

A Systematic Literature Review of Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: Analytical Elements, Methods, and Limitations

XUEYU CHEN
HASRUL HASHIM*

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Chinese martial arts cinema has attained global importance, eliciting considerable academic interest in film studies, cultural studies, and communication studies. However, the diverse character of these studies across disciplines and geographies requires careful synthesis to inform future research initiatives. This systematic literature review addresses this need by examining 54 peer-reviewed articles selected from 8,123 initial records (0.66% inclusion rate). Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this study addresses three research questions concerning dominant analytical frameworks, methodological approaches, and critical gaps in the field. Findings reveal cultural and political analysis dominates (37.0%), followed by industry and production studies (27.8%), cross-cultural reception (22.2%), and technical and aesthetic innovation (13.0%). Methodologically, qualitative approaches prevail (59.3%), with limited quantitative (14.8%) and mixed methods (25.9%) research. Geographic distribution shows balanced international engagement: Asia-Pacific (40.7%), North America (33.3%), and Europe (25.9%). Temporal analysis indicates consistent scholarly interest across two decades rather than dramatic growth. Theoretically, cultural studies (37.0%) and film studies (33.3%) together account for 70.3% of theoretical approaches, while philosophical and aesthetic frameworks comprise 11.1%. Critical gaps include the absence of genre-specific theoretical development, limited engagement with Chinese philosophical traditions, and insufficient attention to digital transformation's impact on martial arts aesthetics. The study concludes that while the field demonstrates sophistication in cultural-political analysis, substantial opportunities exist for methodological diversification, theoretical innovation grounded in indigenous perspectives, and expanded research on aesthetic dimensions. These findings provide evidence-based guidance for redirecting research priorities toward a comprehensive understanding of this globally significant cinematic form.

Keywords: *Chinese martial arts cinema, kung fu, systematic literature review, research methodology, film studies.*

INTRODUCTION

Chinese martial arts cinema represents a distinctive contribution to world cinema, encompassing genres that have evolved over nearly a century of filmmaking. This cinematic tradition has achieved global recognition, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers to become a force in international popular culture (Wong, 2019). The genre extends beyond entertainment, serving as a vehicle for cultural expression, philosophical exploration, and the projection of Chinese soft power in global media (Yang, 2023). From Shaw Brothers productions that dominated Asian markets in the 1960s and 1970s to contemporary blockbusters competing globally, Chinese martial arts cinema demonstrates adaptability while maintaining distinctive cultural characteristics (Teo, 2021).

*Corresponding author: hash@ukm.edu.my

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Academic engagement with Chinese martial arts cinema has expanded significantly over the past two decades, with scholars from diverse disciplines examining this cultural phenomenon through various theoretical and methodological lenses (Morris et al., 2005; Wong, 2018). Research has evolved from early formalist analyses to interdisciplinary investigations engaging with questions of cultural identity, transnational circulation, and digital transformation (Chan, 2004; Xu, 2022). Studies have emerged from multiple geographic regions and academic traditions, suggesting the genre's global scholarly significance (Marchetti, 2012). Despite this growing body of studies, the field lacks a comprehensive systematic review that maps existing research, identifies dominant approaches, and synthesizes findings across disciplinary perspectives. Without such synthesis, researchers risk duplicating efforts, overlooking important contributions, or missing opportunities for theoretical and methodological innovation. The absence of a systematic review impedes understanding of how knowledge about Chinese martial arts cinema has developed, what has been achieved, and where significant gaps remain.

This systematic literature review addresses this critical gap by employing scientific protocols to identify, evaluate, and synthesize existing studies on Chinese martial arts cinema. The significance of this undertaking extends beyond mere cataloguing of existing research. By providing this important comprehensive mapping of the field's current state, this review enables scholars to identify underexplored areas, recognize methodological limitations, and develop more targeted research agendas. Furthermore, the systematic approach ensures transparency and replicability, establishing a foundation for future periodic reviews that can track the field's evolution. Through systematic application of PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021a), this study aims to provide extensive mapping of the field's current state and evidence-based guidance for future research directions by addressing three primary research questions:

RQ1: What are the dominant analytical elements and theoretical frameworks employed in Chinese martial arts cinema research?

RQ2: What methodological approaches characterize research on Chinese martial arts cinema?

RQ3: What are the key gaps and limitations in current Chinese martial arts cinema research, and what opportunities exist for future development?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese martial arts cinema encompasses multiple genres that have evolved distinctly while maintaining interconnected relationships through shared aesthetic principles, cultural foundations, and narrative conventions (Berry, 2006; Teo, 2015). The term serves as an umbrella category including films demonstrating distinctive approaches to action choreography, narrative structure, and visual style, regardless of specific subgenre classification (Wong, 2019; Zhou, 2023). This category includes traditional martial arts films focusing on wushu and emphasizing cultural and philosophical aspects while featuring authentic martial arts techniques (Xu, 2022). Wuxia films, characterized by supernatural abilities and fantasy elements, often feature heroic knights-errant who embody Chinese cultural values within imagined historical settings (Teo, 2021; Zhou, 2023). Kung fu films emphasize physical prowess and realistic combat while maintaining connections to traditional martial arts philosophies and training methods (Wong, 2019). Contemporary Chinese action films combine elements from traditional martial arts cinema with modern filmmaking techniques, creating hybrid genres incorporating martial arts and modern combat techniques (Wang, 2008; Aston, 2020; Cui & Zhao, 2020). Recent developments include military action

films integrating martial arts elements with contemporary warfare narratives, representing a hybrid form maintaining the essence of Chinese martial arts cinema while engaging with modern geopolitical themes (Xu, 2022).

The theoretical landscape of Chinese martial arts cinema studies has evolved through multiple paradigmatic shifts, with scholars adopting increasingly diverse frameworks while revealing both convergences and divergences in their approaches (Berry, 2006). Early formalist approaches focused on identifying genre conventions and analysing cinematic techniques, establishing foundations for understanding distinctive visual and narrative features of martial arts films (Teo, 2015; Wong, 2019). However, limitations of purely formal analysis became apparent as scholars recognized the need to examine these films within cultural, historical, and political contexts (Wang, 2008; Barrowman, 2014). This shift from formalist to contextual analysis represents a significant convergence among scholars, as researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds increasingly agreed that martial arts cinema requires examination beyond its surface aesthetics. The incorporation of cultural studies perspectives enables scholars to examine how Chinese martial arts films function as sites of cultural negotiation and identity construction (Cui & Zhao, 2020). The application of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model illuminates how different audiences interpret martial arts films through distinct cultural lenses, producing varied and sometimes contradictory readings of the same texts (Xie et al., 2022). Postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks enrich understanding of how Chinese martial arts cinema responds to and resists Western cultural hegemony (Aston, 2020). These perspectives reveal how the genre functions as cultural assertion challenging Orientalist representations while engaging with global cinematic conventions (Teo, 2021). The concept of cultural hybridity, developed by Homi Bhabha and applied to martial arts cinema by various scholars, provides tools for analysing how contemporary films create new forms of cultural expression through strategic combination of Eastern and Western elements (Zhou, 2023). Notably, scholars diverge on whether such hybridity represents successful cultural negotiation or problematic capitulation to Western market demands—Wu & Chan (2007) emphasize the strategic benefits of global-local alliances, while other scholars express concern about cultural authenticity. The application of soft power theory has become prominent in recent studies, as researchers examine how martial arts films function as vehicles for projecting national image, promoting cultural values, and building international cultural capital (Aukia, 2023).

