

# The Feminisms of Dharmic India

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the span of many thousands of years, Indian civilization has developed a rich variety of customs, traditions, norms, values, and philosophies that have illuminated the lives of those that belonged to it. Even within strictly regulated and defined social groupings, there are irreconcilable differences within that same group. The Brahmins fit this example well as they are in some regions forbidden to consume meat, like in Gujarat, whereas in other regions meat would be the staple of their diet, like those of Kashmir. It is in this diversity that the history of India should be framed and constructed. What is true in one place may not be in another, what unites a group may not make them uniform, and even the most ancient traditions show signs of evolution. The concept of Dharma, which incorporates everything from duties to ethics, is a fine embodiment of this principle. Dharma is the implicit philosophy for many Indians, especially those of the Dharmic traditions or religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. It is in this reality that I seek to situate my

investigation of womanhood in Dharmic India.

The popular discourses about India, especially the narratives of Dharmic womanhood, are oftentimes constructed in a disparaging fashion that reduces their history to being nothing more than the pawns of patriarchy. None of this is to say that the history of women has been idyllic, or that abhorrent impediments have not been placed before them. Like many Indian languages, Sanskrit literature is replete with misogynistic aphorisms. To quote Stephanie Jamison, “Other legal texts constrain her freedom on the same grounds. But anyone with a passing acquaintance with Sanskrit literature, indeed anyone who has studied first-year [sic] Sanskrit in the traditional way with the story of Nala and Damayanti, has met an entirely contradictory pattern”.<sup>1</sup> It is exactly that contradictory pattern of feminisms that the present paper seeks to explore. Here, feminism is not a movement or ideology rooted in the Occidental experience, but rather a term to recognize the natural expressions of agency by humans in the feminine context. What this investigation seeks to bring out and establish is a

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie W Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15.

narrative that reaffirms the reality that women have not only stepped out of the constraints of convention, including historical imagination, but stood up to make an impact on their worlds through various instances of agency (i.e. feminisms). This paper explores the feminisms of Dharmic India with a focus on marriage, faith, philosophy, education, occupation, politics, and warfare.

## II. RESEARCH

Marriage is an important cultural and social institution that has evolved over time. During the Vedic period, where marriage was largely patrilineal and patrilocal, we find areas where women not only asserted themselves but were encouraged to do so. Take for example 14.1.44 of the *Atharva Veda* which states the following: “So be imperial queen when thou hast come within thy husband’s home. Over thy husband’s father and his brothers be imperial queen. Over thy husband’s sister and his mother bear supreme control”.<sup>2</sup> Here the wife, even though in a patriarchal institution, is encouraged to assert herself not just as an agent but as a

wife in the home of her husband's family. Another instance of female agency comes from the older Rigveda, where a grieving wife seeks to join her husband's funeral pyre; a reference to the “suicidal” custom of “Sati”. It is the wife who asserts herself by action but the Vedic seers that object to her brave but life-negating act.<sup>3</sup> In the *Mahabharata’s* Adi Parva, another reference to Sati is found. It is when Madri joins Pandu’s funeral pyre, requesting that co-wife Kunti care for her children.<sup>4</sup> Here again, there is no indication of pressure for Madri to carry out Sati, though the text’s tone is one of approval, unlike the Vedas. Continuing with the *Mahabharata*, two more stories indicate how female agency was received. The first story focuses upon a woman who boldly asserts her conception of marriage and place within it. The lady in this story is the Goddess Ganga in human form, with King Shantanu as the infatuated person. Ganga tells him that “I shall marry you in obedience to your wish, but on one condition. Whatever I may do, whether it pleases you or not, you shall leave me alone, and you must not speak harshly to me. As long as you observe this rule, I shall stay with you. But I shall leave you the moment you interfere with me, or

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans, *Hymns of the Atharva Veda*, (1895)

<sup>3</sup> Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans. Rig Veda: *Rig-Veda*, Book 10 HYMN XVIII. This incident is in reference to a hymn (10.18.8-10) in the RigVeda “Rise, come unto the world of life, O woman: come, he is lifeless by whose side thou liest. Wifehood with this thy husband was thy portion, who took thy hand and wooed thee as a lover. From his dead hand I take the bow to be carried, that it may be our power and might and glory.” Here a woman asserting herself is

not the issue for the sages, but the harm and loss of her life is; irrespective of gender human life is valued in the Vedic tradition. The quotation is Griffith’s translation.

<sup>4</sup> Chakravarthi V Narsimhan, trans. *The Mahabharata* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 23. Adi Parva: “Thereupon Madri ascended Pandu’s funeral pyre, asking Kunti to bring up her children with kindness and love.” Here the usage of the word “ascending” implies going up and not literally. This is the basis for my interpretation of the text’s approval.

reproach me with harsh words”.<sup>5</sup> King Shantanu accepts these rules and proposes marriage. Note how the idea of a female (even if Goddess in human form) exerting her interest and basis for marital union is unproblematic. Moreover, what should be appreciated is the fact that an ordinary woman is the one who sets the rules for marriage before a mighty monarch, the text does not treat this as abnormal; it appears perfectly natural for a lady to express herself without being submissive, as is sometimes assumed of women from antiquity. The second interesting story from the *Mahabharata* takes place in the Udyoga Parva where a woman’s sexual freedom is not only respected but seen as normal. In the Udyoga Parva two categories of sons are given: One is called Kanina and the other is called Sahodha, the former is one where a son is born out of wedlock but soon after the mother marries the biological father.<sup>6</sup> What is interesting in this story is that extramarital copulation is not a matter of shame nor is the woman seen negatively for having done so.<sup>7</sup>

Furthering the discussion of women in society and marriage, I will address other instances of feminisms

with a brief focus on property and athletics. Starting with sports, it seems that in the Vedic period women did participate in “warlike” sports such as chariot races. This is indicated in the story of Mudgalani and her husband (Mudgala) who participate in some kind of a sporting competition.<sup>8</sup> Mudgalani is celebrated for having won the competition for herself and her husband.<sup>9</sup> What this story indicates is that women not only participated in sporting events but were also recognized for winning. Neither in the *Vedas* nor in the works of scholars who interpret this story is there any hint of displeasure or surprise at the idea of a female being in sports or getting acclaim for it. Also, it appears that marriage does not preclude women from participating in sports as Mudgalani is married to Mudgala. Aside from sports, married women did appear to have property rights. In the 11th century text *Samaya Matrika*, set in Kashmir, there are numerous instances of females acquiring property. One instance, though negative, is the following case: “After gaining control over all his property, she wanted him dead and with this in mind, incited him into a conflict with his kinsmen.”<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Narsimhan, *Mahabharata*, 6

<sup>6</sup> Narsimhan, *Mahabharata*, 110. Udyoga Parva: Direct quote: “The two classes of sons called Kanina and Sahodha who are born by a girl before her marriage have for their father the man who marries their mother subsequently”

<sup>7</sup> This is very similar to the attitude found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (6.4.12) where a prescription is given to a husband to punish a lover (of his wife’s) that he hates. In this story, like the one above, women are not shamed for extramarital coitus nor for having lovers even when married. The Upanishadic story is

one where the husband targets a lover he does not like, not the idea that his wife has a lover. The issue is with a particular person not with the idea of a wife having a lover. Patrick Olivelle’s *Upanisads* page 89.

<sup>8</sup> Swami Madhavananda, *Eminent Indian Women from the Vedic Age to the Present* (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 2005), 42. The book cites *Rig Veda* 10.102

<sup>9</sup> Stephanie W Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife/Sacrificer's Wife*, 109-110.

<sup>10</sup> Ksemendra, AND Haksar, trans, *The Courtesan's Keeper: a Satire from Ancient Kashmir* (New Delhi, Rupa, 2008), 11.

story further elaborates that the wife does indeed get the property she sought to get. Another interesting case within the *Samaya Matrika* is a story of widowhood, Sati, and inheritance. When a wife's husband dies, she pretends to sit upon the funeral pyre as if she is about to carry out Sati to the alarm of both her in-laws and government officials. The story concludes with "on the orders of the king she was given possession of her husband's wealth. The Royal officers begged her to live on, which she agreed to do".<sup>11</sup> Here, what is interesting is that not only are government officials willing to provide the female property rights, they do so in fear of her committing Sati. This appears to evidence an aversion to the custom, irrespective of its prestige, in favor of her life which only further shows that female lives were seen with importance. In another case, there is a woman who ends up in a property dispute with her husband's son and takes him to court, where she wins the case.<sup>12</sup> From these cases, it is clear that married (and widowed) women did have property rights which they asserted. Further discussion of wealth will be carried out in the discussion of occupations and education.

