

# **FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINE**

**Tony Mustafa - Kung fu DVD**

**(1977) World Video CAV**

**Region 0. Video: Full Frame (1.33.1). Audio: Dolby Digital Mono 2.0 (English)**

**Subtitles: None Chapter Stops: 7 Packaging: Keep Case Trailer**

**Directed by Lui Shing Kung**

**Produced by Lui Wei Wan**

**Written by Hsu Shen**

**Music by Chen Shien Chi**

**Cinematography by Li Hsiang**

**Production Design by Wang Fu Liang**

**Starring: Carter Wong, Huang Chia Ta, chen Hsiao Peng, Cheung Li, Kao Chiang, Kuan Tsung, Chou Chiang, Ou Yang Shi Fei, Lu Chu Shih**

Legends say that medieval Chinese warlords developed the ultimate killing machine called the Flying Guillotine. This device was forged from a light metal so that it could be thrown like a frisbee. The Flying Guillotine has a bucket-like shape so that it fits perfectly around a human head. The spinning sharpened interior blades are positioned so that it can easily decapitate the intended victim cleanly and quickly. The weapon is best controlled by a person - who is versed in the martial arts. The wielder controls the Flying Guillotine with a long rope, so the weapon can be hurled at an opponent, decapitate them, and return the bloody head to the thrower. The Shaw Brothers were the first studio to cinematically capitalize on this legend in the 1974 epic, THE FLYING GUILLOTINE, directed by Meng-Hwa Ho and starring the original Iron Monkey himself, Chen Kuan Tai. THE FLYING GUILLOTINE was a huge success for the Shaw Brothers' studios, and several independent efforts saw fit to incorporate this deadly weapon into their martial arts productions. One such effort was the 1977 film, FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINES (YIN YANG XIE DI ZI) directed by Lui Shing Kung (better known as Raymond Lui) and starring Carter (BORN INVINCIBLE) Wong. FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINES is the first Flying Guillotine film to get a legitimate North American DVD release courtesy of World Video and CAV distribution. "...It is written that during the reign of Ching Hong Hee, Shen Mo Chao perfected a weapon known as the lightning strike, which never missed it's target and killed within a hundred feet. It so happens that the fourth Prince was eager to secure the throne. He heard about Shen and his lightning strike, and sent emissaries to persuade Shen to join his side and help the Prince secure the throne. But Shen is not easily persuaded, so much bloodshed ensues..." This opening narrative sets the stage for historical power struggle that took place in ancient China during the Ching Dynasty. Fourth Prince Yun Ching sends his emissaries to the mystical Valley of No Return to convince Shen Mo Chao to join the Ching cause. The Prince wants Shen Mo Chao to share his mastery of the lightning strike technique and his knowledge of the Flying Guillotine. With these two killing weapons in the hands of the Prince Yun Ching, his army would become unbeatable. However, Shen Mo Chao does not appreciate strangers entering his hidden valley. Shen Mo Chao is a dangerous old man with a black heart. As the armed Ching emissaries attempt to approach the meditating Shen Mo Chao, he uses his Flying Guillotines to promptly remove the heads of the Prince's men. When he was younger, Shen Mo Chao's ailing heart forced him to leave his family and seek shelter in the healing mists of the Valley of No Return where he has remained for 20 years. During this time, he mastered the martial arts and especially the Flying Guillotine, and ruthlessly murdered anyone one entered the valley. Shen Ping (Carter Wong) tends to his mother's illness, as she is on her death bed. He learns of a sacred healing tome called the Di Mao almanac that is cloistered away at the nearby Shaolin temple. Shen Ping will do anything to keep his mother alive, so he goes to the Shaolin temple and asks the monks if he can use the Di Mao almanac to save his mother. The Shaolin temple considers this book sacred, and only a man who can fight through three trials of combat can access the book--and so far no outsider has done that. The old Shaolin monk allows Shen Ping to fight for access to the book. Shen Ping fends off scores of monks armed with staffs. He gets by the monks, and enters the second trial by engaging in combat with the higher ranking (and more knowledgeable) priests. The Shaolin priests are amazed to see Shen Ping fight through their ranks. For the third and final trial, he must beat the top Shaolin master, Fat Wei. This monk is the best fighter in the temple, who promptly defeats

