so I guess it's not legal to depict them in the act of sex. It's implied though. Whatever. Anyway, since this tape only has the first few episodes of NOW AND THEN, HERE AND THERE, nothing is actually concluded. Do the two girls escape? Does Shuzo lead a revolt against the psychotic, insecure king who has drafted them? I have no idea. ** -DF

TERMINATRIX

TMC; 1995, Executive Prod.: Yasuo Uchida, Chief Prod.: Tomio Nakagami, Prod.: Kunihiko

Andou, Isao Kurosui, Asst. Dir.: Kouji Ogawa, Screenwriter/Dir.: Kouji Ogawa, English Version by Central Park Media (John O'Donnell), Dubbing Supervisor: Dick Tripwire, English Language Audio Post-Production: Bang Zoom! Entertainment, English Version Audio Post Production Producer: Eric P. Sherman, Cast: Kei Mizutani, Naofumi Matsuda, Shouko Kudou, Saeko Ichijou, Yuuki Fujisawa, Yasunori Matsuda, Reviewed by Damon Foster

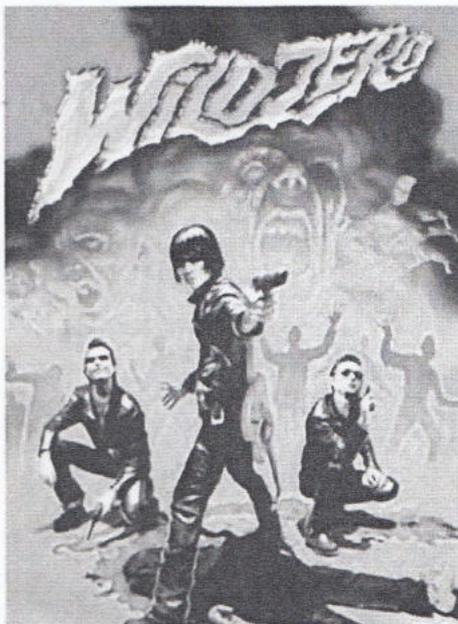
When I first saw this new English-dubbed videotape, I assumed I was in for a fun little adventure; an exploitive spoof of TERMINATOR. But TERMINATRIX turns out to be beyond "exploitation", it's damn near pornographic and downright sleazy. It's not hardcore porn, but it might as well have been. There's plenty of nudity, with full frontal and a lot of close-ups of bare asses (so if you like staring at a shit-crack, go for it!). Every naked person in TERMINATRIX is female (it's clearly made for men), but this feature-length, incredibly low-budget movie didn't do it for me. The women are gorgeous, and almost make this movie worth a star (*). But because I think spoofs should actually be funny, I'll take away that star. The best thing about TERMINATRIX is the videobox, because it shows that Japanese beauty Kei Mizutani (no stranger to QC's readers) wearing a sultry black outfit. Unfortunately, she never wears this suit anywhere in TERMINATRIX. Much of the time she's either in one of those stupid school-girl uniforms, or completely naked. TERMINATRIX offers little for "tight clothing fetishists" like myself, but Mizutani does look nice in the silver mini-skirt; but then, so would you. But seriously, I think it's a safe assumption that we've got a negative review for TERMINATRIX evolving here. However.....

Sleaze freaks and Kei Mizutani completists take note! The chicks in TERMINATRIX are hot, there's no doubt about it. If you like borderline porno and aren't dissuaded by non-existent budgets and horrible writ-



ing, then TERMINATRIX just might be your cup of tea. I tried sitting through TERMINATRIX more than once, and honestly couldn't get into it. This is not to say that TERMINATRIX doesn't have a target audience and potential fans. My problem is that I was expecting more of a sci-fi element, rather like the Japanese-Hong Kongese co-production ROBOTRIX from 1991. Now there was a sleazy sci-fi movie that also included action, a budget and some minor special effects. Though I only rated it two stars (**) when I reviewed it many years ago, it still seems to be the mighty yardstick when I critique and compare sci-fi sexcapades.

Stupidity and nudity alternate in a script that is obviously ripped off from America's early 1980s epic, TERMINATOR. In the case of TERMINATRIX, a female robot goes back in time (to the 20th century) to prevent the birth of a would-be revolutionary. In TERMINATOR, I seem to recall Arnold Swartzenegger was seeking a woman named something like Sarah Connor, and attacking every chick with the name Sarah Connor. In TERMINATRIX, the villainous fembot is attacking every guy named Sera Kota. Meanwhile, Kei Mizutani also materializes into 1995, and she's a human heroine dedicated to stopping the sultry android ("T-69 Terminatrix"; try to hold back your uncontrollable laughter). Mizutani protects her leading man because his future offspring will lead a revolution, resulting in lines like: "The future of humanity depends on your penis, Mr. Sera", and "I'm really glad we could save your penis". While having sex, the robot accidentally sits on an electric dildo and overloads. Then we see the robot's final view as it's destroyed: An electric dildo wobbling on the ground. Then the screen blacks out and it's the end of T-96 Terminatrix. Go ahead and see TERMINATRIX, and see for yourself why you shouldn't have seen it. -DF



WILD ZERO

Gaga Communications; 1999, in Association with Dragon Pictures, & Takeuchi Entertainment Planning, Producers: Furata Kaichie & Tetsuro Takeuchi, Dir. of Photography: Kobayashi Motoki, Visual FX: Kobayashi Atsuo, Dir.: Tetsuro

Takeuchi, Executive Prod.: Tanaka Kazuhiko, Featuring Music by: Guitar Wolf, Teengenerate, Charlie & The Hot Wheels, The Ramblin' Rose, Mad 3, The Vikings, Devil Dogs, Greg Oblivian & The Tip Tops, Cast: Guitar Wolf, Bass Wolf, Makoto Inamiya, Drum Wolf, Masashi Endo, Shiro Namiki, Naruka Nakajo, Kwancharu Shitichai, Yoshiyuki Morishita, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Wow! This is fun stuff! To think that I once thought Peter Jackson's DEAD ALIVE (AKA: "Brain Dead") and the ridiculous HARDROCK ZOMBIES were the strangest zombie movies ever made. That was before I saw this independent (though not entirely cheap) production from Tetsuro Takeuchi. WILD ZERO is a great movie, but it's pretty hard to categorize. On the whole, I guess it's a horror movie, because of the typical flesh-eating zombies. It's also semi-science fiction, because the zombies are revived by alien flying saucers (an obvious steal from Ed Wood's vastly inferior PLAN 9 FROM OUTERSPACE). But there are long stretches of WILD ZERO which have no zombies or space-ships, which could easily place WILD ZERO in the categories of "comedy", "musical", "drama" and "art film". Needless to say, WILD ZERO is a very uneven movie, and there's a lot of weird stuff that simply makes no sense. For one thing, I don't quite understand the title, but I imagine I could if I watched the movie a few more times. I think a better title would be something like "Rockabilly Greasers against the Living Dead", but even that might set up expectations for more zombie action. So I guess WILD ZERO, a nonsensical title, is perfect for this equally nonsensical movie. But again, just because it looks like the work of people who just dropped acid, doesn't make it a bad movie. There are two things to like about WILD ZERO:

1. The music. I've always rocked. If you like hard-edge, electric guitars, you too will want to get the soundtrack from King Record! I loved the music in WILD ZERO. Plenty of punk, rockabilly, shock-a-billy, metal and surf instrumentals. Much of it is from great Japanese bands like Guitar Wolf of course, but some equally catchy tunes from local boys (i.e. The Devil Dogs, Phantom Surfers and the Oblivions, all of which I've been a fan of for years). Though all the songs are nice, I think Guitar Wolf's live performance in some club is so unclear it's barely audible, and anything, even rock 'n roll gets old after a while. Though the songs in WILD ZERO all kick ass, I was a little relieved when the movie finally ended.

2. The characters. I have an unfortunate tendency to compare complex movies [with many strange characters] with the flicks of Quentin Tarantino. I'm not saying that WILD ZERO was definitely inspired by PULP FICTION or JACKIE BROWN, but that's certainly what it reminded me of. WILD ZERO really has a lot of oddball people. Though they're all amusing, my limited cranial capacity gets overloaded and confused if there are too many of them, and there are definitely "too many" of them. The things these freaks do, and the weird situations which arise get distracting (I kept thinking: "I thought this was a zombie movie!"), but this over-the-top exploitation movie never gets boring, that's for sure.

WILD ZERO's downfall is that it's not "user friendly", for those of us who haven't watched a lot of recent Japanese exploitation movies, or those of us who don't believe rock musician Guitar Wolf is a regular person like the rest of us. There are times when a relatively simple story (bikers meet disturbed people and battle hungry zombies) seems to get convoluted with what appears to be spoofs (?) of movies or concepts I couldn't identify. Musician Guitar Wolf (he's called Guitar Wolf, but so is his whole trio of rockers), who's played in Japanese clubs and toured American clubs, is depicted as some sort of super-human warrior. It's never explained how this arrogant character got such powers, but he single-handedly destroys the alien spaceship at the climax, using a magical samurai sword hidden in his guitar. I don't know if WILD ZERO is part of a film series or what-- but if it is, then maybe other films explained how he got these superhero-like abilities. I'm just guessing, but I think the "artistic" approach of WILD ZERO is to deliberately keep us speculating about these things. This is fine & dandy, but I prefer movies that have at least some coherency, and a logical approach. I also got a little tired of watching the "hepcat" posers combing their hair so much; it tarnishes their "tough" image by making them seem vane and at times, both dainty & feminine. Guitar Wolf (who never removes his sunglasses), playing himself in god-like form, seems to go on too much about how great rock 'n roll is, and has little else to say.

The script tells about all these crazy characters that find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. There's this androgynous hermaphrodite called Tobio (Kwancharu Shitichai), perhaps a yakuza or two, a built-ugly club owner who drugs & takes advantage of unsuspecting girls seeking a music career, some attractive women (I counted one shower scene), and of course, there's the main character, Ace (Masashi Endo). Ace is another greaser who became Guitar Wolf's blood brother when the musician gave him a magical whistle. As Guitar Wolf hands the whistle to Ace, the old SPACE GIANTS series comes to mind because the English subtitles quote Guitar Wolf as saying: "Take this. Whistle when you're in danger." So just like Miko and Goldar many years before, all Ace has to do is blow the whistle when he's attacked by outerspace aliens (only this time, the aliens aren't shown and have zombies do their dirty work). When Guitar Wolf and the other good guys fire guns at the walking corpses, there's some totally cool special effects going on here! The exploding heads are excellent, perhaps even better than those in DAWN OF THE DEAD, the movie that really inspired this type of horror-action. Usually, CGI special effects look artificial to me, but when the zombie heads are blown up, I really had to stop and rewind the tape to see how they did it! At first I couldn't tell whether it was prosthetics or "Computer-Generated-Image" stuff, and had to play the tape in slow-motion, just to determine that they indeed used CGI gimmicks. The space-ships of the alien attackers aren't as effective (they're obviously computer generated flying saucers), but we see so little of them that it doesn't matter-- WILD ZERO concentrates more on writing and characters than FX. Anyway, after a lot of strange situations and subplots that go nowhere,

Guitar Wolf finally destroys the invaders' mother ship, causing all the zombies to die, or rather, to become "de-activated". ***1/2 -DF

VERSUS

("Down to Hell 2", "The Ultimate Versus") 2000, Directed by Ryuhei Kitamura, Writers: Ryuhei Kitamura & Yudai Yamaguchi, Cast: Tak Sakaguchi, Hideo Sakaki, Chieko Misaka, Kenji Matsuda, Reviewed by Damon Foster

What's not to like about a horror/adventure where a samurai hacks his way through several George Romero-inspired zombies? Well, the answer is: A movie where the long overdue battle (Japanese swordsman vs. the living dead!) only lasts for the movie's first minute (it's just a flashback)! Needless to say, this low budget movie got off to a good start-- but pretty soon, we switch to a modern setting and a meandering, distracting script full of often-told clichés, artsy-fartsy cinematography, and MATRIX-wannabe martial arts. To be fair, there are some nice kicks & flips, gunplay galore and pretty decent gore effects, but there are slow, pointless moments (i.e. the obligatory "Mexican stand-off" where all these mobsters hold guns to each other's heads—for too long) meant to build tension, but instead they build tedium. There's not a charismatic person in the film, so I certainly didn't care who survived and who didn't. There are plenty of colorful characters though, for what it's worth. I expected to enjoy this movie a lot more; normally I take to zombies & martial arts like Courtney Love takes to heroin. But in the case of VERSUS, they didn't do it right and concentrated too much on some spiritual subplot which went nowhere.

As just another cheap 'zombie forest' movie (ala TOXIC ZOMBIE and REDNECK ZOMBIES, both of which are worse), it's not bad. Just don't expect a zombie classic like DAWN OF THE DEAD '78 or SHAUN OF THE DEAD. As a gangster film, it's tolerable to anybody who wasn't spoiled by John Woo's 1980s & early 1990s flicks. But on the whole, it's just an average movie, though it had such potential to be slightly above average. It's all shot in a forest, and it's apparent a lot of work went into making VERSUS, even if the budget is even smaller than the average Michael Jackson sex partner.

The script of this so-so tale reminds me of my own AGE OF DEMONS (1992), with villains trying to use some sort of 'blood sacrifice'-type gimmick to unlock a gateway to Hell—I guess. But throw in some gangsters who over-act to the point of embarrassment (for the viewer), a few zombies, bloodshed, a hero who wears a black trench-coat (ala THE MATRIX) which somehow never gets in the way of his acrobatic karate moves, and some annoying girl (the hero's love interest) with a special 6th sense. All this amounts to something only remotely entertaining. If only they would have chopped out a good 40 minutes. Anyway, the movie continues until it ends. **1/2 -DF

REBIRTH OF MOTHRA 2

(A.K.A.: "Mosura 2", "Rebirth of Mothra II")

27 ORIENTAL CINEMA

Toho; 1997, Produced by Hiroaki Kitayama, Screenplay: Masumi Suetani, Dir.: Kunio Miyoshi, Executive Prod.: Shogo Tomiyama, Music by Toshiyuki Watanabe, Starring: Megumi Kobayashi, Sayaka Yamaguchi, Aki Hano, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Another Mothra movie from the 1990s? Them Toho guys were busier than Cher's plastic surgeon! This fantasy is every bit as infantile and far-fetched as its predecessor, REBIRTH OF MOTHRA (Toho; 1996)—which I guess I reviewed back in 2004 (O.C.: Gojira 50th Anniversary Issue). I suppose I could also whine about its "unrealistic" approach, unlike the situation with classic Toho monster movies (i.e. MONSTER ZERO), which have at least a remote connection to reality. But then, those were science fiction movies. REBIRTH OF MOTHRA 2 is fiction without the science, and requires that in order to enjoy this kiddie movie, you must suspend not only your disbelief, but your common sense, intelligence and self-respect (of which I have very little). Like the first REBIRTH OF MOTHRA, this movie gets a "guilty pleasure" vote from me. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I do in fact enjoy these stupid, semi-new Mothra capers! So long as we're not expecting another GHIDRAH THE THREE HEADED MONSTER (Toho; 1965), and are instead expecting some Walt Disney-inspired tackiness, the like of REBIRTH OF MOTHRA 2 will entertain. I realized REBIRTH OF MOTHRA 2 wasn't going to put me to sleep when I had gotten about 15 minutes into the movie, for the way its silly script alternated between humor (i.e. skits involving a caterpillar & a cat) and some subplot about all these new, unidentified animals emerging from the sea.

As is always the case in Toho's "Golden Turkeys", what saves this romp is the special effects and the monster scenes. Despite a plush Mothra [that you can probably win at a carnival by throwing baseballs at bottles], the giant monster sequences are all impressive! Whether the giant creatures are battling, rampaging, flying, swimming or causing massive explosions, Toho doesn't skimp on the awesome FX! The miniatures and sets are all first rate as well. Though I still can't quite get used to Mothra's chicken feet, I think the monstrous FX make this movie a slight improvement over the first REBIRTH OF MOTHRA. Mind you, not all of the FX are great. For example, them suspension wires are still visible some times, despite attempts to eliminate them digitally. Watch for a shot early in the movie where mini-witch Belvira's magic elevates a couple greedy fisherman. Digital cover-ups try to wipe out the guys' wires, but instead, this CGI tampering has a reverse effect and the wires are even more noticeable.

The unnatural "movement" of the pixilated trees & leaves in the background really calls attention to the suspension wires. It's as though some FX technician was saying, "Look over here! You see, we still do use suspension wires! Aren't they cool?!"

Here's a wacky, hair-brained script. Something to do with

three typically irritating kids who stumble across the remains of a magical, ancient kingdom (much like Atlantis or Mu) that presumably disappeared in the sea. But the setting starts off as being Okinawa, the beginning is set at some beach resort called "Pension Uranai" (as it reads on the sign). Yet another example of bad Japanese-English, along the lines of coffee creamer called "Creap", and sodas with bizarre names like "Calipsis", "Pocari Sweat", and my favorite, the ever yummie-sounding beverage called "Plain White Water" (ah yes; Grandma's age-old, secret recipe!). But that's irrelevant; most of REBIRTH OF MOTHRA actually takes place at Nilai Kanai (the mythical country mentioned earlier), or rather, what's left of it. Causing plenty of havoc are dangerous monsters like the humongous reptile "Dagahra" (AKA: "Dagala", "Dagar-La" and any other interpretations you can think of), and its army of parasitical starfish! Fortunately, there are good monsters on hand as well, such as "Gorgo". No, not the British Gorgo of the early 1960s. This particular Gorgo is a small, cute critter that looks like a cross between a tribble (STAR TREK) and that furry Hanejiro (ULTRAMAN DYNA) puppet. Speaking of good monsters, Mothra shows up too, along with those two tiny, doll-size women Lora & Mole, and their rival sister Belvira. Once again, the sisters battle each other and fly around, firing beams, etc. The giant monsters do this too. Unfortunately for Mothra, that cool-looking villain "Dagahra" (according to the back of the VHS box for the English dubbed version) can evade Mothra's assorted lightning and laser beams by going underwater. So Mothra has the brilliant idea to morph into "Aquamothra"! Mothra should have done that in REBIRTH OF MOTHRA, to keep from drowning! Regardless, this new version of Mothra resembles a flying fish, which proves mighty handy when it comes to swimming/flying into Dagahra's mouth and becoming lotsa' little tiny Aqua-mothras! Even the awesome lizard's antibodies (more of them evil starfish) are no matches for this army of little Aqua-mothras! After the huge villain's death, the ghost of Nilai Kanai's princess assures us that the children of today are in charge of the world of tomorrow—so much for happy endings. **1/2 -DF



GARAGA

(A.K.A.: "Hyper-Psychic Geo: Garaga") Satomi/AVN; 1989, Director & Screenwriter: Hidemi Kubo, Character Designer: Moriyasu Taniguchi, Producer: Osama Amaya, Original Story: Satomi Mikuriya, Production Company: Aubeck, Executive Producer of English Version: John O'Donnell, Prod. of English Version: Stephanie Shalofsky, Dubbing Supervisor: Tom Wayland, Distributed by Central Park Media (www.centralparkmedia.com), Running Time: 100 Min., Reviewed by Damon Foster



I'm glad that for once I'm seeing a sample of an animated space-opera that doesn't try too hard to emulate the work of Leiji Matsumoto, except that it does involve the obligatory blond alien space chick (in this case, she's a psychic called Queen Farla). GARAGA is outerspace science fiction, but looks more like LOST IN SPACE, STAR TREK or SPACE: 1999 than STARBLAZERS or CAPTAIN HARLOCK. Interesting to note that because of the ape-like villains, the box states "A must have for fans of PLANET OF THE APES!" Indeed, there are similarities to that classic series (when I say classic series, I'm including both the original movies and the 1970s TV series, and not that 2001 piece of absolute garbage from Tim Burton!) as well: From the scene of the crashed spaceship slowly sinking into the water (minus the "Going, going, gone."), to the people in bed-like chambers so they can rest in suspended animation. Or rather, "suspended anime"! Though there are some shoot-outs, explosions and swordfights that involve a lot of squirting blood, it's pretty tame and kids should enjoy it. As just another average sci-fi adventure, I suppose I won't complain too much.

But GARAGA's art and animation aren't very good, and neither is the writing. I didn't absolutely fall asleep, but I was borderline bored for the full 100 minute running time of this videotape. There's a large cast of one-dimensional (in more ways than one) characters, in fact it seems as though writer/director Hidemi Kubo simply wanted to add as many characters as would fit. It would have been a better idea to cut the cast by half, and really concentrate on just those who are important. I suppose if you're heavily caffeinated, you can follow all this, but I simply didn't have the energy to keep up.

The story would appear to be about the sins of colonizing (a lesson mankind still hasn't learned much from), and how humans want to take over Planet Garaga. Unfortunately, the leader of the colonizers turns out to be an evil android called Alf Dalf who wants to destroy all living things. The gullible human colonists are helping him to start a civil war (between psychics called Lar and gorillas called Unlianga) on Garaga, because they think the widespread death will make the planet open for coloniza-



LEFT: Garaga ABOVE: Godzilla fights the smog monster in Godzilla: Final Wars

tion. There are countless other scenes and subplots (i.e. some soldier wants to avenge her father's death—again) which really confuse the story. There's also an occasional dinosaur-like monster, but they're given very little to do. In the end, the apes, psychic villagers and rival sects of humans (everybody shoots at everybody else at some point in the flick) all seem to unite and wipe out Alf Dalf and his army of robots. * -DF

GODZILLA: FINAL WARS

("Gojira: Fainaru uōzu") Toho; 2004, Dir: Ryuhei Kitamura, Producer: Shogo Tomiyama, Music: Keith Emerson, Akira Ifukube, Nobuhiko Morino, Daisuke Yano, Masaru Sato, Screenplay: Isao Kiriyama & Ryuhei Kitamura, Story: Wataru Mimura & Shogo Tomiyama, Cinematography: Takumi Furuya & Fujio Okawa, Special Effects: Eiichi Asada, Nobuhiro Kondo & Yoshikazu Ishii, Stunt Action: Satoshi Kato, Tsutomu Kitagawa, Takashi Sakamoto, Michihiro Takeda, Tomoki Tamura, Cast: Masahiro Matsuoka, Rei Kikukawa, Akira Takarada, Kane Kosugi, Kazuki Kitamura, Maki Mizuno, Masami Nagasawa, Chihiro Otsuka, Don Frye, Kenji Sahara, Kumi Mizuno, Michael Croaker, Masakatsu Funaki, Reviewed by Damon Foster

My favorite Godzilla movie since TERROR OF MECHAGODZILLA (Toho; 1975)! In recent years, it seems the Godzilla series has offered a string of indistinguishable clones, all involving strong-willed female soldiers who struggle for independence & individuality despite they're all having the same hair style & color. In other words, the premises & characters in all the 2000 films (I can't tell one from another) never left much of an impression on me, nor did the "Heisei" stuff—but finally, we have a Godzilla movie that, for better or worse, stands out. It tends to emulate the more over-the-top Godzilla movies of the 1970s, which I certainly don't mind. Instead of following the exact same pattern as all of GODZILLA 2000's (Toho; 2000) predecessors, GODZILLA: FINAL WARS takes a more creative approach and swipes ideas from THE MATRIX (Silver Pictures; 1999), all that "X-Men" junk, and bits of typical Japanese TV hero stuff. While all these mixed genres may not play off each other perfectly and we have a mess, at least we've finally got a Godzilla movie

that actually stands out from the rest (I think the only other stand out film, for better or worse, is 1971's GODZILLA VS. THE SMOG MONSTER). I also love the fact that GODZILLA: FINAL WARS is such a poke-in-the-eye to the stuffy, uptight fans who obsess over these movies. At G-Fest, right after we watched the movie, it was great to hear so many obsessive dweebs ramble on about how 'terrible' the movie is—it's as though these guys' lives depended on it.

Perhaps seeing it in a sweltering theater (Illinois' Pickwick) full of loud-mouthed jerks isn't the best way to be introduced to GODZILLA: FINAL WARS. I was physically uncomfortable (if the movie was longer, my frustration would have elevated and I might have turned to the geek behind me and said: "Yell in my ear one more time buddy, and you'll need cosmetic dental work."), and to make it worse, the movie's over-the-top approach was headache-inducing: The fast pace is overkill (in sharp contrast to every movie in the series starting with GODZILLA 1985), and reminded me of crazy Hong Kong fantasies, specifically Tsui Hark farces like ZU: WARRIORS OF THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN (Golden Harvest; 1983). As I watched GODZILLA: FINAL WARS, my eyes hurt & I was dehydrated, and the movie's way-too-flashy approach added to the symptoms. Yet despite all this, I still like the movie a lot, and consider it an improvement over everything to come out of the series in the 1980s and 1990s. I'll like it even more if I ever get the DVD and can watch it unhampered by physical discomfort and morons who feel compelled to induce fake laughs out loud, to even the most stupid of gags.