In this paragraph, I will address education and the occupations of women. The best place to begin regarding education are the Upanishads, a vast "compendium" of philosophical knowledge. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the following is said, "I want a learned daughter who will live out her full life span"<sup>13</sup> Here, what is impressive is that a parent is wishing for the birth of a learned daughter, which plainly implies scholarship, not just "real world" training in trades or technical subjects. Considering that the Upanishads know of such women, Gargi for example was a philosopher, it would not be incorrect to assume that the parent desired to see an educated daughter that could have been a philosopher, linguist, theologian, and so forth. Prior to the Upanishads, in the Vedic era, there is some indication of women being educated, even if in a patriarchal paradigm. According to Swami Madhavananda, Vedic girls would have received education at home with a father, brother, or uncle serving as the educator.<sup>14</sup> Some Vedic girls might have gotten educated at schools called "Chatrashalas" taught by female teachers.<sup>15</sup> Apart from trades, crafts, and familial education, there is some indication that women were educated in

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<sup>11</sup> Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 13. To quote the story: "But he also had sons, and when they prevented her from selling his house, she went to court." and "There she seduced the magistrate and bribed the court officials who got together to arrange a fraudulent disposal of the property, so that she won the case and obtained possession. She then sold the house and appropriated everything it fetched." On

page 69 there is another similar case, but without the unethical practices.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Olivelle, trans, *Upanishads A New Translation* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), 90. Full quotation: "I want a learned daughter who will live out her full life span" - "if this is his wish, he should get her [his wife] to cook that rice with sesame seeds and [the] two of them should eat it mixed with ghee".

<sup>14</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 31.

institutions dedicated to the arts. For example, in the *Mahabharata's* Virata Parva, there is a sign that schools for women did exist. The evidence for this is provided in the following quotation "There is a dancing school which Virata has built: the girls dance there during the day."<sup>16</sup> This provides evidence that at the very least artistic education was accessible to female students. According to Swami Madhavananda, there were two categories of educated women in ancient India, "Sadyowaha" and "Brahmavadini". The Sadyowaha were educated but married whereas the Brahmavadini was not only educated but continued to advanced studies, skipping marriage.<sup>17</sup> Here it is clear that at least some women in ancient India received the highest education possible without needing to be married. Other examples of highly educated women include: Oduvva Tirumalamba (poetess), Ramabhadramba (historian), and Queen Gangadevi (author). Tirumalamba for example was considered a genius, being an excellent musician and grammarian with a strong command of rhetoric, philosophy, epic literature, poetry, and drama.<sup>18</sup> Ramabhadramba was an educated historian who authored a

historical poem called *Raghunathabhyudayam* which was 12 Cantos long.<sup>19</sup> The example of Queen Gangadevi provides a woman who is educated and wrote a historically important document in Sanskrit called *Madhura Vijayam* where she celebrates the military exploits of her husband, King Kumara Kampana.<sup>20</sup> Further evidence for female education is indicated in the fact that a woman is supposed to have authored a medical treatise on women's diseases which was later translated into Arabic.<sup>21</sup> The *Arthashastra* is a legal text associated with the Mauryan Empire (4th century BCE) that advises the government or king to invest in the education of underprivileged women. The text encourages state-subsidized teachers for prostitutes, female slaves, and actresses.<sup>22</sup> The subjects taught by the teacher included: singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, reading, acting, writing, painting, making perfumes and garlands, and how to do shampooing.<sup>23</sup> This clearly indicates that a government's responsibilities encompassed educating disadvantaged women. As has been shown, the education of women is very much a part

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<sup>16</sup> Chakravarthi V Narsimhan, *The Mahabharata* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), 78.

<sup>17</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian*, 20

<sup>18</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 96. Accordingly the book indicates she knew numerous scripts and coined the largest word. She was employed in the court of King Achutyaraya where she produced many works.

<sup>19</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 96. For further information see dissertation by Mudigonda pages 2,3,5,8, 89, 92, and 118.

<sup>20</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 95. Further information on her read Jackson chapter 4 and Chandrababu page 230.

<sup>21</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 36. Swami Madhavananda points out that female doctors were very rare and were largely doctors' widows. The medical treatise is not explicitly named.

<sup>22</sup> R Shamasastri, trans, *Kautilya's Arthashastra* (1915), 179.

<sup>23</sup> Shamasastri, trans, *Kautilya*, 179.

of the Dharmic heritage, irrespective of whether it was equal to that of men or not.

Like in education, there is a history of women participating in the economic sphere of life. Considering the strong agricultural nature of India, it would not be wrong to assume that most women were restricted to domestic and possibly agricultural contributions to society. The primary issue with that assumption is that it does not capture the wide array of work taken on by women and the economic impact of such endeavors. In the Vedic period, for example, apart from partaking in the agricultural duties women were also said to have engaged in the manufacturing of bows, arrows, baskets, and cloth.<sup>24</sup> In the *Arthashastra* the following is said about women and work, “Those women who do not stir out of their houses (anishkanyah), those whose husbands are gone abroad, and those who are cripple or girls may, when obliged to work out of subsistence, be provided with work (spinning out threads) in due courtesy through the medium of maid-servants (of the weaving establishments)”.<sup>25</sup> Here we have a few reasons enumerated as to why women would decide to join the workforce. Also discussed is the compensation based on

the quality of work produced by the female workers, which indicates that their work was both valued and evaluated.<sup>26</sup> In this particular context, it should be noted that women also engaged in work beyond the textile industry. In the *Arthashastra* itself female spies, guards, assassins, and so forth are mentioned. Women also seemed to take on other positions such as astrology and fortune-telling.<sup>27</sup> Throughout various texts other occupations by women are mentioned but will not be discussed here for sake of brevity. The final occupation to be discussed is prostitution, which reveals quite a lot about society. In the *Arthashastra* the following is stated “A prostitute shall pay 24,000 panas as ransom to regain her liberty”.<sup>28</sup> For a prostitute to be required to pay such a heavy fine is not an indication of governmental tyranny but rather a reflection of the high income earned by prostitutes. Further indication of this is found in the *Samaya Matrika* where prostitutes are described as earning a high quantity of wealth. Take for example a prostitute named Mulhana, she is described as wealthy enough to attain fine clothes [ like luxury silk from China] and jewelry because of the income generated by a large clientele.<sup>29</sup> In another story, a prostitute named Shashankalekha is able to afford a beauty

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<sup>24</sup> Swami Madhavananda, *Eminent Indian Women*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 162.

<sup>26</sup> Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 163. Also interesting is that the protection of female workers from even unwarranted gestures is mandated, while a superintendent that does not follow labor guidelines is required to be promptly punished.

<sup>27</sup> Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 17. In this case the female is not actually an astrologer but a charlatan conning money from clients. But even this is indicative that women were able to participate in this occupation as it would not be a successful scam if women were not permitted to be astrologers.

<sup>28</sup> Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 177.

<sup>29</sup> Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 10.

treatment before meeting her lovers.<sup>30</sup> An early piece of advice given to a prostitute is to get a mother (manager) who will manage finances and deal with tax collectors.<sup>31</sup> Here women, possibly retired prostitutes, are recruited to provide advice and managerial functions to other prostitutes.