Shen Ping when he thrusts him in the stomach. The dejected young man leaves in disgrace, but cannot live with himself until he can think of a way to get his hands on the Di Mao almanac. Meanwhile, Prince Yun Ching hatches a plan to blackmail Shen Mo Chao to join their cause. Knowing that Shen Mo Chao remains in the Valley of No Return because he has a heart condition, the Prince will offer to cure him using the healing powers of the Di Mao almanac. He sends another group of emissaries into the hidden valley to negotiate with the master of the Flying Guillotines. Shen Ping goes back to the Shaolin temple begging the monks for another chance to pass the third trial. The head Abbot welcomes him back and allows him to face Fat Wei again. The combat is fast and furious, and this time Shen Ping prepares for Fat Wei's blow to his stomach--which amazes the monks when the blow has no effect. Shen Ping continues to overpower his surprised opponent, when the top Holy Man of the temple breaks up the fight, and declares Shen Ping the victor. He is allowed temporary possession of the Di Mao almanac, and he runs home to create an herbal concoction that will heal his mother. But, a mysterious Ninja-like figure appears and attempts to kill Shen Ping. In the struggle, Chen Ping rakes the arm of his attacker, then plunges off a cliff. Shen Ping survives the fall, and quickly heads home where he mixes up a healing potion, from the instructions in the Di Mao almanac. After drinking the potion, his mother hemorrhages to death! Shen Ping returns to the temple in a frenzy, and begins beating up Shaolin monks until the Abbot intercepts him. Shen Ping throws the Di Mao almanac in the face of the Abbot and screams that his mother is now dead. The Abbot quickly scans the almanac, and declares that this copy is a fake! After the realization that there is a traitor among them, Shen Ping notices that Fat Wei is looking rather uncomfortable. Then he sees a wound on Fat Wei's arm--it is the same size scar that he gave to the masked assassin. Shen Ping announces that Fat Wei is the betrayer. The jig is up for Fat Wei, and he tries to escape the temple. But Shen Ping will have none of it. He's still upset over the death of his mother and gives the traitor a harsh thrashing. Unfortunately, they never gets any answers as to why he betrayed them, since Fat Wei would rather take his own life. The Shaolin masters learn that Prince Yun Ching now has possession of the original Di Mao almanac. They know he will use it to recruit Shen Mo Chao, so they assemble their own expedition to enter the Valley of No Return. Shen Ping joins the Shaolin entourage. Not only has the Ching emissaries entered the hidden valley, but now the Shaolin expedition as well. But madman Shen Mo Chao has pledged to kill all those who trespass in the Valley of No Return! Hsu Shen crafts an ambitious and complex plot, with plenty of unexpected twists and turns. At times, Hsu Shen's script is overly ambitious for the film's relatively short running time. Thus, many of the character motivations are not clear. For instance, people are constantly forsaking their beliefs, or stabbing others in the back. There is no explanation as to why these characters behave as they do. Another weak point to the script is the portrayal of the Shaolin temple. Never before has such a Kung Fu film portrayed the temple in a negative light. The Shaolin priests have no remorse for others who are in need of the Di Mao almanac. In others scenes, the heads monks sit and discuss ways to eliminate the Ching rivals. Finally, they send a strike force into the Valley of No Return to combat Shen Mo Chao and the Chings. In real life, the Shaolin monks are simple and peaceful folk who fight only when attacked. There are some superior aspects to Hsu Shen's script, though, especially in the portrayal of the evil characters. Usually in the Kung Fu genre, there is a clear-cut adversary or villain, which serves to drive the plot. In *THE FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINE*, we have several. First, there is the arrogant Prince Yun Chin, who will do anything to claim the throne as his own--including making a deal with the devil himself. In this case, the devil is the murderous Shen Mo Chao, who gains pleasure by claiming the lives of his fellow man by using his marvelous "toys". From Shen Ping's perspective, even the Shaolin temple is an adversary. He spends more time fighting monks behind the walls of the temple, than he does battling the true evils. Director Raymond Lui (Lui Shing Kung) drives this point home with his negative portrayal of the Shaolin temple. In the final moments of this three-way confrontation, the Shaolin temple redeems itself. In another bit of inspired scripting, Hsu Shen plants the seeds that Shen Ping and Shen Mo Chao are related father and son. But, Hsu Shen avoids this cliché by never revealing this relationship--not even as the two are duelling to the death. Director Raymond Lui neatly presents this ambiguous ending. From the opening shots of Carter Wong battling against the Shaolin, to the climatic confrontation in the Valley of No Return, the fight choreography is relentless and fast paced. When Carter Wong faces off against the Shaolin, the fight choreography is very intense, even though you know the monks are forbidden to seriously harm him. Director Raymond Lui does a great job of maintaining the illusion that Carter Wong is fighting for his very survival. The director also perfectly controls the pacing--and there is not a dull moment in the picture. Like all the other Flying Guillotine films, this one is full of graphic violence and bloody mayhem. *THE FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINE* features decapitations, dismemberments, throat slashing, suicides, cobra bites, eyeball violence,

hemorrhaging, and more blood than SHOGUN ASSASSIN. Carter Wong is excellent and continues to expand his value as an actor and martial artist (though his acting skills clearly take a back seat to his physical skills here). The guy is gigantic for a martial artist, and he towers over everyone in this movie. His fights with Shen Mo Chao in the last act are some of the best he's done in his career.