The human characters at least offer old-timers like Kumi Mizuno and Akira Takarada some interesting roles. I didn't recognize Akira Takarada right away, but the equally elderly Mizuno has so much make-up that I spotted her right off the bat. From a distance, she might still qualify as "hot". The younger actors are interesting too—better than the generic, boring soldiers of the last few movies, at any rate. The main villain has this eerie make-up, but is so emotional and bumbling that he's more clown-like than scary. When the heroes and villains clash, it's fairly exciting action, but being a post-THE MATRIX movie, everything is over-enhanced with

CGI junk. Their plight is diminished because we know there's really no thrilling stuntwork. What's the point of a high-speed motorcycle chase that isn't real? It's like a radio ventriloquist; simply defeating the purpose. But consider the source of this comment; I was raised on kung fu & HK action films where people do amazing stunts. If you enjoy characters which rely on CGI gimmicks to highlight their action and martial arts, then good for you—you will like GODZILLA: FINAL WARS and its characters even more than I did.

There's an impressive list of nostalgic names on hand: Not just Godzilla and Ghidrah, but Rodan, Mothra, Atragon, King Seesar, Minya, Manda, Angilas, Hedorah, Gino, Spiga, Gimantis, and Ebirah all make appearances. This tops the masterpiece DESTROY ALL MONSTERS (Toho; 1968) in that respect (sheer quantity). It's always exciting to see old favorites return. Angilas looked pretty damn slick, but I didn't like the designs of the two new Gigans, felt Gimantis & Rodan relied too much on CGI artificiality, I never liked the "Godzilla with ears" look, and thought the meager cameos by Gino & Hedorah were way too brief and abrupt—amounting to little more than in-jokes than actual monster battles. Sad to say, for the first time ever, I thought Minya had one of the better designs and was the most interesting monster! So I guess I didn't like the way all the monsters looked, but just seeing them all in one film made it amusing.

This comical script makes GODZILLA VS. MEGALON's (Toho; 1973) script seem dead serious, but being about space invaders who control giant monsters, it tends to remind me more of MONSTER ZERO (Toho; 1966), DESTROY ALL MONSTERS (Toho; 1968), and GODZILLA VS. GIGAN (Toho; 1972). Except this time, the alien controllers [of monsters] wear black, and so does the squad of Earth-protecting "mutants" (can you say "The Matrix meets The X-Men"?), so it becomes hard to tell who's who—especially when the extraterrestrials begin to control the mutants' actions! The only mutant hero who stands out is their American leader (wrestler Don Frye), because his mustache is almost as big as his samurai sword. Regardless, the silly story welcomed an old-timer like me right away, thanks to stock footage and flashbacks from VARAN THE UNBELIEVABLE, GODZILLA VS. MECHAGODZILLA '74, YOG: MONSTER FROM SPACE and other classics) to reassure & confirm that these beloved movies are part of this saga's timeline. But pretty soon, GODZILLA VS. GIGAN is ignored when some ancient "Gigan" (?) is found frozen underground for millions of years. But by now, I didn't care, because I was so amused (on a Pepsi & Dorito's level) by this story of invaders who pretend to be our friends, just like in the early 1980s V sci-fi mini-series. Obviously, if the invaders really were our friends and not our predators, they wouldn't want to eat us, refer to us as "cattle" and be unleashing giant monsters like King Seesar and Angilas. In one scene, Angilas roles up into a ball and King Seesar kicks him like a soccer ball. I enjoyed this "soccer ball" scene because I know it made many of the dead-serious, die-hard fans & geeks cringe. In another scene, Minya (one of the few "good" monsters)

attempts to drive a truck. Yes, it's all pretty goofy, but once Godzilla is unleashed, it's one monster battle after another. Alternately, there are human battles involving some ray-guns, high flying acrobatics and other superhero action gimmicks. Ultimately, the villains and rival monsters are defeated, so Minya joins his father. The two monsters swim off into the sunset, but it was more effective when Angilas (then a good guy, which is how I prefer it) and Godzilla did the same thing in 1972's GODZILLA VS. GIGAN. All in all, GODZILLA: FINAL WARS delivered the goods—some of them. *** -DF



GODZILLA FINAL WARS: HIT OR MISS? THE DEBATE CONTINUES.....

Dan Baghdoian: As a swan song to the Godzilla series, it falls short. However, as pure escapist entertainment, it soars far higher than most of the Heisei & Millennium era films.

Madison Carter: A total mish-mash of what's come before mixed with U.S. Blockbuster influences. But it doesn't make the mistake of its predecessors. It knows it's goofy fun, and with over a dozen of the Toho monsters thrown into a rumble, it succeeds on that level.

Christopher Elam: Coming into this movie with absolutely zero expectations sure helped. While far from the greatest Godzilla movie ever made, it's fun and reasonably fast-paced and gives significant screen time to Akira Takarada (always a good thing in my book).

Donald Fong: Finally, a return to the good old days of "fun" Godzilla movies without the overdrawn military/political drama or soap operas that plagued it's recent predecessors. Wished the Godzilla/Gigan duel was longer.

Randy Giesey: I thought the movie gave fans what they really wanted for the "final" Godzilla movie. Plenty of Kaiju fights and lots of human/alien interaction.

Christian 'Jay' Grymyr: Far-fetched, illogical, & derivative; the monster fights are too short (the

human fights too long). That said, it's a fun, fast-paced throwback to the Showa-era Godzilla films and I like it, flaws notwithstanding.

Paul Haberman: Makes you wonder why Toho wasn't making G films this way for the last 10 years. Comes close to being the perfect giant monster free-for-all that everyone was expecting, but falls a bit short because the director spends too much time on wannabe X-MEN/MATRIX human action. More time spent on the monsters would have been much the best!

Shaun Hite: Loved every minute of it. I especially enjoyed the scene where Original Godzilla kicked American Godzilla's butt. Awesome! It was also nice to have some good martial arts thrown into the mix.

Brett Homenick: It's something Godzilla films hadn't been in a long time: Exciting. With clever dialogue, breathtaking action, fun nostalgia, and a boatload of monsters, it's a worthy 50th Anniversary Godzilla film.

M.G. Keller: Seems people either love or hate it. Personally, I consider it neither great nor terrible, though Kitamura's direction & style does elevate it above some of the more recent offerings. Negative aspects include a surprising lack of monster footage for a movie containing so many of the critters (a noted shortage of the big G himself) and the most pathetic version of King Ghidrah thus far. Fun, nonetheless.

J.D. Lees: An entertaining but overlong mishmash desperately in need of two things: self-restraint on the part of the director, and respect for Godzilla as a beloved film character and cultural icon.

Jason A Longden: It comes off as a pretty self-aware flick, one that knows its the culmination of 50 years of film and pop culture history, both Japanese and international. It revels in its pop-cultural self-awareness with reckless abandon, never once stopping to take a breath. It hits on dozens of pop culture moments that have occurred between 1954 and 2004, and it hits all the major beats. It was as if director Kitamura was making a pop culture time capsule of everything that the big G has influenced, and all the things that have influenced him in return.

Charmane Lee: One of the worst movies I have ever seen and the worst Godzilla movie ever made. Even GINO was a better-made movie. A sad way to celebrate Godzilla's 50th.

John Marshall: Really cool AND really awful.

Lee Merrit: I wanted it to be the ultimate 50th anniversary film for Godzilla. It's a moderately entertaining film for me and nothing more. The film has a "frenzied" feel. Seems the director tried to pack too many things into this one. Too bad it wasn't more kaiju battles.

Mike Quebec: Decent FX, but extremely derivative, not just of U.S. sci-fi, but was basically just a modern re-hash of DESTROY with up-to-date FX. It's good to see Mizuno & Takarada still alive & kicking, as well as Kosugi's martial arts. One interesting cultural note was a scene depict-

ing a "typical evening" in America (happening before Rodan attacks the U.S.). A black pimp (decked out in '70s funk/disco clothes!) & a white cop have verbal exchange (with pimp insulting cop with a combination of pseudo hip-hop/'70s disco slang!). Both pull guns, just before getting wiped out by Rodan. The best part was Godzilla effortlessly squashing GINO.

August Ragone: Self-indulgent, disjointed hodge-podge of clichés, patched together by a director who has utter contempt for Japanese Cinema, and doesn't even try to make a real film. I'd rather watch MEGALON.

Mark Rainey: A deeply flawed but bizarrely entertaining piece of fluff. Less emphasis on MATRIX-style martial arts mayhem and more monster spectacle would have done wonders for its appeal.

Steve "Mr Maskrado" Ross: Entertaining, but it played liked filmed fan fiction: As if every geeky, fanboyish idea was passed through with a shrug and a "Whatever, it's the last one." For now, I'll just pretend that the best parts of GMK: ALL MONSTERS ATTACK and TOKYO SOS are the "final" REAL Godzilla movies, and FINAL WARS is the out-of-control wrap party (or the final dance number over the end credits).

Omar Sayyah: I both loved it and hated it. I'm just a slacker who plays videogames for ten hours at a time, but I loved GFW because Godzilla kicks a lot of ass, and there are good special effects. I hate that they killed & dismembered too many monsters.

Jason Spear: A glorious train wreck. There's a fun Godzilla movie in there somewhere. But too much silly human drama, faux martial arts and blatant swipes from Hollywood dreck seriously bog this movie down!

Danny Tokarz: Fuckin' A !! The greatest Godzilla movie since 1975!! Draws the inevitable comparisons to '69's DESTROY, but this one's even more hyper. Super-charged monster action blended with spastic kung-fu stupidity all wrapped up in an Alien invasion! This flick is a total disaster. I loved it!! Five stars for sure, and Man! Godzilla is sure pissed off in this one.

Armand Vaquer: It's so unconventional & different that it actually worked for me! Although it was a bit over two hours in length, the pacing made it zip by fast. I was thoroughly entertained by it. While not one of the best, it's not one of the worst. I think in a few years it will end up in the top third of all Godzilla films. Remember also, HEDORAH (considered unconventional back in 1971) met mixed (and sometimes hostile) reviews, but it has risen in fan esteem over recent years.

Jerry Weiler: I thought it was a refreshing throw-back; total fun!

Alan Westby: It's DESTROY with CGI, bullet-time, needlessly hyper-active camerawork, dark sunglasses, long coats, HK wire-flying, and every other annoying post-MATRIX stylistic twitch known to smart-ass, soulless cinema. Even the monsters engage in the self-conscious howl, scowl

and strike-a-pose school of acting. In 30 years, it will be as laughable as bell-bottoms. But, on the other hand, it's nice to see the old crew (actors and monsters) again. Some amusing bits w/ Miya and G.I.N.O., a nostalgic look back at the Showa series, and a more memorable plot than the other recent films makes this better than most of the newer entries.

GFW Tokyo Premiere

Dec 4th 2004, Nichigekiplex in Ginza

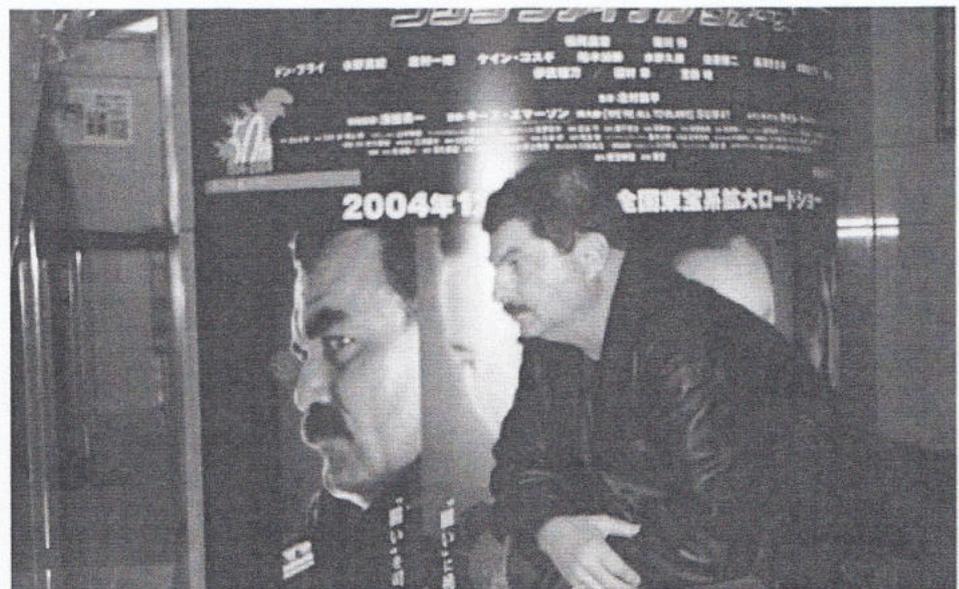
By Jason Spear

Held at the huge, sold out 11th floor theater of the Nichigekiplex theater at the waaaay too early hour 7:15AM, this event was attended by the director, producer Shogo Tomiyama and actors Kazuki Kitamura, Masahiro Matsuoka, and Rei Kikukawa. It seems Masahiro Matsuoka is a very popular pop singer and actor because the theater was filled with teenage girls there to see him in person and he just happened to be in the new Godzilla film. However there were plenty of die-hard Godzilla fans there too. No cameras were permitted to be used in the theater. In order to enforce this the security guards simply put your camera in a bag and stapled it shut, then handed the bag to you to take inside! The lobby of the theater was filled with tables selling theater exclusive goodies if you chose to wait in the well organized lines of crazed, yet well behaved fans. After the film the above mentioned guests look the stage and spoke. It was in Japanese, so I have no idea what was said. Sadly, Godzilla did not make an appearance. Afterwards in the lobby my friend Mark Obert introduced me to Producer Shogo Tomiyama, who asked what I thought of the film. Godzilla fan Richard Pusateri was mistaken for Don Frye by a quite a few people, that was really damn funny. Overall an excellent event even if the film was a bit much to absorb at such an early hour, jet-lagged and without subtitles. —Jason Spear

ABOVE RIGHT: Someone at the premiere.

RIGHT: Tons of anxious people on opening night

BELOW: Richard Pusateri mocks Don Frye



fried eggs, peas, dicea curries
 crispy mo...
 of \$1.50. These dishes include usual
 julienne vegetables.

- Both of the above dishes are served with your choice of the following:
- 97. Bal (Sm) 3.95
 - 98. Mouse Knuckles (Braised) 5.25
 - 99. Roasted Lizard Noodles (Fried or Steamed) 6.50
 - 100. Steamed Rice is served per person at a cost of 0.60¢

ASIAN ODDITIES

Welcome to OC's most unusual column; the section where anything goes. This regular column came about because of misc. films that didn't belong in any of OC's regular columns. So here's where I toss the in Indian stuff, Turkish mind-bogglers, drama, comedy, or American films which have something to do with Asia. Speaking of which, in this issue, I finally review the acclaimed American hit CHINATOWN (Paramount; 1974). I first became aware of this one-time-popular film in the late 1980s or early 1990s. I was having some sort of 'friendly' (at least I thought so) debate with writer Rick Myers. At the time, he was (still is?) writing some column called "Forget It Jake" in the fanzine Martial Arts Movies Associates (whatever happened to them?). Having never seen CHINATOWN, I thought "Forget It Jake" was a completely irrelevant, bizarre name of a column for a Far Eastern-themed publication. So I wondered if the folks Martial Arts Movies Associates had been sucking the toad juice [straight from the toad] or maybe sniffing too much Crazy Glue. Eventually, Rick Myers (already irritated by one of my satires where I dressed like him and photographed myself as "Prick Myers") sent me a post card where he more-or-less tried to make me feel silly for not recognizing the 'famous' line "Forget It Jake" as being from CHINATOWN. As a film critic of sorts, I felt a little embarrassed for not knowing such obvious trivia, and I never put up an argument, and let Myers have the last word.

Anyway, it's fifteen or twenty years later and I've finally decided to watch CHINATOWN. By now, I'm no longer embarrassed to not know much about this perceived classic and not catching the "Forget It Jake" reference, because it just goes to prove how non-mainstream I am, and I'm proud of this. Not only that, but I'm proud to have been critiquing movies most of my life and I honestly don't know what "film noir" means! -DF

From Japan:

R.G. VEDA

C.L.A.M.P./Shinsokan; 1992, in Association with Sony Music Entertainment, Original Story: CLAMP, Producer: Nagateru Kato, Yasushi Kazama, Dir.: Hiroyuki Ohkawa. Screenplay: Nanase Ohkawa, Music: Nick Wood, Created by Mitsuhsa Hida, Yutaka Takahashi, Planned by Masaki Sawanoburi, Character Design: Makona Apapa, Chief Animators: Tetsuro Aoki, Kiichi Takaoka, Art Dir.: Yoji Nakaza, English Version by Central Park Media, Anime One, U.S. Manga Corps, John O'Donnell & Stephanie Shalofsky, Dubbing Supervisor: Tom Wayland, Translators: Pamela Ferdie, William Flanagan, English Rewrite: Jay Parks, Reviewed by Damon Foster

R.G. VEDA is a confusing, needlessly complex mess. And those are this Japanese cartoon's good points! Despite the English dubbing, R.G. VEDA is really hard to follow, in

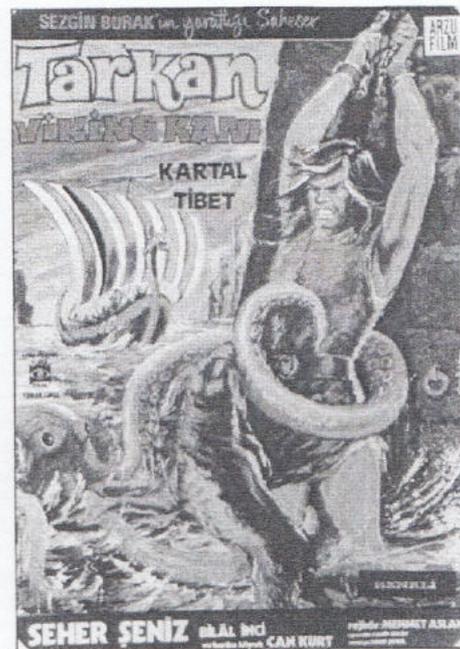
fact it's so technical & talky that it suffers the ultimate sin: Boredom! I just can't understand why releasers are making this stuff available to the American public when so many true classics of Japanese anime (i.e. the TV shows Go Nagai made in the 1970s) remain unavailable in English language form. This 90-minute videotape consists of two episodes, I think. The first on the tape is called "Castle of Ice, Prison of Flame". For an introductory (?) chapter, it does a really poor job of explaining what the hell is going on, and it only vaguely introduces & differentiates between the characters. Though the good guys are traveling through hostile territory and slicing up an occasional snake-monster, none of these battles are staged in an exciting manner; there's no suspense or thrill. It's just a lot of flashy colors and awkward tints.



I really want to get this review out of the way. But I think it looks best if each review (not including capsule reviews, which are only used for extensive filmographies of certain given topics) in OC consists of at least three paragraphs. So far, this review of the immensely uninteresting R.G. VEDA consists of only one paragraph (not including this one). Okay, so anyway, I'm into my second paragraph and this looks decent in print. Hurray! So anyway, I'll now (after the fact) make this paragraph the one positive paragraph on the review. I shall now compliment R.G. VEDA: There are pretty colors and nice designs in some of the drawings.

Okay, last and certainly least: The story. RG VEDA appears to take place in a mythical kingdom (a fantasy world). At first I thought maybe it was Rome because of the gladiators. Later, some chick in the marketplace does belly-dancing. So then I began to think the setting was somewhere in old Persia. But the character of Ashura has pointed ears! Okay, I got it: It

takes place on the planet Vulcan (perhaps back when Vulcans were more like their Romulan ancestors). I don't know. Regardless, the villain is King Taishokuten, who lead a rebellion to take over the whatever (world? country? village?), and even decapitated the former king that he overthrew. But a group of sword-wielding warriors (called the "six stars") are on a pilgrimage to defeat the hordes of King Taishokuten. The leader is handsome swordsman Yasha, who escorts the young princess Ashura-- in fact they're so "close" that it gets a little creepy. There's nothing "adult" or remotely explicit about their relationship, but the closeness of our hero and the little girl gets suggestive, when it's not getting nauseating. I wonder of this couple first met via Myspace.com. Anyway: When our heroes aren't traveling the countryside dodging demons, ghosts, flashbacks, dream sequences and monstrous butterflies, we're seeing brief shots of the gods up in Heaven. I don't quite see the significance of these god characters, but their involvement reminded me of the gods watching over the heroes in JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS. I never want to sit through RG VEGA again; I'd rather have Dr. Hook jerk me off. -DF



From Turkey:

TARKAN: THE GOLD MEDALLION

AKA: "Tarkan: Altin Madalya", 1972. Pro.: Nahit Ataman, Dir.: Mehmet Aslan, Writers: Sezgin Burak & Sadik Sendil, Cast: Kartal Tibet, Eva Bender, Altan Günbay, Zeki Alasya, Birsen Ayda, Pakize Suda, Yesim Tan, Halit Akçatepe, Kamran Usluer, Mürüvet Sim, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Whether you choose to call it a 'guilty pleasure', Golden Turkey, guilty turkey, golden pleasure or whatever, I think it's important to remember this: "Low-budget movie" and "Turkish movie" are synonymous. So, to call this a 'cheap Turkish movie' is redundant. It's one of those movies so enjoyably bad that it's immensely entertaining. Not entertaining in the "wow, how did they do that?" sense, but rather, the "I can't believe

they just did that" sense. My jaw dropped, I laughed out-loud several times as I sat through this admittedly 'resourceful' take on the genre of 'sword & fantasy', 'sword & sandal', or whatever you choose to call it. More than once I had to press Rewind to make sure I just saw certain shots and didn't dream this bizarre stuff up. To the best of my knowledge, this unintended comedy never got released to America (my print has no translation at all), which is unfortunate—given a comedic soundtrack (ala WHAT'S UP TIGER LILY, FEARLESS FEMALE FREEDOM FIGHTERS or SHAOLIN VS. TERMINATOR), this could have been a great movie.

As far as production values go, this medieval (or ancient?) swordplay adventure seems pretty damn inferior. The soldiers wear what appear to be plastic (Halloween accessories?) helmets, and the editing & writing are so horrible that it looks like an amateur film. Being a Turkish farce, it tries to include as many acrobatic antics as the Italian capers of the time—and so trapeze artists were hired to play a team of heroic gypsies (?). The sword-fights have stuntmen doing falls and gymnastic flips, but it seems that although the guys have mastered handsprings, falls & summersaults, nobody taught them how to act! These gymnasts just don't understand the dramatics of fight-choreography and so they put in very little emotion, fierceness or pain when they're supposedly slashed by a sword, or punched. Heroic Kartal Tibet delivers a blow and the compliant opponent merely seems to say: "Okay, let's see. I'll do a jump or flip. I'll do it now." For better or worse, the 'epic' battles are entertaining. The quality of film-stock may also be really poor, but since my bootleg is multi-gen, it's hard to tell.

One weird thing about this oddity is the usage of animals. The bad guys use a boa-constrictor that's so small, that it's hard to believe it's really an 'effective' deterrent or punishment for those sent down into the ever typical pit-of-punishment. This sort of ignorance is typical for action films (i.e. stupid James Bond movies where tarantulas stalk Sean Connery, and of course the 'killer guinea pig' in 3 DEV ADAM) created for simple-minded audiences. There's also a heroic dog throughout. Most of the time, this lovable pooch is chasing villains and biting their trouser legs. Thanks to audio-dubbing, he's one of those rarest of breeds: One who can bark without opening his jaws. In one sequence, this mutt is trapped in a cell with a trapeze artist. The two of them both attempt some fancy 'circus moves' as they seek a window that is just barely out of reach. This escape is funny for the sheer novelty of seeing an airborne dog's front paws being grabbed as they swing to reach the window—but I can't help but feel sorry for the reluctant pooch when he falls on his head! Speaking of heads, beware of a completely unnecessary scene of a live dove's head being torn off by the main villain. If nothing else, it's one of the few blood-letting scenes which wasn't faked. It boggles the mind how any actor can be so cruel & tasteless.

Though I've reviewed many 'so bad they're good' movies, it's still difficult to know how many stars to give it. As far as 'good' in a critical sense, TARKAN is terrible and deserves no star at all. For pure accidental amusement, I

dare say it deserves three stars (**), so on a certain level, I recommend it. I do wish it had a humorous soundtrack: The hungry snake alone deserves to sing a "Trust in Me" song (remember the singing snake in THE JUNGLE BOOK cartoon?) to make a mockery of supposed 'suspenseful' moments. I suppose I do suggest people seek out this stinker for a good laugh, and will average out the rating to the standard two stars (**). And now: The story.....