From the physical to the metaphysical, here I will address women in philosophy with a focus on discourse and debate. As mentioned above, the Upanishads are aware of female philosophers. Here I will briefly address the philosophers Gargi Vachaknavi and Maitreyi. In a debate with the famed philosopher Yajnavalkya, Gargi states the following, "I rise to challenge you Yajnavalkya, with two questions, much as a warrior of Kashi or Videha, stringing his unstrung bow and taking two deadly arrows in his hand, would rise to challenge an enemy. Give me the answers to them!"<sup>32</sup> What is impressive here is not only that a female philosopher is debating a male but that she is doing so with boldness and aggression. No indication in the surrounding paragraph emphasizes her gender or constrains her in any way because of it. Hence in this specific context, it would be fair to regard this as both an equitable and equal situation regarding gender. Another instance is also with Yajnavalkya, but

this time with his philosopher wife Maitreyi. She asks of him "What is the point in getting something that will not make me immortal? Retorted Maitreyi." to which Yajnavalkya states "You have always been very dear to me, and now you have made yourself even more so! Come, my lady, I will explain it to you."<sup>33</sup> Here it is also revealing that a wife can ask her husband meaningful questions on philosophy and not only be welcomed for it but appreciated all the more for it. This represents a fundamental appreciation of women as rational fellow humans. The final philosopher to be discussed here is Yakini Mahattara, a 'nun' in the Jaina tradition. She is credited with defeating a boastful Brahmin scholar in a debate after he claimed to be unbeatable.<sup>34</sup> The boastful Brahmin is Haribhadra Suri, a highly educated Brahmin who was well versed in various scriptures, logic, philosophy, and Yoga.<sup>35</sup> What is impressive here is that Yakini Mahattara was able to defeat such an erudite scholar and make him into her disciple. Equally fascinating in that story is how Haribhadra Suri changes his name to "Yakini Mahattara Sunu" or "Yakiniputra" meaning son of Yakini. What these female philosophers have shown is that not only did women participate in philosophy at various times but did so as equals without misogynistic suspicion; two cases

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<sup>30</sup> Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper*, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Ksemendra, Haksar, *The Courtesan's Keeper* 7. Also on 74 a courtesan is warned about the danger of female bandits; which indicate that women also may have engaged in banditry or criminal activities, much like the infamous or famous Phoolan Devi, a well known female bandit of 20th century India.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Olivelle, trans, *Upanishads A New Translation* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996), 44

<sup>33</sup> Olivelle, *Upanishads*, 69

<sup>34</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 78.

<sup>35</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 78

indicated equality with the third showing excellence.

In the sphere of theology and religion women have played a larger and more impactful role. For example, Lalleshwari (Lal Ded) was a prominent poetess, yogini, and saint of the Kashmir Shaiva tradition whose influence is still felt. She authored some 200 exquisite Vakhs (aphorisms/poems) in Kashmiri which are said to be as majestic as they are insightful.<sup>36</sup> On the opposite side of the Indian subcontinent, we have Karaikkal Ammaiyar who was one of the earliest Tamil poetesses who also had a very profound impact upon Tamil Shaivism.<sup>37</sup> She was in many respects like Lal Ded up north, as both were prominent artists from the Shaivite traditions and are venerated as saints by Tamils and Kashmiris respectively. Impressively Ammaiyar prayed to go from exceeding beauty to utter ugliness, as a sign that she placed importance on ideas and principles as opposed to her own physicality. Another revered Tamil poetess was Avvai who was known for artistic yet sagacious poetry that emphasized (religious) ethical values; her poetry was directed to the commoner.<sup>38</sup> Mirabai, the next figure, is unlike the aforementioned ladies in that she went well beyond her own region to

become a pan-Indian and timeless icon. Her home state may be in today's Rajasthan, but her fame is fully Indian with films and serials depicting her life while daily recitals of her devotional poetry are commonplace.<sup>39</sup> Unlike even the male saints of the Bhakti movement, Meerabai has outshined all of the saints with her songs and poems being recited regularly with new renditions coming out frequently by the latest singers. Antal is the only other saint/poetess that comes remotely close to Mirabai's record, though still distant.<sup>40</sup> Antal does not have as wide an audience and appeal as Mirabai did but nonetheless left an influence on her region. A common pattern among all these women is that they have left a truly profound impact as religious leaders in their respective sects to such a degree that their personalities are almost inseparable from the sectarian or regional identities.

Religion is not the only place where women have shown leadership, as there is a long tradition of women contributing to the political arena. Some examples include: Vijaya-Bhattarka of the Chalukya dynasty (7<sup>th</sup> century CE), Queen Sugandha of Kashmir (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century CE), Akkadevi (11<sup>th</sup> century CE), Queen Malidevi (11<sup>th</sup> century CE), and

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<sup>36</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 85. Professor Braj B. Kachru provides a more detailed account of her life and works in his article on the Poetess and Kashmiri Poetry.

<sup>37</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 85. Also see Sisir Kumar Das's *A History of Indian literature 500-1399* pages 31-32 for more detail.

<sup>38</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 91-92.

<sup>39</sup> John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2010), 120-121.

<sup>40</sup> Vidya Dehejia, *Āṅṭāl. Āṅṭāl and her path of love : poems of a woman saint from South India*, (New York Press, 1990)



Queen Lakshmidēvi (12<sup>th</sup> century CE).<sup>41</sup> With the arrival of the Common Era it becomes increasingly common to see female administrators and political assertion as opposed to prior (before the common era) where such women were rare at best. The discussion on female political administration will begin in Kashmir, with an analysis of Yashovati, Didda, and Sugandha. Yashovati was the Queen and consort of the King Damodara who was killed by the Yadava leader Krishna.<sup>42</sup> After the slaying of Damodara, Krishna appointed Yashovati as the ruler of Kashmir with the help of the court's Brahmins; this move was to the displeasure of the royal advisors who rejected the coronation of a woman.<sup>43</sup> In order to appease the offended advisors and ministers of the royal court, Krishna cited the *Nilamata Purana* to remind them that Kashmir was the land of the Goddess Parvati; a land that was itself the incarnation of the Goddess.<sup>44</sup> According to the *Rajatarangini*, this is what follows "The eyes of men which [before] showed no respect for women as [being only] objects of enjoyment, looked [after Krishna's words] upon her (Yashovati) as the mother of her subjects and like a goddess."<sup>45</sup> What this story reveals is that it was unheard of, at least

in Kashmir, for women to have been the rulers of a government. Krishna's evoking of the *Nilamata Purana* and the Goddess Parvati reveals that religious and textual conceptions of female importance overrides tradition to such a degree that even the staunchest opponents of female rule were quickly pacified; even the opponents begin to view her more respectfully as a goddess and mother. The next Kashmiri queen to be dealt with is Sugandha, who became queen when all the male heirs died.<sup>46</sup> She ruled effectively for two years (early 10th century CE) before she was assassinated by former bodyguards in a coup d'état.<sup>47</sup> The last Kashmiri Queen to be discussed is Didda, a powerful consort and ruler in the 10th century AD. Queen Didda is said to have been so influential that even as the King's *consort* her name was prefixed to his in the official royal coinage.<sup>48</sup> When she became the ruler of Kashmir, Queen Didda's governance brought peace and stability for the entirety of her reign; this was the result of her diplomatic and administrative acumen.<sup>49</sup> The next dynasty to be discussed, the Bhauma-Kara, was situated near what today is the state of Odisha. What is most impressive about this dynasty is that it was successively

<sup>41</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 36-37. On page 79 the argument is put forth that there were supposed to have been Strirajyas or female ruled kingdoms around the time of the *Mahabharata* with the *Jaimini Bharata* and Hiuen Tsang 7th century chronicles being used to bolster the claim. I am somewhat skeptical of the claim and have avoided its discussion.

<sup>42</sup> M.A. Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī, A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr* (Manchester, Archibald Constable and Company, 1900), 14 and 72.

<sup>43</sup> Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 14. The brackets in the quotation are those of Stein, not mine.

<sup>46</sup> Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 207.

<sup>47</sup> Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 207.

<sup>48</sup> Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 104.

