

Bruce lee and his martial arts



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Martial arts became known to the world in the 1960s. This is largely due to Bruce Lee and is what he is known for. Still others are ignorant to this and only know that he is a movie star who fights his way to victory. But none of this would be relevant if it were not for the Chinese Americans before him. Malcolm Gladwell would argue that Lee's success was "handed down to [him] by the history of the community" he lived in (Gladwell 204). People that Lee never knew and never had contact with would lead directly to his success. These men and women suffered horrible racist treatment and had no contact with their families overseas, but were the cause for change in American Chinese relations that is of such fundamental importance to the success of Bruce Lee.

It was not only the direct men and women in Lee's life that allowed him to succeed in America but the lives of an entire ethnic group. Without their suffering and hardships Lee would not have had success in his trials and painful experiences. Chinese Americans' status in the United States began changing for the better at the start of WWII and Bruce Lee's martial arts influence was the final indication that Asian Americans had successfully been accepted into the national culture. He became a hero to Chinese Americans for making the final advance towards social equality and accomplishing this through the medium of martial arts film.

To understand Bruce Lee's impact, one must realize the difficulties of times past. Chinese Americans in the late 19th and early 20th century had such a low status and are "shunned and disliked by the great majority of [their] countrymen who live in California" and are even called names such as "sheepeye" (Blonde Chinese 475). The Chinese Americans were treated

unfairly such as having to pay a 4 dollar tax each month to fish in California and being required to pay for a foreign miner's license in order to work in the mines of California while whites did not have to pay for any of these charges. White labor workers even attacked Chinese homes in an attempt to scare off their competition during economic crises and unemployment periods such as in the Panic of 1873. Eventually the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was passed and prohibited Chinese labor immigration. Up through the 1920s this exclusion act was reinforced by congressional acts and the Supreme Court such as the Geary Act of 1892 and in the case of Fong Yue Ting v. United States (1893) (Tung 19). Justice Field stated that these " Chinese laborers are not citizens of the United States; they are aliens" (Fong v. US). This case, along with others, made it clear that the general views of Chinese Americans were of " aliens" that are just here temporarily even if they were born here. There were also continued attempts at preventing Chinese wives from entering the United States such as the 1924 Immigration act and the case of Chang Chan et al. v. John D. Nagle in 1924. Justice McReynolds decided to " mandatorily exclude the wives of United States citizens of the Chinese race if such wives are of a race or persons ineligible to citizenship" (Chan v. Nagle). This law made it difficult for Chinese Americans to start families and feel at home in the United States.

This all soon changed during WWII when several anti immigration laws were created. These policy changes were not the result of public majority but of politicians who wanted to show the China that America cared about China's people. The U. S foresaw an alliance with them because China had been at war with Japan since 1937. The United States knew that Japan joining the

Axis powers during WWII would lead to an alliance with China who now shared a common enemy and this is why the U. S. wanted to politically befriend the Chinese by changing policy. The first policy passed was the Nationality Act of 1940 that allowed for the naturalization of Chinese Americans and allowed those born in America to become citizens (Bleeker 14).

Bruce Lee happened to be born on November 27 in America a month after the passage of the Nationality Act, allowing him to become an American citizen. Lee's parents arrived to San Francisco on a tour with the Cantonese Opera Company and they had to return to Hong Kong shortly after Bruce Lee was born due to their visas expiring. Bruce Lee's birth supports Gladwell's argument of demographic luck playing a factor in deciding a person's opportunity and success. Gladwell states that " the sense of possibility so necessary for success comes...from our time: from the particular opportunities that our particular place in history presents us with" (Gladwell 137). Lee came into the world at just the right time to become an American citizen and have martial arts success in this country. It was the perfect time to accomplish this success that acted as the medium for solidifying Chinese Americans identity.

Bruce Lee was raised in Hong Kong. Coming from a humble upbringing, Lee was born into a relatively poor family and came into the world a fragile baby. He had cryptorchidism which is when the testicles fail to drop before the child is born. Bruce suffered from the consequences of this well into his college years. But he worked hard and was determined to excel in what he loved, martial arts. This disease impeded the growth of his bones, muscles,

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and psychological maturity. Overcoming this disease was a real show of his incredible hard work. Bruce was praised for his unbelievable body conditioning, speed, and definition but it was not a “ natural genetic possibility” for Lee to have this body; he had to have an unmatched work ethic (Bleeker 15). But it would be quite some time before he finds his calling of martial arts.