The methodological landscape of Chinese martial arts cinema studies has diversified, with researchers employing varied approaches to examine different dimensions of this cultural phenomenon (Stelmach, 2024). Textual analysis remains fundamental to the field, recent studies employ close reading techniques informed by cultural semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, and phenomenology to examine how films construct meaning through the interplay of movement, space, and time (Wong, 2019). Digital humanities methods open new avenues for research, enabling scholars to analyse large datasets and identify patterns impossible to detect through traditional methods. Computational approaches including topic modelling, sentiment analysis, and visual style quantification offer insights into genre evolution, audience reception, and aesthetic trends (Xu, 2022; Stelmach, 2024). Ethnographic and audience reception studies, provide insights into how different communities engage with martial arts films (Van Staden, 2016). Mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques prove effective for examining phenomena such as transnational circulation and

cultural impact (Fauser, 2018). Recent archival discoveries shed light on early film productions, industry practices, and cultural contexts shaping the genre's evolution (Zhou, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The systematic literature review provides a transparent and reproducible framework for examining existing studies (Azarian et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2025). This methodological approach is particularly useful when examining a field as diverse as Chinese martial arts cinema studies, where research spans multiple academic disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approaches (Liu et al., 2025). The approach integrates principles from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework with modifications appropriate for humanities and cultural studies research (Page et al., 2021b). This synthesis ensures scientific rigor and sensitivity to interpretive dimensions characterizing research.

Two premier academic databases were selected as primary sources: Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were chosen to ensure maximum coverage of high-quality studies. Scopus provides extensive multidisciplinary coverage including significant representation of humanities and social sciences publications relevant to film studies (Martín-Martín et al., 2021). Web of Science offers selection criteria and comprehensive citation tracking capabilities that enable identification of influential works within Chinese martial arts cinema studies (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The decision to limit database selection to these two sources reflects a balance between comprehensiveness and feasibility (Mathew, 2024).

Search Strategy

The final search strings incorporated three essential conceptual components: geographical/cultural identifiers to capture Chinese cinema broadly defined, genre-specific terminology encompassing various martial arts film categories, and medium descriptors ensuring focus on cinematic rather than other cultural productions have shown in Table 1. For Scopus, the search string utilized the field to search within titles, abstracts, and keywords. The Web of Science search string employed the Topic Search field with identical term combinations. Both searches were conducted on August 7th, 2025, ensuring temporal consistency in data collection.

Table 1: Database search strings

Database	Search String	Access Date
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ((Chin* OR Main?land* OR Taiwan* OR Hongkong* OR Zhong* OR Sin* OR PRC* OR Huayu* OR Canton* OR Guang* OR Foshan*) AND ("Martial Art*" OR K?ngfu* OR "K?ng fu*" OR G?ngfu* OR "G?ng fu*" OR Wushu* OR Dongzuo* OR Action* OR Wuda* OR Wuxia* OR Combat* OR Swordplay* OR Choreography* OR Fight*) AND (Cinema* OR Film* OR Movie* OR "Motion picture*"))	August 7, 2025
Web of Science	TS=((Chin* OR Main?land* OR Taiwan* OR Hongkong* OR Zhong* OR Sin* OR PRC* OR Huayu* OR Canton* OR Guang* OR Foshan*) AND ("Martial Art*" OR K?ngfu* OR "K?ng fu*" OR G?ngfu* OR "G?ng fu*" OR Wushu* OR Dongzuo* OR Action* OR Wuda* OR Wuxia* OR Combat* OR Swordplay* OR Choreography* OR Fight*) AND (Cinema* OR Film* OR Movie* OR "Motion picture*"))	August 7, 2025

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The establishment of clear inclusion and exclusion criteria shaped the scope of the systematic review in Table 2. These criteria were developed through careful consideration of the research objectives, practical constraints, and the need to maintain consistency with systematic review principles while accommodating the specific characteristics of film studies (Azarian et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2023).

Table 2: Selection criteria - Inclusion and exclusion parameters

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Language	English-language publications	Non-English publications without English versions	Ensures accessibility and comparability for international scholarly
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference proceedings, books, book chapters, reviews, reports	Maintains consistency in quality assurance and review standards
Temporal Scope	No restrictions. All publication years	None	Captures complete historical development of the field
Subject Domain	Primary focus on Chinese martial arts cinema (wuxia, kung fu, contemporary action films)	Studies where martial arts cinema appears only peripherally; focus on literature, TV series, or social media without cinematic engagement	Ensures direct relevance to research questions
Data Availability	Full-text accessible through institutional access or repositories	Articles without retrievable full text	Enables comprehensive analysis
Geographic Scope	Films from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese diaspora	Non-Chinese martial arts films	Maintains focus on Chinese cultural productions

Language criteria specified inclusion of English-language publications only, acknowledging potential limitations while ensuring practical feasibility of the review process (Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2020; Dobrescu et al., 2021). Publication type criteria restricted inclusion to peer-reviewed journal articles, excluding conference proceedings, books, book chapters, reviews, and reports. The temporal scope imposed no restrictions on publication date, allowing examination of the historical development of research on Chinese martial arts cinema. Subject domain criteria specified inclusion of studies focusing primarily on Chinese martial arts cinema across all relevant disciplinary perspectives.

Data Selection Process

The process comprised multiple stages designed to progressively refine the pool of potentially relevant studies to a final corpus of directly relevant research in Figure 1. The initial identification phase yielded 8,123 records across databases, with Scopus contributing 4,762 records and Web of Science providing 3,361 records (both searches conducted on August 7, 2025). Duplicate removal constituted the first refinement stage, employing Rayyan management software to identify and eliminate redundant records appearing in databases.

This process identified 2,277 duplicate records, reducing the pool to 5,846 unique publications for screening.