<sup>49</sup> Stein, trans, *Kalhana's Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, 104.

governed by female leaders. The four queens that ruled one after another were the following: Queen Gauri-Mahadevi, Queen Dandi-Mahadevi, Queen Bakula-Mahadevi, and Queen Dharma-Mahadevi.<sup>50</sup> These women controlled the throne in a time that was marked with internal strife and external threats of invasion. Despite those tumultuous times, it appears that the women were able to maintain some semblance of stability that allowed for the regime to be passed on to the next ruler.<sup>51</sup>

The Virangana, a tradition of female warriors, includes fine examples of leadership akin to, if not surpassing, those in the purely political sphere. Though the Vedic era is not known for warrior women or ruling queens, there is the possibility that at least one such woman existed. Her name is Vishpala who is supposedly said to have had a leg severed in the middle of battle; Swami Madhavananda speculates as to whether this is in a sporting event or an actual battle.<sup>52</sup> The *Rig Veda* verse in question is 1.116.15, which Griffith translates as “When in the time of night, in Khela's battle, a leg was severed like a wild bird's pinion, Straight ye gave Viśpalā a leg of iron that she might move what time the conflict opened.”<sup>53</sup> This translation

indicates that perhaps women, or just this one woman, participated in battle during the Vedic period. Other examples of women in warfare include: Queen Kurma Devi who organized resistance to the invasion of Qutbuddin in 1195; Rana (King) Sangha's widows Queen Karnavati, who rallied the troops to fight against the invading Sultan Bahadur Shah, and Jawahirbai who led the army and battled till her death defending a fort.<sup>54</sup> Another Rajput Virangana includes the widowed consort of King Samarsi (of Chittor) who died in the 2nd Battle of Tarain; soon after his death she headed a Rajput army to avenge her husband's death, however, she sadly met the same fate.<sup>55</sup> The last Rajput warrior woman to be addressed is the legendary Queen Durgavati of the prestigious Chandela dynasty. She married the “lower-status” Gond monarch, Sangram Shah, despite her father's disapproval.<sup>56</sup> This decision would ultimately make her the kingdom's ruler after the death of Sangram Shah. Queen Durgavati's reputation and legend is based on two primary actions: The first is her protection of the commoners, which included personally hunting down a tiger that threatened villagers; the second is her heroic demise in fighting off the

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<sup>50</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 81. More detail on page 23 of *The Muktesvara Temple in Bhubaneswar* by Walter Smith and page 51 of *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa* by Thomas E. Donaldson.

<sup>51</sup> What evidences the political acumen of these women is the ability to obtain, retain, and govern their respective regimes. If these women lacked competence, they most likely would have faced internal insurgency and external invasions. The

ability to govern and peacefully transition power indicates that these women were skilled administrators and diplomats; doing so in difficult times indicates their extraordinary abilities.

<sup>52</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Griffith, *Rig Veda*, verse 1.116.15.

<sup>54</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 37.

<sup>55</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 37.

<sup>56</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 84.

massive invasion by the larger Mughal Sultanate.<sup>57</sup> The final 3 Viranganas to be discussed span the 11th, 13th, and 17th centuries; they respectively are Princess Akkadevi, Queen Rudrama Devi or also known as Queen Rudramba, and Queen Chenamma. Princess Akkadevi of the Chalukya dynasty, henceforth simply Akka, comes from what today is the Indian state of Karnataka. Apart from the domain she inherited, Akka conquered hundreds of districts and villages which she ruled for a little over half a century (1010-1064CE).<sup>58</sup> Inscriptions remember Akka for being ferocious in battle and having female administrators from the village level upwards.<sup>59</sup> The next is the warrior monarch, Queen Rudrama Devi, henceforth just Rudramba. She hails from the Kakatiya Dynasty which claimed to be of Shudra origin and ruled for approximately three decades from either 1262-1295 CE or 1262-1289 CE (the dating is disputed).<sup>60</sup> Two wars define Rudramba's military career: the first is fighting off an insurgency at the start of her rule, the second is successfully fighting off an invasion by a Yadava king named Devagiri.<sup>61</sup> The next and final Virangana to be discussed is Queen Chenemma the ruler of Keladi. Upon the

death of her husband, Queen Chennamma (henceforth Chenna) assumed the throne in the year 1677 and governed for 40 years.<sup>62</sup> Chenna's reputation for leadership stems from her political fortitude and prowess in battle. After Chenna decided to provide asylum to Rajaram, leader of the Maratha rebels, she provoked the mighty Mughal Sultanate pursuing Rajaram. The provocation resulted in an attack by the Mughal Empire which deployed its larger army against Chenna's small domain. Queen Chenna routed the vastly larger Mughal forces swiftly and decisively in defense of her domain; a military tactic and maneuver that was supposed to have impressed even the notorious Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.<sup>63</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

The women of Dharmic India, as this paper has shown, have a long and admirable history of contributing to India's culture and society through what I term as feminism. Feminisms are the natural expression of agency by women in various societal situations and functions. Within the present monograph I have argued that despite all the odds and impediments put before

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<sup>57</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 84. Also see page 114 of *Medieval India A History Textbook for class XI* by Professor Satish Chandra et al. for more detail regarding the life and battles of Queen Durgavati.

<sup>58</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 93. Akka is said to have not only been an able administrator but one that invested heavily in education.

<sup>59</sup> Jyotsna K Kamat, *Social Life in Medieval Karnataka* (New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1980), 107-108.

<sup>60</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 93.

<sup>61</sup> Bonnie G. Smith, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 612-613. According to Smith, Rudramba reigned over the largest female ruled domain in the world.

<sup>62</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 98.

<sup>63</sup> Swami Madhavananda. *Eminent Indian Women*, 98-99. Also see Radha Krishnamurthy's *Sivatattva Ratnakara of Keladi Basavaraja: A Cultural Study* which deals with the Queen and her story more extensively.

women, Dharmic India has a rich and extensive history of feminisms. My survey of feminisms has shown that women have contributed to fields such as but not limited to: philosophy, theology, faith, devotion, poetry, literature, history, scholarship, warfare, and political administration. Women, even in disadvantageous positions, have shown impressive expressions of agency. There is no doubt that women in India have faced and continue to face difficulties of all varieties, but as this history has shown, women have and will continue to show agency as a natural part of the human experience not an aberration from it. Though feminism as a term, movement, and theory are Occidental in origin, feminism is also a pan-human experience in the sense that assertion and agency are very much a part of the human experience.

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# From Martial Arts to Gangsters: Exploring the Transition of the Hong Kong Action Genre

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout its existence, one of the most iconic and integral genres in Hong Kong cinema is that of action. The styles of these films have been portrayed through two primary mediums: the flashy martial arts action movies of the 1960s-1970s, and the gritty gangster movies that were massively popular in the 1990s-2000s. Coming onto the scene in the mid-1980s, films like Johnny Mak's *Long Arm of the Law* (1984) and Stephen Shin's *Brotherhood* (1986) were some of the first of the crime genre in Hong Kong.<sup>64</sup> Once these films did come onto the scene, they gradually gained popularity; in the 2000's, these films piqued in popularity, and Johnnie To was the quintessential director of the genre. Examining this trend, it is curious where and why this shift in genre from martial arts to gang violence occurred. In any culture, politics and government are a popular medium in the media. The introduction of social change reflects changes in the cinema of the time.

Whether it be news stories, film, or satire, politics is ubiquitous throughout. The introduction of a new authority would not be welcomed, so the films were geared to disrespect authority and to show the darker sides of Hong Kong; with these new shifts in control, the mood of the cinema would follow, taking the action genre from lighthearted and full of stunts to dark, brooding, and full of tense, brutal violence. Throughout this essay, the impact of real-life events, political attitudes, and cultural shifts in Hong Kong and their influence on the creation of the gangster films of the 80's and 90's will be examined.

## II. RESEARCH

Within the action genre of Hong Kong, the subgenre of martial arts films reigned supreme throughout the 1960s-1970s.<sup>65</sup> This style of cinema relies on flashy moves from the performers, quick shots, and clever visual effects, involving "... reverse motion, fast motion, hidden

