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Reflection on Existing Cultural Imprint of Bruce Lee

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Further on my class presentation ‘Cultural Construction of Bruce Lee on Mass Media’, I would like to review my psychological change on perceiving existing cultural imprint of Bruce Lee after the MCS course via this paper. First of all, I would examine my feel throughout getting in touch with Bruce’s material in the course and reference, followed by dissecting why I would think that way, inducing the feeling. It would be a ‘feel, and think why’ process. I believe that would give some answers or reference for the reason of popularity of Bruce among the 80’s, after four decades of his death. Besides, I would source out the hidden culture imprint of Bruce around my life on different objects and analyse the formulation and impact of them to the world, enhancing my class presentation. It is mainly covered with a Hong Kong band Chochukmo, Japanese Jazz Pianist Hiromi Uehara, a video work from my current company and virtual character copied from him. I would like to find out the new influence of Bruce in recent years not directed by him, but created by the existing cultural construction of him authored by different parties of various fields.

In the very first lessons, I once refused to admit there is any hagiography of Bruce. I believed it is his sincerity and bravery that attracts mass media to focus on him. I was too ideal before realizing how he is being consumed. As being born on the same birthday with him, I thought I could do the same like him, passing on his own spirit. Then I was awakening by knowing more on power relations in cultural representations, i.e. how the persona “Bruce Lee” is just an artificial construction. There might be extract of real self
of Bruce and inject to the hero image, but we can never know the authenticity of that part. Painfully accepting that, I felt I am more on the side of being less passionate to Bruce than other classmates, but meanwhile I think I can be more objective to try to give critique to Bruce’s influence to modern times. I was having disenchantment and merged from a disciple to an observer. I still feel gutted about it and I believe young supporters of Bruce feel the way he is manipulated in an indistinct sense by media but too unmotivated to pull themselves off from it and objectively rethink. Bruce was once my mental pillar and I wonder how I could stay as strong if I removed it from myself. The reluctance of getting rid of Bruce’s saint by his followers benefits Bruce’s long lasting fame and keeps his popularity. In the Internet, some are protective of their belief in Bruce. They are unwilling to see Bruce being challenged. A comment from a popular forum is: “How about just accept the fact that he broke racial barriers in all kinds of areas? That he changes peoples lives to this very day? That he was the first globally renowned Chinese movie star? How about the fact that he accomplished more that you ever will in two lifetimes? I believe that much.”

But sticking to these ideas I can never review Bruce in a new perspective and provoke more thoughts. That pushes me to go beyond admiring him. It took me lessons to have the right mental state to learn about his cultural construction. I am quite happy I was aware of that.

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The more I learned about him constructed as the icon for empowering the disempowered as its social concern; martial artist; the great teacher, the more shadow of him appeared in my daily life, inside and outside Hong Kong. In the class, we discussed in lessons, advertisements, movies, anime, TV drama, music, multimedia concerning him. Hate to admit, most of the elements taken from him is some shallow principles he once demonstrated, proving that the cultural construction of Bruce is based on no more than a bunch of citations, quotations, or borrowing. And as time goes by, the borrowing action that he did a lot is being vastly copied in modern days. To me it is like a production line from the cultural industry, and it is nothing worthy to be studied about the procedure. There is neither new spirit nor principle generated throughout the process. All it has is repetitively recycling the old words. “Bruce Lee” is a tool to summarize the principles and easily presented to the audience. A convenient new bottle for the old wine. He appeared at specific times when that tool is needed, and he became the ‘great’. With this thought beyond the class, I looked for any other work he did in life that deserves respect.

I started to appreciate the skill of Bruce on borrowing. I found he did quite well on rearranging those principles in a stylish and fashionable way that can approach youngsters and the Chinese race. With his identity as marginal Chinese in western countries, he has the inborn character that resonate the huge population with similar background and can represent a big voice. In addition, he can borrow the western style presentation on traditional Chinese philosophies. This brings freshness and excites people to pay attention to him. Without that fusion and management skill, he might have failed to attain his achievement today. I found numerous people that are doing the same way.
For example, Chochukmo, an indie band from Hong Kong, once said in the interview about their music: “It's like water, with the shape changing all the time but the taste is still similar.” Anyone can tell it is borrowed from Bruce. They are not bounded to a certain genre, but a combination of all kinds of music in their knowledge and to reach a new sound. They demonstrate the spirit of Bruce, being shapeless and formless. Without restriction from any music genre, the band can explore possibility to a much further extent without burden. Mike Orange, guitarist of the band, explained in our conversation, ‘In the 21st century, there will be no independent creation coming out. Instead it will be all the collage of the old works and art pieces established on this foundation.’ Reflecting on his statement, I suddenly understand Bruce has been doing this for all his life and he absolutely is the pioneer of borrowing. I found the accomplishment of his that is to be honored to save the low self-esteem I had after flipping mind in the first few lessons. Apart from the ‘Bruce Lee’ camouflage being operated, the real Bruce did some work that is on his own will and effort.