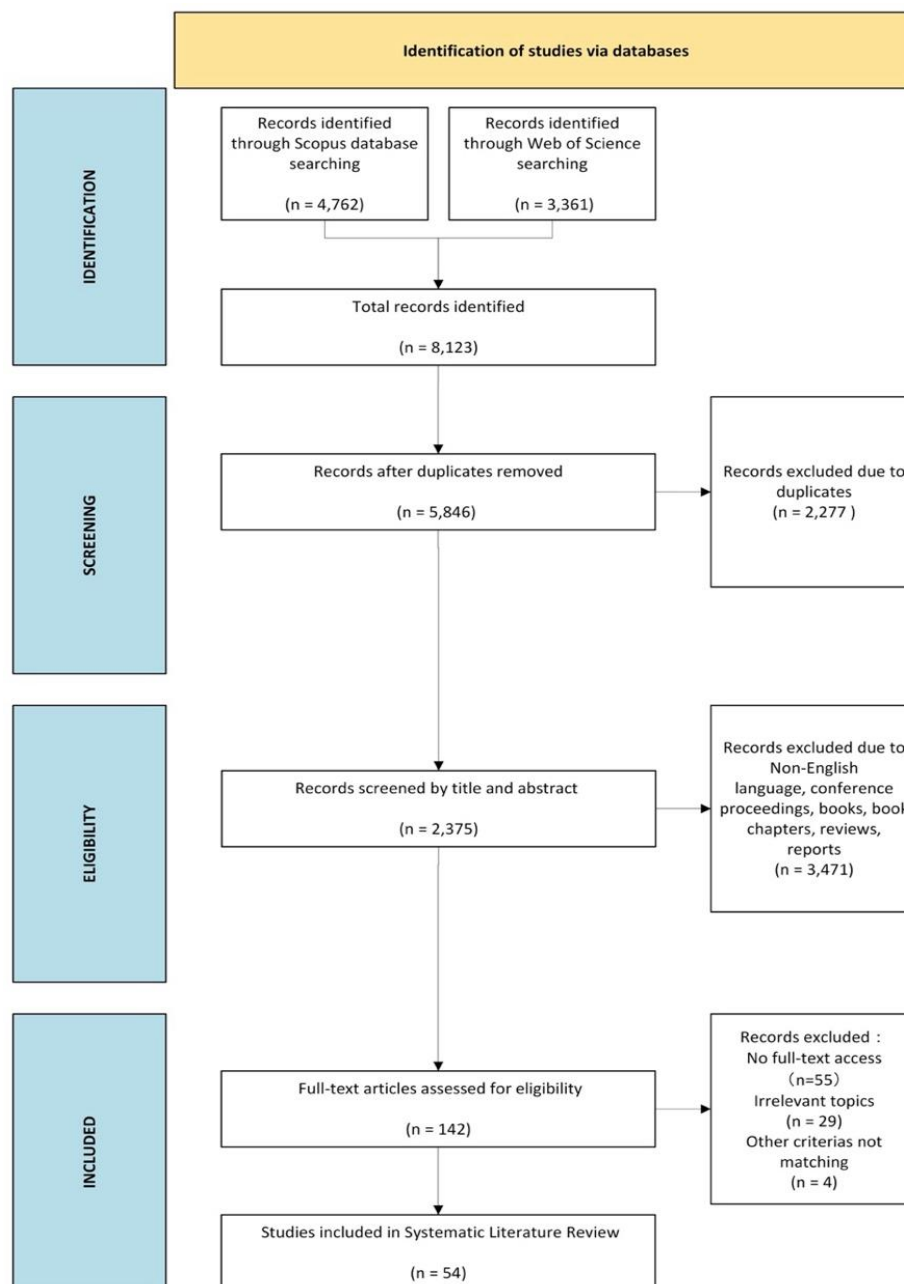


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram for Systematic Literature Review
Source: Adapted from Page et al. (2021b)

Title and abstract screening represented the next stage, requiring evaluation of each record against inclusion criteria based on information available in bibliographic records. This screening process eliminated 3,471 records clearly failing to meet inclusion criteria. The screening employed a conservative approach, retaining studies for full-text review when titles and abstracts provided insufficient information for definitive exclusion decisions. Of 2,375 records identified for full-text review, 142 articles were obtained and subjected to evaluation against all inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The manual screening process resulted in 54 articles meeting all inclusion criteria and forming the analytical corpus for the systematic review. The exclusion of 88 articles rendered them inappropriate for inclusion despite initial appearances of relevance. 55 articles could not be obtained full-text access despite extensive efforts through institutional subscriptions and interlibrary loan services. 29 articles were excluded after full-text review revealed that Chinese martial arts cinema was not the primary focus, despite initial indications from titles or abstracts. 4 articles were excluded for failing to meet other eligibility criteria.

FINDINGS

This analysis presents data extracted from 54 articles selected through the systematic review process. Table 3 lists all included studies with unique identifiers (S1-S54) used for reference throughout the analysis. Analysis procedures included frequency counts, percentage calculations, and cross-tabulation of variables to identify patterns in the literature.

Table 3: Characteristics of included studies (n=54)

ID	Title	Authors	Year
S1	The influencing factors of international long-term competitiveness of Chinese Kung Fu films	Liu et al.	2025
S2	ChineseMPD: A Semantic Segmentation Dataset of Chinese Martial Arts Classic Movie Props	Zhang et al.	2024
S3	Intertextual otherness between Shanghai and Hong Kong: the localisation of space and collective nostalgia in Kung Fu Hustle	Chen	2025
S4	The Chinese wuxia culture in Thailand: dissemination and influence	Han	2021
S5	Re-dissecting Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon from the perspectives of cognition, translation and reconfiguration of culture	Zhang	2021
S6	Re-narrating non-intervention policy in China's military-action genre films	Guan & Hu	2021
S7	Daoism and Diaspora in Post-millennial Taiwanese Martial Arts Films	Feng	2023
S8	Wolf Warrior Spreads Superior: The narrative and effectiveness of Chinese public diplomacy behaviours on Twitter	Guo & Qin	2024
S9	The "Wolf Warrior Cycle": Chinese Blockbusters in the Age of the Belt and Road Initiative	Yang	2023
S10	China's Push for Greater Influence in the Popular Culture Arena: The Ip Man Saga	Aukia	2023
S11	Can audience involvement stimulate visit intention in Chinese Kung Fu? Using a serial multiple mediation model to explore film tourism.	Xia et al.	2022
S12	The Chivalry of a Martial Artist–Interview with Wu Jing	Jia	2021
S13	Improving the tourist's perception of the tourist destinations image: An analysis of Chinese Kung fu film and television	Chen et al.	2021
S14	Is everybody Kung Fu fighting? Indian popular cinema and martial arts films	Clini	2020
S15	"Man-as-nation": Representations of masculinity and nationalism in Wu Jing's Wolf Warrior II	Hu & Guan	2021