Bruce Lee first gained his heart for martial arts in a time of turmoil. It was 1941 and the British, who controlled the city, had surrendered Hong Kong to the Japanese during WWII; with no police power to keep control, the Triads grew exponentially. The postwar world was in one way or another influenced by these organized gangs. Bruce Lee had trouble adapting to a violent world and found no success in school. The hardships of the war left a mental scar on Bruce Lee which caused him to have somewhat of a temper. He would frequently get in trouble at school for “ acting up in class and fighting” he would get suspended for it (Bleeker 16). Lee lost interest in school and by his teen years, he had gotten involved with gangs and soon got into street fights. He wanted to be the best fighter and became involved with martial arts. He went to different masters and no style satisfied him until his father introduced him to master Yip Man and the Wing Chun style. Lee searched for a style that was truly effective in combat and found it with Yip Man; at least until Lee became more knowledgeable about fighting. Lee became obsessed with fighting and was feared locally by his second year of intensive training. He made many Triad enemies and by 1958, his mother decided it would be best if he used his birthright privilege and move to America.

When Lee arrived in America, the civil rights movement was in motion and Chinese Americans were beginning to find cultural acceptance. It brought on a new wave of activism by Chinese Americans who began to organize in multi-ethnic groups such as the Asian American Political Alliance and Orientals Concerned from the UCLA campus. Chinese Americans wanted to be socially integrated into America and sought to gain their identity as Americans. Bruce Lee adventurously arrived in Washington happy to be in a new place “ because for the first time in his adolescent-adult years he was not living the life of a street gang member in Hong Kong” (Bleeker 23). Lee became engaged in the Chinese cultural acceptance movement, at least unintentionally, by teaching martial arts to local students. He did this to make money and attend the University of Washington as a philosophy major but had to drop out in 1964 because he ran out of funds. This short college life proved to be useful because it allowed him to gain enough students to open an official teaching location in Seattle which he would name the Jun Fan Kung-Fu Institution and it is where he found his wife-to-be, Linda Emery. He was among the first in the nation to openly teach non-Asians the way of Kung-Fu. This was good for competition for he had a larger customer base, but it was also bad because he became hated within the martial arts circle for allowing non-Asians to learn their ways; however, this helped him gain national recognition.

Once Lee was starting to get established, he could now experiment with the martial arts style he was creating called Jeet Kune Do. This is where Bruce Lee blended his philosophy with martial arts. He sought to create a martial art that’s sole purpose was efficiency and combat effectiveness that “ does

away with the distinction of branches,[and is] an art that rejects formality, and...is liberated from...tradition[s]" established by ancient martial art styles (Little, Jeet Kune Do 47). He was frustrated with the current state of martial arts and hated how most solely focused on traditions and unnecessary movements that resembled dance. He argued that these fighting styles were once created by men who experimented to find effective means to fight. Lee is disappointed how society fails to see this and blindly follows " abstraction and mystery [until their movements] resemble anything from acrobatics to modern dancing but [never] the actual reality of combat" (qtd. in Inosanto, Jeet Kune Do 48). Throughout his life Lee tried to spread his passion of rebellion from the traditional styles and was discovered by peers in America and soon the world. To show his commitment to his ideology, he never competed in a martial arts bout because it was limited by rules and restrictions. Lee would only fight if there were absolutely no rules; he was a true street fighter.

Bruce Lee first gained national recognition at the first International Karate Championships held in 1964. He attended and showed off his new style and incredible abilities that lead to his discovery by a film producer. And the film career was soon launched and he first played Kato in the Batman TV series and then on the Green Hornet Series in 1966. This was the first time an Asian man was given a significant role in an American TV series (Fu, 29). It also provided a weekly awareness to Americans about martial arts. Up to this point, Kung FU was relatively unknown to the western world, at least to the general public. But his most famous work came from the films titled Fists Of Fury (1972) and Enter the Dragon (1973) (Little 17). These two films

immortalized Bruce Lee as a pop cultural icon. But he would not live to see this through; he died suddenly on July 20, 1973 by a cerebral edema (swelling of the brain) caused by a pain killer given to him by Betty Ting, who he was working with at the time.

He started a rebellion against “ tradition” that could not have come in no other time then the 60s and could not have occurred anywhere else except in America. It was a time when people did not want to follow the rules of a system that were created long ago and this was reflected in his martial arts style of Jeet Kune Do and in turn reflected by his short-lived success in the film industry. He brought an Asian cultural impact to America that effectively introduced Chinese culture to the broad society using the medium of film. This was done by “ combining Western techniques with Eastern motifs [that are] easily understandable [by] non-Asian audiences” (Dresser 138). His work was somewhat of a “ soft-opener” for the American people to witness and accept Asian culture and ultimately it proved effective.

The word martial art is a general term that does not indicate a specific quantitative achievement of Lee. He went beyond simply introducing this large subject to the West; he started revolutions within the field. America proved to be Lee’s “ decisive point of origin for Jeet Kune Do, the popularization of cross-training, a scientific approach to martial arts, ‘ American’ freestyle karate, the widespread move towards mixed- or no-holds-barred-martial arts, and much in the way of self-help ideology” (Bowman 179).