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# ‘Kungfu/Jazz’ as a new approach to music theatre making: Fred Ho and ‘manga opera’

## ABSTRACT

*In this article, kungfu and jazz – performing art forms that originated from the racial Others – will be used as shorthand for two concurrent, interdependent and dialectically opposing cultural processes: one that prioritizes boundary formation or reinforcement, and one that favours boundary elimination or crossing. I analyse the processes of Kungfu and Jazz in the case of Ho’s Voice of the Dragon (1997–2006) and explore the paradoxical process of negotiating between the two, Kungfu and Jazz, in Ho’s creation of a new genre: ‘manga opera’. I propose that in a world of increasing global encounters, racial and ethnic multiplicities, and political and cultural complexities, Kungfu/Jazz provides a politically progressive and transgressive approach to the process of boundary-conscious musical theatre-making.*

## KEYWORDS

Kungfu/Jazz  
boundary  
Fred Ho  
manga opera  
racial Other  
paradox

Fred Ho (born Fred Wei-Han Houn, 1957–2014), Asian-American revolutionary composer, saxophonist, bandleader, writer and theatre artist, was a man of seemingly profound contradictions. He was one of the founders of the Asian-American jazz movement, but later problematized and denounced the use of the term ‘jazz’. He was an activist who saw capitalism as the carcinogenic

1. Amongst them six Rockefeller fellowships, two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships three New York Foundation for the Arts fellowships, a Harvard Arts Medal, an American Book Award, the Duke Ellington Distinguished Artist Lifetime Achievement Award (as the first artist under the age of 30 as well as the first Asian-American artist).
2. The books Ho authored or edited include *Sounding Off! Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution* (1996), which received an American Book Award, *Legacy to Liberation* (2001), *Afro Asia* (2008), *Raw Extreme Manifesto* (2012), *The A to Z: Characteristics and Qualities of Being a Revolutionary* (2013) and *Diary of a Radical Cancer Warrior* (2014). The two edited volumes of Ho are *Naked Practice*, *Wicked Theory: A Fred Ho Reader* (2009) and *Yellow Power Yellow Soul* (2013).
3. I propose the spelling of 'kungfu' instead of 'kung-fu' or 'kung fu', not only to create formal and aesthetic uniformity with the use of the non-hyphenated or -spaced word 'jazz', but also because there has been a tradition in English spelling to combine the pinyin of two different Chinese characters that belong in one singular phrase into one long word in pinyin.

enemy of humanity, but his theatrical works, especially *Voice of the Dragon* (hereafter *VoD*; 1997–2006), achieved high levels of commercial success. He was a self-taught musician who never received any conservatory training in music or theatre, yet he became an established composer and theatre artist, having written, composed and produced all of his own theatre works, and winning various ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) awards. He was the recipient of many other prestigious awards,<sup>1</sup> but he strongly opposed and even castigated the mainstream and the status quo. He was best known as a saxophonist and composer, but he also authored and edited six books, and contributed to two, of which he was the main subject.<sup>2</sup> He paid off his mortgage at age 37 and was well-off ever after, but lived a frugal and low-tech life; he hand-wrote all his scores and designed his own clothes.

On a deeper level, these contradictions are not in opposition at all; instead, they are emblems of a new concept, namely 'Kungfu/Jazz', that I am to introduce in this article. Artistic creation always involves both, to various degrees, the paradoxical processes of boundary formation (or reinforcement) and of boundary elimination (or crossing). To take culinary culture as an example, the creation of modern Mexican cuisine in fine dining restaurants is the result of both processes. The creators not only had to cross boundaries to seek influence from European – especially French and Italian – culinary cultures and fine dining traditions, but also probe deeply and carefully, in a boundary-reinforcing way, into the indigenous Mexican culinary traditions, cultural roots and dining experiences. The two paradoxical processes tend to happen at the same time and are never isolated from each other. It depends on specific circumstances for a creator to choose which process to favour over the other.