S16	Cannibalizing collective memory: Chinese history and political consciousness in Tsui Hark's <i>The Taking of Tiger Mountain</i>	Fang	2020
S17	The Insight and Limitation of "Post-Theory": The Poetics Problem of Chinese Cinema Carried by David Bordwell	Yu	2020
S18	Martial arts cinema in civil society of postcolonial Hong Kong: kung fu hustle and the grandmaster	Yang	2020
S19	Bruce Lee as gladiator: Celebrity, vernacular stoicism and cinema	Steenberg	2019
S20	From affective space to performative depth: spatial aesthetics in 3-D wuxia films <i>Flying swords of dragon gate</i> (2010) and <i>Sword master</i> (2016)	Li	2019
S21	Nothingness in motion: Theorizing Bruce Lee's action aesthetics	Wong	2019
S22	The patriotic narrative of Donnie Yen: how martial arts film stars reconcile Chinese tradition and modernity	Richards	2019
S23	Producing global China: The Great Wall and Hollywood's cultivation of the PRC's global vision	Kokas	2019
S24	Disrupting the sword: The Wuxia legacy of Adam Cheng and the embodiment of Hong Kong cultural memory	To	2019
S25	Historicizing Martial Arts Cinema in Postcolonial Hong Kong: The Ip Man Narratives	Yang	2019
S26	Dubbese fu: The kung fu wave and the aesthetics of imperfect lip synchronization	Magnan-Park	2018
S27	Unisonance in kung fu film music, or the Wong Fei-hung theme song as a Cantonese transnational anthem	McGuire	2018
S28	The grandmaster of snow: Martial arts, particle systems and the animist cinema	Tang	2018
S29	Watching Hong Kong martial arts film under apartheid	Van Staden	2016
S30	Synthesizing Zhenshi (authenticity) and Shizhan (combativity): reinventing Chinese kung fu in Donnie Yen's Ip Man series (2008-2015)	Wong	2017
S31	Violence, wuxia, migrants: Jia Zhangke's cinematic discontent in <i>A Touch of Sin</i>	Wang	2015
S32	I am the invincible sword goddess: Mediatization of Chinese gender ideology through female kung-fu practitioners in films	Hiramoto & Teo	2014
S33	Remembering the body: Deleuze's recollection-image, and the spectacle of physical memory in <i>Yip Man/Ip Man</i> (2008)	Martin-Jones	2014
S34	Action in tranquillity: Sketching martial ideation in <i>The Grandmaster</i>	Wong	2018
S35	Kung fu: Negotiating nationalism and modernity	Li	2001
S36	Hollywood domination of the Chinese kung fu market	Chung	2007
S37	Romancing 'kung fu master' – from 'yellow peril' to 'yellow prowess'	Zhu	2013
S38	Wang Yu–the Taiwan years	Williams	2012
S39	Critique of law in a martial arts thriller: The peril of emotions, limits of rationality, and pluralistic laws	Leung	2014
S40	Globalizing Chinese martial arts cinema: The global-local alliance and the production of <i>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon</i>	Wu & Chan	2007
S41	An interview with Hong Kong sound designer Kinson Tsang	Leow	2018

S42	The Shaw brothers' Wuxia Pian: an early identity and business-cultural connection for the Chinese in Malaya	Ngo	2011
S43	Figures of hope and the filmic imaginary of jianghu in contemporary Hong Kong cinema	Chan	2001
S44	Intersecting anglicization and sinicization: Hong Kong cinema and the modernized colonial	Liew	2012
S45	Entering the cinema of attractions' Matrix: Yuen Wo-Ping's merging of Hollywood spectacle with kungfu choreography	Pettigrew	2018
S46	Modernizing primordialism: Deterritorializing Chineseness and reterritorializing the sinophone in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon	Coe	2018
S47	Virtuality, Nationalism, and Globalization in Zhang Yimou's Hero	Zhu	2013
S48	Popular history and the Chinese martial arts biopic	Teo	2011
S49	Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon in the land of the Cartesians: From comparative reception to cultural comparison	Liu	2008
S50	Martial arts films and Dutch–Chinese masculinities: Smaller is better	Chow	2008
S51	The death of heroes in China	Zhang	2008
S52	"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon": A Diasporic Reading	Klein	2004
S53	The Global Return of the Wu Xia Pian (Chinese Sword-Fighting Movie): Ang Lee's "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"	Chan	2004
S54	Beyond Martial Arts in Hong Kong Films Agents, Place and Culture in Socio-Spatial Context	Okuno	2004

Temporal Distribution

Analysis of publication years across the reviewed articles has shown in Figure 2. The 2020-2025 period includes 18 articles (33.3%), the 2015-2019 period contributed 17 articles (31.5%), the 2010-2014 period produced 9 articles (16.7%), and pre-2010 publications account for 10 articles (18.5%).

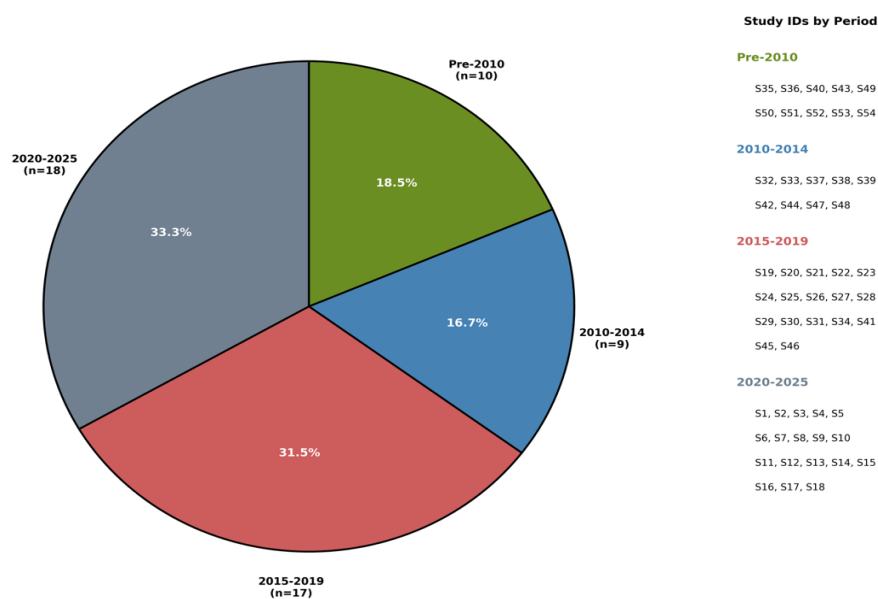


Figure 2: Temporal distribution of selected publications

This distribution indicates Chinese martial arts cinema has been a consistent subject of scholarly interest since the early 2000s, with stable publication rates across different periods. The slight increase in publications during 2020-2025 (18 articles) compared to 2015-2019 (17 articles) represents minimal growth of one article, suggesting the field has reached a mature phase of steady production rather than experiencing rapid expansion. Early foundational studies from 2001-2009, including Li (2001) on nationalism and modernity (S35), Chan (2001) on hope and utopian imaginaries (S43), and Klein (2004) on diasporic readings (S52), established frameworks that continue influencing contemporary research.