TARKAN: THE GOLD MEDALLION is one of several movies about Turkey's sword-swinging folk-hero, Tarkan; sounds like Tarzan, but is more like Conan, Maciste or Hercules. In this case, the script (guesswork on my part) of this colorful, gory laugh-riot seems to involve legendary Hun warrior Attila (Kamran Usluer), who's son is kidnapped by some evil army of barbarians lead by a comical villain who might dress like Julius Caesar, but reminds me of Buddy Hackett, or Harvey Lembeck's "Von Zipper" character (from the 1960s "Beach Party" embarrassments). I kept expecting him to say to his warriors: "You stupid!" This main bad guy has the typical 'pre-Doctor Evil' trapdoor for useless subordinates, and also uses blood rituals (naked women sacrificed, ala LEGEND OF THE SEVEN GOLDEN VAMPIRES!) to revive some sexy, blonde vampire woman. She dances around naked throughout the film—but then, so do many girls. This movie taught me that old-time Turkey was populated by sleazy, blue-eyed super-models who prefer to go topless whenever possible. History lessons aside, heroic barbarian Tarkan (Kartal Tibet) seeks to rescue the young prince, with help from a trusty dog and a troupe of acrobats (that looked like gypsies to me). One minute, this sleazy movie has our heroes battling several Mongol (?) soldiers, and yet in the very next shot, they're having dinner with a hero's mother! Then some belly-dancer performs a seductive dance—again. Despite all these seemingly unrelated scenes, we do eventually get back to the script; I think! So anyway, the good guys do eventually wipe out all the bad guys (and slutty gals) as they rescue the little kid. In one scene, a circus performer tosses the young boy to another hero. Watch it closely: It seems that the runt is nearly dropped on his head, so they cut the film! **
-Damon Foster

From America:

CHINATOWN

Paramount; 1974, a Robert Evans Production, A Roman Polanski Film, Production Designer: Richard Sylbert, Associate Pro.: C.O. Erickson, Score: Jerry Goldsmith, Written by Robert Towne, Pro.: Robert Evans, Dir.: Roman Polanski, Cast: Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, John Hillerman, Perry Lopez, Burt Young, John Huston, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Boy, I just love trashing the classics! This long, confusing, boring movie was impossible for me to tolerate all in one sitting! I've seen a number of talky movies which kept me enthralled, but this slow-paced exercise in tedium isn't one of them! Sure, it's got some slick lines and cute dialogue, but such conversations really just stretch out a simple conversation to make the scene way longer than it needed to be and it

got frustrating. So I kept saying: "Get on with it!" I think you really have to be a fan of Jack Nicholson to enjoy this movie. I find his whiny voice to be irritating and pretentious, and his character ("Jake") isn't particularly tough—the movie chooses realism over excitement. He does kick a couple bad guys, but when a little wimp (director and child molester Roman Polanski) gives him a bloody nose, Jake comes off as rather wimpy himself, hardly a leading man for a crime drama.

My real gripe against this over-rated piece of complexity isn't its pretentious approach, but its almost completely irrelevant title. Hardly any of the movie takes place in Chinatown, and Chinatown is only mentioned two or three times. The only Chinese (i.e. James Hong) are unimportant background extras. I thought for sure that with a title like "Chinatown", there would be something to do with Chinese culture besides making fun of their accents (a Chinese gardener tries to say "grass", but it comes out "glass"). This movie was praised for its similarity to older "film noir" (?) movies, and its demeaning relegation of Chinese to unimportant roles certainly proves this—setting 1974 filmdom back a good twenty or thirty years. Hell, CHINATOWN came out a year after Bruce Lee broke new grounds in ENTER THE DRAGON, so CHINATOWN's racist approach is inexcusable.

So in the final analysis, I think it's absolute crap and don't recommend CHINATOWN. Let me rephrase that: I don't recommend CHINATOWN to myself. But I recommend it for people who don't drink beer (a key point I forgot to mention) while watching DVDs. Also, those who are very alert and able to maintain extreme focus might see the entertainment in a movie like CHINATOWN.

For what it's worth, this mystery deals with Private Investigator Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson), who's specialty is matrimonial disputes. While investigating some husband's infidelity, he discovers that the guy is involved in L.A.'s water industry. So for a good stretch of time, we find

Rio Natsume



Gittes going to reservoirs and the occasional orange grove, as he attempts to find out who's monopolizing Southern CA.'s water supply during a time of drought. If that's not dull enough, Faye Dunaway plays Nicholson's love interest. By this time, I was completely confused and kept falling asleep. Additional subplots (i.e. incestuous inbreeding) add more reasons to ramble on, until eventually Dunaway gets in trouble with the cops who do-away with Dunaway. I disliked CHINATOWN as much as I disliked RG VEGA. I never want to sit through CHINATOWN again; I'd rather have Dr. Hook jerk me off. -DF

From The Philippines:

THE BLOOD DRINKERS

(AKA: KULAY DUGO ANG GABI) Hemisphere Entertainment; 1966, Produced by Cirio H. Santiago, Dir.: Gerardo DeLeon, Cast: Ronald Remy, Amalia Fuentes, Eddie Fernandez, Mary Walter, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Thanks to the DVD revolution, my over 30-year wait is over; I've wanted to see this movie since I was a little kid in the 1970s. Mind you, I wasn't dying to see it, but I was curious. By now of course, I've seen other Filipino-American co-productions from the same company (Hemisphere), so I had an idea as to what to expect. But THE BLOOD DRINKERS is different than the later Hemisphere movies (which had John Ashley and hot blondes) which seemed more American. Although the lead villain (Ronald Remy) has round eyes, pretty much everybody else in THE BLOOD DRINKERS is Filipino, so the flick seems more like a genuine Filipino movie. The whole thing is dubbed in English, and since the lip-sync doesn't always match up, THE BLOOD DRINKERS definitely looks like a foreign movie.

Needless to say, any Filipino movie from the 1960s is going to be crude. The editing is

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less-than-perfect, which causes minor continuity flaws. Special effects are kept to a minimum for obvious budgetary reasons, and when they finally do show any FX, they're pretty bad. The flying bat is so fake-looking that even if the suspension wires weren't visible, it's hard not to laugh. It's also naively written: The often told story of a male vampire trying to get blood sacrifices to revive his wife is one thing, but an early scene of a bunch of guys in Hawaiian shirts trying to serenade the movie's leading lady is just plain embarrassing. I also wonder what idiot decided to have the lead hero (complete with greasy 'rockabilly' haircut) spend all his time wearing an expensive suit, since the whole thing takes place in a hot rain forest's village! Limited sound recording caused repeated usage of the same grunts & sighs for the mute hunchback & dwarf henchmen, so they seem to be repeating themselves.

But THE BLOOD DRINKERS is pretty good, me thinks. There are a couple tolerable fist-fights, and a few unexpected twists. For one thing, the main priest even gets scientific when discussing the vampires and says it's a type of disease, and goes on to explain why wooden stakes do kill vampires and why bullets don't. The unique way THE BLOOD DRINKERS is colored and tinted certainly makes it stand out. Daytime scenes are sometimes in beautiful (if not over-enhanced) full color, while ominous scenes usually get most colors wiped out in favor of red or blue tints. Most of the time, it's obviously an "artistic" statement, but I suspect they couldn't afford to buy all color film, and back then B/W film was cheaper. So I think they padded THE BLOOD DRINKERS out with B/W film whenever possible and added die to compensate, so we would think they meant it to be like that. I could be wrong, and besides, I never said I didn't like its psychedelic approach. All in all, THE BLOOD DRINKERS is pretty average for a horror movie, at least I don't think it's worse than average.

There's not a lot of gore to this atmospheric tale of heart-broken (remember, his sick vampire wife is dying—for the second time) vampire Marco. It's a watchable, rarely boring story of some orphaned girl (Amalia Fuentes) who for some reason not important enough to waste space writing about, has a heart which villainous Marco wants to put into the body of his ailing wife. This love story subplot is pretty typical of vampire movies and THE BLOOD DRINKERS gets both erotic and kinky at times, like when a vamp hench-woman wants him to whip her and then drink the blood from the laceration. But otherwise, it's all pretty clean—in fact, when the villagers, heroes & priests finally slaughter the vampires with wooden stakes, much of the violence is implied off-camera. Anyway, heroic Eddie Fernandez (sporting a suit and Presley wannabe pompadour) uses a flair gun to light up the dark forest sky (putting the light-hating vampires at a disadvantage) as he rescues his leading lady from the undead villains. Marco himself escapes, and although he never appeared in any sequels, the actor himself (Ronald Remy) when on to play MAD DOCTOR OF BLOOD ISLAND. *** -DF

From Korea:
VOLCANO HIGH

Aka: "Whasango", "Hwasan Highschool", Cinema Service & Sidus; 2001, Dist.: Media Asia, Dir.: Kim Tae-gyun, Pro.: Cha Seung-jai, Cast: Jang Hyuk, Shin Min-ah, Kim Soo-roh, Kwon Sang-woo, Gong Hyo-jin, Jung Sang-hoon, Kim Hyung-jong, Chae Shi-ah, Huh Jun-ho, Kim Il-wu, Reviewed by Damon Foster

I never saw this dark fantasy's English version (MTV hired a bunch of rappers to dub it in English), because the Korean language print was bad enough. Granted, if I'd have seen the dubbed version on MTV with Snoop Doggy-Bag's voice, I might have understood it-- there's a seemingly important line in the subtitles; bleach-blond hero Jang Hyuk says: "If that's my destiny, I'll deal with it". Unfortunately, the preceding lines [which lead up to this statement] had a white background, so I missed some important plot elements. Not that it matters; VOLCANO HIGH is only worthwhile if you think the world needs more rip-offs of THE MATRIX. My, god, I really wish THE MATRIX was never made! VOLCANO HIGH is dull and slow-paced, with ridiculous over-acting for no reason; sometimes it seems they just wanted to throw in random scenes of people yelling. I can see why MTV showed interest in VOLCANO HIGH; it's edited like a music video, with some stylish cinematography. But I was frustrated & bored by VOLCANO HIGH. I had to keep replaying the disk just to see if I missed something (I just couldn't keep up with the bizarre characters and pointless scenes). I never want to sit through this over-rated piece of junk again—I'd rather go to Middle Eastern mosques to announce I'm producing a kiddy-porn movie called "The Last Temptation of Mohamed". But seriously, I loathed VOLCANO HIGH. But my opinion is in the minority:

For conflicting views, you only need to go to that cheap, ever-present, vast wasteland of self-proclaimed film critics that we call The Internet. "Visual eye candy of the sweetest kind" is what was said at kungfucinema.com, while the IMDB had praises like this: "Sheer brilliance from start to finish", while www.lovehkfilm.com had some guy write: "Ultra-cool special effects and a fun comic-book tone highlight this comic book adaptation from Korea." In the final analysis, I suspect that younger generations, reared on manga, anime and CGI-packed movies, will be right at home watching this typically post-THE MATRIX movie. Oldtimers like myself on the other hand, who's hearts still belong to the sci-fi martial arts of KAMEN RIDER V3, INFRAMAN, KINKYU SHIREI 10.4.10.10 and other colorful camp classics, might not see the fun in VOLCANO HIGH.

When Kim Kyung-soo (Jang Hyuck) was a kid, there was an accident while he was cleaning out a fishtank of electric eels! He fell in, while simultaneously experiencing a lightning storm! This amusing scene (granted, there are funny moments in VOLCANO HIGH) explains how our hero got his super powers. Naturally, he grew up being too much of a risk among normal people who can't fly or control the elements, so he's sent to Volcano High, where all the students have these same super powers. Let's see, a dark school full of young wizards; you think these Koreans have been reading too much Harry Potter crap?

But we wouldn't have much of a movie unless there was a typically Hong Kongese-inspired script for a secret manuscript, right? Not only that, but we need villains; in this case a long-haired school-bully (Su-ro Kim) whose yelling, over-acting and bad martial arts really got on my nerves. When all these magical, high-flying, Kendo sword-wielding students start controlling elements (wind, fire, electricity, water, etc.), and start taking over the school, the sniveling, ass-kissing principal finally decides to hire some teachers who also have super powers. There's a temporary truce between rival students (Hyuk Jang and Su-ro Kim) so that our hero can take on these new, demanding teachers. The fights consist more of running toward each other than actual fighting. Anyway, the team of domineering teachers, with their black leather trench-coats look just like characters in you-know-what, but the characters are so flat & uninteresting that they don't seem that villainous. Anyway: One rainy night, our hero defeats them all, using the usual Yin, Yang, control of the elements, CGI, and suspension cables. -Damon Foster



From Japan:

LABYRINTH OF FLAMES

Studio Fantasia/Bandai Visual; 2000, Dir.: Katsuhiko Nishijima, Scenario: Kenichi Kanemaki, Dir. of Animation: Noriyasu Yamauchi, English Version Released by U.S. Manga (in association with Central Park Media), Executive Producer of English Version: John O'Donnell, Prod. of English Version: Stephanie Shalofsky, Dubbing Supervisor: Tom Wayland, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Though I've seen plenty of Japanese animation over the years, including madcap comedies like *THE PING PONG CLUB*, I still think releasers should use extreme caution when trying to dub a foreign comedy (i.e. *LABYRINTH OF FLAMES*) into English-- because sometimes, the puns, gestures, spoofs and gags fall on deaf ears when taken so far out of their culture. I'm not saying that wacky comedies like the animated *LABYRINTH OF FLAMES* series have no place in the English language world, but perhaps a lot of discretion is needed. As is often the case,

Japanese cartoon characters go into these weird facial expressions which convey a certain choice of Japanese words and add emphasis to what they're saying. These emotional outbursts (in the case of *LABYRINTH OF FLAMES*, the faces actually change shape dramatically) make perfect sense in Japanese language versions, and often they also can survive well in the subtitled prints. But who the hell wants to strain their eyes when they can watch something which is conveniently dubbed?! So either way, the jokes in *LABYRINTH OF FLAMES* are at a major disadvantage when they're up against an American or European audience. Though this typical example of zany Japanimation kept me consistently interested (at times even entertained), the humor came off as bizarre, not funny.

Awkward translation errors aside, *LABYRINTH OF FLAMES* is about average for Japan's animated TV genre. I think it's okay, not great. Since it came from director Katsuhiko Nishijima (*PROJECT A-KO* and *AGENT AIKA*), the artwork is absolutely typical of other Japanese cartoons. Being the work of Nishijima, all the female characters wear tight, short skirts so that we can get scene after scene of gratuitous panty shots. I suppose there's nothing wrong with this, but after a while I was starting to wonder if the excessive scenes of girls' underwear was a major plot point. They're not, but there was just so much of it that I was getting distracted (it's bad enough that I get distracted when actual women in the real world wear tight clothing, but now I'm checking out cartoon characters!). I wonder if the artists who draw this sexually suggestive stuff are getting off on knowing that hundreds, maybe thousands of pathetic anime geeks & otakus (same thing, spelled differently) are jerking off to the stuff. Personally, if my hands were creating something from scratch, which would get members of my own sex horny, then I would start to wonder about what sexuality I was.

Though the script of these two 30-minute episodes (there are two on this volume) is a little hard to follow because there are many characters and abrupt temper tantrums (some of which occur for no known reason), the basic premise would be about Galan, a blue-eyed, blond haired guy who somehow ended up in Japan. It would appear he's obsessed with them chanbara movies and wishes that despite the modern setting & his obvious European features, that he were a sword wielding samurai. So far, so good. But immediately the story gets confusing because they introduce his girlfriend Natsu Shigamitsu, who's obviously descended from a major Japanese clan despite the video rental box's note about her being "his Russian princess girlfriend". Natsu is called "Lady Natsu" by her asskissing servant Kazumi (who carries a magical I.V. unit around which on occasion changes her into a superhero ninja). Anyway, this bumbling trio (Galan, Natsu & Kazumi) goes to Natsu's home-town, which turns out to be quite old-fashioned; there are temples and all the villagers dress like characters from a few hundred years ago (Japan's samurai-filled Feudal Period). This just serves to introduce more characters, such as Natsu's perverted father, a buxom cowgirl Interpol agent and the token villains: In this case, the two main villains

are women (Nastashia & Irola) who pose as the mistresses of Natsu's father, but their real plan is thievery. They're after some precious sword or whatever, which segways into a few fight scenes. The climactic "fights", if you can call them that, alternate between bloodshed (there's a decent amount of blood loss in *LABYRINTH OF FLAMES*, though none of it takes itself seriously) and over-the-top spoofs of more traditional Japanese anime. The swordfights aren't very exciting, it's just a lot of colors, tints, strange animation gimmicks and absolute disregard for physics & gravity. Luckily, bumbling hero Galan overcomes his ineptitude and cowardice and manages to defeat the two evil women and their army of flying robots (odd looking robots at that). Unfortunately, our hero accidentally swallows the sacred sword at the climax and so Natsu wants to cut him open to retrieve it. It ends with her chasing him off toward the horizon. *1/2 -Damon Foster

From America:

THE LOST EMPIRE

NBC, 2001, Produced by Babelsberg International Film Production, Co-Producer: David Henry Hwang, Produced in Association with RTL Television, Production Services by: Milk & Honey Pictures (Prague, Czech Republic), Cast: Thomas Gibson, Bai Ling, Russell Wong, Ric Young, Kabir Bedi, Eddie Marsan, Randall Duk Kim, Henry O, Richard Ng. Reviewed by Damon Foster

An English-speaking (and not dubbed!) Monkey King flick, and it showed on prime-time TV, no less! We do have that computer-generated *MONKEY MAGIC* series to be thankful for, and them British did see the Japanese *SAIYUKI* series, but finally America has a live action version of the Monkey King legend! There are thousands of versions (movies, TV shows, cartoons, books, etc.) of the story, and hundreds of versions that, over the decades, I have reviewed in *QC*. I won't re-cap this story all over again, so let's just say that Wu Cheng En's ancient novel, *Journey to the West*, continues to influence the entire world.

THE LOST EMPIRE is not a complete re-telling of the actual novel; so don't expect another *NEW TILGRIMS TO THE WEST* or *ALAKAZAM THE GREAT*. *THE LOST EMPIRE* is more of a follow-up which takes place at a later date, except that the old book is part of the script, and characters can gain access to a mythical world of magic. So it's more like a combination of Steven Chow's *CHINESE ODESSY* and that 1980s fantasy, *LABYRINTH* (with David Bowie). Though *THE LOST EMPIRE* is an interesting variation of the story, I would have rather it had been a faithful re-enactment of the story, but that might have been too exotic for the American viewers. I imagine oldtimers, purists and Chinese audiences might be disappointed to see white-bred, all-American Thomas Gibson get the lead role. I suppose I agree, I personally think the story didn't need him. But what I find amusing is that the character gets romantically involved with Chinese goddess Kwan Yin! If there's a movie that has the audacity to do this (and get away with it), I wish somebody would make a flick where a modern Chinese guy goes

back in time and gets to bang the Virgin Mary!

This two-part movie was okay; not bad for a TV movie and/or mini-series. Being an "epic American spectacle", it of course has lavish production values, great sets, etc. It's only average, but I can't help liking it. It's pure bias on my part, because I am a big fan of the Monkey King! From film to film, series to series, Monkey & Pigsy are always played by different actors, and yet I always feel like I'm seeing the same heroes I've always loved. There is something surreal about seeing Monkey and the other pilgrims speaking English and actually mouthing genuine English words, but this doesn't make it any less enjoyable. Hell, over the years, I've seen these guys speaking Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese and Japanese, so seeing them speak another language won't hurt.

The special effects are pretty good, in a glossy, big-shot American sort of way. The rampaging tiger and occasional monster are okay too, but those C.G.I. special effects are ultra typical and I'm really sick of this junk. Some people think CGI critters are convincing, but their mechanical gestures and pre-calculated moves generate a look that strikes me as being "cheesy". I know many people think the rubber suits of old Japanese movies look "cheesy" too, but at least they have heart! The costume & makeup of the Monkey King is pretty lame: It's basically just Russell Wong with sideburns (which, more often than not, is the way most Chinese movies have done it too). The cast members play their parts well, but they're mostly unknowns. But Russell Wong (VANISHING SON, ROMEO MUST DIE) plays good old Sun Wu Kung himself. I guess he does a good job, but his Caucasian features (just like his brother, Michael Wong) make him seem out of place to me. Oh well, the character is supposed to be neither white nor Chinese (he's an ape, damn it!), so even a white guy can play him. Also on hand is that hottie Bai Ling (THE KING AND I), who I know best for her role in THE CROW. Once again, she's sporting one hell of a push-up bra, giving the goddess Kwan Yin (here called "Kwa Ying") more cleav-

age than in any other version I've seen. I was surprised to see a cameo by former HK comedian Richard Ng (FIVE LUCKY STARS, MR. VAMPIRE 3, ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA AND AMERICA, etc.), and a small supporting roll by Burt Kwouk ("Kato" in 1976'S THE PINK PANTHER STRIKES AGAIN, and was also in Patrick McGouhan's god-awful KOROSHI.)

The fight-scenes are pretty disappointing. I wasn't expecting the high-speed martial arts of BATTLE ON WHIRLING RINGS OF FIRE (Monkey King chop sockey!), nor did I expect an over-the-top pacing like that in the wonderful MONKEY WAR. The weapons duels in this TV movie just barely suffice, they didn't put a lot of work into it.

The story of this 4-hour (almost), two-part series has an American scholar get transported to a magical kingdom in a premise similar to THE WIZARD OF OZ-- substitute the good witch with Kwan Yin! The white boy finds himself in an ancient Chinese kingdom where he meets such famous Chinese personalities as the Patriarch Subodi, Wu Cheng En, The Jade Emperor, Confucius (depicted as a two-faced fool), and of course, the Monkey King (Russell Wong) himself! The script is a confusing one which would take up too much space if I went into intricate detail. Let's just say that the white guy goes on a pilgrimage with most of the heroes from Journey to the West, as they take on these demons who want to restore China to an old-fashioned, nearly primitive level. The premise for the story works. Unfortunately, way too much screen-time deals with the Caucasian fellow's crush on the goddess, Kwan Yin. Their romance keeps interrupting an otherwise interesting story. I almost gave these two movies three whole stars, but the obnoxious love story was distracting. Interesting to note that Sandy is depicted as humorless, lacking the ability to laugh & joke. This condition of his seems absent from the other movies I've seen (i.e. NEW PILGRIMS TO THE WEST, where the character clowns around and laughs it up), and makes the movie even more like THE WIZARD OF OZ; instead of a

lion seeking courage, we've got Sandy seeking laughter. Though the ending swordfight where our heroes battle the demons in the modern world is fun, the production itself misses the mark. Not bad, but not great. ** -DF

From Japan:

RIO NATSUME: MISSIONARY

(Me Lon; 2005) Dir.: Mitsuhiro Shimamura, Pro.: Tomoyuki Ito, Camera: Masayuki Suzuki, Photographer: Yorihito Yamauchi, Videotaped at Mariana Resort & Spa, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Yet another shot-on-video quickie to earn a model (in this case, the delectable Rio Natsume) some chump change. But since that's about what I spent to buy this bootleg off Ebay, I'm not complaining. The busty beauty never goes nude or even topless on this DVD—which is fine by me. After all, I for one know what nipples look like. She never removes her enticing, leopard print bikini, so her hairs remain pubic, not public. Though there's an erotic oil massage and some bondage shot where she's wrapped in aquarium tubing, RIO NATSUME MISSIONARY is pretty clean, perhaps in the PG range. Maybe her other DVDs (2003's PURE SMILE, 2004's COSPLAY, etc.) are that way too. All in all, RIO NATSUME MISSIONARY is average for this type of softcore exploitation.

RIO NATSUME MISSIONARY gets off to a decent start with our title babe walking slowly (and unnaturally) in a brown bikini. I must say, the brown top looks padded. Fortunately, she later wanders around aimlessly (accompanied by bad synth music) in the obligatory shiny leather get-up, and other cleavage-enhancing attire—all of which is more effective than the opening shots in the strange brown bra. At one point, her voice (with an artificial echo) narrates a scene of her out by a pool. It's untranslated, and since beach bunnies never have anything important or interesting to say, it's better that way. ** -Damon Foster

Rio Natsume of: Rio Natsume: Missionary



From Korea:

STREET LAWLESS

(A.K.A.: "Ger Li Wi Moo Bub Ja") Dae Won; 1992, Producer: Ahn Hyung Dong, Director: Shim Sang Il, Planning: Ahn Hyun Sik, Original Story: Park Jong Joon, Illustration: Lim Jong Woo, Released: 9/4/92, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Well, I suppose that if Turkish movie-makers can get away with producing a shameless rip off like 3 DEV ADAM (see last issue), then it's not such a far-fetched idea that the Koreans could blatantly steal characters from the Capcom videogames like STREETFIGHTER, STREETFIGHTER 2 and/or STREETFIGHTER 3. Videogames such as STREETFIGHTER never impressed me, so perhaps I didn't get all the jokes in this unofficial parody from Dae Won Publishing. This entire cartoon is in Korean with no English translation at all, so this adds to the frustration. STREET LAWLESS (that's the literal translation, but there is no actual English version) was intended for theatrical release, but that never happened. My guess is that they changed their minds because it's too obvious in its swipes from the Capcom videogame STREETFIGHTER. Perhaps it's more of a rip-off than a satire, I don't know. It would appear that the Dae Won company is really just a publisher of comic books ("Manhwa", which is their manga), and not real good at making movies, though they did create enjoyable flicks like SPARKMAN (see review in O.C.: The Robo Hero Issue) and at least four of the "Young Gu" movies, which aren't strangers to the pages of O.C. Apparently, Korea has other movies that imitate American videogames, such as: ART OF FIGHTING (based on FIST OF THE NORTH STAR), and DODGEBALL TAN-PYUNG, which is based on DRAGONBALL Z.