This article examines the intricate reactions between the two processes of boundary formation (or reinforcement) and that of boundary elimination (or crossing). I propose two shorthand terms, 'Kungfu' and 'Jazz', to emphasize the concurrence of both processes: 'Kungfu' indicates the process that prioritizes boundary formation (or reinforcement), when boundary elimination (or crossing) also occurs without taking predominance; 'Jazz' indicates the opposite – the process favouring boundary elimination (or crossing) rather than boundary formation (or reinforcement). The terms 'Kungfu' and 'Jazz' are capitalized to distinguish them from actual forms of performing arts.<sup>3</sup>

These two terms are selected for three reasons. First, both terms refer to performing arts genre, but both are so much more than merely a genre. Kungfu – other than signifying the martial art genre – indicates the process of one's training, expertise or excellence achieved through extensive endeavour, or a way of living in the world; jazz – other than signifying a genre of music – has been described as 'a reflection of broader cultural, political, and economic factors' (Giddins and DeVaux, 2009: ix) and 'a way of communal bonding, ritual, and social interaction [...], the most exhilarating and controversial ways of making music, love, poetry, race, and America' (Savran 2010: 25). Second, both terms are known for their racially 'Othered' origins; the juxtaposition of the two suggests the racial Other's capacity to empower his or her self through boundary negotiations, which is a key concept to the 'Kungfu/Jazz' approach. Third, the two terms intimate boundary-guarding and boundary-crossing processes, respectively. Kungfu, especially Shaolin kungfu, is known for its well-developed totality that weaves together philosophy and martial art. It has a strictly defined boundary, and as an art form it protects its own purity. Jazz has African American origins, but since its inception, it has been

fluidly and gracefully taking in many musical influences. Contingency and mobility are what characterize jazz historically and at present. In the meantime, dialectically, even though kungfu as a performing art form works within the confinement of clearly defined boundaries, it has its own distinct moments of boundary crossing. And jazz, formed through the obscuring of boundaries, at times honours and guards its own boundaries. In the new terminology 'Kungfu/Jazz', the slash – a punctuation signifying both conflict and connection – indicates the traversing process in between the two.

In this article, I will start by examining 'Kungfu' as the process for defining and reinforcing political boundaries in Ho's work for the empowerment of the racial Other. I will then analyse 'Jazz' as the process of eliminating racial and sociocultural boundaries particularly seen in Ho's concept of popular avant-garde. Finally, I will explore 'Kungfu/Jazz' as the paradoxical process of negotiating between 'Kungfu' and 'Jazz' (prioritizing either one or, impartially, both) in Ho's music theatre-making: the creation of a new genre 'manga opera'. What 'Kungfu/Jazz' offers is more than a new mode of conceptualizing correlations between politics and art. It proposes a new approach of music theatre-making, particularly from the perspective of the racial Other, that pinpoints cultural processes of negotiation between boundary formation, elimination and rebuilding. With increasing hegemonic boundary-making in the current political climate, 'Kungfu/Jazz' suggests a politically progressive response through the paradoxical process of boundary-conscious music theatre-making.

4. Fred Ho was born in Palo Alto, CA, and spent the next five years in Michigan and Nebraska while his father searched for a full-time teaching job.

### **'Kungfu': Cultural empowerment and political radicalism of the racial Other**

Cultural empowerment and political radicalism of the racial Other has been a central and consistent ethos throughout Fred Ho's musical and theatrical career. Primarily boundary-reinforcing in nature, this ethos reflects Ho's life-long goals as an Asian-American activist and revolutionary artist to contest various forms of oppression and domination. The boundaries that he firmly guards are those of the racial Other's cultural capacities and political rights to self-empower and combat systematic oppression. The boundaries that he defies are racial, sociocultural, class and gender boundaries imposed structurally on the masses throughout history. In this section, I briefly trace the trajectory of Ho's racial consciousness and the ways in which racial and ethnic (Afro-Asian as well as Asian-American) solidarity and empowerment – 'Kungfu', a process that prioritizes boundary protection – play a crucial role in Ho's artistic creation and, in particular, his *VôĐ*.