Geographic Distribution

Geographic distribution of research reveals global engagement with Chinese martial arts cinema has shown in Figure 3. Based on author institutional affiliations, Asia-Pacific scholars produced 22 articles (40.7%), North American researchers contributed 18 articles (33.3%), and European scholars authored 14 articles (25.9%).

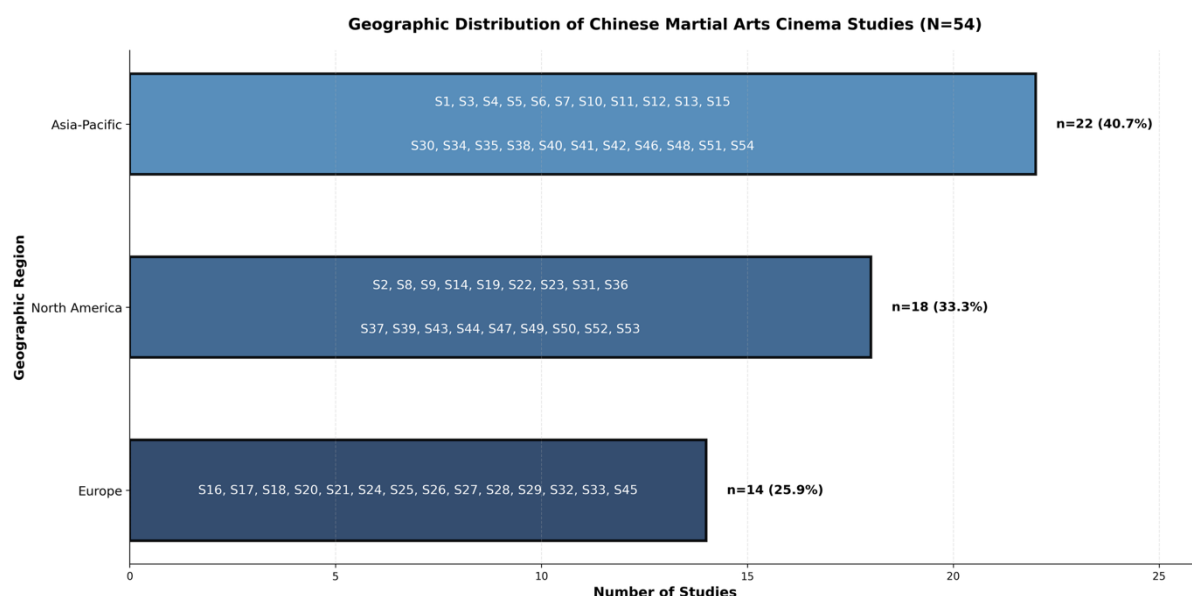


Figure 3: Geographic distribution of Chinese martial arts cinema studies

Within the Asia-Pacific region, contributions come from multiple locations including Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Australia, providing diverse regional perspectives. Geographic analysis reveals patterns in research focus aligned with regional perspectives. Asian scholars frequently examine industry dynamics, cultural authenticity, and local reception patterns. Western scholars tend to emphasize cross-cultural reception, appropriation, and transformation. This distribution across three major regions demonstrates the genre's international scholarly appeal, with researchers from diverse cultural backgrounds contributing to knowledge production.

Methodological Approaches

The methodological landscape of the reviewed literature demonstrates diversity in approaches to studying Chinese martial arts cinema (Table 4). Qualitative methods remain dominant, employed in 32 articles (59.3%). Within qualitative approaches, textual analysis appears in 15 studies (27.8%). Cultural analysis comprises 10 studies (18.5%). Historical analysis accounts for 7 studies (13.0%).

Table 4: Methodological Approaches Distribution

Method Category	Specific Approach	Study IDs	Count	Percentage
Qualitative Methods			32	59.3%
	Textual Analysis	S3, S5, S6, S21, S24, S31, S33, S37, S39, S43, S47, S51, S52, S53, S54	15	27.8%
	Cultural Analysis	S4, S7, S10, S15, S16, S17, S18, S25, S30, S35	10	18.5%
	Historical Analysis	S38, S42, S48, S49, S45, S46, S44	7	13.0%
Quantitative Methods		S1, S2, S8, S11, S36, S40, S41, S50	8	14.8%
Mixed Methods		S9, S12, S13, S14, S19, S20, S22, S23, S26, S27, S28, S29, S32, S34	14	25.9%
Total		S1-S54	54	100.0%

Quantitative methods appear in 8 articles (14.8%), indicating empirical approaches remain minority within the field, though their presence signals growing methodological diversification. Mixed methods approaches utilized in 14 articles (25.9%) demonstrate recognition that understanding Chinese martial arts cinema benefits from multiple analytical perspectives. The dominance of qualitative methods (59.3%) reflects the field's roots in humanities, where interpretive approaches remain central. Textual analysis studies (27.8% of total) maintain traditional film studies approaches, examining narrative, visual style, and meaning construction. Cultural analysis (18.5%) and historical analysis (13.0%) together account for nearly one-third of studies, indicating interest in contextual understanding. The emergence of quantitative (14.8%) and mixed methods (25.9%) approaches, while still minority positions, suggests methodological maturation and expansion beyond traditional humanities frameworks.

Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical frameworks employed across the reviewed studies are shown in Figure 4. Cultural studies frameworks appear most frequently, utilized in 20 articles (37.0%). Film studies theories inform 18 articles (33.3%). Political and communication theories appear in 10 articles (18.5%). Philosophical and aesthetic theories guide 6 articles (11.1%).