It's a shame that STREET LAWLESS wasn't translated, and that it wasn't released in pure form. Though intended as a theatrical movie, this cartoon was edited to look like a TV show; the pre-record tape I watched (no less than

three times!) adds these awkward titles here and there, presumably to separate each story into a TV episode. But it doesn't flow like a TV show, since any true episode should have a beginning, middle and end. Instead, the story flows too smoothly, like the featured-length movie it was originally intended to be. Even without translation, it's still pretty uneven and the plot has more holes than Swiss cheese. Characters (i.e. a sumo wrestler, and some zombies are briefly revived) are vaguely introduced and later they just disappear. It becomes evident that random scenes must have been chopped out. The music is boring, monotonous synth stuff which does nothing to highlight the action scenes and makes the over all mood of STREET LAWLESS pretty dull. In Korea, this cartoon was quickly forgotten and everybody, even collectors, thinks it's crap. I however, enjoy bizarre novelty items, parodies and rip-offs, so I actually got into this slow-paced cartoon. It reminds me of Turkey's 3 DEV ADAM, for its shameless approach.

Though not great or even good, I recommend this movie to fans of anime, and fans of videogames. The humorous approach reminded me of Japan's THE PING PONG CLUB, and I think videogame freaks would get a kick out of seeing satirical versions of their heroes speaking Korean. Despite language barriers, I found these eccentric characters (i.e. the bald guy in the lotus position who's mastered levitation) strangely appealing in their own way. With a better script, better music and over-all better planning, this could have been a really entertaining video.

But whatever you choose to call this animated movie okay with me, or anybody else. It bombed in Korea, and came & went. The intention was to release this crap theatrically, but not surprisingly, it ended up going straight to video. Tapes of it are hard to find because even though it came out in 1992, already it's apparent that nobody thought to preserve or re-release it. It could be that the Capcom company, who have the rights to STREETFIGHTER and other video games, sued it into oblivion. But even in Korea, video collectors found this farce to be boring, and nobody liked it.

This silly comedy has two main heroes, called Je Gal Seng and Lee So Ryong. Both are idiots, as well as martial artists. They, like other characters on this goofy tape seem to get runny noses (some times in the middle of a fight) frequently; it's a running gag in STREET LAWLESS. Anyway, the setting is post-apocalyptic, with much of the world now a barren wasteland because of some war. The story starts off with our two heroes Je Gal Seng and Lee So Ryong at some video arcade, completely oblivious to the apocalypse which has just happened. Then their fellow student, Chun Li (a female martial artist) storms into the room to tell them that their teacher has fainted because he had been defeated by some suspicious-looking being. The being would appear to be a villainous "nazi ghost", as I call him. This bad guy looks like an overweight Captain Harlock who wears a swastika. The evil magician (or whatever) is called Mu Chun Hwang ("Dark Master"), which doesn't sound very German to me. So the cute girl Chun Li, and bumbling heroes Je Gal Seng & Lee So Ryong set out to find the evil Mu Chun Hwang. But other heroes join the pilgrim-

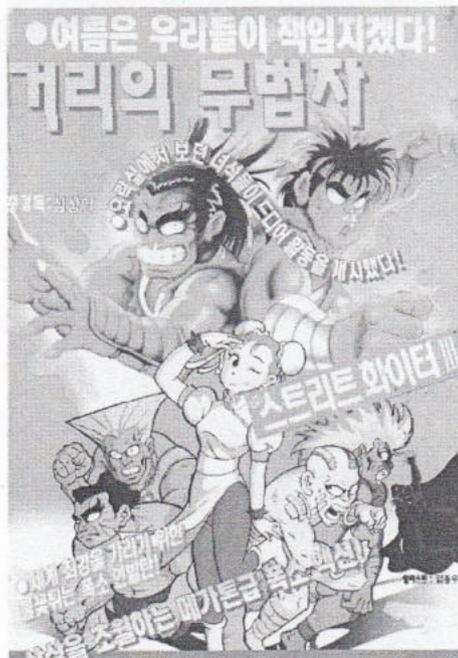
age too, and they all look like characters from Capcom's STREET FIGHTER 3. In fact, I think only the main two good guys Je Gal Seng & Lee So Ryong and their elderly teacher are original. Eventually, our heroes team up with former rival martial artists (including a green electric monster, a Hindu with band-aids on his head, and a blond army pilot) for the final fight with villainous wizard and/or spirit Mu Chun Hwang ("Dark Master"), whom they defeat. The fights are okay (mainly using hidden energy, beams and jumping around), but because I knew so little about the main villain, I wasn't too excited. The bad guy wears a cape and looks somewhat ominous, but I felt we never were made to see how evil he really is. After his defeat, a gold coin falls from a pendant he was wearing, and I'm not sure what that's about either. ** -DF



From Japan:

REVOLUTIONARY GIRL UTENA: THE MOVIE (AKA: "Kakumei Utena") Be Papas; 1999, Original Concept/Director: Kunihiko Ikuhara, Original Manga by Chiho Sato, Executive Producer: Toshimichi Ohtsuki, Character Designer: Shinya Hasegawa, Art Dir.: Hichiro Kobayashi, Screenwriter: Yoji Enokido, Music: Shinkichi Mitsumine, J.A. Seazer, Planning & Original Story: Be-Papas, Special Thanks to Taeko Baba, Executive Producer of English Version: John O'Donnell, Producer of English Version: Stephanie Shalofsky, Dubbing Supervisor: Tom Wayland, English Language Audio Post Production: Taj Productions, English Language Art Dir.: Anthony Salerno, Translation: Takayuki Karahashi, Released by: Software Sculptors & Central Park Media, Reviewed by Damon Foster

I knew this cartoon was going to leave me in the dark when I saw "The Movie" added to the title. I take it this means there were already other videotapes of this story. No doubt the other ones explained what the hell is going on. Unfortunately, REVOLUTIONARY GIRL UTENA: THE MOVIE is for obsessive Utena fans exclusively, it's not at all user friendly to new comers or the casual observer like myself. I'm not entirely certain if the average anime freak would like this one either, some might like it, some might not. As far as I'm concerned, REVOLUTION-



ARY GIRL UTENA: THE MOVIE is just an odd collection of disjointed scenes and confusing nonsense. There are a lot of characters and subplots so it's hard to follow, and since none of these characters or subplots interested me in the slightest, I found my mind wandering within the first few minutes of this 87 minute videotape. The uniforms of the characters look somewhat European I suppose, but at least one guy with long green hair has a samurai sword. This story is complex and exists in its own fantasy world. It's the type of film that requires a lot of patience to understand. I have neither patience nor understanding for REVOLUTIONARY GIRL UTENA: THE MOVIE, so I think it's junk.

The rental box says it's intended for audiences "13 and up", and I guess that sounds about right. Perhaps 13 year olds mature a lot faster than I did at that age. When I was 13, I couldn't see me watching a cartoon so adult in nature. There's not just excessive romance, but some nudity (no nipples or pubic hair) and very intimate situations. There are sexual references and even some fairly obvious lesbian themes! But once you get passed this gimmick of Lesbianism For the Whole Family, there's not much about REVOLUTIONARY GIRL UTENA: THE MOVIE that stands out. There's also some flashback where a boy gets molested.

The setting is apparently some mythical fantasy-land. Being a Japanese cartoon, everybody has big eyes of course, but this time the eyes are even bigger than average (the people look like fish!). Much of the story takes place at some school with lots of swordplay classes (the setting seems modern because of cars, but there are sword duels too). I'm not sure who's fighting who or why. This weird, boring cartoon deals with roses, romance, bisexuality, androgyny, and of course the occasional sword duel. Though there are strange things like a talking car and a humorous sequence involving a cow and some elephants (my favorite portion), the script would appear to be about the quest for a mystical sword. There's also a lot of talk about the "Rose Bride", whoever that is. One minute, some guy is saying "the Rose Prince was really the lord of the flies", and later, women are dueling to win a slave girl. -Damon Foster

From America:

SUDDEN DEATH

Universal; 1995, Prod.: Moshe Diamont & Howard Baldwin, Dir.: Peter Hyams, Exec. Prod.: Ash Shah, Sundip Shah, Anders Jensen, Sunil Shah, Based on a Story By: Karen Baldwin, Screenplay: Gene Quintano, Cast: Jean Claude Van Damme, Powers Boothe, Raymond J. Barry, Whitney Wright, Ross Malinger, Dorian Harewood, Audra Lindley, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Though I know there's some older film also called SUDDEN DEATH, I honestly couldn't tell if I've reviewed this here Jean Claude Van Damme movie before. The title of this Claude Van Damme vehicle rings a bell, but I'm uncertain as to whether or not it's been critiqued in the pages of OC before! As I watched its cut version on USA last night (as part of "Van Damme

Week"), I found it to be so routinely American that I simply can't tell I've even seen it before! D  ja vu is quite rampant in Hollywood, that's for certain. Have I already seen & reviewed SUDDEN DEATH before, or have I only seen & reviewed a zillion Hollywood run-of-the-mill movies just like it? Perhaps I'll never know. The problem is that despite the "blockbuster budget" and other overkill, this is an unmemorable movie that just sits there. It's neither bad nor good and just exists.

To be honest, the acting & writing struck me as being okay, but there's a scene where a female terrorist, disguised as an animal-mascot, puts a gun to the back of a little girl. The costumed animal says an unintelligible line meant to convey something like "don't move" or "hands up", but because of the muffled voice caused by a penguin mask, it sounded like: "Hey, I stand! And I'll pull your wallet!" It's certainly not what you would say to your hostage during a life or death crisis, but I watched this scene more than once, and still can't understand what the bitch is saying. Later, Claude V.D. himself has a humorous yet admittedly gripping fight with this plush penguin, in a kitchen. They use cooking utensils (i.e. dangerous meat shredding machines and hot grease from the french-fry maker), but there's nothing particularly inventive about this fight or any of the others. It's obvious that V.D. was moving away from the martial arts portion of his career, because SUDDEN DEATH's bouts are more in the category of "realistic". I guess the fights and other action scenes are decent, in a routine sort of way.

I suspect this so-so story to be a variation on DIEHARD (I've never seen DIEHARD, but I did see a spoof on the old BEN STILLER comedy show). V.D. plays a demoted, divorced fireman who somehow finds himself at a hockey game with a couple of kids. If all that's not bad enough, a group of terrorists (white Americans, not Middle Easterners, because that would be "racist") are holding people hostage in the arena. The bottom line is that villainous leader Powers Boothe is easy to hate because of his combined ruthlessness (he and his helpers shoot people indiscriminately) and his calm wit and sarcasm. With cocky bad guys like that, it's pretty hard not to cheer V.D. on, for his plight and inventiveness. V.D. prowls in corridors, invents makeshift weapons (i.e. filling a squirt-gun with lighter fluid) and ultimately causes the bad guys to die in a helicopter crash. *-DF

From Japan:

KEI MIZUTANI: UNDRESSED FOR SUCCESS

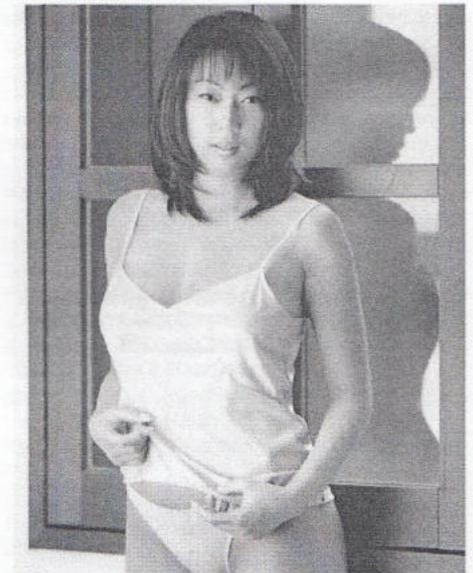
HV Project; 1995, Prod.: Youjiro Fukuda, Video Engineer: Piston Ogawa, Video Engineer: Hiroshi Yoshimura, Lighting: Haruo Hara, Make-up: Tetsu Ishihara, Stylist: Emi Murakami, Director: Shouken Takahashi, Starring: Kei Mizutani, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Okay, so Kei Mizutani is a gorgeous woman. I get that part. I think any heterosexual male, and any not-so-heterosexual female will agree. But where do we go from here? The videobox for this incredibly cheap, shot-on-video waste of time says: "No script, No Story, No Clothes".

They forgot to include: "No budget, No Reason to Rent this Stupid Video". My review of this 40-minute tape is going to be a short one, there's really not much to say besides "Kei Mizutani prances around naked". This dumb production reminds me of one that Amy Yip released a few years earlier, but at least Kei Mizutani bears all, and leaves nothing to the imagination.

Though Mizutani is beautiful whether naked or in seductive attire, I don't think this movie will arouse anybody other than diehard Mizutani stalkers who want to keep jackin' it. They can jack their hot, spicy boners to this movie all they want. Kei Mizutani is a real turn-on, but I don't think she's hot enough to make KEI MIZUTANI: UNDRESSED FOR SUCCESS a must have video. Kei needs an amusing script (like in TOKYO DECAMERON: THREE TALES OF MADNESS AND SENSUALITY and the classic comedy WEATHER WOMAN) to be completely entertaining. Perhaps nudity fetishists will also like this movie, but I would have preferred more tight clothing like leather, lace, spandex or whatever. -DF

Kei Mizutani



From Japan:

BEAUTIFUL KILLING MACHINE

("XX: utsukushiki kinô") 1996. Dir.: Takahito Hara, Cast: Rei Natsume, Saiko Isshiki, Shunsuke Kariya, Naomasa Musaka, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Damn it! A few months ago, I reviewed this decent crime drama in detail, but yesterday I accidentally erased the whole file! Worse yet, I gave the tape of BEAUTIFUL KILLING MACHINE away once I completed the review! Having critiqued countless movies since then, I don't remember it that well and can't write an informative review. I can say, however, that I was expecting yet another of those "Zero Woman"-type movies, also from the 1990s. Fortunately, BEAUTIFUL KILLING MACHINE turned out to be better than that. Though there are a couple kicks and maybe a punch or two, the emphasis is more on story than action. So I won't go heavily into the plot, so as not to give too much away.

It's got something to do with a bodyguard played by Rei Natsume. She goes naked once or twice, which is great if you love skinny chicks. In-between the occasional shoot-outs with some villain called The Owl, she has health issues and some strange dreams about kick-boxers. For a while, I felt the movie made no sense. But the trick ending (reminiscent to THE CRYING GAME), helped everything to fall together, and caught me off guard. **1/2 —Damon Foster

From Korea:

SECRET EXECUTIONERS

("Haegyelsa", "The Trouble-solving Broker") Filmark Int.; 1982, Pro.: Thomas Tang, Assoc. Pro.: Chong Chan Park, English Version Vaughan Savidge, Action Dir.: Wong Cheng Li, Dir.: Godfrey Ho (Doo Yong Lee), Cast: Wong Cheng Li, James Chan, Jim Norris, Steve Tam, Peggy Min, Chuck Campbell, Mandy Yong, Sam Kwon, Sandy Shin, Alan Kong, Tom Wagner, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Last time I bothered looking, the IMDB listed this stinker as a "Hong Kong & South Korean" co-production, which makes sense. But back in the day, so many producers, directors & actors were flying back & forth from HK to Korea that there are countless "co-productions". Any time I see a movie with the names Wong Cheng Li, Thomas Tang or Godfrey Ho, I tend to [hastily] assume it's officially a HK movie, no matter where it was filmed. More often than not, HK's many shot-in-Korea movies look like typical HK kung fu cheapies. But in the case of SECRET EXECUTIONERS, it definitely comes off as more Korean than Hong Kongese. The setting is obviously modern Korea (as evidenced by a Korean language newspaper), and there are so few familiar faces that I'm hereby considering it the biggest Korean disaster since the birth of Kim Jung Il.

SECRET EXECUTIONERS is a terrible martial arts film, period. The dubbing is terrible, and an idiot must have written the script. The story is one dull, confusing scene after another. In one

scene, a guy gets hit in the stomach and coughs up milk instead of blood! The nearest thing I can figure out is that the character must have drunk milk before the fight. Speaking of fights, some of the worst martial arts ever filmed is in SECRET EXECUTIONERS! Though star James Chan and Wong Cheng Li fight pretty well, there are others who seem to have very little martial arts skill. Then there are the obligatory foreign villains! Boy, oh boy! The credits list Chuck Campbell, Jim Norris and Tom Wagner—none of which have I heard of. I don't know who is who, but there are three non-Asians in SECRET EXECUTIONERS. One is a badly dubbed black dude with a ridiculously large afro (I thought this flick was from the 1980s!), and another is some middle-aged, slightly over-weight white guy with red hair and a bandana. My god, where, just where did Thomas Tang & Godfrey Ho find these accidental comedians? The only thing worse than their acting is their martial arts! Watching these untalented idiots attempt the simplest snake-style arm-blocks is an absolute hoot! These non-Asians get killed off quickly, but if they had played the lead heroes, this movie would have been a superb unintended comedy. I imagine the people responsible for this movie, and particularly its non-martial arts foreigners feel extreme pain when they think of these terrible fight scenes.

Some longhaired Korean apparently named James Chan plays "The Trouble-solving Broker". I guess somebody ripped off a bunch of shop owners and killed a witness, to cover their tracks. At one point a detective questions Wong Cheng Li's gang. An insignificant scene, but I mention it because the detective would play a main villain in SKY WARRIOR EAGLE MAN (Seoul Screen Home Video; 1992), reviewed in 1995's O.C.#7: American Martial Arts Issue. Wong Cheng Li plays the leader of one of two rival gangs, and as bad as this film is, the fight between him and James Chan is decent—they tear down a whole house in the process. —Damon Foster

From Thailand:

THE PROTECTOR

(Thai title: "Tom yum goong", British title: "Honour of the Dragon") 2005, Director: Prachya Pinkaew, Writers: Napalee & Piyaros Thongdee, Cast: Tony Jaa, Petchtai Wongkam-lao, Xing Jing, Nathan Jones, Johnny Nguyen, Lateef Crowder, Jon Foo, Damian de Montemas, David Asavanond, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Here I am watching THE PROTECTOR. No, not the 1980s Jackie Chan stinker of the same name, but another of the "new wave" of Thailand's Thai boxing movies (i.e. ONG BAK). I must say; the fight-scenes totally impressed me! No CGI or suspension wires, and the thrilling stuntwork harkens back to the good old days of HK 1980s classics! Not only are Tony Jaa's acrobatic flips amazing, but they're unique—I've not seen those specific flips before and he pushes the limit of what I thought was humanly possible. One whole sophisticated, stunt-laden, intricate fight (in a big, fancy-assed restaurant that smuggles endangered species) was shot in one continuous take, and had me absolutely in

awe. It's been many years since a martial arts sequence amazed me this much. For sheer spectacle and image sensation, THE PROTECTOR kicks ass. The wild fight scenes alone might be worth a five star (*****) rating, I think.

But if you're trying to be entertained by an overall movie and are expecting interesting characters & decent script, you'll have better luck being entertained by a chess game—in slow-motion. As a film, it's predictable, too serious, and at times both embarrassing & sappy. Lead hero Tony Jaa is so dorky & foreign that he makes Thais seem like ass-backwards hicks, especially when he's fighting stylish villains in black leather (yet again, the bad guys are supposed to look like bikers & punks). Too much of the premise has him on the run (like Brandon Lee in RAPID FIRE), and the endless chases chased away my interest & focusing ability early on. It quickly became one of those movies where we're not bored, but are able to leave the room without pausing the DVD, and not miss anything important. The uninteresting approach deducts two or three stars, no matter how good the ample fights are. Oh well, at least there's no annoying romance involved.

This so-so movie has something to do with a sect of Thai boxers in Thailand, who protect elephants. But we wouldn't have much of a movie unless an elephant or two was captured by the bad guys, right? When heroic, righteous Thai boxer Kahm (Tony Jaa) isn't having cute CGI dreams about elephants & battling warriors, or engaging in admittedly impressive boat chases (ala James Bond), he's heading to Sydney, Australia. Why Australia? Well, I guess they needed an excuse to prove all round-eyed people are evil—again. Once in Australia, the ridiculously far-fetched, fast-paced script has him find the villains immediately, almost as though they were waiting for him at the airport. You got your double-crossing cops, a Chinese triad lead by a sexy dragon-lady Madame Rose (Xing Jing), and more over-acting Caucasians than you can shake an elephant tusk at. For some mythological or symbolic reasons, they all want elephants (in the CITY). As an animal lover who occasionally does volunteer work for vulnerable species, I should have really liked heroic Tony Jaa's character & plight. But the script is just an excuse to dazzle us with superb stunts and acrobatic fights—Jaa could have just as easily been seeking microfilm, buried treasure, incriminating evidence or whatever. The high points, as always, are just the battles, whether he's beating up big oafs using elephant bones or tangling with Capoeira performer Lateef Crowder. He does eventually rescue a baby elephant, but only after a particularly impressive stunt involving a helicopter on top of a skyscraper. All in all, it was an average (at least) movie. **1/2 -DF

From Japan:

AZUMI: THE MOVIE

Toho; 2003, Directed by Ryuhei Kitamura, based on the comic by: Yu Koyama, Writers: Mataichiro Yamamoto (AKA Rikiya Mizushima) & Isao Kiriya, Cast: Aya Ueto, Shun Oguri, Hiroki Narimiya, Kenji Kohashi, Yuma Ishigaki, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Tolerable but unremarkable samurai adventure

that, as you see, includes "The Movie" in its title. So it's a safe assumption this "Azumi" character is of historical importance, or at least has had the usual other movies, TV shows, anime or manga versions—but then, who doesn't!? Actually, I do not. I'm still waiting for director Ryuhei Kitamura to make DAMON FOSTER: THE MOVIE, or DAMON FOSTER: THE ANIME. But seriously, I don't give a flying fuck about the history behind this here "Azumi" character, and found this particular movie to be typical modern stuff; there are plenty of movies like it. Thanks to its fades, artsy-fartsy pans and attempts at slick cinematography, the pace suffers a great deal and I really wanted to scan forward—unfortunately, my crappy little DVD player will only SKIP to the next chapter! So I had to sit through the entire 142 minutes. While some of the action (swordplay, blood-letting, explosions, high-flying leaps, etc.) is amusing, the movie really didn't do much for me. Fortunately, there are a few interesting characters and colorful villains, such as the effeminate dude in the white robe—and zombie make-up (never explained).

The script is a little grim at times; I've not seen this much raping & pillaging since I read The Holy Bible. Despite obvious inspirations (CROUCHING TIGER, MATRIX and other money-makers), it's really a typical Japanese chanbara film, all about assassins hired to kill the local warlords. That's the whole story: Aya Ueto, Shun Oguri, Hiroki Narimiya were trained in ninjutsu since childhood, so they can engage in pre-emptive strikes against corrupt samurai-leaders during the Tokugawa era. The sword-fights didn't always excite me, thanks to the nausea-inducing cinematography and unavoidable CGI 'enhancements' which first irritated me when I sat through Ridley Scott's GLADIATOR. Lead heroine Azumi (Aya Ueto) is so emotionless & uninteresting that I kept expecting her to turn to the director and say: "Where's my yen?" Don't get me wrong—I'd do her at the drop of a hat; yet she's too young for me. But I tell ya': If I had a daughter like her, well, I'd be in jail! Anyway, the script meanders along, with this common theme: "Let's hire an assassin to kill the assassins, and if the assassins, kill our assassin, well, we'll hire another assassin! A couple more assassins happen by and exclaim: 'Looks like trouble.' 'Shall we?'" But seriously: There's a minor romantic subplot, like when one of the young assassins falls for some ugly girl (part of a traveling acrobatic troupe). Anyway, only Azumi herself and one other hero (some guy with a ponytail making him resemble a pinhead in Todd Browning's FREAKS) survive the explosive carnage at the end when they use cannons & bullets to blow up a shanty-town. *1/2 -DF

From France:

CHOK DEE THE KICKBOXER

2005, Produced by Stéphan Films, Télégraphe, France 2 Cinéma, Dir. Xavier Durringer, 105 minutes, Starring Dida Diafat, Bernard Girardeau, Florence Faivre, Lakshantha Abenayake, Sombat Metanee, DVD released by Tai Seng Entertainment, Reviewed by Mike Quebec

As someone who hated that 1990 KICKBOXER film of Van Damme that supposedly featured Muay Thai (but resembled the antics of professional wrestling), this drama is a personal sigh of relief. With all due respect to the incredible acrobatics of the great Tony Jaa, CHOK DEE THE KICKBOXER is one movie (that's accessible to us who don't live near a Thai video store) that features realistically choreographed Thai boxing. One thing to note is that it's not an action movie, nor an exploitation film. As such, the filmmakers strove to show an accurate portrayal of Thailand's national sport.