Fred Ho's racial consciousness developed as a result of his childhood exclusion by white supremacists and his embracement by African-American educators during his pre-teen and teenage years. At the age of six, Ho moved with his parents to Amherst, MA, where Ho's father, a first-generation immigrant from China, landed a full-time position as a political science professor.<sup>4</sup> As a young boy growing up in a white neighbourhood, Ho was treated with 'isolation and avoidance by the other kids'; in addition, his 'white teacher deliberately told the other kids (all white) not to play with [him]' (Ho 1993: 177). The pain of being singled out by the community led Ho to connect with other oppressed peoples outside of his neighbourhood. In junior high school, he took his first black studies class with Marilyn Lewis, the first African-American teacher hired at Ho's school, who introduced the pre-teen Ho to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1987), a book that sparked

5. *Journey Beyond the West: New Adventures of Monkey* (1989–97), one of Fred Ho's signature manga operas, is about the Monkey King trickster challenging the power structure of the gods. *Journey to the West* (ca. 1570) by Wu Cheng'en is one of the four classical novels of the Chinese language. Its protagonist is Sun Wukong, the Monkey King – a triune combination of divinity, humanity and animality.

Ho's political awakening. As an advanced high-school student, Ho had a chance to take classes with a number of members of the 'illustrious radical Third World faculty', including poet Sonia Sanchez, musician/composer Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Reggie Workman, Roland Wiggins and so on, whose classes helped prepare Ho to become a revolutionary artist and writer (Ho 2006a: 167–68).

The Black Power Movement had a significant influence on the young Fred Ho and on his voice as an Asian-American musician. As Ho was coming of age, the Black Power Movement was in its heyday and was 'both a cultural and a political revolt, each thrust reinforcing the other' (Van Deburg 1992: 189). Motivated by his admiration for the Black Power Movement, Ho joined the Nation of Islam in 1975, the year he started attending Harvard as a Sociology major. Like the musicians of the Black Arts Movement, who believed in 'returning to the source' (Fujino 2013: 98–99), Ho was convinced that Asian-American music had strong links to traditional Asian art forms such as folk music, which help to instill pride in the histories of the oppressed peoples. Not only infusing African-American jazz elements with Asian instruments and idioms, but bringing the spirits of the Black Power movement and Asian-American movement together with jazz and Asian sound, Ho constructed the concept of 'Afro-Asian', one that crosses the boundaries of racial identities and the specificities of political and cultural struggles within respective communities. Ho found fault with the word 'jazz', critiquing its oppressive etymology, and stopped using it to describe his own music in 1989. He proposed 'Afro-Asian New American Multicultural Music', which he believed more accurately depicted the hybrid roots and revolutionary spirit at the heart of true jazz (Ho 1999a: 47).

Musical legacies and cultural narratives of the racial Other are vital to Ho's work. By taking on political themes, his music galvanized its listeners to take action and transform their society. In 1980, Ho formed a unique 'jazz' chamber orchestra, the Monkey Orchestra, a 'twelve-piece Big Band of Chinese and Western instruments with vocals in Chinese', and in 1982 he formed his core band, Afro Asian Music Ensemble, right after he moved to New York City (Ho 2006a: 51, 60–61). His first two recordings, *Tomorrow is Now!* (1985) and *We Refuse to be Used and Abused* (1987), were released by Soul Note Records. In 1989, Ho's opera *A Chinaman's Chance*, regarded as the first Chinese-American opera, was first performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the venue that premiered many of Ho's important works. In 1997, Ho finished the genre-defying 'living comic book' *Journey Beyond the West: New Adventures of Monkey*, based on the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*,<sup>5</sup> in which the Monkey trickster, Sun Wukong, challenges the power structure of the gods. In 1999, Ho created *Warrior Sisters: The New Adventures of African and Asian Womyn Warriors* (1991, with libretto by Ann T. Greene), a martial arts opera that built on influences from African and Asian folklore, Black Power movement and revolutionary feminism.