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<sup>64</sup> Vesia, Michael. "The Gangster as Hero in Hong Kong Cinema." *Offscreen*, August 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Bordwell, David. 2000. *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 131. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

trampolines, and whirs and whooshes to emphasize colossal leaps.”<sup>66</sup> One movie that demonstrates these qualities is *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), by director Chang Cheh. This is a film that takes place hundreds of years ago, alluding to a more traditional time. In this film, the protagonist, Fang Kang, seeks revenge against his aggressors after they chop his arm off unjustly. There are glorious fight scenes with animated martial arts moves, stunts that use hidden trampolines and clever camerawork, and fast shot changes to create a sense of urgency for the viewer.<sup>67</sup> This style of film would be the standard throughout the 1960s-1970s, with many others of this style being released during this period, like *Five Brothers*, and *The Magic Blade*. This new style of film would be due to many factors, some of which include “... unparalleled industrial growth, rapid population increase, a nascent culture of consumption, and the proliferation of a youth-based mass culture...”<sup>68</sup> Man-Fung Yip discusses how people’s attitudes were brighter, and outlook on life was more positive in this time period. Many things were changing for the better between the 1960s and 1970s, especially economic growth. During the 1960s, Hong Kong’s GDP in exports was at 54%, and the government had begun to

engage in industrial planning.<sup>69</sup> With the newly flourishing economy, the style of the film was made to match the atmosphere at the time; having a movie genre of mainly darkness and dreariness during a time of growth and expansion would be contradictory. The martial arts films of the 1960s and 1970s focused heavily on astonishing effects and graceful fights rather than brutal violence and dark plots, both of which would be seen as reflecting the attitudes of Hong Kong residents within their respective time periods. Another martial arts action movie that reflected the attitudes of Hong Kong in the 1960s-1970s is the renowned Robert Clouse film, *Enter the Dragon*. Starring Bruce Lee, one of the most legendary Hong Kong action stars, the film follows Bruce Lee portraying a character named Lee. Lee decides to attend a martial arts competition on a crime lord’s island in order to gain intelligence about the crimes he is committing.<sup>70</sup> Throughout the film, Lee demonstrates genuine prowess and skill in fighting, using his Wing Chun martial arts knowledge. Similar to the tricks used in *One-Armed Swordsman*, there are instances of camera illusions and wires being used to create epic stunts for the audience.<sup>71</sup>

With their fast-paced shots and sense of

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<sup>66</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 130.

<sup>67</sup> *One-Armed Swordsman*, Directed by Chang Cheh (Shaw Brothers Studio, 1967)

<sup>68</sup> Man-Fung, Yip. 2014. “In the Realm of the Senses: Sensory Realism, Speed, and Hong Kong Martial Arts Cinema.” *Cinema Journal* 53 (4): 81

<sup>69</sup> Schenk, Catherine. “Economic History of Hong Kong”. EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert

Whaples. March 16, 2008. URL <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/economic-history-of-hong-kong/>

<sup>70</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 130..

<sup>71</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 135-136.

urgency, these movies reflected the changes occurring in Hong Kong at the time; the excited camera moves and mystical action shots reflected the excitement held by Hong Kong during their time of growth. With the city flourishing and new freedoms being added, filmmakers were eager to celebrate through their art form. The booming industry, new business freedoms, and greater happiness among the people were driving factors of this identity. Hong Kong had developed its own identity over many years, a feeling that would be reflected in the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>72</sup> As previously mentioned, the GDP of Hong Kong dramatically increased during this time period. This factor certainly worked to incentivize the creation of new, lighthearted, and fun cinema for the people of Hong Kong to enjoy. This, along with the other political factors like new gained independence and identity were paramount in the jovial tone these action films took on at the time. When social attitudes would change later on, the films would match. This trend of the media matching the attitudes of the people at the time is one that would remain consistent throughout Hong Kong's history. The political happenings in the 1990's in Hong Kong held content repercussions for the cinema produced. There would be a shift into the gangster action genre in the 1980s. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, these action movies

would focus on martial arts, fast camerawork, stunts, and carefully choreographed fight scenes, the transition into crime and gangster films was a significant change in style and presentation. Instead of elegant fight sequences, there would be brutal shootings and killings, with dramatic showdowns and stories to match the new, darker environment brought on by the changing political climate of British control and a loss of identity.<sup>73</sup> Johnnie To was one of the prominent directors in this new genre. His movies often matched the described grit and brutality, especially in his film *Election*. This film features many shootings, blood, and unfiltered fights. When examining this shift, there appear to be several factors at play. The foremost factor in this shift to grittier, darker times are the experiences and events occurring in Hong Kong from the 1990's onward. A key event which led to this new genre was the introduction of Hong Kong's own political parties, as up until "...the late 1980s and early 1990s Hong Kong had no political representation or political parties."<sup>74</sup> This new introduction of political parties would mark a new shift in Hong Kong culture and lifestyle, one marked by a struggle of power between Hong Kong, China, and Britain. In the late 1990s, this would come to a head with Hong Kong being handed over to China in 1997. With this new introduction of Hong Kong's own

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<sup>72</sup> Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007. Accessed May 2, 2021

<sup>73</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 13.

<sup>74</sup> Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 6.



political parties, derision and criticism would follow in Hong Kong cinema matching the darkness and doubt looming over Hong Kong.<sup>75</sup> Political and social turmoil would continue in Hong Kong, coming to a head in 1997. Hong Kong was already undergoing immense change and turmoil before the handover of 1997. The economy was slowing down, identity was being lost, and the people were living worse lives than the previous glory of the 1960s and 1970s.

Other social happenings in Hong Kong would influence this new style of action film, particularly that of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China; The Hong Kong handover to China had been in the works since the colonial takeover of Hong Kong began hundreds of years prior. In 1982, that colonial rule was set to expire. British and Chinese leaders met over this matter to negotiate the transition, with British prime minister Margaret Thatcher deciding that British rule over Hong Kong was no longer worthwhile. Thus, Thatcher decided that Britain would hand over Hong Kong to China with no input from Hong Kong itself.<sup>76</sup> Eventually, in 1984, Britain and China came to an agreement with the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which stated China would assume sovereignty over Hong Kong from 1997, lasting fifty years until 2047.<sup>77</sup> These changes were

very unwelcome by the people of Hong Kong, but they reluctantly accepted the inevitable changes. One 1988 poll revealed that "...more than half of the respondents believed that reversion to Chinese rule would hurt civil rights and individual liberties."<sup>78</sup> Similar to the case in the 1960's-1970's, these social events influenced the moods and attitudes that would influence the cinema at the time. Along with this new shift in mood, some of the rules associated with British rule were eliminated, leading to fewer restrictions on crime movies. In an interview, Johnnie To explains that while under British rule, filmmakers could "...do what they wanted to do, so long as the films and events... weren't controversial or criminal in nature."<sup>79</sup> He goes on to describe that any language mentioning triads or other gang-related crime was outright banned until the introduction of the three-category film rating system, allowing for cinema to be rated 18+.<sup>80</sup> Johnnie To would take advantage of this new filmmaking freedom in the creation of his action films. The Sino-British agreement provided that China would have sovereignty over Hong Kong as a "one country, two systems" model, meaning that in theory, Hong Kong could govern itself.<sup>81</sup> Of course, China would still hold great governmental influence over Hong

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<sup>75</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 248.

<sup>76</sup> Little, Becky. "How Hong Kong Came Under 'One Country, Two Systems' Rule." History.com. A&E Television Networks, September 3, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 180.

<sup>78</sup> Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*,

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<sup>79</sup> Nochimson, Martha P., Robert Cashill, and Johnnie To. "One Country, Two Visions: An Interview with Johnnie To." *Cinéaste* 32, no. 2 (2007): 37..

<sup>80</sup> To, Johnnie. "One Country, Two Visions: An Interview with Johnnie To." 37.

<sup>81</sup> Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 6.

Kong, hence some of the disrespectful themes towards China that would be seen in the gangster genre.

After shifting to Chinese sovereignty, members of Hong Kong felt a loss of identity and anger. Hong Kong had adapted to their unique status of being multicultural and diverse. The introduction of new rule over their territory held the consequence of another identity shift occurring, leading to disgruntled attitudes. Accordingly, the identity they had developed over the years felt disrespected and disregarded. Feeling the need to re-establish themselves, cinema at the time, especially of the action genre, would no longer represent the themes of old, with traditional martial arts and customs. Along with these social changes, the gangs, known as triads, moved to the forefront of Hong Kong's media, a shift that would have a lasting impact on the gangster genre.

This new attitude regarding politics is demonstrated in Johnnie To's *Election*. In this film, the stylization that was seen in the martial arts genre is stripped away. There are no fancy stunts or camerawork, but rather a more realistic feel to make the film feel more genuine and less mystical. Since much of Hong Kong felt as if their previous identity was lost, the focus on traditional martial arts and customs would change to a focus on disrespecting authority. Released in 2005, this gangster movie follows Lok and Big D, two political candidates seeking election for the now vacant

chairman position of the Wo Luen Shing, one of the triad societies in Hong Kong. Lok is seen to be the more level-headed and patient of the two candidates, while Big D is rambunctious and tries to buy out the election. Lok is elected over Big D, a result that Big D does not take kindly to. Eventually, Lok proposes a truce to Big D, which he accepts. Later on, this move would be seen as one of sly ambition to gain power unfairly. The two men agree that Big D will become the chairman when Lok's term is up. Moreover, in the final sequence of the film, Big D and Lok are fishing together when Big D suggests that they share the power of the chairman position, prompting Lok to savagely kill him with a rock, after which he tracks down Big D's wife and does the same to her.<sup>82</sup> This can be interpreted as To saying that even when things appear to have a happy ending, betrayal and deceit will follow, making reference to the new Chinese control of Hong Kong. Many of To's other films held a similar theme of a happy ending being impossible with uncertainty of who is actually in power.