Filed in Thailand and France, this French production tells the real life story of one of Muay Thai's greatest (non-Thai) fighters. The pacing of the film starts out slow (admittedly, a little too slow), but when it does pick up, the fights, with realistic, brutal grace, make CHOK DEE THE KICKBOXER stand out. Okay, this is basically a boxing film (with kicking...and kneeling...and elbowing), but it is a reasonably realistic film & it's obvious that the people behind this movie have a true love & respect for the art of Muay Thai.

The drama deals with Dida's life as a small time hood & inmate, his introduction to Muay Thai, his having to overcome prejudice to be accepted at a Thai training camp, & his having to act as the go-between for his trainer and his trainer's estranged daughter (who of course is the love interest. Bet you didn't see THAT coming!). For some of you who like dramas with a martial arts background (think a more brutal version of IRON AND SILK: the late '80's indie about an American student traveling to China to learn wushu), then CHOK DEE THE KICKBOXER would be to your liking. **** -Mike Quebec

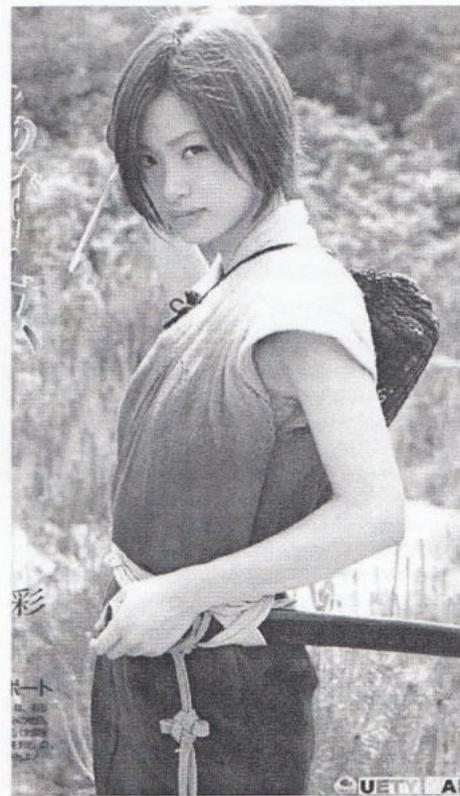
From Mainland China:

TONG-ZI-GONG OF THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE ("Consummate Power", "Tongzигong of Shaolin", "Shaolin Tongzигong", "Shaolin Tong Zigong", etc.) 1984. Dir.: Shih Hou, Pro.: Lim Kim Hui & Hou Qi-Jian, Cast: Zhang Long, Wong Li-Sha, Reviewed by Damon Foster

The sound effects and voice dubbing (two "but still"s) would make this seem just like the HK kung fu films. But the plot lacks many of the HK clichés (other than training and vengeance), and follows a different approach. Also, Red China kung fu movies have slightly different choreography than in the HK stuff, utilizing fancy, highly stylized Wushu moves and flowing motions. The fight scenes in TONG-ZI-GONG OF THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE also tend to be a lot shorter. There are awkward, obviously staged scenes that make it seem amateur: Toward the climax, a group of Shaolin kids confronts some soldiers. In the foreground, two opponents are going at it, but the background extras are standing still, just aiming their weapons at the opposing group. Even when this climactic free-for-all finally explodes, it's more like a series of one-on-one duels, rather than all-out warfare. What also made TONG-ZI-GONG OF THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE unique when it played on TV alongside "Kung Fu Theater"s typically Hong Kongese stuff, was its two ballads with subtitles (captions like "Shaolin is going on an expedition"), and other captions which appear through out the

movie to designate a certain historical location or technique ("sleeping Arhat", "gymnasium in Shaolin Temple", "Prone fish", "Single Auspicious Palm", "Thinoceros Ploughs Field" and other bizarre concoctions). Much like Jet Li's SHAOLIN TEMPLE before it, TONG-ZI-GONG OF THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE makes resourceful use of actual Buddhist temples, presumably hundreds of years old.

Despite it's unique elements, this story of evil Lord Fu comes off as average chop-sockey stuff. Much of it involves little boy monks, because many of Shaolin's adult martial artists have been deceived into leaving, allowing Lord Fu's soldiers (i.e. villainous swordsman Tsu) to attack Shaolin and a family of rebels who posed as circus acrobats in the nearby village. While it gets talky, slow-paced and downright uninteresting in spots, TONG-ZI-GONG OF THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE's story does offer a better than average look at kung fu: It's practice, theory, execution, etc. While the young students learn kung fu's "tongzигong" (also "Tong Zei Gung") style, the villainous guards are encircling the temple. In one clumsy scene, the bad guys are hiding behind makeshift weed shields (resembling teepees), waiting to ambush unsuspecting rebels. But these crouching soldiers are right out in the open; anybody who's not blind could spot them a mile away! But these crude glitches don't make the final battle between the Shaolin monks and the evil soldiers any less exciting. Lord Chu and his minions are defeated shortly before the main hero's wedding to his leading lady. Both are a little young to marry, I thought. ** -Damon Foster



Aya Ueto in Azumi.

Kaizo Ningen

Superhero section

\ki-zo neen-gen\ [Jp] Potential (debatable) synonyms: alien, android, cyborg. 1. Literally 'mysterious person'. 2. Transformed man. 5. Superhero. As far as OC is concerned, "Kaizo Ningen" means superhero. If you wish to debate this, you might be correct—but you also have too much time on your hands.



As you can see unless you're blinder than a diehard Bill O' O'Reilly fan, you'll see I've dropped the word "Update" from this continuing superhero column (it's been called "Kaizo Ningen Update" for years). Let's face it, this column hasn't actually 'updated' anybody on anything since before the Internet came along and accelerated life, the universe and everything. Regardless, OC's continuing superhero column presents not only the 40th anniversary of ULTRAMAN with opinions by anybody who still gives me the time of day, but reviews of MAZINKAIZER, NINJASCOPE (THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS), CUTIE HONEY, ULTRAMAN: THE NEXT and KAMEN RIDER: THE FIRST.

What three of them (MAZINKAIZER, CUTIE HONEY and KAMEN RIDER: THE FIRST) have in common is that I reviewed HK disks of these Japanese productions. Disks like these are of questionable legitimacy, but common in Chinatown stores. These Chinese releases are cheap & subtitled, making them convenient for me. It's interesting how this new digital era mirrors the analog 1980s and 1990s, when I would suffer through unreadable subtitles on VHS tapes picked up in Chinatown videostores. Back then, the subtitles were on the celluloid film prints themselves, and because they weren't designed for home use, they didn't read well on TV screens. Today, however, we have a different type of Chinese-generated subtitle: Modern DVD subtitles are much bigger & cleaner than those of the 1980s VHS crap, because they're clearly intended for home use. Yet the English continues to be bad with unintended humor. Also, I've noticed a new glitch: Absence! Sometimes the digital subtitles disappear at random and then return. Often we're reading half a conversation, as alternate lines vanish or appear for a fraction of a second. Although the digital age has brought us much better subtitles than the analog age offered, there still seems to be some glitches that need to be worked out. I suspect many DVD bootlegs use the "DVD Shrink" program which seems to omit an occasional subtitle.

-Damon Foster



ウルトラマン ザ ナックスト

ULTRAMAN: THE NEXT

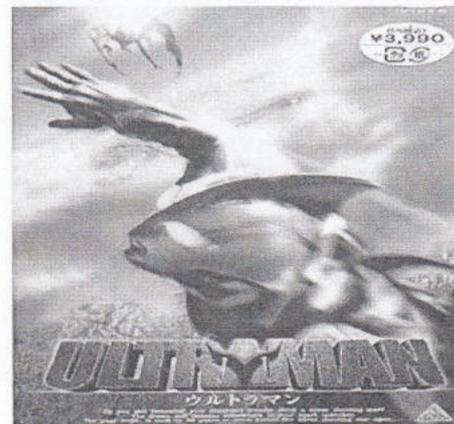
Tsuburaya Productions; 2004, Director: Kazuya Konaka. Writer: Keiichi Hasegawa. Producer: Kiyoshi Suzuki. Cast: Tetsuya Bessho, Kenya Osumi, Kyoko Toyama. Reviewed by Damon Foster

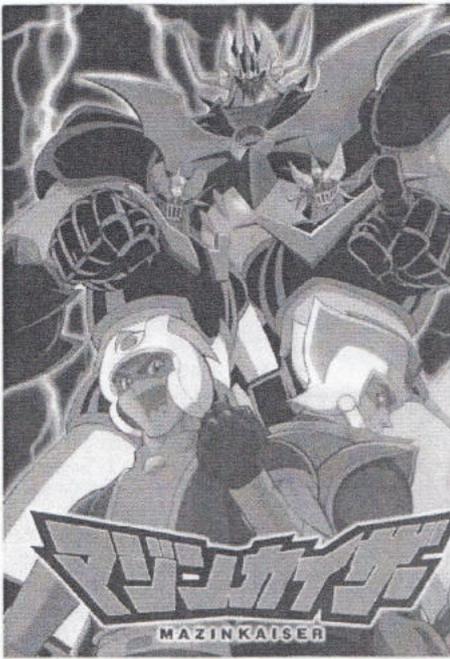
This has got to be the most boring Ultraman movie I've ever seen! This sappy, slow-paced, feature length exercise in tedium makes me respect quirkier Ultra flicks like 1984's THE ULTRAMAN STORY or even that stupid 6 BROTHERS VS. THE MONSTER ARMY (URUTORA 6-KYODAI TAI KAIJU GUNDAN) from Thailand! ULTRAMAN: THE NEXT presents us with a new timeline (again), making it yet another bastardization where only the audience knows who the Ultra Brothers (all absent) are. Having to re-tell the story again is pretty pointless; rather than concentrating on the strengths (such as superhero-action) of the Ultra series, we get yet another re-hashing of that whole business of some pilot getting merged with a silver alien from space and how they unite to battle a monster—eventually. It was done better in the original classic series ULTRAMAN (1966) or even the first episode of ULTRAMAN MAX (2005). But the real reason ULTRAMAN: THE NEXT bored me wasn't because I hate remakes, but because of the talky subplot involving our heroic astronaut and his terminally ill son.

As uninteresting as it is, I can give this new movie credit for at least trying to be intelligent & serious. To a non-Ultra fan (with no jaded, ingrained expectations), it just might come off as average science fiction action, certainly no worse than THE X-MEN (2000). For better or worse, ULTRAMAN: THE NEXT is pretty typical for these CGI-enhanced times. As an old fart, I have to face facts: The campy, fun programs & movies from my childhood are a thing of the past. Since the producers are more interested in aiming their products toward a modern, more narrow-minded audience instead of hardcore devotees who grew up on this stuff, we're going to see more slick, serious stuff such as this. The odds of them making any thrilling, colorful actioners like in the Golden Years of Japanese superheroes are about as likely as Mel Gibson making a movie about the Spanish Inquisition!

The script starts off with some mutant monster escaping from a laboratory. The maraud-

ing creature bears a striking resemblance to Tri-Star's G.I.N.O. ("Godzilla in Name Only") monster, complete with nauseating CGI-movements. This mutated villain also resembles the alien from ALIEN (1979), a horror sci-fi movie that no doubt inspired the opening scenes of this creature on the loose. If them Tsuburaya folks had the guts to throw in some gory bloodshed, then just maybe they could have generated some tension or a sense of intimidation to power up the atmosphere. But yet again they played it safe for the kiddies, which defeats the whole purpose of horror-suspense! So not only is ULTRAMAN: THE NEXT dull, but it's wimpy! Sheeeeeee-iiiiit! Getting back to the story of this rampaging creature called The One (no, it's not Jet Li), we wouldn't have much of an Ultra story if we didn't have some pilot (Japanese, no less!) who somehow gets chosen to become a giant silver flying hero (simply called "The Next"), now would we!? So that's what happens again; only this time, the human would rather spend more time with his wife and son than be a fighter pilot. Meanwhile, more mayhem is being caused by Alien, I mean G.I.N.O., I mean Jet Li-- that is, I mean The One! Not only has The One morphed with skinks, rats, some girl's fiancé and several ravens, but also it got bigger than Michael Moore's stomach. But so did Ultraman The Next (obviously, the Tsuburaya dudes are running out of names). As giant as they are, they're still dwarfed by what must obviously be some humongous buildings that they both fly around. These scenes were obviously inspired by 2002's SPIDERMAN, where the web-spinner hops from skyscraper to skyscraper. Regardless, The Next defeats The One and manages to get home in time for some father-son bonding. -DF





マジンガザ

MAZINKAISER

Bandai Visual; 2000, Production Company: Dynamic Productions, Producer: Murata Masahiko, Original Creator: Go Nagai, Series Producer: Fujita Shizo, Character Design: Hayama Kenji, Voices: Ishimaru Hiroya, Tomita Kousei, Shibata Hidekazu, Kitayama Seiko, Tatsuki Fumihiko, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Yet another OVA (Original Video Anime) based on an old Japanese cartoon. These are more common than volatile freaks at a European Soccer game! MAZINKAISER is based on some other OVA series about them ever popular Mazinga ("Mazinger", or whatever) robots who have been staples of Japanese TV and manga since the early 1970s. While I loved the classic Japanese robot cartoons when I was a kid in the 1970s, I've long since outgrown most animated stuff and don't like remakes, or alternate timelines. But in the case of this DVD of MAZINKAISER (released in Chinatown with English subtitles in 2001), I was at least somewhat amused. Character designer Kenji Hayama did a great job of capturing the look of the early 1970s classics by Go Nagai, and beautifully meshed these characters with vivid, modern technology. Nobody will be fooled into thinking this is the original 92-part TV show MAZINGER Z (Toei Animation; 1972), but at least MAZINKAISER strives to be faithful. Hell, voice actor Hiroya Ishimaru even reprises his role as the main robot's pilot, and he still sounds the same after all these years. The pilot (Koji/Kouji), however, hasn't aged a bit!

If explosions, vivid colors, silly antics and robots firing things at each other are your bags (baby), then so is MAZINKAISER--and so are a zillion other comical Japanese cartoons. While entertaining in an average anime sort of way, I eventually became bored with the endless scenes of giant robots shooting stuff at each other and demonic Dr. Hell always condemning the

failures of his co-horts, and I longed for human drama to balance it out. But when we get to the human drama, I wasn't relieved; I was annoyed. The naïve romantic comedy between heroic pilot Koji ("Kouji" in the subtitles of this disk) and his leading lady Yumi Sayaka was irritating, especially in the forth episode ("Battle to Rescue Sayaka") where our bumbling male heroes drool at the chance to put suntan lotion on bikini-clad, voluptuous blond babes. These beach scenes are derivative of countless sitcoms & teen flicks I've stomached over the years. But if nothing else, the ever-amusing MAZINKAISER held my attention. Although I've not seen the original classics in a quarter-century at least, I can't help but think that them oldies have that certain something that these goofy follow-ups lack. It's not a great movie, but better than some of the recent Kamen Rider stuff I've seen.

It's the continuing story of would be conqueror Dr. Hell, his army of monstrous robots and hooded hermaphrodite Baron Ashura. They're still at war with the good guys, who pilot robots like Mazinga Z, Diana A, the snowman-like Boss Robot, and of course, let's not forget Great Mazinga (he gets scratched up a lot, so "Pretty Good Mazinga" might be a better name). Whether you're of the 1970s generation who knew of the Mazingas as Shogun Warriors or of the 1980s generation who called them "Tranzor Z" robots, make no mistake about it, these are the same heroes & villains from the classic period. So I was a little disappointed in episode one ("Tatakae! Double Mazinga", AKA "Fight! Mazinga Attacks"), because although it's action-packed, many of the heroes of the by-gone era get scrapped in a battle to make way for a new, high-tech Mazinga, obviously called Mazinkaiser (hence the title). The course of this OVA series focuses on this new & improved robot, with the classic heroes of old functioning more as sidekicks. When Mazinkaiser and his fellow giant robots aren't firing their rocket fists at countless evil giants, the robot controllers are often involved in sophomoric shenanigans. It sometimes gets adult in nature, with an occasional nipple or crotch shot. ** -DF



仮面ライダー

KAMEN RIDER: THE FIRST

("Masked Rider: The 1st", "Masked Superman: The 1st", "Kamen Laida: Za Fasto", ect.) Toei; 2005, running Time: 90 Min., Dir.: Takao Nagai-shi, Writing Credits: Toshiki Inoue (screenplay) & Shotaro Ishinomori (manga), Cast: Masaya

Kikawada, Hassei Takano, Rena Komine, Issa Hentona, Hiroto Honda, Renji Ishibashi, Hiroshi Miyauchi and the late Hideyo/Eisei Amamoto (stock-footage), Reviewed by Damon Foster

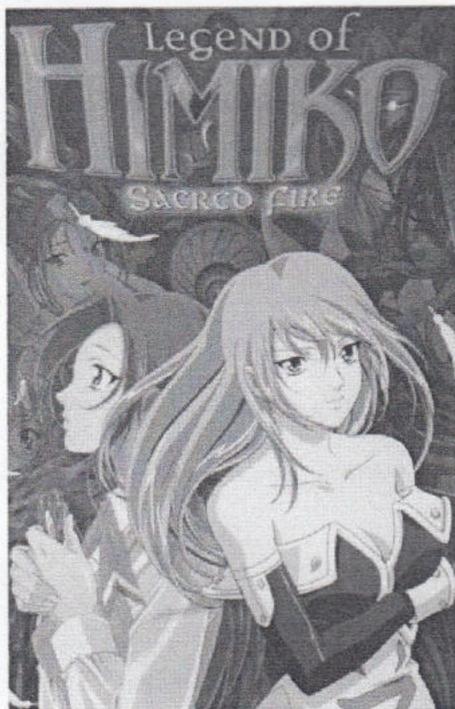
After pathetic bastardizations like KAMEN RIDER KUUGA (Toei; 2000), and 1992's SHIN KAMEN RIDER bringing the Kamen Rider genre to an all-time low, this movie can only be seen as a comeback. I think the cinematography is excellent, and over all, the bug-eyed heroes of Japanese pop-culture have a glossy, slick addition to their never-ending series of adventures. I loved the newly re-vamped costumes of the classic heroes Kamen Riders 1 & 2; their eyes light up because of bulbs in the helmets, and the shiny vinyl for the pants & gloves is well crafted. The opening shot of a bright-eyed (like I said, nifty bulbs) Kamen Rider in front of a fiery explosion is neat, however.....

Shortly after the opening shot, the true nature of KAMEN RIDER: THE FIRST sets in. We're treated to a series of uninteresting, pointless, sterile, tedious conversations in what's basically a love story. While I can appreciate this 'adult' (thankfully, there are no silly little kids in KAMEN RIDER: THE FIRST) approach, it all falls flat because we never actually see any of these couples shaking the sheets or even kissing. There are, however, lots of shots of flowers. It would have been better off trimmed down to being a 30-minute TV episode. I was bored by the constant romance & drama even though my DVD has subtitles. The subtitles are of Chinese origin, and any time you get Chinks trying to translate Jap talk into words for Yankees & honkeys, there's bound to be some communication gaps! Character names are botched up so badly it makes me think them stupid Chinese subtitle-makers are deaf! Let's see here: Villainous Shocker is spelled "Sajia", Takeshi Hongo is spelled: "Benxiang Meng", Hayato Ichimonji is spelled: "Yiwenzi Zhunren", and a basic Japanese name like Kazuhiko comes off as: "Keyan"! Since I was reading the subtitles and clearly hearing the Japanese say different names, it got distracting. Granted, any time you take Japanese kanji and try to break it down to its basic Chinese equivalent, shit happens. Worse yet, the subtitles are sporadic. They don't always play on my DVD player. That's another problem with Chinatown bootlegs, they don't always get along with each and every DVD player. But even occasional subtitles (and inaccurate ones at that) are better than none at all.

So, what's the verdict, you say? Was viewing this film a pleasant experience or not, you say? Well, after weighing the plusses and minuses of KAMEN RIDER: THE FIRST, I say it's okay, about average. There is some decent superhero action when our two heroes eventually take on Shocker's henchmen (guys in gas-masks) and mutant thingies, but all these fights are made for modern times and a younger generation reared on modern CGI sterility (i.e. THE MATRIX or THE X-MEN). I enjoyed the battles because there are a couple worthwhile karate kicks, but the wirework, weak sound effects, inevitable CGI spattering and drab keyboard music don't make this the most exciting Kamen Rider martial arts I've seen.

The script of this so-so movie is a re-telling of

the classic 1971 TV series. As an avid hater of remakes and new timelines, I began copping an attitude even before this generally disappointing story of motorcyclist Hongo Takeshi (Masaya Kikawada) started. He, Like Hayato Ichimonji (Hassei Takano), got captured by that army of mad scientists, Shocker. As you know, Shocker specializes in manufacturing stuff like monstrous assassins and mutants, and yet whenever they turn Hayato & Takeshi into Kamen Riders, they botch it up and somehow the Kamen Riders always defect and become good guys! When will Shocker ever learn!? If they would just stick to making evil monsters instead of righteous superheroes, they would have it made! Just what morons run Shocker; Chinese translators, perhaps?! In this case, the two Kamen Riders have to be nice, because they're both in love with the same girl (Rena Komine). She likes nice men who appreciate roses. Meanwhile, there's another romantic subplot about flowers: A couple of terminally ill patients in a hospital are attracted to each other but Shocker turns them into leather-clad warriors so they can die in a battle with the Kamen Riders. Anyway, female lead Asuka Midorikawa (Rena Komine) gets captured by one of Shocker's winged creatures. So our two heroic riders take a boat to Shocker's island base to form a rescue mission, in a scene similar to the climax of INFRAMAN (but not nearly as fun). The cliffhanger-ish battle isn't bad though. The clichés mesh very well: The damsel-in-distress is tied to a table in a laboratory as a drill slowly approaches her head. Meanwhile, outside the two Kamen Riders overcome their rivalry and take on the bad guys to rescue her. They do so in the nick of time, and main hero Masaya Kikawada gets the girl. He carries her semi-conscious body off as he walks on the beach. ** -Damon Foster



ひみこでん

LEGEND OF HIMIKO
(AKA: "Himiko Den", "Sacred Fire") Hakuodo/

Amuse; 1999, Original Idea: Ko Maisaka, Story Concept: So Toyama, Executive Prod.: Oui Hiroi, Series Planning: Sanshiro Kuramoto & Masumi Hirayanagi, Original Character Design: Oh Great, Animation Character Design: Megumi Kadonosono, Design & Opening Animation: Keiji Goto, Music: Kuniaki Haishima, Animation Production Coordinator: Atumi Tashiro, Animation Production: Group TAC, Collaboration: Red Company, Dir.: Ayumi Tomobuki, Executive Producer of English Version: John O'Donnell, Producer of English Version: Stephanie Shalofsky, Dubbing Supervisor: Tom Wayland, In House Production Manager: Tim Werenko, In House Production: Justin Sevakis, English Language ADR Engineer: Kevin Wilson, Translation: Katsuhiko Shimoharu, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Yet another Japanese cartoon about hot chicks fighting bad guys. This TV show was dubbed in English by Central Park Media and/or U.S. Manga Corps, and looks pretty typical of the other anime that the company (companies?) is known for releasing. Depending on your main interest, this may or may not be a good thing. 'LEGEND OF HIMIKO' might impress diehard fans of Japanimation, but it's not likely to win the genre any more converts; not that it needs any more. LEGEND OF HIMIKO is complex and so full of itself that it's hard to pay attention. This, in turn, makes it guilty of the ultimate sin: Boredom. Though I've seen cartoons that were a lot more confusing and uninteresting, this typical fantasy didn't hold my interest in the slightest. I think the artwork is good, and there's a lot of pretty, colorful images, but the characters and stories are so absolutely typical of the genre that my attention got diverted early on. Anyway, for what it's worth, here are the episodes that appear on this generally disappointing videotape:

Sacred Light of the Bokka: That's pronounced "bow-ka", as in boca hamburgers and boca hot dogs—you know, those decent, meatless substitutes for real meat patties, available at your local supermarket. Anyway, this here "Bokka" (not pronounced "bakka", which is Japanese for 'stupid') thingle is some sort of magical fire or energy sought by a squad of sword-carrying heroines: Imari, Karan and others. The script of this pilot episode has something to do with Himiko Himijuma and Masahiko Kutani, who go on some time-warp while exploring an archeological site.

Fountain of Darkness: Himiko Himijuma and Masahiko Kutani try to cope with this strange fantasy world they're stuck in, and it's not easy, because of an evil empire called the Kuni Army and zombie-ghosts who arise from something called the Fountain of Darkness. But just when this happens and it's getting interesting, we switch to modern times, thanks to another magical transition or whatever.