Ho's most monumental and 'most ambitious work' of his lifetime (Ho 2013: 7) was *Voice of the Dragon: A Trilogy of Martial Arts Operas* (1997–2006). Despite its political radicalism, *VoD* was also the most commercially successful of all his work. *VoD* is a trilogy that comprises *Once Upon a Time in Chinese America...the Martial Arts Epic* (*VoD I* hereafter), *Shaolin Secret Stories* (*VoD II* hereafter) and *Dragon V. Eagle: Enter the White Barbarians!* (*VoD III* hereafter). The trilogy – a radical political allegory that critiques the failure of the Asian-American movement – pays homage to Chinese historical legends and Chinese kungfu.

*VoD I* tells the story of the betrayal of the Shaolin Temple – a sacred Buddhist temple known as the cradle of kungfu – by Gar Man Jang, a female disciple within the temple whose craving for power turns her into a 'poisoned soul' that conspires with the invading Manchu army to carry out carnage inside the temple. No one in the temple survives except for four monks (Chen Jak, Miao Hin, Gee Shin and Li Wen Mao) and a nun (Ng Mui), later known collectively as the Five Ancestors of the Shaolin Temple, who manage to escape. During the carnage, Gar Man Jang discovers the most well-defended treasure of the Shaolin Temple – the Shaolin Secret Scrolls, and becomes invincible with supernatural powers. Realizing their ability is insufficient to defeat Gar Man Jang, who has now embodied the entirety of kungfu, the Five Ancestors decide to discard the teachings of the Secret Roll. They invent an improvisational and unpredictable new fighting style called 'The Drunken Fist', and thereby defeat Gar Man Jang.

*VoD II* is the prequel to *VoD I* and presents the backstory to the key characters in *VoD I*. In addition to telling the unpredictable stories of Chen Jak, Miao Hin, Gee Shin and Li Wen Mao in their early years, *VoD II* also focuses on the relationship between the two women, Gar Man Jang and Ng Mui, who turn out to be sisters that share a disturbing secret about their birth relations. The episode also depicts the early life of Gar Man Jang and how she gradually becomes sinister.

*VoD III* takes place half a century after the end of *VoD I* in a time when all the characters of *VoD I* have passed away. The world is divided into two forces: the Land of Dragons and the Land of Eagles. In a global martial arts tournament, the Eagles defeat and humiliate the Dragons. The Magistrate of the Dragons, in a desperate attempt to restore their glory, uses a long-lost secret scroll to resurrect Gar Man Jang, who thereafter defeats and castrates the Eagles and proceeds to enthrone herself. However, the world has turned out to be on the edge of destruction, brimming with torturous chaos and crises. Ng Mui and her only disciple, Yim Wing Chun, defeat Gar Man Jang and, as a result, a completely new order of existence is in its infancy.

As a political allegory, *VoD* reimagines an alternative outcome of the Asian-American movement of the late twentieth century by bringing to fruition an audacious overthrowing of the existent system and practices. The Asian-American movement was an outgrowth of and a reaction against the New Left social movement of the 1960s and 70s in the United States (Maeda 2015: 165). The Americans of Asian ancestry participated in various segments of the multifaceted New Left movement that confronted issues of race, class, gender, poverty and the war and decided that, despite historical enmity among Asians of different ethnicities in the United States, all Asians shared a common relationship to US racism. The Black Power movement advocated 'community control' as a 'separatist strategy that would contribute to their own empowerment' (Wei 1993: 41). This strategy was taken up as a model of self-reliance and self-empowerment by Asian-American communities, who developed a collective pan-Asian consciousness and coherent culture rooted in their experiences in the United States. In 1968, Yuji Ichioka used the term 'Asian American' for the first time when he co-founded the multi-ethnic Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) at the University of California, Berkeley (Maeda 2015: 165–66). Single-ethnic organizations, such as I Wor Kuen (IWK, a.k.a. Society of the Harmonious Righteous Fist) – of which Ho was a member – alongside multi-ethnic ones, contributed to the building of Asian-American solidarity and the spreading of anti-racist, anti-exploitation and anti-imperialist ideologies.