The following paragraphs will continue to explore the existing cultural constructions of Bruce. Although they involve mostly superficial borrowing, I will try to dig out how they also present some of the real Bruce marks.

I would like to talk about jazz pianist Hiromi Uehara whom is mentioned briefly in the class representation. She was commented as “Bruce Lee of piano”, talked about honestly
expressing oneself. Pure magic right here.”iii Same as the nature of jazz music, she
unveils all her talents on the keyboards to voice out her emotions to the audience. During
my first attendance to her live performance, I had a lot of ‘Bruce Lee’ image in mind. It
echoes with what Bruce said in ‘Enter the dragon’: We need emotional content.
Undoubtedly there is a huge similarity. I believe she feels comfortable expressing in this
way because she had Bruce as the walker on the same road in front. That is the
importance of Bruce’s honestly expressing himself. People born after him get courage
from his fearlessness, and thus they walk on their path solidly. Hiromi as a Japanese
might not do the same in young age under the traditional influence, however she met
Bruce via his pieces. Her background is also like that of Bruce --- an Asian in western
society. She must have seen the path Bruce walked, which guided her to how she can be.
Another modern work ‘Bruce’ could do is to encourage people to face fear and stereotype,
to work towards making full use of their potential. There is a lot of obstacle ahead for
Hiromi, like marginal identity Bruce once had, she was revealed as a red hue beginning
to color her face, “You know, it’s not easy. I have a reason to fight. To really fight, you
need to have love and passion. There’s a huge wall — not made by me — and I have to
fight it every day, because I’m Asian, I’m female and an instrumentalist.”iv I believe
Bruce inspired many more people with similar background. As more and more people are
ready to stand up for themselves, equality in the world is becoming more feasible and the
power is huge that could even start a revolution to provoke new elements to the world.

Look at Admiralty and Bruce stickers around the corners.

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iii xrandolphx (2013), " HIROMI UEHARA Place To Be," Youtube (25 Jan 2011)
iv Kao Yung-Hsiang (2007), " Hiromi Uehara’s piano keys ‘burn red’," The Japan Times (30 Aug)
Nov 2014.
Another character of Bruce found in her is that she doesn’t mind which genre the music she is regarded as. She did the music fusion process same as the earlier mentioned band Chochukmo. “I don’t really name what I am, myself,” she says. “(Other) people can label me… If they want to call me a jazz musician, then it’s OK; if they want me to be something else, that’s fine… I want to be music — nothing else.” I believe this trend is becoming the mainstream as it is getting harder to define a latest album to a certain genre and put to a specific rack in a CD store. It is a product of joined breeds. Thanks to Bruce for being part of the movement, people are no longer afraid of people labeling. They are just honestly expressing themselves regardless of people’s mouth.

She belongs to one of the ‘don’t think, feel’ believers, too. She thought, “Kids, because your brain cannot really process what “forte” is when you are like 6 or 7, but you can see -- you can understand the color, you can see visuals more than trying to understand something by brain. So, I could really feel the music with my emotions.” Any musical note she played penetrated her heart instead of only via her brain. I believe it is one of the keys for the wonderful music created by instinct. The true improvisation of jazz.

Not a Chinese, or a man, but she is the person at present that reminds me of Bruce the most.

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Talking about the music piece she pays her tribute to Bruce Lee, she composed “Kung-Fu World Champion”, which leaps off the disc and delivers a funky dropkick\textsuperscript{vii}. Followed by a reprise “Return of Kung-Fu World Champion.” The electronic keyboard she played is as the front man, while the trio supports with “a bubbling, gurgling delight, full of oddball sounds, popping percussion, vibrating bass, and downright funky passages”\textsuperscript{viii}. Those are the direct mimic of Bruce. Combined with her character similar to Bruce’s, the inner part in her heart and outer part from her hands attracts me so much. When talking to her after her show in Chicago 6 years ago, she said when she played the piece, the images in her mind were about the 5-level tower in Game of Death. She acted as Bruce in the music and fought her way up the tower. She is thrilled to say Bruce never stopped inspiring her. In an earlier interview she explained “It was like a little bit of entertainment, a little bit of artistry... and I found out it was really close to improvisation in jazz. I wanted to bring what Jackie Chan (as well as Bruce) does in Kung Fu to what I do on piano.”\textsuperscript{ix} The song of Bruce ends with a funky synthesizer rhythmic part which changes tempos rapidly, representing the kick, punch and shouting of Bruce. I treasure so much the re-creation of Bruce on a new art form by her – music instead of movie.