Jaki, the Night Chasers: Despite his own magical powers that he doesn't know how to utilize, Kutani relies on one of them typically busty, redheaded, large-eyed Japanese girls to protect him from demons in some mysterious forest. He talks about his long lost love Himiko (they got separated somehow) a lot, and they all talk about the Bokka a lot. May the Bokka burgers be with you.

The Hideaway Village: The villagers are attacked by evil conquerors of the Kuni Army, but Kutani and his female sidekick Imari manage to escape, and bicker their way through man-eating plants much like the one in LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS.

That's pretty much all I have to say about the episodes on this tape. They're not actually terrible, but I found it very, very hard to stay focused. The swordplay isn't even staged well, and the romantic subplots take up too much time. So let me be on my way, as I explain the script in one sentence: Prophecy has it that in some other time period or world, an eternal flame will turn a baby into a mighty avenger, just in case an evil empire decides to conquer a not-so-evil-empire.
-Damon Foster

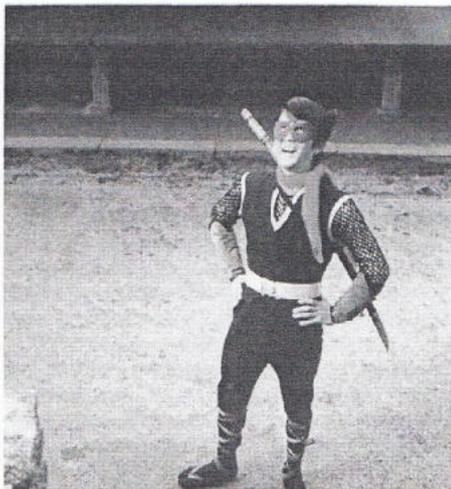
仮面の忍者赤影

NINJASCOPE: THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS

Toei; 1967, Dir.: Tetsuya Yamauchi, Original Story: Mitsuteru Yokoyama, Asst. Dir.: Naoya Furuichi, Film Editor: Tadashi Kawakami, Pro. Manager: Rijoji Kitamura, Photography: Miki Hirayama, Special Effects: Maruyoshi Matsuki, Screenplay: Masaru Igami, Assoc. Pro.: Tetsuo Kato, Toru Hirayama, Masao Takada, Art Dir.: Takao Terajima, Recording: Terunobu Kogane-maru, Lighting: Massichi Sasaki, Cast: Yuzaburo Sakaguchi as The Red Shadow, Yoshinobu Kaneko as The Blue Shadow, Fuyukichi Maki as The White Shadow, Also Appearing: Daisuke Abachi, Hachiro Gen, Bin Amazu, Tomoko Megumi, Reviewed by Damon Foster

If ever there was a Japanese superhero TV series shrouded in mystery, it was KAMEN NO NINJA AKA KAGE ("Mask of Ninja: Red Shadow", "Red Shadow Mask of Ninja", "The Red Shadow of a Masked Ninja", "Masked Ninja with a Red Shadow", "Dude, This Ninja's Shadow Is Red" or however the hell you choose to translate it). This kiddy program is as mysterious as ninjas themselves. Off and on, I've watched episodes of this 1967 program for years and although I like it a lot, I've never been able to figure it out! Hell, our hero 'Red Shadow' doesn't even have a red shadow! His mask is red, but his shadow





is grey-ish, just like everybody else's! I thought seeking one of KAMEN NO NINJA AKA KAGE's rare, English dubbed compilations (this here NINJASCOPE) would explain a lot. But after having watched NINJASCOPE (THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS) several times, I'm stuck with even more questions than answers! What I'm critiquing here is the feature-length movie consisting of episodes 1, 2, 4 & 6, and not the preview compilation (of the same name) mentioned in 1994's *O.C.: The Ninja Issue*. That hastily edited 'highlight reel' made the rounds in the VHS bootlegging underground of the 1990s, and should not be confused with this here DVD release NINJASCOPE (THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS), which at least offers some continuity from scene to scene. However, that grainy collection of clips offers footage from episode 3 (English dubbed footage where the giant toad is finally killed off) which does not appear in this presumably theatrical (?) release! So watching this DVD was frustrating, because I was expecting the marauding toad to be killed off at the finale, since I'd seen this climactic battle already. But alas, it's never resolved in this movie; thanks to a script that has more holes than Swiss cheese. One thing I can say about NINJASCOPE (THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS) is that I saw part of it all the way through!

Since the feature-length movie NINJASCOPE (THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS) obviously isn't complete and yet its conclusion is on that old promotional splice-job, it seems there are plenty of other English dubbed AKA KAGE movies (collecting dust in basements in various countries?) hiding out there, so perhaps the whole series was at one point dubbed in English; in one form or another. In the case of NINJASCOPE, the voices are by none other than the "but still" crowd that dubbed 99% of the martial arts movies that came out of HK in the 1970s. Yet again, recognizable voices are disguised so that one man can supply gruff vocals of several characters. In one scene, a monster-making wizard called "The Toad Man" mumbles something so incoherent, I could have sworn this evil wizard said: "But I have a mighty cock that no enemy in the world is able to vanquish"! I listened to it about seven times, and finally realized he said "art", not "cock" in NINJASCOPE! Two other English-dubbed AKA KAGE movies (WATARI THE CONQUEROR and WATARI AND THE FANTASTICKS) have surfaced on Japanese DVD, but both have

much different dubbing than that of NINJASCOPE. Other elusive film titles include WATARI: NINJA BOY, which I've not been able to track down. Equally scarce is the ultra-rare, if not non-existent WATARI AND THE 7 MONSTERS. In comparing NINJASCOPE with the other two movies I've seen, I think it's the best of the three. Heroic Aka Kage (Yuzaburo Sakaguchi) is translated faithfully as "Red Shadow", and nobody in NINJASCOPE is referred to as "Watari" or any other irrelevant names that cash-in on [unrelated] hit movies. So NINJASCOPE is the most faithful to the original TV program. Also, NINJASCOPE has a good balance of action, comedy and fantasy; the ratio tries its best to introduce us to our heroic ninjas Red Shadow, Blue Shadow and White Shadow despite hasty, low-budget source material. Being a children's series comparable to that of Sid & Marty Kroft stuff, it's pretty colorful, but NINJASCOPE rarely gets ridiculously over-the-top.

Despite confusion & frustration, I'm giving NINJASCOPE a 'thumbs up'. How often do you get to see the famous Japanese AKA KAGE series dubbed in English?! Since I'm a few years older than the program itself, I love the cheesy, old-school elements I grew up with: Laughable miniatures, artificial-looking sets, bad fight-scenes, a theme song that sounds like circus music, and the occasional giant monster. I recall only two rampaging rubber-suits in this one, but since the toad costume is a hand-me-down ("Oh-Gama", or "Dai Gama") from Toei's THE MAGIC SERPENT, all the better. Things like NINJASCOPE & AKA KAGE (all of which owe something to the folk-tale "Jiraiya Goketsu Monogatari") allow me to relive my childhood. But because it's an obscure series, it offers new (to me) adventures, not just nostalgia. So anybody who grew up on stuff like old-school dai-kaiju and chanbara will enjoy NINJASCOPE for generating both old memories and new experiences; NINJASCOPE offers the best of both worlds. Younger generations reared on CGI or even 1970s & 1980s stuff might see NINJASCOPE as unbelievably tacky, however. Yes, NINJASCOPE/AKA KAGE came out a few years before Japan's Golden Age of superheroes, at a time when Japanese TV wasn't that sophisticated; and it certainly shows. But I see this cheesy crudeness as "cute". You know, like when some stupid little kid does a lame drawing and you're expected to say it's good. If NINJASCOPE were a little boy, I would pat it on the head condescendingly and put on a fake smile. When NINJASCOPE went outside to play, I'd cease biting my lip, and bust out laughing. This consistently amusing movie can be broken down into four chapters:

1. KAIBUTSU BAHOSHI (The Toad-Man Apparition) [04/05/1967] When samurai Hanbei's agents don't return to the palace after infiltrating a magical cult of villains, it's time to hire heroes who materialize

out of thin air: Red Shadow and the obnoxious kid Blue Shadow. Not a bad episode, but both heroes are only vaguely introduced, and watch for a scene where a monstrous statue drops a heavy object onto a man's leg. In the very next shot, the object seems to have disappeared and the crushed victim runs away. Too bad the budget didn't allow for inserts & retakes! For the finale, that giant toad chases Red Shadow.

2. KOGA NO AKUDUJI (The Kouga's Evil Child) [04/12/1967]

Black-faced villain Jinai impersonates samurai Ban and unleashes some cheap, cloth-covered blockhead "puppet ninjas" in Lord Tochiro's castle. But things go from amusing to stupid when we meet another villain: A circus clown who rides a kite! Our third hero, White Shadow, is finally introduced—but he too becomes weightless and rides kites (which sound like electric motors, no less!).

3. KAIKI SHINOBI YASHIKI (The Mysterious Spy's Mansion) [04/26/1967]

Samurai Hanbei's soldiers are escorting rifles to be used in the battle with Kosumi Valley's evil sorcerers. So the three 'shadows' decide to aid the convoy, using another transportation kite—which sounds like a tractor!

4. KYOFU NO DAI MA ZO (Scary Big Evil Figure) [05/10/67]

It's a fun chapter to end NINJASCOPE with, despite a confusing sequence where Red Shadow impersonates somebody else impersonating Red Shadow—or whatever. Otherwise, there's exciting swordplay, cute 'outdoor' sets obviously

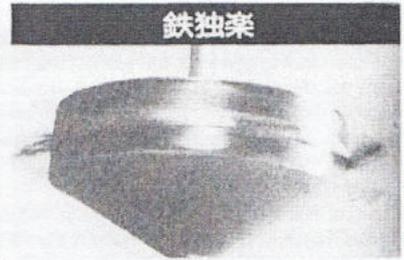




悪童子 (露谷七人衆)



甲賀幼妖齋



鉄独楽



魔一貫 (露谷七人衆)



千念塞



墓法師 (露谷七人衆)



金目像



改造後



傀儡甚内 (露谷七人衆)

The Villains of NINJASCOPE

shot on a sound-stage, and for the finale, a giant statue comes to life so the heroes blow it up. The script also has something to do with the bad guys hassling some Buddhist monk. The monk's daughter looks half-Caucasian.

Naturally, not all the cast members are still with us: Lead hero Yuzaburo Sakaguchi (1941-2003) died of brain hemorrhage in his home of Fukuoka, and cancer victim Fuyukichi Maki (1930-1998) is best remembered as "Tombei" in THE SAMURAI, a program popular in Australia and the Philippines in the 1960s. He was no stranger to period fantasies, having also played a sidekick in NINJAARASHI (Toei; 1972), not to mention a role in 1988's CYBER NINJA. Equally prolific in the genre was Bin Amatsu (here credited as Bin "Amazu"). I think he died in the early 1990s, and is known for villainous roles (THE MAGIC SERPENT, "Spider" in THE SAMURAI, etc.). He appeared in anything from THE STREET-FIGHTER to America's BAD NEWS BEARS GO TO JAPAN! At the time of this writing, the energetic yet annoying boy (Yoshinobu Kaneko) was still alive, but all grown up of course. As an adult, he still puts his thumb to his nose because that's one of Blue Shadow's many stupid gestures. It's been rumored (never proven) that Yoshinobu Kaneko's 'ninja-boy' roles were popular enough through out Asia that he was in Chinese-Japanese co-productions in the late 1960s and/or early 1970s, perhaps under titles like MAGIC SWORD OF WATARI or WATARI AND THE SEVEN MONSTERS. Perhaps the truth will never be known. This former

child star's brother is none other than Mitsunobu Kaneko (Johnny Sokko himself!). Last time I checked, Yoshinobu Kaneko even had a website: <http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~jd3t-kkc/Profile.html> But his brother Yoshinobu Kaneko died in 1997; it's sad to think that Johnny Sokko himself is probably a worm-farm by now.

The opening NINJASCOPE credits are the same as those of the TV show except for a familiar voice which proudly narrates: "The Red Shadow is coming!". Afterwards, we quickly see that the setting of this unintentional comedy is feudal Japan (despite giant futuristic vehicles which spin like flying saucers!), where three secret agents are helping protect a local lord from an evil cult called the Golden Eye Sect, which is terrifying the townsfolk into worshipping the Gold Eye God (this statue is a poor man's Majin). Though the villains possess magic powers, so do the three heroic ninjas. Not only that, but Red Shadow and the boys have James Bond-ish gadgets which the setting clearly pre-dates; to say the least! But they're evenly matched with the villains; magical ninjas who also utilize advanced machines & vehicles alongside the more time-friendly weapons like swords, guns & the occasional shuriken. With such futuristic devices, it's a wonder that so many characters still wear kimonos and samurai armor, but in the world of far-fetched fantasy, it all seems to work. During the movie, these goofy shenanigans have our boys dodge ninjas, clowns, sorcerers and ultimately the stone giant Golden Eye God itself. They seem to destroy this huge villain,

but when the remains of it disappear, the story is kept open for sequels. Sequels I hope to review in the future, if I can find them. ***1/2 - Damon Foster



CUTIE HONEY

Towani; 2004, In Association with: Vap, Avex Inc. & Warner Bros., Director: Hideaki Anno, Original creator: Go Nagai Animation director Tadashi Hiramatsu, Animation Character Design: Tadashi Hiramatsu, Costume Design: Dango Takeda & Yutaka Izubuchi, Assistant Designer: Katsuya Terada, Martial Arts Choreographer: Yukari Oshima, Running Time: 93 min., Cast: Eriko Satoh, Jun Murakami, Mikako Ichikawa, Eisuke Sakai, Hairi Katagiri, Mayumi Shintani, Mitsuhiro Oikawa, Shie Kohinata, Hideaki Anno, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Even during the height of my 'anti-anime' phase, I've always had a soft spot for android heroine Cutie Honey Kisaragi. Now that I've seen this live action version played by the sexy Eriko Satoh, I naturally have a hard spot for the character. Her beauty, limberness and comedic timing really highlighted this live-action movie

based on the classic Go Nagai TV cartoon CUTIE HONEY (Toei Animation; 1973). I've not seen that program in ten years, and I've not seen the comicbook in well over 20 years—so I can't make comparisons or judge faithfulness. But I can say the movie is definitely entertaining at times.

The first half is a pretty zany comedy, but the humor misses something in translation. There are some gags that drag on and make no sense other than to take up space, like our heroine serving tea to her co-workers in some office. The goofy characters (especially lead Eriko Satoh herself) really ham it up. The energetic performances make it clear they're trying to be funny, but it also makes it clear that they're only trying to be funny to Japanese people, and Japanese fans of the program they're spoofing in particular. Granted, the subtitles I saw came from another of them Chinese disks. Yet again the subtitles disappear at random, particularly during the seemingly important lines delivered by Jun Murakami's character (Seiji Hayami who has funny hair and a funny hat; a nod to his look in the '70s cartoon). Though this silly movie is lively, and colorful/nostalgic in an Austin Powers sort of way, it's not wacky enough to make subtitles unnecessary— CUTIE HONEY gets pretty talky toward the middle, when it all goes downhill. The first ten minutes are great, and I really liked the scene of a monstrous spider-lady running on the ceiling, chasing Eriko Satoh & co-hero Mikako Ichikawa down an office building's hallway. But the middle of CUTIE HONEY is a bore as they toss in the character development and a couple of irritating ballads. The beginning battle on some island, and some swordplay at the finale made this crazy movie worth a three star (***) rating, but the dull middle, and the irritating, unbelievably sappy ending deduct at least a star (*).

I had to scan forward more than once, but on the whole, I recommend this quirky farce to fans of superhero action. Whether you're into anime or tokusatsu (Sentai, Kamen Rider, etc.), you'll get a kick out of this somewhat amusing movie. The costumes & sets are well-done, and although there's plenty of CGI FX, it's only used

Erika Satoh



when necessary and not CGI overkill. CUTIE HONEY isn't great, but I've seen worse. Yukari Oshima herself staged the few martial arts fights, but the action scenes are designed to look more like that in anime than that in a martial arts film. In the final analysis, the movie should have been a lot shorter.

The story has our sexy android battling the monstrous mutants of Panther Claw. That's the basic premise, but subplots include reporter Seiji Hayami (Jun Murakami), police woman Natsuko Aki (Mikako Ichikawa), and much talk of the "I System". It's what empowers Cutie Honey to fight and transform into her many sexy costumes/alter-egos. It's also what lead villain Sister Jill (some sort of gloomy "tree monster") is after, and the reason she's sending her henchmen and dangerous monsters to go cause mayhem. Cutie Honey's climactic swordfight with the mutants (with names like "Scarlet Claw" and "Cobalt Claw") at Tokyo Tower is okay, but the movie keeps going. And down it goes! And I thought the middle was bad! When Cutie Honey confronts the solemn villainess (Sister Jill), there's all this dead serious, sappy bullshit about "The Power of Love", or words to that effect. If this tugs at your heart strings, that's great. I found it pretentious and embarrassing. But at least the villains are all defeated. ** -DF



ULTRAMAN 40TH ANNIVERSARY SALUTE:

I hadn't originally planned on doing anything on ULTRAMAN (Tsuburaya Productions; 1966) in this issue, because the show is old and I've critiqued it many times. But being the classic program's 40th anniversary, and since it inspired me a great deal, I felt the 2006 Edition of "Kaizo Ningen" should have something on the series which changed the face of TV as we know it. There's been a lot of interest in ULTRAMAN in recent years. Not only did I host a panel called Ultraman: A 40th Anniversary Tribute (complete with clips, comedy, trivia and actual props from the show) at G-Fest 13, but I attended Ultramania, a weekend of ULTRAMAN-related films at San Francisco's Castro Theater (see this issue's Convention Reviews). All this plus an official DVD releases (see my review) of English-dubbed ULTRAMAN in America, and it's about time! Before we get to my critique of these new disks, let's see what fans, experts, readers & friends have to say about this inspirational program.....

Madison Carter: It remains the best of its genre, if not my favorite (that goes to the

cheesier SPECTREMAN). It had the right balance; never too serious, but not aimed at the rug rats, either.

Donald Fong: Low budget, yet creative, charming & fun. The actors look to their roles well. The costumes, models, & props were cool. Maybe the best of the 1960s Tokusatsu shows.

Paul Haberman: I wasn't lucky enough to watch it on TV in the 60's/70's, but it is still a timeless classic of the Japanese super hero genre. Even after 40 years, it is an enjoyable sci-fi/action series with memorable characters and monsters. The original is still the best!

Shaun Hite: As a kid, I read a vague synopsis of it in a TV reference book, and thought it sounded great. Several years later I actually got to see the show, and boy it was worth the wait. All I can really say is that it was truly groundbreaking & an inspiration to all that followed.

Brett Homenick: ULTRAMAN revolutionized television like few shows anywhere in the world have been able to do. While the red and silver superhero from M78 spawned a host of imitators, none could ever reach its worldwide popularity.

Bob Johnson: It's far and away my favorite series of all time, both growing up and now.

M.G. Keller: Neither the first Ultra series nor the first show involving giant heroes fighting monsters (SPACE GIANTS had it beat by a few months), but, for all intents and purposes, the one that started it all. Monster designs are classic, more so than in any sequel series (ULTRASEVEN comes close). An entire sub-genre of tokusatsu owes its influence to ULTRAMAN and it is, ultimately, the barometer by which every other Japanese superhero show is measured.

J.D. Lees: Our paths have crossed only sporadically, so he and his family were still much of a mystery to me for decades (I was never exposed to Ultraman as a child). Now, thanks to DVD, I've seen ULTRAMAN and enjoy it immensely for many of the same reasons I like Godzilla movies. It's comforting to know there's so much about Ultraman I haven't yet experienced. It'll give me something to do in my retirement.

Jason A Longden: Prior to the recent North American release, I'd been mostly an ULTRAMAN virgin. I saw TIGA during its brief Saturday morning stint, but wasn't able to appreciate its history. Now that I have, I see I've missed much. It's so full of inspired creative lunacy that it's a wonder to behold. At the same time, along with that lunacy is a good heart, filled with hope for the future. It's a somewhat goonier take on the same ideals that Gene Roddenberry brought to STAR TREK, that humanity will prevail (even if we need the help of a giant alien), but it leaves you with an even more infectiously positive outlook.

Lee Merritt: I first watched an episode (the first one) in 1971. I have been a fan since. I enjoy all of these series—the storylines, the characters, the monsters, and all the Ultra's.

Mike Quebec: A favorite for myself & fellow classmates at Alvarado Middle School in Union City (CA) between 1978 & 1980. I would rush home every day just to make it in time to see our hero take on Bemlar, Gohorasaurus, Red King, & Kira at 4:30 p.m. on Channel 2. Pretty catchy them song, too!

August Ragone: Even if giant monsters aren't your thing, there's no denying that ULTRAMAN remains popular around the world, and even after four decades, Eiji Tsuburaya's series still allows us to dream.

Mark Rainey: As a kid, I always loved visiting my grandparents because their TV picked up shows that didn't air where I lived, such as DARK SHADOWS and ULTRAMAN. After all these years, I still get that wonderful twinge of excitement when I hear ULTRAMAN's distinctive opening sequence. Happy Ultra-anniversary.

Steve "Mr Maskrado" Ross: the beginning of a lifelong love affair. Even as a kid, I knew that was a hundred times cooler than anything offered in the networks' watered-down Saturday morning line-ups. And of course, there are friends I've made as a direct result of being an ULTRAMAN fan: long-time kindred spirits like John Marshall, Ben Dunn, John Ingram, and our own Damon Foster himself.

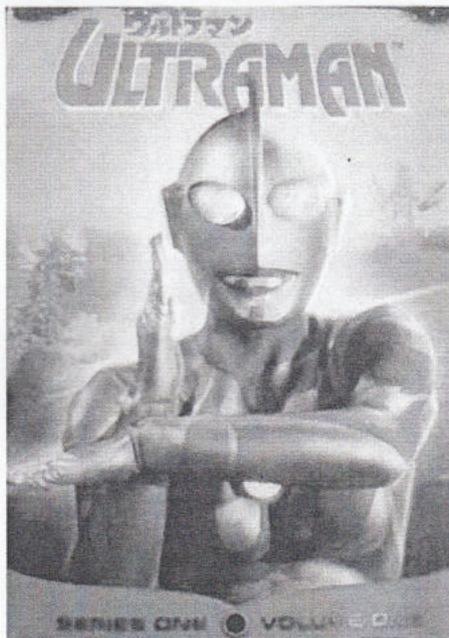
Omar Sayyah: I love this great series for its special effects, but Ultraman is a fuckin' asshole. He kills giant reptiles. I want to make a video where Godzilla kills him and his whole family. I'm a fuckin' dragon priest and a buffoon who can't get out of bed. I'm a joke who believes God is a reptile. I fuckin' hate it when reptiles get killed. I fuckin' wanna' watch reptiles break shit.

Danny Tokarz: It remains as the greatest Japanese Tokusatsu series even 40 years after its debut. Truly groundbreaking & destined to be ripped off forever, an integral part of my childhood and has my adoration to this day.

Armand Vaquer: I know diddly-squat about ULTRAMAN.

Alan Westby: It was a daily dose of Godzilla

to sustain me from one Saturday to the next. The Science Patrol's adventures informed a 10-year-old me how commonplace and varied monsters are (snow monsters, desert monsters, island monsters, underground monsters, etc.). Monsters that eat oil, and monsters that eat pearls. They can be diabolically clever or oafishly stoopid; funny or tragic. But no matter the nature of the monster, each of them will eventually have its butt kicked by our hero. And ignore that flap of rubber coming loose from Red King's leg. Thinking through the implications of that will bring your whole 10-year-old belief system crashing down.



DVD REVIEW: ULTRAMAN

Released on July 19, 2006 by BCI Eclipse (Los Angeles, CA), a wholly owned subsidiary of Navarre Corporation (NASDAQ Symbol: NAVR). CEO/Chairman: David Catlin, President: Ed Goetz, Senior Vice President: Greg Glass, George Lukan, & Jay Catlin, Corporate Financial Officer: Mike Dowd, Controller: Dennis Medici. Reviewed by Damon Foster

First of all, my reaction to this disappointing series of disks is only slightly biased because of that whole dispute between Tsuburaya Productions (Japan) and Chaiyo Productions (Thailand). For those who don't know and actually give a damn, both companies collaborated in the 1970s to produce that feature-length piece of crap, THE SIX ULTRA BROTHERS VS THE MONSTER ARMY. But the owner of Chaiyo, Sompote Saengduenchai (how the hell do you pronounce that?!) later claimed that his involvement with the whole Ultraman franchise goes back way further

than that. The Thai businessman's name has never appeared in any official sources I've seen; maybe because nobody could pronounce it! But truthfully, I think the old geezer fabricated the whole thing. Allegedly, his proof was to show people a photo of himself showing Eiji Tsuburaya a book of photos of various Buddha shrines. The idea being that Sompote Saengduenchai and Tsuburaya both studied pictures of Buddha when "they" designed Ultraman! But in reality, it seems the extent of their relationship was when Sompote was living in Japan as a film student in the 1960s, and happened to visit Toho Studios (where he met Eiji Tsuburaya). Jump to 1996: Weeks after the passing of Tsuburaya Productions' then president, Noboru Tsuburaya (son of Eiji). Using a letter supposedly issued & signed by the late Eiji Tsuburaya, Chaiyo Productions now claimed (get this!) to have exclusive rights to distribute many of the Ultraman programs outside of Japan! Though the current Tsuburaya Productions representative Kazuo Tsuburaya (son of Noboru) dismissed the letter as a forgery, there are some sources that claim the courts ultimately sided with Chaiyo Productions! Last I heard, the battle is still on going. It seems that for some time to come, Thai lawyers & Japanese lawyers will be busier than a horny redneck at a family reunion! It's unlikely that Tsuburaya Productions would hand their bread & butter over to the Thai guys, but that hasn't stopped Chaiyo from releasing this DVD set commercially! I wonder if one day, Tsuburaya Productions will sue Chaiyo into oblivion for these disks! Time will tell.