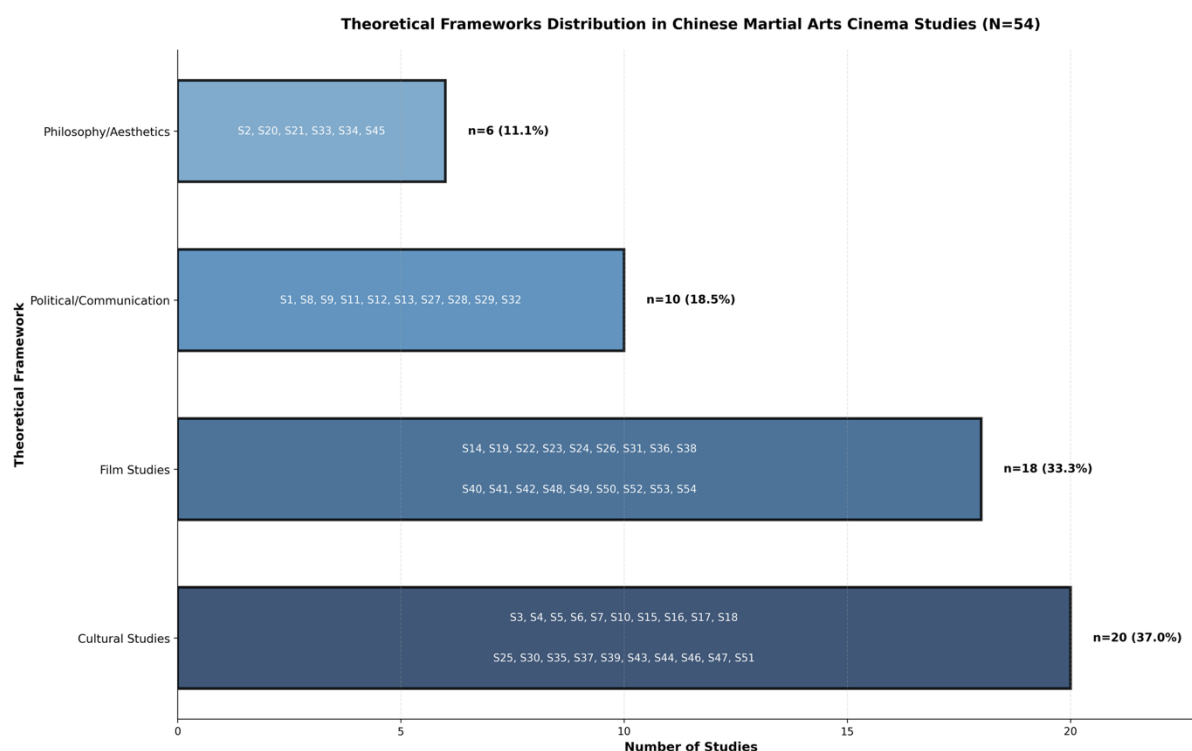


Figure 4: Theoretical frameworks distribution in Chinese martial arts cinema studies

The prominence of cultural studies (37.0%) and film studies (33.3%) frameworks, together accounting for 70.3% of theoretical approaches, indicates the field's primary orientation toward humanistic interpretation. These dominant frameworks draw on established concepts from postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, genre analysis, and auteur theory. Political and communication theories (18.5%) represent growing interest in martial arts cinema's ideological and soft power dimensions, as exemplified by Aukia (2023) and Yang (2023). Philosophical and aesthetic approaches (11.1%) remain minority perspectives, suggesting limited engagement with abstract theoretical questions despite Wong's (2019) development of action aesthetics theory.

DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis reveals patterns in how scholars approach Chinese martial arts cinema studies, demonstrating the field's maturation and its persistent limitations. Building upon the findings, this section synthesizes four primary thematic domains in Table 5: cultural and political analysis (20 articles, 37.0%), industry and production studies (15 articles, 27.8%), cross-cultural reception (12 articles, 22.2%), and technical and aesthetic innovation (7 articles, 13.0%). The analysis reveals that Chinese martial arts cinema studies has developed a sophisticated understanding of cultural representation and political messaging, while demonstrating less engagement with aesthetic innovation and audience reception. The dominance of cultural-political analysis alongside limited technical and aesthetic studies suggests scholarly priorities that privilege ideological interpretation over formal analysis.

Table 5: Distribution of studies across thematic sub-categories

Main Theme	Sub-category	Study IDs	Count	% of Theme	% of Total
Cultural & Political			20	100%	37.0%
	Identity & Authenticity	S3, S4, S7, S30, S35	5	25%	9.3%
	Politics & Soft Power	S6, S8, S9, S10, S15, S37, S51	7	35%	13.0%
	Memory & History	S16, S17, S18, S25, S39, S43, S44, S46, S47	8	40%	14.8%
Industry & Production			15	100%	27.8%
	Market Dynamics	S1, S36, S40, S49, S54	5	33.3%	9.3%
	Co-production	S8, S9, S23, S38, S42	5	33.3%	9.3%
	Film Tourism	S11, S12, S13, S41, S48	5	33.3%	9.3%
Cross-cultural			12	100%	22.2%
	Reception Patterns	S14, S29, S31, S50, S52, S53	6	50%	11.1%
	Star Studies	S19, S22, S24, S33	4	33.3%	7.4%
	Translation & Linguistic	S26, S32	2	16.7%	3.7%
Technical & Aesthetic			7	100%	13.0%
	Choreography & Philosophy	S20, S21, S34	3	42.9%	5.6%
	Digital Innovation	S2, S28, S45	3	42.9%	5.6%
	Musical Innovation	S27	1	14.2%	1.8%
Total		S1-S54	54		100%

a. Theme 1: Cultural and Political Analysis

Cultural and political analysis dominates reviewed literature with 20 (37.0%) articles examining how Chinese martial arts films construct, negotiate, and circulate cultural meanings. Within this domain, questions of cultural authenticity emerge as central concerns across multiple studies. Chen (2025) demonstrates through analysis of *Kung Fu Hustle* (S3) how contemporary films bridging Shanghai's cosmopolitan past with Hong Kong's colonial experience, creating hybrid cultural spaces that resist categorization as either authentic or inauthentic. This finding challenge binary frameworks of cultural purity, suggesting instead that authenticity functions as strategic performance rather than fixed essence. The

negotiation between tradition and modernity appears consistently across temporal periods, though with evolving emphases. Li (2001) established a foundational understanding of how early kung fu films negotiated nationalism and modernity (S35), while recent studies like Feng (2023) examine how contemporary Taiwanese martial arts films employ Daoist philosophy to articulate diasporic identity (S7). The persistence of this theme across two decades indicates that questions of cultural authenticity remain unresolved, continuously renegotiated as production contexts and audience expectations evolve. Wong (2017) synthesizes these tensions through concepts of “Zhenshi” (authenticity) and “Shizhan” (combat realism), demonstrating how films balance traditional martial arts philosophy with contemporary audience demands for realistic action (S30).

Political dimensions of martial arts cinema receive extensive attention, particularly regarding soft power projection and nationalist messaging. Guan & Hu (2021) analyse how military action films reframe China's non-intervention policy through heroic individual narratives (S6), revealing tensions between official diplomatic positions and cinematic representations. The Wolf Warrior phenomenon receives particular scrutiny, with Guo & Qin (2024) demonstrating through social media analysis that Wolf Warrior diplomacy narratives show limited effectiveness in international engagement (S8), while Yang (2023) reveals how these films align with Belt and Road Initiative narratives but face reception challenges globally (S9). The Ip Man saga emerges as a rich site for analysing soft power dynamics. Aukia (2023) demonstrates how these films function as soft power tools promoting Chinese nationalism and cultural values (S10), though with varying effectiveness across different cultural contexts. Analysis reveals an understanding of how martial arts films serve state interests while pursuing commercial objectives, creating negotiations between propaganda and entertainment. These studies demonstrate that while Chinese martial arts films increasingly serve explicit political functions, their effectiveness as soft power instruments remain limited by cultural translation challenges and audience resistance to overt messaging.

