



“Chinese Connection” in Diasporic Nationalism – An Analysis of Fist of Fury as a National Allegory

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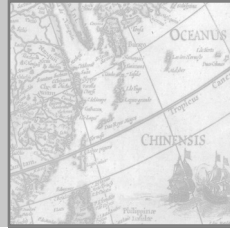
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Eunyeong Kim

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“Chinese Connection” in Diasporic Nationalism: An Analysis of *Fist of Fury* as a National Allegory

Eunyeong Kim*

1. Beyond official nationalism, beyond mainland China

According to Balibar, nationalism is an ideological tool used to create affective bonds among people as a nation community produced through a state-led nationalization process. On the one hand, this process retrospectively nationalizes, or appropriates, the so-called “pre-history” of a nation-state that includes different polities and institutions not necessarily reducible to those of a nation-state. On the other hand, it progressively nationalizes society, intervening in almost every sector of private life, especially through universal schooling and the nuclear family. (Balibar, 1991)

Although these two nationalization processes are clearly distinguishable in their object—history and society—and method—appropriation and

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intervention, they essentially share a commonality in that both are repressive in nature: nationalization of the pre-history of a nation-state means no other than teleological and evolutionary writing of history to exclusively legitimize and privilege the nation-state, which seems to be the culmination of human civilization but is in fact just one of various political forms that have existed so far. Nationalization of society is only possible when private spaces are systematically repressed and controlled by the centralized state that is in charge of the entire nationalization process. (Balibar: 92) As Duara has demonstrated, for example, the top-down statist nationalization in imperial China eventually led to the suppression of *fengjian* tradition, in which the centralized imperial state was checked by autonomous local powers and communities, as well as by civil-society discourses throughout the 20th century. (Duara, 2003: 147-175)

If the nation-state is historically and socially repressive, nationalism launched by the state in an official dimension to bond individual nationals together, as a logical consequence, cannot help being repressive as well. To be accurate, nationalism, especially written in the linear, evolutionary, teleological mode of Enlightenment History, according to Duara, can only be established by repressing other diverse nation-views. (Duara: 3-5) In fact, the case of the suppression of *fengjian* tradition mentioned above clearly indicates that the establishment and institutionalization of statist official nationalism based on the Enlightenment mode of History was a result of the repression and exclusion of alternative nation-views including *fengjian* discourse. This sort of nationalism, historically, prohibits us from approaching rich political legacies that have already fallen into oblivion

but might contribute to maximizing our political potential if recovered. In social terms, it limits and infringes on people’s autonomy that can be best expressed in civil society, where what Anderson calls “popular nationalism” can also be forged spontaneously by the people.

In that sense, rewriting nationalism, or, more precisely, reconstructing popular nationalism, can be understood as a way of liberating historical and social potential oppressed by the monopoly of statist official nationalism. For example, Chu Tien-hsin’s fiction “In Remembrance of My Buddies from the Military Compound” (1992) shows the emergence of popular nationalism among the children in the military compound where KMT’s official nationalism constitutes hard boundaries between Taiwanese (本省人) and mainlanders (外省人). Here, the affective bonds between the children in the compound and Taiwanese people outside built through their lived experience help both of them transcend not only the territorial borderline between the compound (mainland China) and Taiwan, but also the ideological borderline between CCP and KMT, creating a new national narrative.

It is noteworthy that the new popular nationalism in Chu’s short story implies transnational bonds between two nation-states—if we regard Taiwan as a de facto nation-state—that was split along the ideological line and, eventually, the symbolic reconciliation between the two. This sort of “transnational nationalism,” or “the national in the transnational” (Berry & Farquhar: 195-197) though it sounds quite self-contradictory, can also be observed in a much broader “imagined community” of the sinophone world created through the consumption of Bruce Lee’s martial arts films

and their nationalistic narratives in the 1960s and 1970s. Among those films created and consumed in diasporic Chinese communities including Hong Kong, *Fist of Fury* can be regarded as the most representative, not only because it was a huge box office hit all over the sinophone world, earning more than four million Hong Kong dollars in Hong Kong alone, but also because it successfully evoked nationalist sentiment among overseas Chinese with a new prototype of national narrative in which martial arts and popular nationalism were combined well together. The fact that a lot of sequels and remakes, including *New Fist of Fury* and the *Yip Man* series, have been made after the model of *Fist of Fury* and have achieved great popularity and success shows well how much influential and appealing *Fist of Fury* was to the people who, at least interiorly, identify themselves as Chinese.