That said; let's get to the quality of these Chaiyo/BCI releases themselves. First of all, I'm glad ULTRAMAN is finally available in English—on DVD. The picture quality is superb and as I watched them, the series itself once more held my attention as I re-lived my childhood. I was again thrilled by Ultraman's battle with his imposter Zarab in episode #18 ("The Brother from Another Planet"), and even after all these years I shed a tear over the way Gabadon is treated in #15 ("The Terrifying Cosmic Rays"). Just seeing this classic program in such a clean form is a delight, after grainy TV broadcasts in the 1960s & 1970s, and unwatchable VHS bootlegs in the 1980s & 1990s. So the fun is still there no matter how old I get, and on that level, these BCI/Chaiyo products entertained me. It's great that finally, we can see all this with optional English dubbing, or the Japanese soundtrack, and/or English subtitles. The labels on the DVDs are pretty slick, and an extra feature includes interviews with three voice-dubbers. Since I borrowed (never purchased) these disks, I was able to enjoy them for free and had nothing to lose. So the experience was consistently amusing. But don't throw out your old VHS bootlegs just yet.....

Starting with episode 1 ("Ultra Operation No. 1"), I was appalled at the sloppy sound editing! The disk gets off to a bad start, with voices much lower than the sound effects, causing me to constantly re-adjust (up and down) my TV's volume! More than once, I heard 'double' music that just sounds weird. As I watched other episodes, there were frequent reminders that they did a lousy job when they took the original English soundtrack (as dubbed by Peter Fernandez, Corrine Orr, etc.) and re-mastered it to



high-quality Japanese footage [from some other release]. Fans have done this sort of thing (be it ULTRAMAN, ULTRAMAN TARO, Chiba's THE EXECUTIONER & STREETFIGHTER, etc.) for years, to get the best of both worlds. Naturally, the fans' re-mastering projects of the 1980s & 1990s weren't perfect, because these bootleggers were limited to analog technology. So they couldn't very well edit a VHS tape because it's often done in one shot, depending on what type of VCR was used for this merging. Naturally there would be continuity gaps in sound whenever something changed (i.e. shots missing from the American prints), unless the individual pressed the Pause button and painstakingly edited a VHS tape! So the occasional dead-air and other sound issues were expected for these crude fan dubs. But naturally, I assumed that with actual corporations releasing these ULTRAMAN disks, and using modern digital technology no less, the soundtracks would be sufficient for once. But guess what!? The BCI disk's soundtrack is just as sloppy as the fan-made crap from the 1980s! I can't believe this shit (with sound drop-outs and all) is being released commercially; people are actually paying money for a substandard product! This junk is sold in Best Buy and other stores!!! There are amateur-ish, distracting cuts from English to Japanese and back! I think the worst thing about the language jumps is that this continuity issue could have easily been solved. Scenes abruptly switch from English to Japanese, because allegedly, BCI didn't have those scenes in English. Yet the rest of us certainly did! Bootleggers & collectors have had entire English episodes for years! The BCI idiots obviously didn't look very hard to find the English version's "missing" (hah!) scenes! It's a pretty sad day when all the fans have complete footage and yet the so-called "professionals" do not! As I watched these disks, my jaw dropped and I just shook my head slowly, in dismay.

I also didn't like their font for the "Ultraman" text used on the DVD & box title. It looks too much like that of Australia's ULTRAMAN: TOWARD THE FUTURE (1991). But that minor complaint is a question of taste. I also thought it was stupid to play the English-language theme song ("Here he comes from the sky", etc.) twice, during the opening credits. The original Japanese song is twice as long during the credits, so they had to stretch out the music somehow. But I don't think it was necessary to even play the Japanese graphics, since these disks are clearly intended for English speaking audiences and not Japanese (who have always had readily accessible ULTRAMAN episodes available to them). By including the Japanese credits, it tarnishes the 'nostalgia' element, because this is not how the series aired on American TV. The American opening credits are instead relegated to the Bonus Features. Like I said, the Bonus Features also include some old interview with dubbers Corrine Orr, Peter Fernandez and Earl Hammond ('Hayata' himself). It appears to be from the 1990s, and could have benefited from an external microphone. Another comment on the Bonus Features, but which is neither good nor bad, is the way they did their "Kaiju (Monster) Profiles". Over the years, the names of the episodic monsters have been translated & spelled many ways, and I guess all have equal merit. I tend to name the monsters however

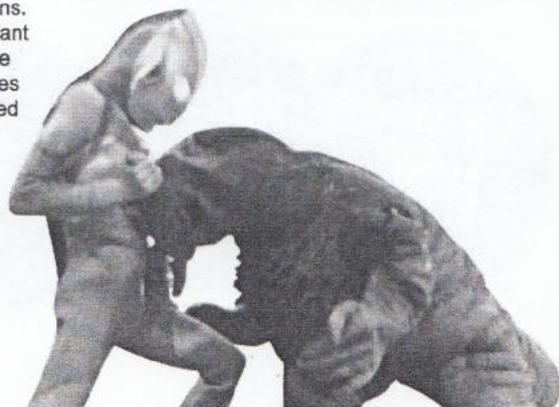
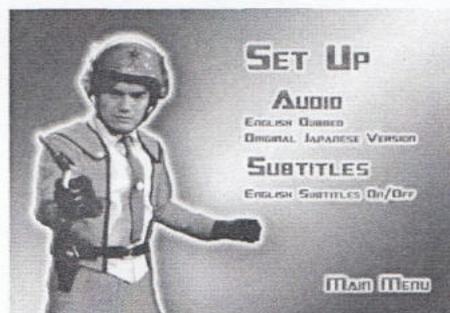
they were pronounced in the English version. What I call Aboras ("Avorus" in an old Japanese book's English section), they call "Abolas". The monster in the pilot episode has been called "Bemlar", "Bemura" and "Bemular", and on this disk's profile, it's spelled "Bemler". The infamous Godzilla alter-ego Jiras (AKA "Jirass") is spelled "Jiraasu", but is clearly pronounced Kira/Keyra on the English dubbed episode itself. Oh well, spellings of monster names are trivial and I could go on forever. But I won't.

In my opinion, Chaiyo's take-over (or whatever you choose to call it) has delivered an inferior product. I won't comment on who's right or who's wrong in the Tsuburaya vs. Chaiyo dispute, because I don't care. But Tsuburaya Productions owns the master prints both in Japanese and English. As such, a legitimate Tsuburaya release would have been better. Then we wouldn't have cropped dialogue, as in "I doo-da!" I was expecting Captain Mura to start singing "The Camp Town Ladies sing this song, doo-da!" But the line, in complete form, was originally: "I do, Doctor." Hopefully, history will ultimately paint a different picture of English ULTRAMAN DVDs. I pray that eventually, Tsuburaya will get their rights back and release the program appropriately, and that this set will be forgotten or collected as an oddity for unintended humor ("People were selling this to the public?", future generations might say).

In the final analysis, this set strikes me as being "okay". It's not "great" or even "good", but it's better than nothing. Perhaps there's a way to end this review on a couple positive notes:

1. The Thais have many different Ultra programs dubbed in English (some sources say they're dubbed in Thailand, while others say Malaysia; not that I know the difference), rarities like English ULTRAMAN TARO and English ULTRAMAN ACE. If Chaiyo wants to actually be constructive (and make something available that's truly scarce), they should make these latter [English-language] Ultra-programs available on DVD in America, instead of something so common as the original ULTRAMAN. Chaiyo and BCI—if you're listening, this is a way for you to redeem yourselves!

2. I also found it interesting to read the subtitles while simultaneously hearing the English dubbing. This creates an over-all better view of the story. The dubbing takes liberties so that the dialogue is less awkward in English, while the subtitles are more literal. In episode 2 ("Defeat the Invaders"), the English dubbing omits the fact that Ultraman's beam is made of "Specium" (or "Spaceum"). But it's a key point in the Japanese version, because Specium is one of the few elements that can destroy the Baltans. So when Ultraman's beam finally kills the giant Baltan, the subtitled dialogue reads: "It's the Specium Ray". The dubbing, however, states simultaneously: "The Specium wasn't needed after all!" -Damon Foster



Hong Kong HEROES



Welcome to yet another edition of Hong Kong Heroes, where we examine movies from Hong Kong, Taiwan, sometimes Mainland China, and sometimes even Korea. While inclusion of the occasional Taiwanese & Korean movie might confuse this column with Asian Oddities, the fact remains that many Chinese movies are shot in Korea and other countries. So it gets difficult to determine what's really a "Chinese movie" and what isn't. Awe hell, who am I kidding?! The only reason I'm making this excuse is because I couldn't come up with a 1960s HK movie! Yes, I still like to include movies from several decades (the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s and so on) and this issue, the only 1960s flick I could find was Taiwan's YOUNG FLYING HERO. Oh well, close enough! I'm just glad I found this elusive gem after all this time, and besides, director Tang Chim also directed some Shaw Bros. movies! So there! -Damon Foster

1960s:

YOUNG FLYING HERO
 ("HSIAO FEI HSIA", "SHAO FEI SHA") United Filming; 1969. Director: Tong Chim (Tang Chim), Writer: Poon Lui/Peter Pan Lei, Production Managers: Lai Gua Tsai, Chen Ri Liang, Jung Fa Gung, & Chien Kuo Shu, Storyboards: Cho Chu Liang, Dir. of Photography: Jeung Shen, Cheung Lua Shen & Yu Dong Shan, Film Editor: Shen Yieh Kang, Special Effects: Wen Ju, Lighting: Liu Yi Min, Production Manager: Chen Ching Fong, Wardrobe: Yen Pin, Props: Na Ri,

Makeup: Wen Ju, Photographer: Shieh Jin Lou, Sound Recording: Chien Chung Studios, Cast: Regina Pai Ping, Ang Gwoh/Ba Ge (also known as Pa Gwoh), Chiu Keung/Zhao Jiang, Hon Kong/Han Jiang, Tin Mung/Tian Meng, Cheung Jan/Jiang Zhen, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Trying to categorize this rare fantasy is harder than getting President Bush to admit he's brought hopeless doom to the world. Swordplay fantasies aren't uncommon in the various parts of China, but giant monster movies are best left to the Japanese. So when I heard them Chinese combined "dai-kaiju" and Chinese-style costume drama, I had unfair, high expectations. I thought: "Swords and giants! In 1969! The tail end of classic Japanese monster movies and the beginning of classic HK chop-sockey! It can only be a masterpiece because it's got the best of both worlds! It can't go wrong!!" But I was rather disappointed by this hasty, crude, awkward rip-off of Japanese flicks like THE MAGIC SERPENT and NINJASCOPE: THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS (see review on page 40). To me, YOUNG FLYING HERO is an obscure time-capsule into a mysterious era. It's a genre that creates rumors of Taiwanese-Japanese co-productions such as THE MAGIC SWORD OF WATARI (presumed English title), which may have also been known as WATARI AND THE SEVEN MONSTERS. This incredibly rare, perhaps lost movie supposedly put actor Yoshinobu Kaneko (AKA KAGE KAMEN NO NINJA) in with an otherwise Taiwanese cast and got released to Belgium as WATARI ET LES SEPT MONSTRES ("Watari and the

seven monsters"). French title: SUPERBOY, LE VOLEUR DE HONG KONG ("Super Boy, the thief from Hong Kong"). For that film, I could only come up with these titles. Normally, that's grounds for me to dispute its existence, but if I hadn't just watched the feature-length YOUNG FLYING HERO, I might have thought somebody only imagined this one too. I suspect this here YOUNG FLYING HERO is somehow related to THE MAGIC SWORD OF WATARI; perhaps one is a rip-off of the other. Maybe both were inspired by Japan's NINJASCOPE: THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS. It's a genre that seemed to thrive in Asia in the late 1960s, but has long since been forgotten. For what it's worth, YOUNG FLYING HERO is part of a Taiwanese film series that also includes at least one other film, the even rarer DEVIL FIGHTER. DEVIL FIGHTER pits the same heroic boy (then child star Pa Gwoh) against giant bats similar to those in LATTITUDE ZERO (Toho; 1969) from around the same time. YOUNG FLYING HERO is so rare & mysterious that I've never even heard of its production company: "Lei Hu Yim Yeh Yo Shen Gung Su". The reason I credited this obscure company as "United Filming" (far left column) is because that's how this Chinese name is broken down: Lei Hu means United, Yim Yeh means Filming, and I think Yo Shen Gung Su means Corp. Ltd.

Anyway, this long, talky, boring, untranslated (the only subtitles are also in Chinese), Mandarin-language movie looks like your average cheap, Shaw Brothers wannabe movie. The costumes, sets & props had me thinking: "All

Scenes from 1969's Young Flying Hero





we need now are Jimmy Wang Yu or The Monkey King". Some elements are similar to THE KINGDOM AND THE BEAUTY (Shaw Bros.; 1959), while certain plot twists reminded me of Japanese stuff like THE MAGIC SERPENT (Toei; 1966) or the "Majin" movies. I bet writer Peter Pan Lei at least heard of Japan's folk-tale Jiraiya Goketsu Monogatari (The Story of the Gallant Jiraiya) which inspired THE MAGIC SERPENT and countless other movies & TV Shows. The Lead hero is child actor Pa Gwoh (AKA Ba Ge, Ang Gwoh), whose sword skills are pretty poor. While a few of the acrobatic stunt doubles are okay, YOUNG FLYING HERO fails as a martial arts film because the action scenes are too crude. The sound effects are inefficient, boring music probably stolen from Italian sword & sandal junk fails to add excitement, and the choreography also comes off as unsophisticated when seen today—in fact the way they staged certain action scenes just had me thinking, "What just happened?" But bad swordfights are better than no swordfights at all, right? Right! As crude (even for 1969) as these battles are, at least they're amusing—amusing enough that they alone deserve a couple stars (**).

The real jaw-dropper is the brief inclusion of a giant toad! This huge amphibian is a pretty cheap costume, and although Asian folklore has had its share of monstrous frogs & loads, this creature was obviously designed because of the giant toad costume in THE MAGIC SERPENT and NINJASCOPE: THE MAGIC WORLD OF NINJAS. This O-Gama wannabe just abruptly appears out of nowhere, in time to battle some sort of giant reptile (dinosaur? Dragon?) that also appears inexplicably. Our young hero (Pa Gwoh) flies into the toad's mouth, presumably to control it when it battles the other behemoth. But I suspect this whole dai-kaiju battle to be added at the last minute! We never really see the human actors react to the marauding giants, and I suspect these creatures weren't originally in the script. It was probably an after thought, added in post-production. Hell, the monsters could even be stock-footage from some other movie (completed or not). I'm guessing that the hero (Pa Gwoh) and villain each become or control a colliding giant, before squaring off

in human form for the climactic swordfight near the water. I'm guessing all this because that's how its presumed inspiration, THE MAGIC SERPENT ends. As for the quality of the two cold-blooded giants in YOUNG FLYING HERO, they're definitely not up to the standards of Japanese movies of the time. If nothing else, the two costumes compare to the quality of the "Ultra monsters" of Japanese TV. There seems to be a scaling issue between the toad and the dinosaur—this villainous reptile is much larger than his opponent. Both could have been constructed independently (different origins & projects?) of each other for all I know.

If nothing else, it's a humorous look at two inexperienced actors clomping around in clumsy monster costumes. This 'glorious train-wreck' deserves a star too.

Granted, it's a cheap old Taiwanese movie, so I wasn't expecting state-of-the-art FX. But the crudeness gets frustrating. With a title like YOUNG FLYING HERO, I was expecting the boy to fly all over the place. Most scenes of him in flight don't seem to show his whole body; mostly it's just his head & shoulders with wind & dust blowing past him. Were it not for a couple shots of a miniature figure flying by pagodas and the Great Wall of China, I might not have guessed he was supposed to be airborne (he could have just as easily been standing in the middle of a storm). His co-hero (character name: "Arn Yiu") has a shaved head and ponytail, just like the kid in Japan's COZURE OKAMI (SHOGUN ASSASSIN, LIGHTNING SWORDS OF DEATH, etc.) stuff. But it's obviously a fake bald scalp because it's over-sized. It looks more like a funny hat than a shaved head, and it's hard to suspend my disbelief. Here's an amusing bit of useless trivia: The Chinese title ("Hsiao Fei Hsia", which is literally "Young Flying Hero") was also the nickname for athlete Kobe Bryant, as given to him by the Chinese press.

If it were translated and given more interesting music, I might have really liked this story of evil warlord General Wu-I's army conquering an imperial palace. I guess the emperor is held hostage, and other subplots seem to include a woman (Princess Jueh Yi) who's bedridden and

unconscious, just like in SLEEPING BEAUTY (Disney; 1959). Another famous fairy tale that comes to mind is Aesop's The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs because some bird seems to do that in YOUNG FLYING HERO too. Anyway, General Wu-I's conquest of the emperor's palace is temporary, because of heroic peasant kid Jieh Shu Li (Pa Gwoh). When this spunky little boy isn't outsmarting his greedy, rich, corrupt uncle (character name: Lai Fu), he's in a forest learning magic & swordplay from a wizard called Hsien Hu ("crane"). Our hero's cute sister is some mountain girl called Yueh Fung (nickname: "Hua Lu", which means "Colorful Deer"), played by Hong Ling. After some conspiracies at the palace the flying kid finally guides the vengeful townsfolk to overthrow the villains—resulting in a series of admittedly entertaining skirmishes. In one interesting conflict, he defeats some "spider witch" (remember the monstrous spiders & webs in MONKEY WAR?) and escapes from a giant spider-web. *** -Damon Foster

1970s:

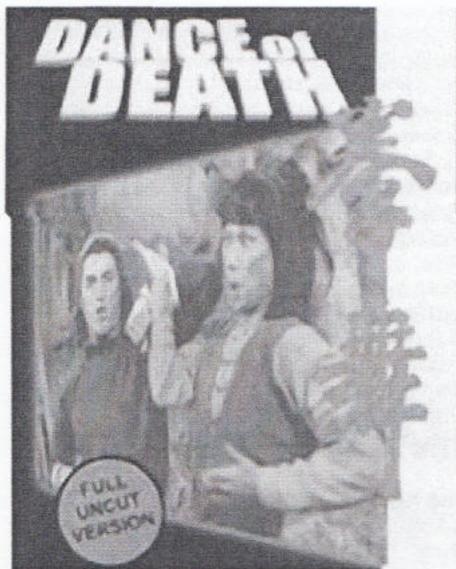
OL' DIRTY KUNG FU

(1979) Presented By: Yu Cheng Chang, Martial Arts Director: Chen Yiet San (AKA Chien Yuet Sun). Producer: Chien Juen. Director: Ho Meng Hwa, Yu Cheng Chun. Cameraman: Li Yue Tong. Music: Chow Fook Leu. Editor: Fah Kung Min. Starring: Simon Yuen (A.K.A. Yuan Hsiao-Tien), Chin Tung, Lau Yat Fan, Cheung Hon Yip, Wang Hum Chen. Reviewed by Shaun Hite

For fans of Simon Yuen's (father of Yuen Woo-Ping) "drunken master" kung fu films, this is by no means his best work. On the same token though, I can honestly say I didn't hate this film either. I've not seen all of Simon Yuen's films featuring the now classic scenario "Look at me, I'm a drunk, dirty, smelly old bum! You want me to teach you kung fu?". But judging from what I have seen, I can definitely say that this film fits the mold. OL' DIRTY KUNG FU is a fun little film, comparable to his roles in DRUNKEN MASTER and SNAKEFIST FIGHTER. One of the main differences in this film compared to other Yuen vehicles is the lack of bizarre training methods that one might expect from a film of this nature. This gimmick is dropped for the film and replaced with Yuen's hobo-like character giving helpful fighting advice instead. I must admit, I would have rather seen some of Yuen's off the wall, but entertaining training methods instead of his helpful hints advise session, but alas this was not to be the case. This film does offer some amusing imagery such as an evil warlord type character who uses his bald head as a weapon, a not so great display of monkey kung fu (complete with overdubbed chimpanzee screams), a kung fu wind-breaking scene, two scenes of men in drag, an exploding watermelon scene, more "you bastards" than you can shake a bamboo stick at, the token antagonistic Japanese villain (in this case he looks like an Asian Tony Orlando and is the arrogant master of a local judo school), and we're even shown how deadly the art of Chinese noodle making can be. Regardless of what you might think of this type of film (love it or hate it), it's worth watching if for any reason just to see Simon Yuen and his much younger and thinner stunt double kick bad

guy butt with his mighty bamboo twig-- I mean Stick!

Our story basically revolves around the character Quan Chen Chi, who is the former student of the famous fighter "Bamboo Stick" (Yuen) and Cliff Lok, who is a drifter that befriends Chen Chi during a fight and is soon posing as Bamboo Stick, using his fame as a do-gooder to score free meals from the grateful townsfolk who apparently have never laid eyes on the real Bamboo Stick (who looks nothing at all like Cliff). Anyway, one thing leads to another and Chi is killed by the evil Yung Fing, a bald warlord type who uses his iron head technique as a lethal weapon and who hates the real Bamboo stick because he killed his son at the beginning of the picture. This caused Fing to swear vengeance against his new enemy, Bamboo Stick, and is what led to the death of Chi, Bamboo's former pupil. Anyway this causes the real Bamboo Stick to wander back into the film after being gone for the entire middle and help Cliff kill the evil warlord with Chinese noodle dough and some good old fashioned kung fu! *** -Shaun Hite



1980s:

DANCE OF DEATH

1980, Supervisor & Prod.: Yen Wu Dong, Dir.: Chen Chi Hwa (Chen Jyh-Hwa), Kung Fu Dir.: Jackie Chan (Chen Yuan-Lung, Chen Lung), Video release: Crash Cinema; 1998, Cast: Angela Mao Ying, Shih Tien, Chin Pei, Shiao Bou-Lo, Chia Kai, Sun Rong-Ge, Reviewed by Damon Foster

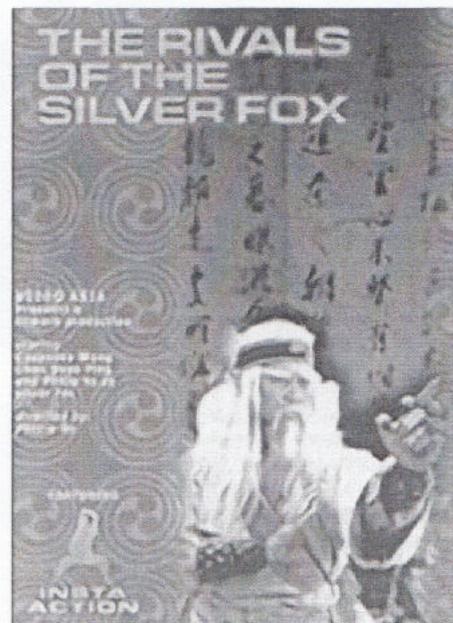
Many people made blatant DRUNKEN MASTER rip-offs (i.e. OL' DIRTY KUNG FU, reviewed previously) in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and, sad to say, even established has-beens like Angela Mao Ying tried their hand at this tired concept. For what it's worth, DANCE OF DEATH is Mao Ying's turn up at bat, resulting in a predictably Hong Kongese farce which offers no originality from a dying art. The scenes and gestures (down to the tiniest detail) are oh-so Hong Kongese that even the casual observer can start to identify the incredibly Chinese stereotypes and clichés. As an expert who's

by now seen most of these kung fu "comedies", the predictable repetition and formulaic antics irritated me all the more. I felt like I had seen this movie a trillion times, and became disinterested almost immediately. From the opening credits of Mao Ying doing a Jackie wannabe kata (choreographed by the man himself, no less), to the scene of her pick-pocketing, I just rolled my eyes and couldn't stay focused on the film. It's amazing that when I made the satirical, shot-on-video spoof HOT DOGS ON THE RUN (which parodied every martial arts gimmick I could squeeze into a single movie), I had never seen nor heard of DANCE OF DEATH. Yet my penniless caper fits DANCE OF DEATH to a "T". Well, not quite. Maybe not to a "T". But it fits it to a capitol "O", at least!

