



Kung Fu Master (aka Kung Fu Cult Master)

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

Jet Li, Sammo Hung, Chingmy Yau, Cheung Man. Directed by Wong Jing. Written by Wong Jing. Produced by Charles Heung. Released by CAV Distribution. Hong Kong (Cantonese/Mandarin). 1993. 105 minutes. Not rated. Trailer.

With Jet Li's career surging in the United States, thanks in part to films like "Kiss of the Dragon," attention is rightfully being turned to many of his older, less well-known Hong Kong efforts. Two of those films finally make their debut thanks to CAV and World Films who previously released the DVD of Li's "The Bodyguard from Beijing." Both of the new DVDs -- "Last Hero in China" and "Kung Fu Master" (better known as "The Kung Fu Cult Master" and, in some circles, "Lord of the Wu Tang") -- are comparable in quality to the other CAV releases of World titles, which is to say adequate transfers of poor to mediocre source prints. This doesn't in any way diminish the joy of watching such films -- some would say it actually enhances it -- but it should be mentioned as a caveat for those who care.

"Last Hero in China" and "Kung Fu Master" (amusingly identified as "Kung Fu Colt Master" on the DVD's menu screen and introductory subtitling) were both made in 1993, the most prolific year of Jet's career to date. After surging to stardom during the previous three years with the first three films from the "Once Upon a Time in China" series (in which he portrayed historic hero Wong Fei-Hong) Li made a whopping five new pictures in 1993, including the legendary "Fong Sai Yuk" film and its sequel, and the popular "Tai Chi Master," both of which drew their stories from other legendary Chinese heroes. Precisely where these two films fit alongside the others is a point of debate among fans. Both were written and produced by Wong Jing, whose wildly diverse body of work ranges from softcore to nonsensical fantasy-slapstick to Jackie Chan's "City Hunter" to such classics as the Chow Yun-Fat "God of Gambler" films. Li made a variety of films for Wong and these two represent some of the best and worst of that relationship.

"Last Hero in China" is unique in that Jet is once again playing Wong Fei-Hong, albeit this time it's for Wong Jing and not for Tsui Hark's "Once Upon a Time in China" series, which he vacated the previous year. Needless to say, even with the great Yuen Wo-Ping again on board for action choreography (Yuen did the first "Once Upon a Time in China" as well as "The Matrix" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"; he also directed Li in "Tai Chi Master" the same year), the film bears Wong Jing's mark. It's frenetic and much more sexual in its content with Wong battling the Boxers who have been selling women into prostitution. It's a fun, madcap and endlessly entertaining picture distinguished by the fact that it afforded Li the chance to do the one thing with the Wong character that Hark's films never allowed him to do with the Wong character -- Drunken Boxing. While it's Jackie Chan's two performances as Wong in the "Drunken Master" films that are best known for showcasing this style, Jet Li here proves that he's every bit its master as well.

"Kung Fu Master," on the other hand, represents everything that most people dislike about Wong Jing. It's not a bad film -- merely one that is so tangled with mystical and fantastical mumbo-jumbo and impossible-to-comprehend plot twists, that unless one is completely enamored of the action and the visuals, it can be terribly frustrating. Jet stars as a young hero seeking a magic sword, his lifelong quest since boyhood. In his way are a host of sorcerer type baddies. Helping him is the film's action director, popular "Martial Law" star Sammo Hung. Everything else is visually assaultive in the extreme and makes next to no sense. But if one can get past these hurdles, it's potentially a lot of fun. -By Wade Major