This visceral final sequence and the violence throughout gave *Election* an 18+ rating. However, it was still successful at the box office. Looking at the new elements portrayed in this film, there are a number of real life-events and general factors which influenced the darker atmosphere in the film. First, it is important to contextualize the dark triad in the film. Triad groups are similar to American mafias. They are "...not

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<sup>82</sup> *Election*, Directed by Johnnie To (Milkyway Image Studios, 2005)

exclusively criminal organizations but are multi-faceted brotherhoods in the form of loose cartels bound by social as well as economic ties."<sup>83</sup> Some authorities say that these groups would often hold great power, conducting criminal operations all throughout Hong Kong, including things like human and drug trafficking.<sup>84</sup> This demonstrates that the general sadness and disdain for the new Hong Kong held a good deal of influence on the brooding moods seen in the film.

The dark triad in *Election* is portrayed as one of these groups, representing the dangers of crime in Hong Kong during the 2000's. This is not to say that these groups were only dangerous in the 2000's; these crime groups have been prevalent ever since the late 1950's.<sup>85</sup> In an interview about his gangster films, Johnnie To says that "What was important was not being graphic, but to emphasize the fear and anxiety in the gangsters' world. That's how gangsters operate, they impose fear. They use the word honor, but it's really all about money and profit."<sup>86</sup> Through both the director's own expressions and the film's realistic nature, it is clear that *Election* sought to portray a sense of realism, especially in its message. To masterfully sets up the environment of the film and constructs the plot to match the real fears

and anxieties that the people of Hong Kong felt towards these criminal organizations, all while maintaining a subtle sense of criticism towards corrupt government and practices. In a separate interview about his gangster films, To proves this when he says that "The *Election* films are meant to portray reality, the way things really are. No one shoots guns. It's the way gangsters really behave."<sup>87</sup> It is clear that with Johnnie To, his gang movies did not wish to stray away from real world events and accuracy, especially with events that were contemporary. This is a contrast to the martial arts films within the action genre, with many of them having made-up stories and plot lines. This reinforces the notion that authenticity was a driving factor for the new form of action movies. Another film showing the dark triad and gang theme within the action genre is that of *Young and Dangerous*. Directed by Andrew Lau, this film was released in 1996. This film follows a group of teens' involvement in a triad after getting a beat down due to a misunderstanding between the group and a man named "Ugly Kwan" and his men. Later in the film, the teens seek their revenge on Ugly Kwan's men through performing hits, but are quickly caught and punished. The triad then falls apart, and many of the members betray one another.. However,

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<sup>83</sup> Broadhurst, Roderic, and Lee King Wa. "The Transformation of Triad 'Dark Societies' in Hong Kong: The Impact of Law Enforcement, Socio-Economic and Political Change." *Security Challenges* 5, no. 4 (2009): 3

<sup>84</sup> Broadhurst and Wa. "The Transformation of Triad 'Dark Societies' in Hong Kong" 6.

<sup>85</sup> Broadhurst and Wa. "The Transformation of Triad 'Dark Societies' in Hong Kong" 6.

<sup>86</sup> Eagan, Daniel. "Interview: Johnnie To on Election and Exiled." *danieleagan.com*, June 1, 2007.

<sup>87</sup> To, Johnnie. "One Country, Two Visions: An Interview with Johnnie To." 37.

in the end, the members seek to work together. One of the members, Chiang, returns to take the chairman position of the triad group, all while letting fellow member Ho Nam that he will not be forgotten.<sup>88</sup>

With this gesture, director Andrew Lau wanted to portray these criminals as virtuous towards their own people, while presenting the audience with a dilemma of whether or not to support these criminals; on one hand, they have committed violent acts, but on the other, they are still ethical in the treatment of their own, only using violence for revenge. Portraying the triad members as the “good guys” was used to undermine the impending Chinese takeover of 1997.<sup>89</sup> The triad members are portrayed as above the law, going against the laws implemented by the unfavorable Chinese rule. When the film was released, it was said that “...the *Young and Dangerous* franchise may have won some street credibility because of its edgy disrespect of China.”<sup>90</sup> This demonstrates the discontent Hong Kong felt with the impending rule of China looming. As seen in films like *Election*, *Young and Dangerous*, *Internal Affairs*, and *To Be Number One*, when the social and political climate got darker, the themes and violence of the cinema followed.

One last factor that is essential to understand the shift to the crime genre of

action movies is the influence and effects of the United States on Hong Kong cinema. The United States held a moderate amount of influence over Hong Kong throughout history, ranging from media to financial impacts. In 1983 “...the plunging Hong Kong dollar was pegged to the American Dollar...”<sup>91</sup> This powerful influence would carry over to other aspects of Hong Kong life, such as the film industry. In the 1990’s, the description of directors was “Often trained in the West and in television, less tied to Mainland traditions than older hands, these young filmmakers turned away from the martial arts and toward gangster films...”<sup>92</sup> Being trained in the West, these filmmakers would be exposed to the gangster and crime genre, as these films were very prevalent in the United States. While initially this new style of film revived the Hong Kong cinema industry, with some even calling it the golden era,<sup>93</sup> this newfound attention to Hong Kong cinema would hold some negative implications. With this new wave of popularity, Hong Kong cinema would not be confined to local popularity.

The United States of America took notice of Hong Kong cinema, being particularly interested in the martial-arts action stars. For example, “Jackie Chan and John Woo became American celebrities, and Tsui, Lam, Wong, and others finished

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<sup>88</sup> *Young and Dangerous*, directed by Andrew Lau (Jing’s Production 1996)

<sup>89</sup> Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*, 6.

<sup>90</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Carroll, John M.. *A Concise History of Hong Kong*,

178.

<sup>92</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 3.

<sup>93</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 3.

films in Hollywood.”<sup>94</sup> Jackie Chan became so popular in the United States that he is largely credited with generating the genre of Comedy Kung Fu in America, a genre that combined legitimate martial arts skills with comedic plot lines and action sequences.<sup>95</sup> With Hong Kong losing some of its most iconic martial arts actors, the action industry would again start to lose its identity, hence the turn towards gangster and crime films. Consequently, local action films of the Martial Arts variety would start to fail, going into “...a tailspin, losing its regional markets and failing...”<sup>96</sup> With these new martial-arts films failing locally, the crime and gangster variety would begin its popularity. This resulted in an interesting exchange of genres, as Hollywood received martial arts influence for its cinema, and Hong Kong received crime for its action genre.

### III. CONCLUSION

Political climates and culture shifts hold a great deal of importance on the cinema. As was seen in Hong Kong, when the times got dark, the cinema’s contents, attitudes, themes, and characters followed. Triads had always existed in Hong Kong. It took deep political turmoil in the nation to push this dark theme to the forefront of the cinema, away from a focus on tradition,

happiness, and cultural security. Furthermore, the shift to crime and gangsters as the primary type of action film can be attributed to a number of factors; however, it is essential to understand that the cross-cultural influences, political changes, and social changes are largely responsible for this shift in the action genre. The introduction of social and political change reflects in the people’s attitudes, and created a distinct change in the cinema of that specific era. In the case of Hong Kong in the 1990s, the new Chinese rule over the nation created an attitude of disdain towards the new authority. For this, the cinema would focus on gangs, crime, and violence, both to disrespect this authority and to illustrate the way Hong Kong citizens felt during the 1990s. As Hong Kong continues to change, its cinema will match.

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<sup>94</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Chen, Xiaxin. *Kung Fu Moves in American Movies*. Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University, 2016, 60.

<sup>96</sup> Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*, 3.