The attempts at humor won't impress anybody who already saw these same old gags (i.e. the bad jokes about farting) in movies like SNAKE-FIST FIGHTER, etc. In one scene, Mao enters a fight wearing a hat while chewing some wheat, and so the music is again stolen from FIST FULL OF DOLLARS. Later, Dean Shek is using various "animal technique" kung fu gimmicks and demonstrates his "Pink Panther Style", so you can guess which theme music is ripped off. Seen today, all the jokes are old and embarrassing, and it's hard to imagine they were still considered funny even back in 1980! The 1980s were upon us, and HK was gearing up for a whole new type of action comedy, fortunately. Unfortunately, however, Mao wouldn't be a part of it because she seemed to retire some time after DANCE OF DEATH. Jackie Chan, who choreographed this movie to make it as much like his hits as possible, was ready for something new and was about to bring his kung fu comedy to international audiences via THE BIG BRAWL. Watching the so-called comedy DANCE OF DEATH is like watching the last of a dying breed, but only if that breed has overstayed its welcome.

If you haven't guessed already, the themes in DANCE OF DEATH are revenge, comedy and training scenes. Angela Mao plays a girl called Fei Fei ("fly fly") who dresses like a man and fools everybody. She also gets a couple eccentric, aging martial artists (one drinks, one carries a long cigar holder) to train her in kung fu. As the subtitles say, "Whoever's kung fu is the most good"! To be fair, the fight scenes are pretty good. Fortunately, we can see these action scenes in all their widescreen glory, because the VHS tape (Crash Cinema; 1998) is in the beautifully letterboxed format. This makes not only every kick visible, but the Chinese subtitles are quite legible, except when there's a white background. Crash Cinema's superb job is better than the movie itself. Getting back to the script, Mao Ying just keeps on learning kung fu from the two idiots, so she can take on the local villains, as everybody's avenging somebody. The fights are of the typically mechanical, calculated variety (swingy-arm, patty cake kung fu, animal technique, or whatever you choose to call it), which is over-choreographed and ultimately loses any sense of thrill or adventure. Granted, everyone involved is talented & energetic, and even a comedian like Dean Shek is made to look good, but within minutes, it all gets tedious. Even as I scanned forward, her victorious, climactic duel with the stereotypically white-haired

villain was never-ending. * -DF



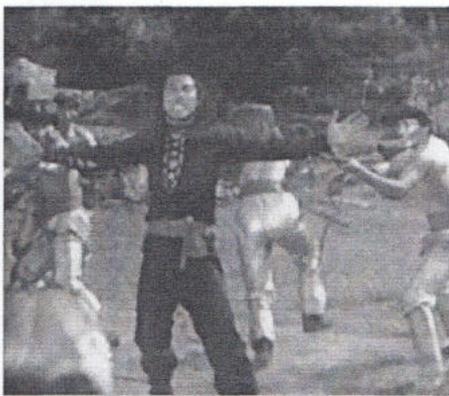
RIVALS OF THE SILVER FOX

Regal Video; 1982, Dir.: Chan Siu-Pang, Producers: Joseph Lai & Tomas Tang, Martial Arts Instructor: Chen Shao Peng, Cast: Casanova Wong, Barry Lam, Chen Shao Peng, Lee Fat Yuen, Han Ming Wun Chung Chin, Bui Han Chi, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Any movie made by Joseph Lai & Tomas Tang can be considered a rip-off of something, and in this case, the title makes it obvious that its target is Yuen Wo Ping's SILVER FOX RIVALS II. To be fair, both titles (SILVER FOX RIVALS II and RIVALS OF THE SILVER FOX) are part of their English release. But I don't care, because RIVALS OF THE SILVER FOX is worthless crap. Lead hero Casanova Wong was one hell of a kicker, and when this movie was made, he was in his prime. He fights very well, but many of the other martial artists are beyond inferior. Sitting through RIVALS OF THE SILVER FOX is about as pleasant as getting jerked off by Captain Hook.

The real problems with this rip-off-in-name-only are the editing and writing; or lack of them. From start to finish, RIVALS OF THE SILVER FOX is a disjointed mess! Scenes don't make sense; characters just disappear and appear (no build up or arrival). Some scenes just begin in the middle of a fight, so I couldn't tell who was fighting and why. Though sources list it as a 1982 film, I suspect that's when it came to America—it's so crude & cheap that I think it's from the late 1970s. One minute, heroes & villains alike are seeking some "secret document", and later, heroic Casanova Wong is taking on guys with gold make-up (another rip-off of 18 BRONZE MEN) and silver make-up too.

Vaughan Savidge's English version doesn't help. It's all the same "but still" voices we've heard a jillion times, and again it's so obvious that only a few men are dubbing the voices of several. That's why the dubbers make those ridiculous-sounding, low-pitched, gruff voices for villains. In one scene, a villain actually laughs



with two voices simultaneously!

Despite some decent kung fu skirmishes and some 'poison needles' flying around, I don't recommend this crude story of a hero trying to get both "the magic book" and revenge for his wife's death. There's also some annoying pickpocket called "the invisible thief" who steals knives. Anyway, heroic Casanova Wong gets training from some old man, so he can take on the bad guys one last time, which, according to the VHS box, involves "passing through the five deadly gates of wood, water, gold and fire" (a quick steal from SUPER NINJAS?). But it looks to me like he's just fighting men in silver & gold make-up, but the continuity is so bad that in alternate shots, the opponents have no make-up! The make-up just appears and disappears with no explanation! -DF

THE BIG HEAT

AKA: "Cheng shi te jing"; 1988, Directors: Andrew Kam, Johnny To & Tsui Hark, Cast: Waise Lee, Philip Kwok (Kuo Chui), Joey Wang, Robin Shou, Ken Boyle, Kong Chu, Roy Cheung, Reviewed by Damon Foster

I came damn close to actually liking this routine crime-drama! The heroes were okay and borderline likeable, and the villains were almost villainous enough to despise. But somehow, the meandering, confusing script just irritated me and the characters weren't interesting enough to pull me into the story. It was made in "Coldwar Hong Kong", and seems to concentrate on social commentaries of the time. To Hong Kong audiences in 1988, this gloomy drama probably hit the mark as an apocalyptic look at Hong Kong's capitalism, grit, drug-dealing, corruption, homosexuality, and its upcoming loss of independence against communism. Historians and people looking for a time-warp might find THE BIG HEAT fascinating. But as an action film, it's just like any other urban shoot 'em up movie of the 1980s. In the long run, THE BIG HEAT struck me as being a crime-drama so average that it's below average, if that makes any sense. Back in the 1980s, Hong Kong had more of these films than Fox TV has news "commentators" who tell their right-wing audiences what they want to hear.

As for performances, it's easy to see why Kuo Chui will always be remembered for his 1970s kung fu films (i.e. KID WITH THE GOLDEN ARMS, FIVE DEADLY VENOMS) and not his 1980s action films. Even so, he seems slightly more charismatic in THE BIG HEAT than lead hero Waise Lee. Waise displays little emotion or facial expression, which might be inten-

tional, but I would rather he had gotten into the script and had some fun with it. All through THE BIG HEAT, Lee is just standing there like a mannequin. His character has some sort of wrist problem that makes it difficult to pull the trigger, until he improvises at the climactic shoot-out.

Even on a DVD, the subtitles are small and too quick; if you dare blink, you'll miss a whole sentence. But I think lines like "Good, it won't so boring then" and "Many are need money" helped me to get the basics of the plot: I think it's about a Malaysian smuggler (appropriately named "Ho") caught in compromising positions because he was secretly photographed with his gay lover. Some undercover cop tries to blackmail the powerful puff and suffers a fiery death for his actions. So vengeful cops (Waise Lee, Kuo Chui and a squeamish rookie) seek out the responsible villains: Ho, bad guy Ching Han (played by Kong Chu, the double-crosser in THE KILLER) and some Soviet spies. During the proceedings, there are shoot-outs, bribery attempts, bothersome girlfriends, sting operations, the death of Waise Lee's fiance', stashes of cocaine, and even an elevator shaft scene where a villain gets chopped in half! Yes, there are gory, wince-inducing moments in THE BIG HEAT. When enough extras are cleaned from the plot (they should have just done that at the beginning and made the whole movie less complex!), main villain Kong Chu finally dies in some sort of car & tractor chase. * -DF

1990's:

THE BLUE JEAN MONSTER

Paragon Films; 1990, Released: 1991. Dir.: Kai Ming Lai (Ivan Lai Gai-Ming), Cast: Fui-On Shing (Shing Gui On), Pauline Wong (Wong Siu-Fung), Gloria Yip (Yip Wan-Yee), Amy Yip, Kunimura Jun, Reviewed by Damon Foster

Strange gags which the subtitles failed to translate, and other gags which are stupid in any language bog down what could have been an effective horror movie. It's an uneven film, which makes it typically Hong Kongese. One minute, characters are clowning around endlessly, and the next, a clerk's hand is shot off during a bank-robbery. In other words, it's normal for a HK horror comedy! Complete with a baby peeing in a man's face, and the obligatory cruelty to animals (a fish bowl is shattered, much to the regret of the involuntary actors who were living in it). THE BLUE JEAN MONSTER isn't a great film, but since I only fell asleep once, it's okay I guess. Granted, I sat through an old Tai Seng VHS tape (complete with an ad for a Karaoke machine on the back sleeve) where the subtitles aren't always perfect.

Pauline Wong is annoying as the protagonist's pregnant wife, and speaking of annoying: Gloria Yip and some actor called Tse Wai-Kit (character name: "Power Steering") tend to over-act. That brutish, ugly guy Shing Fui On plays the lead hero for once, and deserves the role. The big fellow looks so scary that he usually gets cast as a villain, but he plays a charismatic, likable, yet sadly doomed character. Regrettably, HK's then queen of the silicone implants, Amy Yip, over shadows his performance; many a critic made it a point to mention her appearance. Granted, she and her obvious padding look delectable in a red Playboy bunny outfit, but her silly scene only lasts about five minutes. Hell, here I am

commenting on a scene so insignificant to the script! Yes, this is the movie where her push-up bra is grabbed and milk squirts out. Despite this throw-away gag, lead hero Shing Fui On might not be as nice to look at, but he's the real star of THE BLUE-JEAN MONSTER. His character alternates from a zombie-like state with bright contact lenses, to a normal human who talks and holds a job. Much of the story has him coming to terms with whatever he is: He's conscious and aware of his surroundings so he's theoretically alive. Yet he isn't stimulated (by taste, smell, sex, etc.), and doesn't seem to breathe or bleed. There are a few gory make-up effects and prosthetic appliances that are wince inducing! Ouch!

Shing Fui On plays a cop killed in the line of duty, in a story not unlike the American movie DEAD HEAT. But when our hero comes back to life, the script reminded me of Brandon Lee's THE CROW, which came out about four years after THE BLUE JEAN MONSTER! Right down to the scene of somebody asking if our undead hero is a ghost, and the he answers that he doesn't know just what he is. THE CROW was based on some comic-book, but I can't help but suspect it's similarity to THE BLUE JEAN MONSTER isn't a coincidence. Maybe THE BLUE JEAN MONSTER was also inspired by the comic book. I don't know. Anyway, Shing Fui On seeks to kill all the criminals who more-or-less killed him at the beginning of the movie. Unfortunately, it's never made clear exactly what the "walking dead" character is. He hates sunlight, much like a vampire. His super-strength is charged by electricity, rather like Frankenstein. After some so-so action scenes (chases, shoot-outs, a car crash or two), he does finally wipe out all the thugs, and before he finally rests in peace, gets to see his newborn son—played by a baby that's obviously a few months old. ** -Damon Foster

The Zero's:

THE ACCIDENTAL SPY

Golden Harvest; 2001, AKA: "Dak miu mai shing", "Te wu mi cheng." Dir.: Teddy Chan, Cast: Jackie Chan, Vivian Hsu, Min Kim, Hsing-kuo Wu, Eric Tsang, Anthony Rene Jones, Alfred Cheung, Reviewed by Damon Foster

It's pretty average for an action-drama. As always, Jackie Chan's creative use of nearby objects (be they fishing nets or baskets of spices) help add extra laughs to the chase scenes. But all the action scenes are derivative of gimmicks he's done in previous movies: You got your jumping from car-to-car, balancing acts and the occasional kung fu kick (which get a little more scarce with each successive Jackie Chan romp). He still does most of his own stunts and it's impressive to see him dangle from such great heights.

I felt standout action scenes of the generally uninteresting THE ACCIDENTAL SPY are 1. A scene of Jackie using a motorcycle crash to prevent a small plane from taking off and 2. A funny chase in a Turkish market-place where Chan runs around naked. He's using various pots, pans and other nearby products (which he grabs from stunned vendors) to knock out the bad guys while simultaneously keeping his privates covered (ala' AUSTIN POWERS). It's nice to

Letters continued from page 2

Dear Damon,
I enjoyed the INFRAMAN info a lot; in fact I'm already planning on getting the DVD from Celestial Pictures. I'm looking forward to the next OC, since you never seem to run out of material (despite what you say)!

Kevin Lonergan
Hyannis, MA

Tadashi Nishimoto (INFRAMAN Cameraman)



ABOVE: Cinematographer Tadashi Nishimoto. LEFT: Nishimoto (wearing sunglasses) on the set of THE LAST WOMAN OF SHANG (1964)

Born: 2/5/22, in Hakata (Kyushyu)
Died: January, 1997
He lived in China, and learned cinematography before returning to Japan in 1946. In 1947, he began working at Shin-Toho as a Cinematography Assistant, and worked on movies such as GATE OF FRESH (1948). He went to HK in 1957, to work at the Shaw Brothers Studios. Additional films to his credit include:

COME DRINK WITH ME (Shaw Bros.; 1966)
RETURN OF THE DRAGON (Golden Harvest; 1972)
GAME OF DEATH (Golden Harvest; 1973)
INFRAMAN (Shaw Bros.; 1975)

Interesting to note that these two photos of him show a man much older than the one shown next to Bruce Lee on page 18 of O.C.: The Inframan Issue. Now that we know he was born in 1922, it seems last issue has another glaring error! If Nishimoto was born in 1922, that would make him 50 years old when he filmed GAME OF DEATH. The dude in last issue's photo doesn't look that old. —Damon Foster

Damon,
O.C.: The 30th Anniversary Issue! What can I say? I'm glad you finally got the INFRAMAN stuff in print. Looking forward to reading it in-depth. Just to let you know, the true reading of "Masao Mikami" is Mikio Mikami -- it's not a pseudonym, but the actual reading of his kanji name -- according to the man himself. Also, he was born and raised in Manchuria, so he speaks Mandarin -- which is why he probably got the job on INFRAMAN in the first place. He currently

lives in Shanghai as an Interior Designer -- according to a 2003 interview in the "Kamen Rider V3 Chronicles".

Later,
August Ragone
<august.ragone@gmail.com> San Francisco, CA

Dear Damon,
I was delighted to receive in the mail your latest issue of Oriental Cinema the other day. I have been a fan of OC since the old days, and I'm happy to see that you're still very active in the realm of obscure film/TV series from the East.

I enjoyed the articles about SUPER INFRAMAN, which by the way was re-released on DVD in France last year using a brand new pristine master, directly from Hong Kong. This movie still rocks - there's nothing more to say.

Take care,
Damien MARTINET
<gingaworld@hotmail.com> France

Hello Damon,
glad to hear from you after all this time !! Thanks for the INFRAMAN edition of the mag, which is still in great editorial shape!!

Your most wanted 3 SUPERMEN series are now easily available in DVD here in Italy. Aah, the DVD fever! I wonder what we'll all do when Sony's Blueraay is gonna' take over.

Anyway, a pleasure.
Keep in touch and all the best
Massimo Lavagnini
bastard6969@fastwebnet.it Italy

Dear Damon,
Your O.C.: The Inframan Issue certainly broke new grounds! It's the best coverage of the movie that the English-speaking world has seen! It certainly didn't take long for the rip-off artists on the Internet to swipe your information! /Yep, I doubt the IMDB ever had any entry for Tadashi Nishimoto until after my issue came out! It cost me money, blood, sweat & tears to come up with all that rare info, and along come these Internet people who get it for free—from OC! Now you know why I quit sending them my reviews and paying my monthly membership. Hell, the IMDB should be paying me! —DF/ Keep up the great, though infrequent work.

Alex Griswald
San Diego, CA

Hello!
Just got your new issue. Some information: INFRAMAN: Stunt director Yuan Hsiang is Yuen Cheung-Yan (Yuen Wo-Ping's brother) /Wow! I wish I'd realized the connection when I made the issue! —DF/Tsen Su Yi is another name for Dana. Terry Liu (Lau Wai Yue)'s second famous movie is BAMBOO HOUSE OF DOLLS.

12 DEADLY COINS:
The main villain is Fong Min/Fang Mian (CHINESE BOXER). Hao Li's full name is Hao Li Ren (Cantonese: Kok Lee-Yan)
FISTS OF THE DOUBLE K:

Also known as "Fists to Fists". Jackie Chan appears briefly as extra at the villain's house. Yuen Wah is in a few scenes as stuntman/extra (including the final fight scene). Action directors are Yuen Wo-Ping and (again) Yuen Cheung-Yan. John Woo is the assistant director.

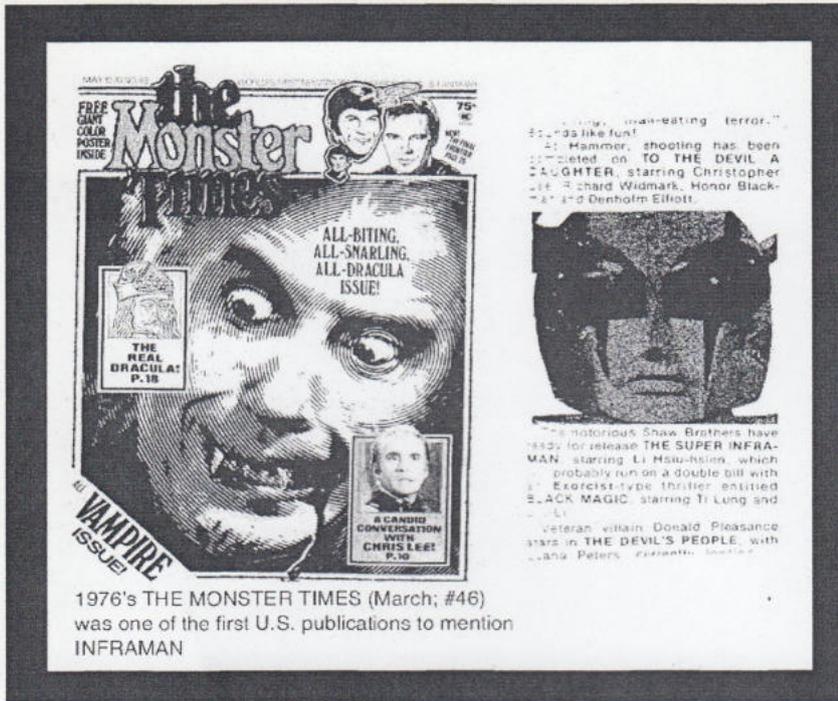
Greetings from Germany,
Michael Kistner

"TOKYO 1970"?

It's the presumed title of a Filipino-produced giant monster film believed to have been from the 1960s. The movies of the Philippines had a "Golden Decade" (the 1950s), but in the 1960s, Filipino movies began imitating foreign competition (i.e. spy films, westerns, etc.). So it's not inconceivable that they also did their own take on Japan's 'Dai-Kaiju Eiga'. Eyewitness reports are all we have, and claim that this beyond-elusive TOKYO 1970 had at least two monster suits and a few giant model UFO's. If the movie ever really existed, it played in Filipino theaters in the 1960s.

It supposedly starred the then popular husband and wife acting team Shirley Gorospie and Zaldy Zhornack. No giant monster movies are listed on their IMDB bios, so it's possible that the rumors are false-- or somebody didn't get their facts straight. Maybe what the eyewitnesses saw was a Filipino version of MONSTER ZERO or some such film and got confused, thinking Filipino actors were in it. I'm just guessing, of course. Perhaps we'll never know, but TOKYO 1970 is a title to keep an eye out for! —Damon Foster





號	片名	Title	導演
55	金絲神偷手	The Girl with the Dangerous Touch	羅維
56	真偽難辨	The Man from Hong Kong	元帥/ 鄭保森
58	中國超人	The Super Ultraman	葉山
59	三超人與女霸王	Supermen against the Amazons	歐陽村
60	女逃犯	Female Fugitive	高寶樹
61	七面人	The Imposter	鮑學禮
62	轟動乾坤	Mutiny on the High Sea	羅志山
63	紅孩兒	The Fantastic Magic Baby	張徹
64	萬門人家	A Family in Thousands	胡小峰
65	廉政風暴	Anti-Corruption	吳思遠

A program booklet for an HK film festival lists INFRAMAN as the 58th HK movie made in 1975

Convention Reviews continued

There were more audience members watching the little kids (from the audience) sing than there were for the subtitled episode of ULTRAMAN LEO! So I guess it's a question of taste: People would rather watch modern Ultra movies with their impersonal approaches, let's-look-like-Hollywood attitudes, and rip-off timelines, than something like ULTRAMAN LEO which is not only faithful to the classics which preceded it, but had more action than anything else shown at Ultramania. —Damon Foster

EVENT: G-FEST 13

DATE: July 7 - 9, 2006

LOCATION: Crowne Plaza, Rosemont, Illinois
by Brett Homenick

From July 7 through 9, 2006, fans of giant Japanese monsters gathered in the Chicago area for the 13th annual G-FEST convention, sponsored each year by G-FAN magazine. Lucky G-FEST 13 saw the first-ever North American appearance of director Kazuki Omori, who wrote and directed GODZILLA VS. BIOLLANTE (Toho; 1989) and GODZILLA VS. KING GHIDORAH (Toho; 1991). Joining Mr. Omori were actor Robert Scott Field (who played Android M11 in GODZILLA VS. KING GHIDORAH) and SFX director Yoshikazu Ishii. The screening of kaiju films at the nearby Pickwick Theater has become a staple of the convention, and this year saw GODZILLA VS. KING GHIDORAH screened Friday night and GAMERA: THE BRAVE (Kadokawa; 2006) screened Saturday night.

Some of the presentations at G-FEST included: a tribute to Akira Ifukube by film composer John Schuermann, a panel discussion about whether the fan film NEGADON is the wave of the kaiju future, an examination of kaiju fighting styles by Kevin Horn, a 40th anniversary tribute to

Ultraman by Damon Foster & Vince Cornelius, a discussion of Comic Images' Godzilla trading cards by G-licensee Robert Conte, and a session about trips to Japan hosted by Armand Vaquer and Randy Giesey. These and other panel discussions took place throughout the weekend and highlighted the tremendous amount of involvement both fans and professionals have put into making the convention what it is.

One of the most anticipated presentations of the weekend was called Growing Up Daikaiju, hosted by Damon Foster (the session leader), Danny Tokarz, Kevin Frederick, and Omar Sayyah. The presenters discussed the impact Japanese monster films had on them as kids and how they influenced them as they became adults. Despite the fact that everybody involved worked on the session for about a year, it wasn't until the convention started that Omar informed the group he wouldn't be able to make it to the show! For Damon, the choice was simple: Either the entire presentation would have to be rewritten, or someone would have to play Omar. He chose the latter. A quick trip to Minya's Place later (full of arts & crafts for the kiddies), a genuine Omar Sayyah mask was created by Damon, and worn alternately by Joey McGough and yours truly. In spite of all the last-minute pressure to keep the session from falling apart, the panelists kept everything together, and it was well-received by the audience.

Although the convention experienced a few glitches, the event was overall another success. Just before leaving, Kazuki Omori told this reviewer that he had a great time, which was a feeling shared by all the attendees I spoke with. To keep up to date of future G-FESTs, check out <http://www.g-fan.com> for all the latest news.
- Brett Homenick



Foster puts on his ugliest face for G-Fest 13 antics. Photo: Brett Homenick



Joey McGough takes the stage for comedy & satire at G-Fest 13's "Growing up Dai-Kaiju". Photo: Brett Homenick

แต่แบบตอลฟลม ชักจูงนำ

ใช้ทนต์ทรงฤทธิ์
เกาะเทียร เต็มลม ชักจูง
ลงแปลงกาย
ยแล้วถูกขบขันมาใหม่
กับศึกรักวีรศักดิ์ เช่น
ลงมนสาว แผลงปองพิษ
ฟแดง กระทบยักซ์ ทางรกเข็ญ
มเด่น! มหิศจรรย!

บ้านเสกโคย
เข่ง... นามทวีปโยค
หญิงชุน
กลีเจียง
ไปปอง

ตัวหาเดนมองบงกช

YOUNG FLYING HERO
ชิงมาสโตป/สือสตันแมน

幕銀潤彩七

白巴 俠飛小

領銜主演 冰戈

บรรยายอักษร
ไทย-จีน-อังกฤษ
ในฟิล์ม □

