

The Man with the Iron Fists: Reactionary Kung-Fu

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Directed by RZA, written by Eli Roth and RZA

The Man with the Iron Fists is such an eclectic mess of a film that even the most dedicated fans of the Wu-Tang Clan—a popular 1990s rap group led by RZA, the work’s director and star—will be left scratching their heads.

Anyone familiar with RZA’s distinct artistic voice and sensibility will be convinced he is not entirely at fault for the end product here, and this reviewer would argue that his efforts were likely damaged by his Hollywood mentors, Quentin Tarantino (credited as the film’s “presenter”) and Eli Roth (screenplay-producer).

The film offers us a humble blacksmith (RZA) in 19th century China who serves as an arms dealer for a number of warring clans, all adept at martial arts. We are then introduced to various “warriors,” including a ridiculous personification of British imperialism known as Jack Knife (Russell Crowe), who despite his whoring and other excesses is depicted quite heroically in the end.

In addition, there is the whorehouse manager Madam Blossom (Lucy Liu), a variation on an increasingly common and vulgar female empowerment character—à la Tarantino’s own *Kill Bill*—who proves her “equality” by use of cartoon violence and a semi-religious gender solidarity, and Zen-Yi (Rick Yune) who has apparently lost his father to the Lion Clan and is terribly enamored of his girlfriend—beyond this he is a virtual nonentity in the film.

These characters all find their interests threatened in some way or another by the Lion Clan and ultimately unite to defeat that clan and its powerful mercenary, Brass Body (David Bautista). This all takes place in

something vaguely known as “Jungle Village.” In the improbable and mythical Jungle Village, we find a community seemingly inhabited only by savage warriors and venal small businessmen, empty of everybody else except a group of needy children whose only purpose seems to be signaling which characters are “good” and “bad” by either running toward or away from them.

Ultimately, the film is not much different than a run-of-the-mill comic book movie, but with a touch of identity politics wrapped up in an empty-headed Hollywood history “remix” and topped off with healthy doses of gratuitous violence replete with gruesome torture scenes. Presumably, we can thank Roth, the perpetrator of the *Hostel* series and one of the founders of the “torture-porn” genre, for those scenes.

The only character about whom we come to know more during the course of *The Man with the Iron Fists* is the Blacksmith. He turns out to be a former slave from the American South, whose mother (played by veteran Pam Greer) gained her son’s freedom by maintaining a sexual relationship with her master. Upon being freed, the future Blacksmith finds himself in a fight with two white racists, accidentally kills one of them and then absconds to China where he studies ancient martial arts and weapons-making from wise teachers who take him in.

Perhaps we see here a fantasized recreation of the director’s own childhood encounter with the classic, low-budget Kung Fu movies made by the Shaw Brothers Studio in Hong Kong, which won a cult following in the United States in the 1970s. *The Man with the Iron Fists*—like much of RZA’s musical output—is a confused homage to those films, such as *Five Deadly Venoms* (1978).

The popular tradition that the best of these classic

Kung Fu films drew from—directly or indirectly, in a debased form or otherwise—is bound up with the anti-imperialist, nationalist struggles of Chinese peasants, such as the one remembered by history as the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901)

By 1900 China was the object of predatory exploitation by a number of rival imperialist powers. The result was widespread poverty, opium addiction and religious persecution by foreign missionaries. Large numbers of poor peasants and youth organized themselves in a secret society known as “The Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists”—or the “Boxers” to foreigners—with the goal of purging Chinese society of foreign imperialism. The fighters convinced themselves and others that through sheer will power they could perform magical feats of martial arts and thus expel the foreigners, despite all their material disadvantages.

Although the Boxers were defeated in the end, they won the support of sections of the Imperial Army and held foreign forces in Beijing under siege for 55 days. They were finally crushed by an army of 20,000 soldiers armed and assembled by eight imperialist powers, which later carried out brutal reprisals and imposed severe monetary penalties on the country.

The Shaw Brothers’ Kung Fu films were influenced by these social struggles in China and an interest in the Boxers in particular. The latter became the subject of at least two of their films: *The Boxer Rebellion* (1975) and *Legendary Weapons of China* (1981). That some of the Kung Fu films retain a fascination today it is in part due to their echoing of a real history of class struggle.

Born in 1969, RZA, or Robert Fitzgerald Diggs—named after John Fitzgerald and Robert Francis Kennedy (both recently assassinated)—grew up in Brownsville, a poverty-stricken and crime ridden section of Brooklyn.

The harsh realities of the place and times found reflection in the music of the Wu-Tang Clan, which, despite hyperbole (not uncommon to the genre), painted a more realistic picture of the social chaos than other rap groups of the period. Members of the Wu-Tang Clan themselves seemed to have been genuinely traumatized by their early experiences, most notably RZA’s cousin Russell Jones, better known by his rap name “Ol Dirty Bastard,” whose life was marred by a number of legal and drug problems. He died in 2004 of

an overdose.

Presumably RZA found something in the Kung Fu films he could relate to, with their themes of rising above bleak and oppressive surroundings without compromising one’s principles or identity.

Sadly, however, what was most interesting in the Shaw Brothers’ films has been entirely removed from *The Man with the Iron Fists*, despite a seemingly fetishistic adherence to the most minute aspects of the original films, down to the collection of quirky characters and low-budget sound effects.

Worse still, there are elements in *Iron Fists* that seem deliberately meant to invert the original connection between Kung Fu films and the Boxer Rebellion. In the final scenes, Crowe’s character Jack Knife blurts out such lines as, “Opium is a benefit and a solace to the hard-working Chinese” and “Haven’t had this much fun since we protected the crown in Macau,” while he helps the Blacksmith and Madam Blossom defeat the evil Lion Clan.

None of this seems accidental when we consider the role played in the film’s production by Roth and Tarantino, the duo who brought us another twisted, gruesome Hollywood history lesson in *Inglourious Basterds*.

Every wretched aspect of *Iron Fists* has the fingerprints of these two all over it. One wonders what RZA might produce with better collaborators.



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