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# The Spread of Influenza: How the United States Military Caused a Global Pandemic

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Influenza – what at one time was regarded as one of the deadliest and most prevalent diseases in the world – has become known as a harmful, but treatable, disease that garners more annoyance than fear in its victims. The Center for Disease Control estimates that “influenza has resulted in between 9 million – 45 million illnesses, between 140,000 – 810,000 hospitalizations and between 12,000 – 61,000 deaths annually since 2010.”<sup>97</sup> This high infection rate, coupled with its relatively low mortality rate, granted influenza the reputation it has today. However, while that might be the case for today, this was not what influenza was thought as in the early twentieth century during the 1918 Influenza Epidemic. The 1918 Influenza Epidemic granted influenza its designation as one of the most prevalent and deadly diseases in history. With death estimates around 50

million worldwide, the 1918 Influenza Pandemic has since gone down in history as the one of deadliest disease outbreaks ever.<sup>98</sup>

While countries were suddenly battling the emergence of this deadly disease, at the same time, the world was fighting another deadly battle in the form of World War I. Although the United States did not join the war until 1917, they would still sustain great losses of life in combat and combat-related deaths. While U.S. military leadership was focused on their success in Europe during World War I, they were simultaneously fighting a losing battle against a deadly and invisible opponent: influenza. In my essay, I am going to prove that, in their efforts to aid in World War I, the American military would unknowingly spread deadly, virulent influenza throughout Europe and eventually the rest of the world. This was mainly due to overcrowded base conditions, limited

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<sup>97</sup> “Disease Burden of Influenza,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, October 5, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/burden/index.html>.

<sup>98</sup> “1918 Pandemic (H1N1 Virus),” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 20, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>.

knowledge, and conflicting advice on how doctors should fight influenza, and the rotation of troops through the trenches, bases, and battlefields that provided the disease with an unlimited supply of healthy bodies to infect.

## II. RESEARCH

While the exact geographical origins of the strain of influenza that caused the pandemic in the early twentieth century have not been pinned down, some modern historical study theorizes that the 1918 Influenza Epidemic began in Haskell County, Kansas. One strong advocate for this theory is historian John M. Barry, who published his book *The Great Influenza* about the epidemic. According to Barry, Dr. Loring Miner, a practicing physician in the sparsely populated area, was the first doctor to record the appearance of the abnormally deadly strain in January and February 1918. Dr. Miner was perplexed; patients were presenting with symptoms consistent with influenza, but they were dying at abnormal rates.<sup>99</sup> Prior to the 1918 epidemic, influenza typically only killed the very young, the very old, and the sick.<sup>100</sup> However, unlike typical cases of influenza, this new strain was killing young, healthy people that would have normally survived the illness. Barry writes that Dr. Miner attempted to warn colleagues at

the U S Public Health Service about his findings, but no one paid much attention to his concerns.<sup>101</sup>

While this deadly strain of influenza was starting to spread, wartime efforts were in full swing at Camp Funston. Funston was, as Barry describes, “the second-largest cantonment in the country [which] held on average fifty-six thousand green young troops.”<sup>102</sup> When called to serve, Funston was also the base that soldiers drafted from Haskell County reported to. Soldiers leaving ground zero in Haskell County for Camp Funston would inevitably bring this influenza virus with them introducing the disease into the military. From there, as soldiers traveled around the country, they would spread influenza wherever they went.

One of the first major recorded outbreaks of influenza at a military base was at Camp Devens in Massachusetts. At the height of the outbreak there, there were 14,000 influenza cases and 500 deaths among the 50,000 men stationed there.<sup>103</sup> There were similar situations at other bases around the country, and military hospitals all over America were overrun with influenza. Many hospitals were ill-equipped and understaffed.

In a letter home, Corporal Hubert G. Culin, who was stationed at Camp Mills on Long Island and worked at the

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<sup>99</sup> John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York, NY: Viking, 2004), 114-116.

<sup>100</sup> Barry, *The Great Influenza*, 115-116.

<sup>101</sup> Barry, *The Great Influenza*, 116.

<sup>102</sup> Barry, *The Great Influenza*, 118.

<sup>103</sup> Kathleen M. Fargey, “The Deadliest Enemy: The U.S. Army and Influenza, 1918-1919,” *Army History*, no. 111 (Spring 2019), 32.



base hospital there, wrote that their hospital had, at the time, over 2,000 patients with the majority of those patients being treated in tents. Corporal Culin writes that the hospital was severely understaffed with less than 600 medical staff available to treat these patients. The situation was so dire that Culin tells his correspondent that “it is necessary to use our convalescent patients” to treat the sicker patients. Culin also writes that the government was building a new hospital for the base, but it would not be completed until December, by which time it would be much too cold for patients to remain in tents outside.<sup>104</sup> The case of the base hospital on Long Island and how they were forced to keep patients in tents is indicative of the larger issue that plagued military hospitals during the pandemic – overcrowding – and the result was unsafe working conditions for medical professionals and soldiers alike.

Other bases faced similar issues with understaffing and overcrowding. At Camp Grant in Rockville, Illinois, 11 out of the 81 medical professionals that worked at the base got sick with influenza after treating patients. 6 of them died from the disease. Eventually, conditions at the base got so severe that the military leadership there lifted their ban on employing Black nurses.<sup>105,106</sup>

With the conditions at Camp Grant in Illinois, Camp Mills in New York, and Camp Devens in Massachusetts being so dire that patients and medical professionals alike were dying from the virus, it was evident that the disease had thoroughly infiltrated military ranks and was swiftly making its way through the United States.

Back at Camp Devens, with the infection rate as high as it was, military officials soon took notice of the situation and sent several medical experts to examine the troops and their living conditions. The experts outlined 16 recommendations for how the troops could slow the spread of influenza at the camp. One of their recommendations included pausing all soldier transfers in and out of the base until the conditions were better. However, before this plan could be implemented fully, a transfer of soldiers was sent to Camp Upton on Long Island, unwittingly bringing influenza with them.<sup>107</sup> Camp Upton served as one of the final transfer points soldiers had to go through before they were sent overseas to France. Once influenza spread here, it was only a matter of time before it made its way to Europe.

In addition to efforts to slow the spread of influenza by officials at Camp Devens, American military leadership was still working to prevent the spread

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<sup>104</sup> Union Trust Company, *Service Letters: A Record of Experiences and Achievement* (Pittsburgh : Union Trust Company, c1918), 17.

<sup>105</sup> These nurses were still segregated, and they were required to work separately from white medical personnel.

<sup>106</sup> Carol R. Byerly, “The U.S. Military and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919,” *Public Health Reports* 125, no. 3\_suppl (2010): 87.

<sup>107</sup> Byerly, “The U.S. Military,” 86–87.

of the virus across the armed forces. Army Surgeon General Charles Richard recommended temporarily pausing military deployments to France, transfers of soldiers between infected bases, and the drafting of new soldiers to the infected bases.<sup>108</sup> He also recommended a one-week quarantine period for transfers before they traveled and suggested that the number of soldiers allowed on troopships should be reduced by 50% to prevent overcrowding in already tight quarters.<sup>109</sup> Army Chief of Staff Peyton March took his suggestions into consideration, but ultimately rejected implementing them all to the degree that Richard recommended. Instead, March implemented pre-screening measures for soldiers before they were allowed to disembark, and he allowed a reduction in troopship capacity by 10%. When President Woodrow Wilson asked about the status of troop transfers to France, March told him what precautions had been taken, explained why he had not followed Richard's recommendations, and argued that reducing transfers to Europe by the amount that Richard recommended would send the wrong message to enemy troops. Wilson accepted this argument and Army Surgeon General Richard's recommendations were never implemented.<sup>110</sup>

Influenza swept through the United States in several waves. The first wave, first witnessed in Haskell County by Dr. Miner before it spread throughout the rest of the country, was fairly mild, did not cause much panic, and resulted in relatively few deaths. This wave more closely resembled traditional influenza pandemics where healthy adults generally came through the illness with little difficulty. The second wave, which is thought to have begun in late 1918, was much deadlier; it was this wave that would establish this outbreak of influenza as endemic.<sup>111</sup> With wartime efforts in full swing, there was a steady movement of soldiers between military bases all over the country. This increased traffic around the nation and the rate of infection among service members ensured that the disease was transmitted around the country and reached civilian populations. Had the country not been currently at war and involved in World War I, the infection rates could have been much lower.