2. *Fist of Fury* as a national allegory

Although the narrative of *Fist of Fury* is seemingly about a martial-art trainee's personal revenge for the death of his Kung Fu master, it has many elements that allow us to interpret this narrative as a “national allegory,” which is defined by Fredric Jameson as follows:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the

private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (Jameson: 69)

The narrative of *Fist of Fury* begins with the Kung Fu master’s assassination by Japanese men in Hongkou dojo and the ensuing conflict between Jingwu school and Hongkou dojo develops into a racial conflict between Chinese and Japanese after the Japanese side’s provocative calligraphic message that reads “sick man of Asia (东亚病夫).” In other words, the humiliating calligraphic work transforms a story of private revenge into that of national allegory, igniting anti-Japanese sentiment among Chinese in the Jingwu school. We can also say that the calligraphic work leads Chinese in Jingwu school to change their recognition of Japanese people from mere foreigners to national enemies against which they imagine a community constituted only by their fellow countrymen.

This national allegory is reinforced by the degrading treatment that Chen Zhen (Bruce Lee) receives at the entrance to a park in Shanghai. When Chen is refused entry into the park under the sign of “No dogs and Chinese allowed,” his personal humiliation becomes the national humiliation of all Chinese people who are treated no better than dogs in their own territory. This national humiliation heightens when the Chinese translator—and also a traitor—mimics a dog in front of Japanese people, crawling on hands and knees, in order to entertain them. Making a sharp contrast with Chen Zhen’s obstinate refusal to kneel before foreign intruders, the translator voluntarily becoming a dog to flatter national enemies exposes the fact that even if the traitor himself thinks that he enjoys higher social status than his

compatriots who are equated with dogs, it is he who is actually treated as a faithful running “dog” by the Japanese.

Although national humiliation itself quite frequently appears in various national narratives, not every national humiliation necessarily leads to defiance against a nation’s enemies. For example, national humiliation makes the protagonist of Yu Dafu’s “Sinking” (1921) isolate himself both from Japanese and his compatriots and indulge in sexual perversion. In the end, he even chooses to commit suicide, lamenting the weakness of his motherland that results in his sexual frustration and melancholia. If “Sinking” shows how national humiliation is romanticized and individualized, *Fist of Fury*, on the contrary, demonstrates how individual humiliation is expanded into national humiliation through specific events that can be experienced in reality, calling for a retribution for national enemies’ provocation. That’s another reason why the narrative of *Fist of Fury* can be read as national allegory.

In the film, Chen Zhen’s defiance or retribution against the Japanese is carried out through Kung Fu, the Chinese national martial art. Since Kung Fu and Karate are respectively representative of the so-called “national essence” of China and Japan, the martial arts match between Chen Zhen, a Kung Fu trainee, and the Japanese Karate experts is described almost as a proxy war between the two nations. Noteworthy is that martial arts here also helps to reify the social Darwinist idea of “survival of the fittest,” which was the underlying worldview of Western and Japanese imperialism, as well as of Third-world nationalism emerging as a reaction against it at the time of China’s semi-colonial status. In fact, martial arts is the best way

to visualize the social Darwinist worldview, for the strength or weakness of a certain nation can be immediately revealed through the result of a match. Therefore, we can say that Chen Zhen’s victory against Karate experts from Hongkou dojo also has a significant implication for China’s victory against imperialist powers, not only against Japan, in the social Darwinist world order. The fact that Chen Zhen defeats a Russian martial arts master as well as Japanese Karate experts underpins this interpretation.

