ABSTRACT

Tsui Hark’s *Once Upon a Time in China* serialized the adventures of Wong Fei Hong in six films between 1990 and 1997. This film series is a period kungfu drama based on the traditional folk hero, who was a martial artist and a physician in Canton province at the turn of the century China. Since 1949, Wong Fei Hong’s heroism has been depicted in more than 100 films, including TV serials, which have been produced and released in Hong Kong. In the early Wong Fei Hong movie series, most of them were starred by veteran actor Kwan Tak-Hing. His portrayal has made him almost synonymous with Wong Fei Hong for a generation of post World War II Hong Kongers.

In Tsui Hark’s *Once Upon a Time in China* series, issues that were seldom dealt with in the early Wong Fei Hong movies series were brought up. Set in late nineteenth century, China faces the encroachments by Western colonizers as well as the challenges brought about by new technology. Wong Fei Hong now deals with issues such as modernization and the conflicts between traditional and Western culture. Although set in historical past, the film series responds to the implications of Hong Kong’s reunification with Mainland China.

Chapter 1 relates the historical background of the 1997 issue well as the social climate at the time when the film series were produced.

Chapter 2 of this thesis traces the evolution of Wong Fei Hong as a cinematic hero, and discusses how Tsui Hark’s reinterpretation of this hero has made him more appealing to the contemporary audience.
Chapter 3 looks at how the film series identify with a kind of nationalism, which is not necessarily based on the support of a particular political entity or ideology. Instead, this kind of nationalism is built on cultural and historical ties. Connecting Wong Fei Hong with modern Chinese history play out the fantasy of a local hero also acknowledges the ties between Hong Kong and China.

The theme of "self-strengthening" appears frequently in the Tsui Hark’s *Once Upon a Time in China* film series. From a historical point of view, it refers to the attempt to rejuvenate China in the face of foreign intruders during the late nineteenth century. Chapter 4 discusses the relevance of this topic to the contemporary audience as it reveals conflicts between western and traditional values. This chapter also takes a look at how female roles are relegated to minor positions as compared with the more active parts played by male characters.

Lastly, Chapter 5 concludes the views presented in the previous chapters.