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Reflective Essay

The digital storytelling for the CEAS 306 class has been a valuable project for me. I began this project with a broad interest in Hong Kong martial arts cinema and the gendered roles within it. As I explored deeper, I found myself drawn to the figure of Cheng Pei-pei—not only because of her iconic performances in martial arts films, but also because of her complex personal and professional experience in her life. In this self-analysis, I will reflect on the decisions I made in narrowing my focus, my use of StoryMapJS as a creative tool, the research methods I used, and the larger insights I've gained about Hong Kong martial arts, diasporic identity in the United States, and gendered representation in martial arts film.

Research Decisions and Project Design

In this project, I mainly went through two stages for my creative evolution. Initially, I planned to do a project centered around the historical and political conditions that shaped female figures in Hong Kong martial arts cinema from the late 1940s to early 2000s by providing a brief overview of the development of the portrayals of female roles through a chronological order and an examination of the case study of key actresses and characters. However, the more I researched, the more I realized that this topic was too expansive for the time limit of this assignment. I decided to shift toward a case-study approach, using Cheng Pei-pei as the core research subject. Her career provided a unique lens through which to examine both the historical context and the transformation of female figures in Hong Kong martial arts cinema. Conducting

the project around her enabled me to explore key themes of gender, motion, and diaspora without losing narrative clarity. After I confirmed my topic, I mainly went through 5 stages: composing outline for this project, conducting research of online resources, academic essays, books and films, drafting summaries and comparative analysis for Cheng Pei-pei's films and experience by decades, design and construct different sections in StoryMapJS, refining each section and finalizing my StoryMap.

The decision of using StoryMap as my creative tool enables me to visualize Cheng Pei-pei's journey across different geographic and cinematic regions. Her rich life experience from Shanghai to Hong Kong and later to the United States can be perfectly and interactively illustrated in this way, which shows how her cinematic roles and her own identity evolved in response to place and time. Thus, this digital tool helped me to provide not only a timeline, but also how her career was physically and symbolically traveled in-between regions and narrative conventions. This reflects how femininity, heroism, and motion are defined on screen over time.

Methods and Results

My research used films analysis and textual analysis of primary sources and secondary sources as the main research methods.

In the process, I found Cheng Pei-pei's autobiography her wrote in 2014. This firsthand narrative was crucial for me to understand the detail of her journey and how she sees her life. Besides, I also conducted film analysis for two of her two films *Come Drink with Me* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. I began by watching these two films and taking notes of Cheng Pei-pei's figures in films. Then, I conducted close readings of key scenes by focusing on her body movements and difference of the roles her played in two films. In addition to film analysis, I also reviewed secondary sources such as academic essays and online articles on the

evolution of wuxia cinema and Cheng Pei-pei's figures. Through these different sources, I was able to build the connection between her dancing experience and her martial figures in wuxia films, and highlights the important experience in different phases of her life and career in StoryMap. The slides about her migration, career shifts and family roles were directly based on Cheng Pei-pei's autobiography, while the slides about her roles in specific films were drawn from my own understanding and interpretation.

In this way, I aimed to engage viewers visually and intellectually with the balanced combination of life anecdotes and academic analysis. Throughout the process, I found Cheng Pei-pei's portrayals in *Come Drink with Me* challenged traditional and gendered martial roles in Hong Kong martial arts cinema in 1966, while *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, marked further evolved martial roles in 2000. This illustrates that Cheng Pei-pei's life and career not only reflects her personal achievement in the film industry, but also traces the growing influence of representation of female martial figures in Chinese-language martial arts cinema worldwide. Beyond Chinese-language martial arts cinema, Cheng Pei-pei's legacy continues to resonate across generations in diasporic life in North America. Her films, TV programs, and dance classes served as a positive cultural bridge to the American Chinese community.

What I Learnt

One of the most unexpected results of the project was the realization of the impact of Cheng Pei-pei's off-screen life on her legacy for a diasporic audience in the United States. Her experiences of immigrating to the United States as a cultural ambassador and her continued attending entertainment industry related events show that her influence goes beyond performance on screen. In this way, she became a bridge between generations, regions and traditions. In addition, I also developed a better understanding of how space, gender and cultural identity

intersect in cinemas. Drawing Cheng Pei-pei's journey digitally made me more aware that movement itself from both literal and symbolical meaning is at the core of martial arts storytelling.

Finally, I learned how to integrate creative tools like StoryMap with academic research. It was a challenge at first, but ultimately it prompted me to think about narrative structures, audience engagement, and interdisciplinary work in a new way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my storytelling project helped me connect historical research, film analysis, and digital storytelling in ways I had not previously imagined. By focusing on Cheng Pei-pei, I was able to have a better understanding of the intersections of gender, motion, and genre in Hong Kong martial arts cinema. Besides, I also learnt how a Chinese actress's life experience and her Chinese-language martial arts films in the United States can shape diasporic views of femininity, action, and Chinese identity. Moreover, in terms of the future direction, this project could serve as a basis of a broader research project about how martial arts cinema frames female agency, cultural identity, and heroism.

Link of My Project:
https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/6cb3e1a83b1ca5f4b1bc63dda3b680fe/ceas-306-final-project/index.html