Interestingly, however, this film focuses not only on how Chen Zhen surpasses the national enemies with his physical strength, but also on how social Darwinist logic is overcome by China’s spiritual superiority. Chen never loses in any of martial arts matches he has, while his colleagues are severely wounded and even killed by Japanese in theirs. This clearly shows his extraordinary talent in martial arts as well as his physical strength. Nevertheless, it is still problematic that everyone else in Jingwu school is no match for the Japanese in terms of martial arts skill. In virtue of spiritual and moral superiority of Chinese martial arts, however, the relative physical weakness of the trainees in Jingwu school is redeemed and the narrative of the film, which could have easily become a hero narrative, turns into a national allegory. For example, at the Master’s funeral the senior instructor deters Chen Zhen from taking vengeance for their master’s death, reminding that they are training themselves in martial arts not to gain the upper hand (争强斗狠) but to strengthen their body and inspire patriotism (强身爱国). Furthermore, even when the unwelcome visitors from Hongkou dojo show up at the funeral, the disciples of the late master treat them with unflinching courtesy, which shows a striking contrast to the extremely aggres-

sive and rude attitude of the Japanese visitors.

The spiritual superiority of Chinese martial arts is also found in modern values such as gender equality. In the film, the portrait of Chinese female trainees in Jingwu school and that of a Japanese geisha are at opposite poles: while the Japanese geisha is reduced to a mere sexual object crystallizing the anachronistic, patriarchal, and decadent Japanese culture, Chinese female trainees are depicted as enjoying equal treatment as their male colleagues in the martial arts world that used to be regarded as an exclusively male domain. The fact that Hongkou dojo is not coed also shows Japan's backwardness in terms of women's emancipation, which has already been perceived as a barometer of modernity in Western society.

However, we should be careful not to identify women's entry into the world of martial arts described in the film as their rejection of female identity.¹⁾ First, the female trainees still maintain their "femininity" in their hairstyle and fashion, although the concept of femininity itself is extremely controversial and problematic. Second, the female protagonist Yuan Li'er is depicted as a character with distinct female sexuality: as Chen Zhen's fiancée, she performs the role of Chen's lover and will take the role of wife and, possibly, a mother in the future. This means that she doesn't reject the gender roles typically expected of women. Moreover, her kiss with Chen Zhen demonstrates that she doesn't suppress her sexuality, though she is

1) For further discussion on the rejection of female identity "in national narrative", see Liu, Lydia H. "The female body and nationalist discourse: The field of life and death revisited." In Inderpal Grewal & Caren Kaplan, eds. *Scattered hegemonies: postmodernity and transnational feminist practices*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 37-62.

not so active in expressing her sexuality or sexual desire. For these reasons, the new portrayal of Chinese female figures in the film can be said to suggest an alternative female identity in which gender equality and femininity do not exclude each other.

Although the last scene of the film implies that Chen Zhen is shot to death by Japanese after completing his revenge against his Japanese enemies, this ending seems to work better as a national allegory, for it can produce more nationalist resonance by leaving the task of revenge for Chen Zhen’s death to those in Jingwu school as well as a duty to commemorate him to his “Chinese” compatriots. Probably, that’s why the Mandarin version of *Fist of Fury* deliberately inserts the term “中国人” into subtitles, although the dubbed voice only says neutral terms as “我们” or “一样的人.”

3. Divergences from mainland nation-views

Compared with other nation-views that deal with the same period of Japanese semi-colonial rule but were produced in mainland China—for example, imperial, reform, and revolutionary nationalism (Duara, 1997), literary works with national-allegory written at the time or afterward, and theatrical or cinematic productions representing semi-colonial life—the nation-view of the film *Fist of Fury* is quite unique in several respects. First of all, there are no intellectual figures in the film, while it is intellectuals, including the CCP members and “*zhishifenzi* (知识分子)” after 1927 (Barlow, 1991), that play a key role in the narrative of mainland nation-views. More-

over, different from mainland nation-views that are, at least partially, based on official nationalism created or disseminated by intellectuals, *Fist of Fury* is about the emergence of popular nationalism generated through the protagonist's direct experience of national humiliation, without intellectuals' intervention or mediation.²⁾

At first glance, the absence of intellectual figures in the martial arts film seems very natural, especially in the dichotomous framework of literature and martial arts. However, the fact that *Fist of Fury* has no intellectual figures needs more scrutiny and analysis, considering that letters and martial arts are not necessarily exclusive of each other. Actually, intellectual figures frequently appear in traditional military narratives, playing important roles such as adviser, strategist, and mentor, all of which are missing in *Fist of Fury*.

