



Fight Club

Martial arts movies are facing a new battle at the U.S. multiplex

By Chris Koseluk

Just a few years ago, Asian martial arts movies were all the rage in North America. After "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" earned \$128 million domestically in 2000, a slew of Asian fight titles followed, from "Hero" to "House of Flying Daggers" — and then what?

"The audience stayed, but the films went away," says Bey Logan, vp acquisitions and co-production (Asia) for Dragon Dynasty, the Weinstein Co.'s home entertainment label, devoted solely to bringing Hong Kong action cinema to the American DVD market. He argues that the audience would have been there if the films had been released. But, "There hasn't been a major theatrical release comparable to those three movies (since)."

That's partly because filmmakers in Asia have lost some key talent to Hollywood. Top Hong Kong action stars and directors from the 1980s and '90s — Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Michelle Yeoh, Chow Yun-Fat, director John Woo — were lured stateside. Now they work only sporadically on Hong Kong-based films.

Without those names, and with a tougher market domestically for foreign-language product, Asian producers are more reluctant to finance such movies, knowing they are less likely to get a U.S.

theatrical release.

"The problem is that the United States is so expensive now," says Logan. "Unless you have something that really is a sure bet, you just end up burning up your DVD revenues on theatrical prints and publicity!"

The small number of Hong Kong-themed actioners that are getting U.S. theatrical exposure are largely star-driven — and very dependent on a Hollywood connection. "The Forbidden Kingdom," one of the few martial arts pictures released in the U.S. this year, features both Jackie Chan and Jet Li and grossed just over \$52 million domestically for Lionsgate. But it had American roots: Director Rob Minkoff helmed "The Lion King" and "The Haunted Mansion."

Given this marketplace, Asian-made martial arts titles have become a lower priority for Hong Kong movie companies. The slate is thin for Mandarin Films, a leading Hong Kong producer and distributor that produced one of the few recent U.S. theatrical releases of a martial arts pic with this year's "Flash Point." It will release "Ip Man," a biopic of the legendary Wing Chun master who taught Bruce Lee, in Asia in December. U.S. rights are still available.

"We are still planning to produce one martial arts/action film per year," says Christy Choi, a

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Mandarin distribution exec.

Peggy Lee, production controller for Hong Kong-based Emperor Motion Pictures, concurs. "We will continue to make martial arts films when we find the projects right for us," she says, noting that none is currently in production. Instead, Emperor is using its production dollars to invest in Oliver Stone's "W."

"They're just not producing as much," confirms Mark Pollard, creator of KungFuCinema.com. "You look at China — and specifically Hong Kong, which was the chief exporter of those types of films — and we're just not seeing as many per year."

With Asian martial arts movies on the decline, Hollywood is moving to fill the void, but with a twist: It's banking on mixed martial arts (MMA).

An almost anything-goes sport that incorporates several fighting techniques, MMA started catching fire in the U.S. in 1993 when the first Ultimate Fighting Championship was held. The UFC organization has since become the world's largest MMA promoter. In 2006 it broke the record for single-year pay-per-view revenue, taking in over \$222 million.

"(MMA is) in its infancy, but it's going to have a profound cultural effect as the next generation embraces the sport," says filmmaker Gavin O'Connor (2004's "Miracle"). "It'll be a college sport. It will be in the Olympics eventually. It's not a fad, it's a phenomenon."

O'Connor recently signed a deal with Lionsgate to produce and

direct "Warrior," a screenplay he co-wrote with actor Anthony Tambakis about two brothers confronting the issues that have led to their estrangement. The climax finds them facing off in the finals of a MMA tournament.

MMA has slowly been developing a big-screen presence. Summit Entertainment's March release of "Never Back Down" grossed \$24.8 million domestically — though two months later, Sony Pictures Classics' "Redbelt" earned only \$2.3 million.

One of producer Kevin Misher's new films, tentatively titled "Fighting," features several different forms of man-to-man combat, including boxing, grappling and martial arts. Rogue Pictures is scheduled to release the film, directed by Dito Montiel and starring Channing Tatum and Terrence Howard, early next year.

Similarly, IM Global is selling "Bunraku," which pairs Josh Hartnett with Woody Harrelson in a wide range of martial arts disciplines.

And — ironically — Asian filmmakers have been taking note of the new MMA trend. "Flash Point," one of Dragon Dynasty's recent releases, was a title with MMA appeal. The Donnie Yen starrer was "a fantastic cinematic depiction of MMA technique," says Logan. "The most die-hard fan looks at that and goes, 'That's cool!' (Yen) has the genius to reproduce this (MMA-style) action in movies. Show me somebody else doing that, even in America, to the level that he is."

Pollard cites Tony Jaa, a rising

Thai action star who's gained attention with such films as "Ong-Bak" and "The Protector," as another performer capturing the MMA spirit. "He's not really doing UFC style," he says. "It's Muay Thai boxing. But I think it appeals a lot to the MMA and UFC fan base."

Art Birzneck, president of Birch Tree Entertainment, plans to fuse the old with the new. An international sales and production company specializing in martial arts films such as "The Brave," featuring Thai action star Mike B, Birch Tree is teaming up with action star Russell Wong ("The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor") to produce films under the joint venture Urasia.

"You have to mix the styles, start bringing a little bit more Western sensibilities into the films," says Birzneck. "Our primary directive is to fuse the Asian component and MMA component together."

Urasia's first production, "Silencers" will be unveiled at AFM. The endeavor calls for three productions a year, with Wong appearing in each.

"The trick is to give audiences something new," Misher says. "After 'Crouching Tiger,' there was a rush to give everybody kung fu movies, and they ran their course. The stories weren't as good as the original movie that resurrected the genre."

But, he warns, "Throwing up a movie about mixed martial arts (in and of itself) won't guarantee success. It's all about your storytelling." **EW**