So I cannot wait to do it with my hands. The whole music piece of Hiromi is actually so visual that I had to work my final year project in bachelor degree on this. On top of the music I added a live martial art performance and projection of video to further enhance the song that originated from Bruce. I enjoyed so much the process of borrowing and re-creation and understood more about Bruce’s action with my own experience.

That FYP project was 6 years ago, and I encountered Bruce once again in my new job as a videographer in a fashion magazine. It was a project demonstrating workout at home, we were told to pack it with elements of Bruce by senior editors. It proves my conclusion that ‘Bruce Lee’ is an appetizer for the main dish behind. I felt quite sad it is being used for entertainment right in front of me, as Bruce is the heroic icon in my heart. But I just have to deal with the reality and move my hands to work on it. I should always remind myself not to forget what I really want to do, not for a living. One of my dreams is to continue making some valuable art pieces paying tribute to Bruce like what Hiromi did. I would like to pay effort on sublimation of work related to Bruce from entertainment level to aesthetic level. Not only the statue of him in Tsim Sha Tsui harbor, but to get the Bruce visitors infected with some Bruce spirit. Visiting the exhibition in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum would be a great option.

Lastly, I would like to sort out the impact of virtual character copied from him. In the class presentation I talked about the street gangsters with Bruce Lee’s face and body

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x https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImFFadmqoj0
xs http://www.yohoboys.com/news/sports-2393-0-0.html
created in Hong Kong comic\textsuperscript{xii}, Ken from Fist of the North Star – Japanese Comic\textsuperscript{xiii}, Fei Long from TV game Street Fighter\textsuperscript{xiv}. They all have a character in common - a sense of honor and justice. The virtual platform further consolidates the Chinese heroic image of him mainly to the youngsters. We 70’s to 00’s all missed the era to witness Bruce getting famous on TV screen, but the reconstruction helps us to feel it and imagine the real Bruce, with an addition of monosodium glutamate to enhance the sensual stimulation. With only the archive of his past work, it can never be as close to strike your heart with Bruce symbolic ‘WHAAAAAAATTTAA!’ Again, even after his death, Bruce was lucky to meet the time of this technology to make him even ‘greater’. It has a positive impact to make people care for the honor and justice. However it also favoured the shallow understanding of him, making a stereotype of him. It will be continued as he is now everywhere – stickers of him on various social network sites, info graphics with his quotes spreading over the Internet, appearing in Mixed Martial Arts TV games, printed on fashion clothes and accessories, lyrics in pop music etc. All partially sum up to complete a virtual figure of Bruce Lee from modern people’s mind. It is like he is undead, still taking advertisement for junk food, cars, and wine; still performing in exhibitions of him around the world, still teaching Jeet Kune Do in many centers. It doesn’t matter for his life came to end anymore. The virtual platform inserted the coin for him and continued the game instead of reaching ‘GAME OVER’. Another world-class icon that is being manipulated in this way is Michael Jackson who died 5 years ago. It is inevitable,

\textsuperscript{xii} https://www.facebook.com/hongkongvintagecomics/photos/a.468076793205487.113876.468075086538991/700661103280387
\textsuperscript{xiii} http://www.hokuto-no-ken.jp/
\textsuperscript{xiv} http://www.capcom.co.jp/sf4/feilong.html
and I wish there will be more good side of it to the world instead of just a tourism spot and highlight. So in my reflection, I would like to emphasize the importance of demonstrating his spirit, even if it is a borrowed one from the past. That is the essence that long last, but not entertaining living zombie with no soul.

In conclusion, I had once thought I disliked Bruce after the lessons. But in fact I don’t, I was just transformed to accept the side that he is being cultural constructed and look for the imprint of his spirit that is truly valuable to me. Throughout the semester dissecting Bruce and his works, I get the ability to relate the surroundings to Bruce. I felt for his works and I can analyze the origin of the feeling I had, relating the social context. I tried to get the answer to the popularity of Bruce among the teenagers and I linked up my favorite musicians, video works and virtual characters to Bruce. I anticipate the cultural imprint of Bruce Lee can change the world and make it a better place. And I look forward to discovering more of it for some new reflection.