Of course, we can find at least one intellectual-like figure in *Fist of Fury*—the senior instructor. As mentioned above, at the funeral of the Kung Fu master Huo Yuanjia, the instructor reminds Chen Zhen about the teachings of his master, emphasizing the ultimate goal of their martial arts training—self-strengthening and patriotism (自強愛國). Although it sounds very similar to the nationalist intellectuals' slogan in the late Qing period, the instructor, strictly speaking, can hardly be regarded as an intellectual, since he doesn't participate in the production or processing of dis-

2) In the film “Yellow Earth,” we can see an intellectual figure (soldier from the propaganda department of the CCP *Eight Route Army*) Gu Qing who tried to mediate between rural people and the Party by collecting folksongs and replacing the traditional lyrics with new communist lyrics. But his efforts in the end turn out to be unfruitful.

course. The nationalistic motto of Jingwu school is not the instructor's own creation but is what handed down from his master, who was also influenced by various nationalist discourses produced by various groups of intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th century. In other words, although the instructor's sermon reflects the nationalist atmosphere during the semi-colonial period, he is still far from an intellectual figure that actively engages in nationalist discourses with his own standpoint. Except for him, the other members of Jingwu school, especially Chen Zhen who confesses that he has little learning, seldom talk about any grand discourses. Instead, they fill the absence of discourse with their concrete experience, particularly that of humiliation and discrimination, through which they gradually come to have a clear sense of nationhood. In that sense, we may say that the fundamental confrontation in *Fist of Fury* exists not between literary and martial arts but between discursive language and lived experience.

It is exactly the lived experience that encourages Chen Zhen and the other members of Jingwu school to create their own nationalism, which is rooted in a strong desire for “national revenge.” If, in many of the mainland nation-views, nationalism is supported mainly by the ruling class (for example, royal family of the Qing dynasty and government officials), intellectuals, and revolutionaries, and is then disseminated and propagated to the public through various forms of campaign and schooling, nationalism in *Fist of Fury* has to do neither with such social groups nor needs any sort of media to circulate itself. Although Jingwu school can be counted as an educational institution in some sense, the school itself contributes little to the spread of nationalist sentiment among its members and the broader

Chinese society, since it is more like a private martial arts club. Enjoying relative autonomy, the self-governing martial arts school enables Chen Zhen to imagine the nation in his own way.

As mentioned above, to Chen Zhen, nation above all means a community where the people share the experience of humiliation and discrimination. He is not interested in and doesn't care about intellectual discourses. For example, on what kind of reform is most urgently needed for China or what sort of political system China should choose in order to survive the social Darwinist world order. That's why he is excessively obsessed with taking physical and direct revenge on the national enemies, despite the terrible cost of it, that is, the "genocide" of Jingwu school. Ironically, however, his "physical" and "direct" revenge turns out to be rather "symbolic" and "nonfatal" in the end—it fails to change the fate of China and its people in reality, while still serving as a symbolic event, showing the Japanese how intense Chinese people's anti-Japanese sentiment is and how strong the Chinese people are. Furthermore, the result of Chen Zhen's revenge only confirms that the Japanese Empire is still unscathed after losing some of its people at the hands of a resentful Chinese man. This also leads popular nationalism based on the absence of discursive language and the experience of humiliation to the same dilemma. By keeping distance from both official nationalism and intellectuals' nationalist discourses, this popular nationalism can not only free itself from the repressive nationalization process led by the state, but also prevent the nation from splitting along with different political orientations. Without being connected to the state power or intellectual groups, however, it can hardly make any structural changes to the

status quo. In the film, Chen Zhen dies before he becomes aware of this dilemma, as if he wants to evade it. Probably, it is up to the audience to face the real problems left behind after Chen Zhen’s revenge and death.

4. The national in the transnational

As mentioned above, *Fist of Fury* achieved great success not only in Hong Kong but also in the countries where there exists a large overseas Chinese community. In terms of narrative, we may say that what enabled this worldwide box-office success is, firstly, the narrative structure of the film, which feels very familiar to overseas Chinese, especially the older generations. According to Duara, in the late 19th century, the Qing court and intellectuals began creating special nationalist narratives for overseas Chinese in order to strengthen their “Chinese” identity—thereby gaining their support for nationalist campaigns and enterprises in the mainland. The narrative of “the victimization of loyalist heroes by foreigners,” which is the bare bones of the plot of *Fist of Fury*, was originally from one of those nationalist narratives. (Duara, 1997) Besides, some slogans and metaphors that appear in the film such as “自强爱国” and “东亚病夫” are nothing strange or new to overseas Chinese, for they have been taught those terms in nationalist educational institutions since the late 19th century. In that context, it would be no exaggeration to say that *Fist of Fury* is arguably the most successful example of the fleshing out of nationalist narratives created for overseas Chinese into a commercial film.