Historical memory emerges as a crucial analytical framework, with studies examining how martial arts films reconstruct and mobilize the past for contemporary purposes. Fang (2020) introduces the concept of “cannibalizing collective memory”, demonstrating how films selectively appropriate historical narratives to serve contemporary nationalist agendas (S16). This process involves not simply representing history but actively reconstructing it through selective emphasis, strategic omission, and creative reinterpretation. Yang (2019) provides postcolonial historicization revealing how martial arts cinema evolution reflects broader patterns of cultural decolonization (S25), while Chan (2001) examines how films construct figures of hope offering utopian imaginaries during periods of uncertainty (S43). The manipulation of historical memory extends to biographical films, with multiple studies examining how real martial artists become mythologized through cinematic representation. The transformation of historical figures into nationalist symbols, as analyzed in studies of Ip Man and Wong Fei-hung films, reveals how biography serves ideological functions while claiming historical authenticity. These findings demonstrate that martial arts cinema functions as popular historiography, shaping public understanding of the past while serving contemporary political and cultural needs.

b. Theme 2: Industry and Production Studies

Industry and production studies comprise 15 articles (27.8%) examining economic structures, production processes, and market dynamics shaping Chinese martial arts cinema. Liu et al. (2025) provide analysis of international competitiveness factors, employing data mining

techniques to identify glocalization and cultural hybridity as success factors (S1). Market analysis reveals persistent challenges in global competition. Chung (2007) documents Hollywood's continued domination of kung fu markets despite the genre's Chinese origins (S36), while Wu & Chan (2007) trace how globalization transforms production and reception patterns (S40). Analysis demonstrates that Chinese martial arts films face structural disadvantages in global distribution, including language barriers, cultural specificity, and limited marketing resources compared to Hollywood productions.

Co-production emerges as a dominant strategy for accessing global markets, though with mixed results. Kokas (2019) provides an analysis of China-Hollywood co-production tensions (S23), revealing how creative compromises often satisfy neither Chinese nor Western audiences. The study demonstrates that co-productions face challenges in reconciling different production cultures, narrative expectations, and censorship requirements. Contemporary co-productions increasingly involve multiple countries and streaming platforms, creating financing and creative arrangements that challenge traditional production models. These findings suggest that while co-production remains economically attractive, creative success requires careful negotiation of cultural differences rather than simple compromise.

An emerging research area examines martial arts cinema's broader economic impacts through film tourism. Xia et al. (2022) demonstrate correlations between audience emotional involvement and tourism destination visit intentions (S11), while Chen et al. (2021) explore strategic destination marketing through film narrative alignment (S13). These studies reveal that martial arts films generate value beyond box office revenues, with film tourism contributing billions annually to regional economies. Findings suggest untapped potential for development of film tourism infrastructure and marketing strategies. Sites associated with martial arts films become pilgrimage destinations for fans, creating economic opportunities for local communities while raising concerns about cultural commodification.

c. Theme 3: Cross-Cultural Reception

Cross-cultural reception studies comprise 12 articles (22.2%) examining how martial arts films circulate and transform across cultural contexts. Analysis reveals diverse reception patterns, challenging assumptions about universal meanings or predictable cultural translations. Clini (2020) demonstrates how Indian popular cinema selectively adapts Chinese martial arts elements while maintaining local narrative traditions (S14), revealing creative appropriation rather than simple imitation. Van Staden (2016) provides analysis of how South African audiences under apartheid read Hong Kong martial arts films through anti-apartheid resistance frameworks (S29), demonstrating how local political contexts reshape textual meanings. Reception studies reveal that audiences actively construct meanings rather than passively receiving intended messages. Chow (2008) examines how Dutch-Chinese men use martial arts films to negotiate masculine diaspora identities (S50), demonstrating how films serve identity construction needs specific to diasporic contexts. Klein (2004) reveals how diasporic audiences interpret films differently from homeland and host culture perspectives (S52). These findings demonstrate that Chinese martial arts cinema acquire multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings as they circulate globally.

Star studies reveal how martial arts performers function as transcultural icons mediating between local and global meanings. Steenberg (2019) analyses Bruce Lee as embodiment of vernacular stoicism appealing across cultural boundaries (S19), demonstrating

how star personas transcend specific cultural contexts while maintaining cultural specificity. Richards (2019) traces Donnie Yen's evolution toward increasingly explicit patriotic narratives (S22), revealing how star images respond to changing political contexts and audience expectations. Analysis demonstrates that martial arts stars function as cultural ambassadors, though their effectiveness varies across different reception contexts. These findings suggest that star studies provide insights into cross-cultural mediation processes, revealing how individual performers negotiate between cultural specificity and universal appeal.

Linguistic mediation emerges as a factor shaping cross-cultural reception. Magnan-Park (2018) demonstrates how English dubbing created a distinct aesthetic affecting Western reception of kung fu films (S26). The study reveals that dubbing practices, often dismissed as a technical necessity, shaped how Western audiences understood and appreciated martial arts cinema. Poor synchronization, exaggerated voice acting, and simplified dialogue became defining characteristics of the kung fu film experience for many Western viewers, creating nostalgic attachment to aesthetically “inferior” versions. Subtitle translation presents different challenges, with studies revealing how philosophical concepts resist translation across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Hiramoto and Teo (2014) demonstrate that translation involves not simply linguistic conversion but cultural mediation, requiring translators to make interpretive decisions that shape viewer understanding (S32). These findings suggest that translation studies offer potential for understanding how martial arts films acquire new meanings through linguistic mediation, though this area remains relatively underexplored in current research.

d. Theme 4: Technical and Aesthetic Innovation

Technical and aesthetic innovation studies, though comprising 7 articles (13.0%), provide insights into formal dimensions distinguishing martial arts cinema. Wong (2019) offers philosophical analysis of Bruce Lee's action aesthetics, demonstrating how his incorporation of Daoist concepts of emptiness and spontaneity revolutionized fight choreography (S21). This analysis reveals that martial arts choreography involves not simply physical movement but philosophical expression, with different choreographic styles embodying distinct worldviews and cultural values. Li (2019) examines how martial arts films create affective spaces through innovative cinematographic techniques (S20), demonstrating how camera movement, editing rhythm, and spatial composition generate embodied viewer responses. Wong (2018) explores how films reconcile action with contemplation, revealing martial arts cinema's ability to combine kinetic excitement with philosophical reflection (S34). These studies demonstrate that martial arts cinema has developed aesthetic strategies that differentiate it from other action cinema traditions, though these innovations remain understudied relative to cultural and political dimensions.

Digital technology's impact on martial arts aesthetics receives limited but important attention. Zhang et al. (2024) pioneer computational approaches through semantic segmentation datasets enabling AI-driven analysis of visual props (S2), demonstrating how digital humanities methods can reveal patterns invisible to traditional analysis. Tang (2018) provides analysis of digital particle systems in *The Grandmaster*, showing how CGI enables new forms of poetic expression while potentially sacrificing physical authenticity (S28). Pettigrew (2018) theorizes how Yuen Woo-ping's work creates a new “cinema of attractions” for the digital age (S45), suggesting that digital technology enables spectacular experiences impossible in traditional filmmaking. These findings suggest potential for future research

examining how digital technology transforms not just production techniques but also the fundamental aesthetics of martial arts cinema.