Given that the 1918 influenza epidemic was uniquely lethal for young and healthy people like the soldiers needed to fight in the war, the demand for physicians on military bases grew as influenza threatened military numbers. Consequently, nurses and doctors from civilian populations had to join forces with the army to try and quell the rising

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<sup>108</sup>D. C. Howard, W. P. Chamberlain, and A. G. Love, "The Influenza Epidemic of 1918," in *The Medical Department of the United States Army in the World War, Volume VI, Sanitation*, eds. Frank W. Weed

and Loy McAfee (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926)349-371.

<sup>109</sup> Byerly, "The U.S. Military," 89.

<sup>110</sup> Byerly, "The U.S. Military," 89-90.

<sup>111</sup> Byerly, "The U.S. Military," 88.

infection rate and death toll. Many bases had issues with understaffing. On Long Island, as Corporal Culin said in his letter, convalescent patients who were healthy enough were required to aid more critical patients even though they were still sick with the virus. However, while understaffing was a significant issue, overcrowding was a much larger problem that contributed greatly to the spread of the disease among servicemen.

The Epidemiological and Statistical data report published by the Navy states that overcrowding at the bases was a major contributing factor to the spread of the disease, but there was little that military officials could do to alleviate this issue.<sup>112</sup> Several bases were forced to treat patients outside of base hospitals because there was not enough room. There are reports of patients being relocated to tents at Camp McClellan in Alabama, Camp Meade in Maryland, and Camp Greenleaf in Massachusetts.<sup>113</sup> The government had only a short amount of time to prepare adequate housing and spaces for the increased number of troops required to contribute to the war, and the result was that there simply was not enough space for influenza patients. Overcrowding would continue to be a major contributor in the transmission of the virus among servicemembers.

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<sup>112</sup> Department of the Navy, Bureau of Medicine & Surgery, *Epidemiological and Statistical Data, U.S. Navy, 1918* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920)  
"Epidemiological and statistical data, U.S. Navy, 1918," U.S. Department of the Navy, 435-436.

As more and more doctors were required to treat the growing number of influenza victims in the military, civilian populations were left without enough physicians to treat them back home. Carol R. Byerly writes in her article on the American military's involvement in the pandemic that "almost 30% of American physicians [were] in [the] military service, ' . . . there were [even] sections of the country that were absolutely stripped of physicians.'"<sup>114</sup> This shortage of doctors led to an even worse spread of the disease among civilians. Additionally, physicians had not yet come to a consensus about the best way to treat influenza. In one collaborative publication put out by practicing physicians titled *The Medical World*, doctors recommended using different methods of treatment like ingesting sodium bicarbonate or castor oil while others suggested using drugs like morphine, opium, or codeine to treat symptoms. The doctors even suggested treating patients with dangerous methods like ingesting strychnine, injecting mercury salicylate into the bloodstream, or ingesting creosote.<sup>115</sup>

Though an influenza vaccine existed and had been distributed among civilians and soldiers alike prior to the 1918 Influenza Epidemic, there was still some debate among physicians on the effectiveness of the vaccine. In *The*

<sup>113</sup> Fargey, "The Deadliest Enemy," 26-29.

<sup>114</sup> Byerly, "The U.S. Military," 85.

<sup>115</sup> Dr. C.F. Taylor and Dr. J.C. Rommel, *The Medical World*, vol. 37 1919, 1, 12, 13.

*Medical World*, Dr. A.G. Servoss says that the vaccine can be effective if the proper vaccine is used. Later, in the same publication, Dr. T. E. Reed warns against the use of vaccines, calls them a fad, and recommends treating symptoms with drugs rather than using preventative vaccines. The next article by Dr. H. J. Jennet argues that there is little use of vaccines in the treatment of influenza.<sup>116</sup> *The Medical World* contains many articles from doctors from all over the country arguing for homeopathic treatments of influenza or the use of vaccines and serums. These articles and the differing opinions that the doctors who wrote them took show that there was no consensus among physicians on how influenza should be treated.

While doctors might not have had concrete methods for treating the disease, they largely understood how the disease was transmitted from person to person. The Epidemiological and Statistical Data Report outlines preventative measures that they say, when employed properly, help slow the spread of influenza at military bases. These measures included quarantines for infected individuals, regular temperature checks of personnel, the use of face masks, reduction of overcrowding in military buildings, improvement of ventilation in these buildings, mandates concerning indoor gatherings and travel, increased attention to personal hygiene, and the sanitation of shared spaces and

utensils.<sup>117</sup> With our knowledge of influenza today and our understanding of how diseases spread, we know that the report was correct that these measures could have successfully prevented the spread of the disease or at least could have reduced the rate of infection.

After American troops landed in Europe, they moved through battle zones, spreading their disease wherever they went. The inherently cramped and overcrowded conditions of trench warfare allowed the disease to spread rapidly among service members. When infected soldiers made it to the front lines and inevitably got too sick to fight, they were removed from their posts and replaced with healthier soldiers who were able to fight.<sup>118</sup> These healthy soldiers, having been exposed to influenza during the rotation, would eventually fall victim to the disease themselves and the cycle would start over. This constant rotation of healthy and sick men in and out of the trenches ensured that the virus had a steady supply of bodies to infect. From the trenches, the disease would spread to civilian populations in Europe and eventually made its way across the world.<sup>119</sup>

As men on the battlefield got sicker, it became more difficult for the military to fight the war they had come to fight. Meanwhile, Europe was swiftly feeling the effects of the new deadlier influenza epidemic. The European side

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<sup>116</sup> Taylor and Rommel, *The Medical World*, 13, 17, 389, 391.

<sup>117</sup> "Epidemiological and statistical data," 426-427.

<sup>118</sup> Byerly, "The U.S. Military," 86.

<sup>119</sup> Byerly, "The U.S. Military," 86.

of the epidemic appeared in waves of varying severity, just like how the United States experienced the pandemic. The deadliest wave of the virus was likely caused by the movement of infected American troops through Europe. Biologist James E. Hollenbeck explains how the virus continued developing and becoming deadlier while the war raged on in Europe. In his article, he says that “the crowded hospitals with hurried medical care procedures and mass transport of sick and dying soldiers... compounded the likelihood of an emerging infectious disease or a possible mutation of an existing disease that would target this age group.”<sup>120</sup> He argues that the influenza strain that the American troops brought over with them developed into a much more serious and deadly disease on the battlefield. From the trenches, the disease spread to Russia, America, Spain, Germany, and the rest of the world.<sup>121</sup> As Hollenbeck says, the virus traveled from the trenches and ravaged country after country until finally the whole of Europe was thoroughly infected with the disease. While the American military might not have brought the deadliest form of influenza with them, they supplied the necessary factors needed to develop the disease into the killer that it became.

An armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, ending World War I, which ended the constant rotation of infectious troops and the need for overcrowded military hospitals. It was too late, however, as the damage had already been done. In the end, the number of soldiers that died from influenza rivaled the number of soldiers that died in battle. The official estimate of combat or combat-related deaths for American troops during World War I is 50,500 soldiers. In contrast, influenza killed an estimated 55,322 soldiers during the same period.<sup>122,123</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

The 1918 Influenza Pandemic, coupled with the battles waged during World War I, decimated the world's population. The American military played a large role in facilitating the spread of influenza through Europe. First, the virus began infecting bases in the United States as soldiers traveled around the country, bringing influenza with them. The prevalence of the disease in military bases and their chronic issue with overcrowding allowed the virus to spread efficiently and thoroughly. This effect continued as American troops made their way to Europe, acting as hosts to influenza and providing the disease with a new population to infect. The disease soon spread throughout

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<sup>120</sup> James E. Hollenbeck, “The 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic: A Pale Horse Rides Home from War,” *Bios* 73, no. 1 (2002): 21.

<sup>121</sup> Hollenbeck, “The 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic,” 21.

<sup>122</sup> It is important to remember that this estimate of soldier deaths due to influenza does not include civilian deaths from influenza.

<sup>123</sup> Fargey, “The Deadliest Enemy,” 25.

Europe, multiplying and mutating until it was much deadlier than the disease that the soldiers brought with them. Therefore, it is evident that the American military's involvement in World War I facilitated the spread of influenza throughout the rest of the country, Europe, and eventually the rest of the world.

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