Chapter 1
Introduction
Theorizing Bruce Lee: Sublime Object of Academia

Cross-ethnic representation, then, is not just a matter of discovering more and newer routes to and contacts with other cultures, whether by means associated with Christopher Columbus (caravels) or Bill Gates (modems). Instead, it is a process in which the acceleration and intensification of contacts brought by technology and commerce entail an acceleration and intensification of stereotypes, stereotypes that, rather than simply being false or incorrect (and thus dismissable), have the potential of effecting changes in entire intellectual climates...

- Rey Chow, ‘Brushes with the Other as Face’ (2002: 63)

Stereotyping Bruce Lee: Trivia, Clichés and Provocations

The topic of Bruce Lee may strike some as trivial – kids’ stuff, even: a 1970s celluloid action man who defined a brief moment in a bygone era when ‘everybody was kung fu fighting’, or briefly wanted to be. Indeed, not only trivial, Bruce Lee might actually exemplify many of the things we might be better off without: silly boys’ crazes, faddishness, escapism, nerdiness, fantasies of physical violence, representations reliant on ultimately racist stereotypes, the commodification of oriental alterity. So: trivial, nerdy, fetishistic, violent, orientalist, exploitative, and typifying the western impetus to appropriation. Already this could constitute a
fairly damning series of charges, charges which are implicit in the essential thrust of not only certain Marxian views on popular culture, but also a fair few feminist and liberal humanist criticisms too. Thus, if the question is ‘What is Bruce Lee?’, then one answer might be: a trivial and trivialising, violent, masculinist, orientalist stereotype; a mythologized commodification of alterity packaged for a fetishistic Western gaze; the mythological reduction of ethnicity into posters, t-shirts, nerds’ film collections; one which provided bullies, show offs, fighters and fantasists the world over with an entire new lexicon of moves and stances for posturing, parading and pugilism. So, perhaps not even ‘kids’ stuff’, Bruce Lee could ultimately come to strike you as exactly the sort of putatively trivial thing that is not actually trivial at all, but is rather the sort of thing you might want to keep very far away from kids: a dangerous supplement, an irredeemably patriarchal and fetishistic commodity, a sublime object of ideology.

Although this may seem like excessive hyperbole and caricature, it is nevertheless the case that precisely such dismissals and denunciations of Bruce Lee do occur – particularly as a first reaction to the suggestion that anything remotely serious or worthy of attention might condense in or around Bruce Lee. Yet even if there is indeed something in the sorts of criticism to which I have just gestured, wherein Bruce Lee might be deemed trivial, deleterious or ideological, or in which Bruce Lee is regarded as representing or participating in something to do with capitalist commodification, Western orientalism or patriarchy, then surely this can only mean that there is indeed something serious and worthy of attention here.

This array of thorny issues can be broached through a consideration of the intertwined topics of representation and participation, particularly in this case in the way that they converge in the chiasmus of the cinema. Representation is, of course, not exactly the same topic as that of cinema, but the two are deeply intertwined and interimplicated. Moreover, both are arguably implicated in the very constitution of everyday social and cultural reality – particularly people’s beliefs, biases, assumptions, values and prejudices, and in the complex relationships between representation and participation. In the case of Bruce Lee, we are perhaps chiefly or primarily obliged to consider the knotty issue of cross-cultural and inter-ethnic representation. How do we represent others, first of all?