Another reason for the film's success can be found in its political neutrality, derived from the fact that the film doesn't represent any specific ideology-laden nationalist discourses. We have already discussed that the narrative of *Fist of Fury* pays more attention to the emergence of popular nationalism from the direct and concrete experience of national humiliation than on the intellectual discourses on nationalism. Although it does borrow some terms from the nationalist narratives of the late 19th century as mentioned above, these were commonly used motifs in different narratives and not representative of any specific perspective. Furthermore, the original narratives were all made before China was politically divided into two parties, the CCP and the KMT, so they are quite free from ideological controversy. Instead of supporting a certain nationalist discourse, the narrative of *Fist of Fury* maintains an ideologically neutral perspective by focusing on the unity of Chinese people against their national enemies. (Culler, 49) This is exactly why it was widely welcomed by overseas Chinese, whose political orientations are highly diverse according to their origin, family background, host country's political atmosphere, and so forth.

Lastly, the parallel between Shanghai and the host countries where Chinese immigrants and their descendants live also seems to help the Chinese audience in the sinophone world empathize with the narrative of *Fist of Fury*. Before comparing the two different kinds of places, let us look first at the characteristics of the city of Shanghai.

As a big, modern, and cosmopolitan city, Shanghai in the semi-colonial period gives an impression of a microcosm of the world at that time. Ironically, however, the cosmopolitan city was an extremely nationalist space

as well: foreign concessions and the foreign residents there were the direct result of expansionist nationalism, or imperialism. In that sense, Shanghai cosmopolitanism in the semi-colonial period was the simple arithmetic sum of the nationalism of the imperialist nations occupying the city.

This unique geopolitical environment of Shanghai provided favorable conditions for Chinese residents to develop a strong sense of popular nationalism in their own way. Surrounded by the front-runners of nationalism, Chinese people in Shanghai, different from rural people, were able to internalize so-called "world culture" (Duara, 2003: 154) that prepared the ground for nationalism through their daily experiences. The idea of "national" martial arts is probably a product of this world culture. Besides world culture, Chinese people as "non-citizens", treated no better than dogs by foreign intruders, were also able to imagine their nation as those who were pushed into the same "state of exception" in their own land. (153-156) The fact that many Shanghai Chinese "physically" encountered their national enemies in their everyday life, not just imagined them through newspapers or novels, can also be considered in relation to the cosmopolitan setting of Shanghai. Last but not least, the existence of relatively autonomous local Chinese communities is also an important factor in the formation of nationalism in Shanghai. Functioning as rallying points, those communities provided places and opportunities for Shanghai Chinese people to interact and socialize with their compatriots, which was a favorable situation for strengthening ties among Chinese people as well as strengthening the Chinese identity, which can be compared with other cities or counties that were completely colonized and prohibited from having any

rallying points.

An overseas Chinese who feels himself to be an alien in the country where he lives currently, now would easily identify himself with the Chinese in the film who live no better than aliens in their own native land; intermingled with the natives and nationals of the host country. He may also be keenly aware of the impassable differences between “them” and “us”; sometimes he might be frustrated with, for example, racial boundaries that are not supposed to exist but in fact exist; nevertheless, life won’t be so hard, since there are Chinese communities where he can still have a sense of connection.

Fist of Fury successfully extended this sense of connection into the much broader Chinese community of the sinophone world. However, there still remain several questions: is the community imagined through the consumption of *Fist of Fury* in the sinophone world still a nation (“Chinese”) community? Isn’t that an illusion produced by global cinema industry? Is the transnational sense of connection able to provide any meaningful experience of what Balibar says “going beyond the nation”? Further research into the interplay between “the national in the transnational” and global film market could provide clues to address these questions.

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