The aesthetic of music design receives minimal attention with McGuire (2018) providing systematic analysis of Wong Fei-hung music (S27). The study demonstrates how musical rhythm synchronizes with fight choreography to create unified audio-visual experiences linking action to emotional narrative. McGuire's analysis demonstrates that the precise synchronization between musical beats and physical impacts creates embodied viewer responses, with audiences experiencing fights viscerally through sonic-kinetic fusion.

Addressing the Research Questions

The preceding thematic analysis provides empirical evidence for addressing this study's three research questions.

RQ1 inquired about the analytical elements and theoretical frameworks that dominate Chinese martial arts cinema research. Regarding analytical elements, cultural and political analysis dominates thematic focus (37.0%), followed by industry and production studies (27.8%), cross-cultural reception (22.2%), and technical and aesthetic innovation (13.0%). Regarding theoretical frameworks, cultural studies (37.0%) and film studies (33.3%) together account for 70.3% of approaches, while philosophical and aesthetic frameworks represent only 11.1%. This distribution indicates that scholars have prioritized understanding Chinese martial arts cinema as a cultural-political phenomenon over analysing its distinctive formal qualities. While this orientation has generated sophisticated insights into identity construction, soft power projection, and historical memory, it leaves a fundamental question insufficiently addressed: what formal and aesthetic qualities enabled Chinese martial arts cinema to achieve global appeal in the first place, an appeal that preceded and now enables its cultural-political functions.

RQ2 inquired about the methodological approaches that characterize the field. The analysis reveals qualitative dominance (59.3%), with quantitative methods (14.8%) and mixed methods (25.9%) representing minority but growing approaches. This pattern reflects the field's primary location within humanities disciplines where interpretive methods remain standard practice. Methodological choices correlate with thematic focus. Cultural-political studies rely predominantly on textual analysis. Industry studies demonstrate the greatest methodological diversity, incorporating market analysis and interviews. Reception studies employ ethnographic and comparative approaches. Aesthetic studies range from philosophical inquiry to emerging computational methods. The field's methodological conservatism, particularly the limited adoption of computational and quantitative techniques, constrains its ability to identify large-scale patterns across the genre's extensive catalogue and limits the generalizability of findings.

RQ3 inquired about existing gaps and opportunities for future development. Four interconnected gaps emerge from the synthesis. The aesthetic gap reflects imbalanced scholarly priorities, with technical and aesthetic studies receiving disproportionately less attention than cultural-political analysis. This imbalance leaves the genre's most distinctive formal features, including choreographic grammar, spatial aesthetics, and audio-visual synchronization, insufficiently theorized. Future research should investigate how formal and cultural analysis might integrate, and how digital technology transforms both aesthetic possibilities and cultural meanings. The methodological gap constrains the field's empirical foundations. Predominant reliance on qualitative case studies limits pattern identification

across the genre's history and restricts generalizability of findings. Greater adoption of computational visual analysis, social media analytics, and mixed methods approaches could strengthen the field's empirical base while complementing interpretive work. The theoretical gap represents a missed opportunity for contribution to global film theory. The predominant application of Western-originated frameworks to Chinese cultural productions overlooks potential for developing indigenous analytical tools grounded in the philosophical traditions (Daoist, Buddhist, Confucian) that martial arts cinema explicitly engages. The geographic gap leaves global reception patterns underexplored. Current research concentrates in Western and Asia-Pacific contexts, yet audiences in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East likely generate distinctive interpretive patterns shaped by their own cultural and political frameworks.

LIMITATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Limitations

This systematic literature review, while rigorous within its defined parameters, contains methodological limitations that must be acknowledged. The restriction to English-language publications creates linguistic bias that may overlook important scholarship. Studies published in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other languages likely contain theoretical and empirical contributions not captured here. Given that Chinese martial arts cinema originates from Chinese-speaking contexts, scholarship in Chinese probably offers insider perspectives and culturally specific insights absent from English-language discourse. The exclusion of books, book chapters, and conference proceedings eliminates publication formats where substantial film studies research traditionally appears. Book-length analyses, edited collections, and emerging conference papers may contain innovative theoretical or methodological contributions not represented in this journal article corpus. The database selection, limited to Scopus and Web of Science, captures mainstream academic publications but may miss studies in specialized film studies databases, regional academic platforms, or open-access repositories. Additionally, the search string construction, though comprehensive, may have failed to capture vernacular or culturally specific terminology that does not translate directly into English search queries. These limitations suggest that findings should be interpreted as indicative of patterns within peer-reviewed English-language journal scholarship rather than definitive statements about the complete state of Chinese martial arts cinema studies globally.

Contributions

Despite these limitations, this systematic review makes three primary contributions. Firstly, this study provides an important comprehensive mapping of Chinese martial arts cinema scholarship using systematic methodology. By establishing baseline data on thematic distribution, methodological patterns, geographic representation, and theoretical orientations, this review enables scholars to identify where research has concentrated and where opportunities exist, supporting evidence-based decisions about research priorities. Secondly, the application of PRISMA 2020 protocols demonstrates that systematic review methodology can be productively adapted for humanities research. This methodological contribution may prove valuable for scholars seeking to conduct systematic reviews in other film studies subfields or cultural studies domains where such approaches remain uncommon. Thirdly, the synthesis across the selected studies reveals interconnections not visible through traditional literature review approaches. The identification of how aesthetic underrepresentation relates to methodological conservatism, and how both connect to

theoretical dependence on Western frameworks, provides integrated understanding of field development that narrative reviews cannot achieve.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review examined 54 peer-reviewed articles selected from 8,123 initial records, achieving a 0.66% inclusion rate to analyse the current state of Chinese martial arts cinema studies. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the study addressed three research questions concerning dominant analytical frameworks, methodological approaches, and critical gaps in the field. The findings demonstrate a field that has achieved sophistication in certain domains while exhibiting significant imbalances and gaps that constrain overall understanding. This search significance extends beyond documenting existing studies to providing strategic guidance for future research development. By systematically analysing patterns across temporal periods, geographic regions, methodological approaches, and thematic domains, our study establishes an empirical foundation for evidence-based decisions about research priorities, methodological innovation, and theoretical development. The synthesis of findings across multiple dimensions reveals interconnections and implications not visible through individual study examination, enabling holistic understanding of the field's current state and future potential. As a globally significant genre, Chinese martial arts cinema merits academic engagement that balances interpretive sophistication with renewed attention to its distinctive qualities.

BIODATA

Xueyu Chen is a PhD candidate at the Center for Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Malaysia. His research includes film studies and communication. Email: p120822@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Hasrul Hashim (Dr.) is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Malaysia. His research includes broadcasting and media literacy. Email: hash@ukm.edu.my

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