#### **SIGHT**

THE FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINE was originally released in the 1.85:1 aspect ratio. The transfer on CAV's DVD is full frame (1.33:1). The print is worn, grainy, and at times muddy. Thankfully, Director Raymond Lui kept the fight scenes toward the center of the image, so the fight choreography is preserved. The low budget production design is impacted little, as THE FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINE is not a large scale epic film (like a Shaw Brothers picture); there is little real estate lost in the presentation. THE FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINE is an atmospheric martial arts film, and the murky presentation reinforces the dark tone of the film. The violence and bloodshed are capably reproduced, without any over-saturated tones. The black level appears improperly calibrated, thus contributing to the grain and softness. The wild fight choreography is similarly detailed and pleasing. I would have loved to see a sharp wide-screen print of this film, but considering the vintage of this genre film, this is better than VHS or VCD.

#### **SOUND**

This is a very good Dolby Digital Mono 2.0 soundtrack. The mix exhibits a high frequency range, which is perfect for recreating those exaggerated martial arts combat sequences. This two channel mono mix includes a hint of bass as well. The sound effects for the Flying Guillotines themselves are cool. The English dubbed dialog is always clear, and never canned (a big problem on many of these DVD's, such as Crash Cinema). THE FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINE is another film that mimics music from Spaghetti Westerns. Chen Hsun Chi's score successfully combines Old West themes with atmospheric horror tones. The music, sound effects, and dialog are perfectly integrated

#### **FEATURES**

The only extra is an original Chinese language trailer for the Donnie Yen's HEROES AMONG HEROES. This trailer is widescreen, Dolby Digital 2.0, and runs 3:00. There is also Web site information for World Video. The menu navigation is basic but colorful, with a reproduction of the DVD cover artwork.

#### **CONCLUSION**

THE FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINES is not as good as the other Flying Guillotine pictures, but it is a superior independent Kung Fu flick, nonetheless. THE FATAL FLYING GUILLOTINES is chock full of intrigue, colorful characters, menacing villains, and break-neck action sequences. World Video/CAV's overall DVD presentation is better than I imagined. When I heard the reports of the chapter stop problems, I feared the worst. But the pause on my DVD player is literally a half-a-second. This does not excuse CAV from rushing these 5 old school Kung Fu DVDs past a quality control inspection, mind you, but hopefully the next batch of DVDs will be properly checked. I would not recommend upgrading to this DVD if you already have the widescreen commercial VHS release

**Rating (out of 5): Movie: 4.0. Video: 3.0. Audio: 3.0 Extra's: 1.0 Overall: 3.5**  
**Tony Mustafa - Kung fu DVD**



## The Fatal Flying Guillotine

\*\*1/2 (Audio: C-, Video: C-, Features: C+)

***Chen Hsing, Wang Chia Ta. Directed by Raymond Lui. Produced by Lui Wai Man. Released by CAV Distribution for World Video. Hong Kong (Cantonese). 90 minutes. Not rated. Trailer.***

Between the death of Bruce Lee and the emergence of Jackie Chan, Hong Kong cinema languished in a vacuum, with few major stars or franchises on which to rely. One of the few was the popular "Flying Guillotine" series, which began with the memorable "Master of the Flying Guillotine." The device itself was not a new creation -- the notion of a tethered decapitation device goes back many years -- but its revival in the '70s was met with audience enthusiasm in Hong Kong and throughout the globe.

"The Fatal Flying Guillotine" is one of the more middling follow-ups, but its Ching Dynasty credentials and martial arts choreography are unimpeachable. Anyone familiar with these films knows what to expect here -- treachery, betrayal, fighting and lots of beheadings. It's bloody and gruesome, even gratuitously so, but it's grand fun. It is, however, in full-frame with English-dubbed dialogue.

Like most of its fellow CAV Hong Kong releases, the DVD also includes a trailer for the excellent Donnie Yen effort, "Heroes Among Heroes."

***-By Wade Major***