

# Gallant

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pics courtesy of **Focus Pictures and Sony Pictures**



Bruce Leung lives again in *Gallants*.

**In the West, Bruce Leung's unforgettable face and calloused knuckles are most often associated with *The Beast* from Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* and, infamously, with *The Dragon Lives Again*, in which the actor imitated the recently deceased Bruce Lee in outrageous fashion.** But Leung is really a symbol of Hong Kong's film industry itself, emerging from humble origins to do stuntwork and fight choreography before becoming an actor. His career has included television hits, starring roles, and now a late-career revival after a decade of being virtually blacklisted for visiting China.

In Derek Kwok and Clement Cheng's *Gallants* (shot in 17 days), Leung's career explodes yet again, essaying a lethal-but-washed-up 60-year-old martial artist who finds reason to fight once more. His performance is a reason to watch the film—not just for the incredible sight of a senior citizen kicking ass but for a single moment near the film's end that offers an emotional suckerpunch that few martial arts films come close to approaching.

I encountered Leung at the New York Asian Film Festival and was surprised to find that, unlike most film personalities, the actor is wonderfully upfront and unguarded. He's also mischievous and gentlemanly, proud and humble, all at once. It's now up to Asian—and perhaps even Asian-American—filmmakers to give Leung the roles he deserves.

**GR: What came first: martial arts or movies?**

BL: First I was a martial artist. I started out at the lowest level, as a stuntman, and slowly moved up. After gaining experience as a martial artist, a director told me that as long as I wasn't shy, then I could act. I debated the idea for about six months before I really chose to go into acting.

**GR: What was the debate?**

BL: I was shy!

**GR: Was it your spirit as a martial artist that allowed you to overcome the shyness?**

BL: The real reason was that I had a girlfriend at the time who was a very famous singer in Hong Kong, and I wanted to be on the same level as her.



*There are a lot of people in China who still challenge me to fight.*

**GR: How did you stand out and get noticed?**

BL: At the time Hong Kong belonged to the British so there were a lot of British soldiers in the streets. Late one night, a couple was walking down the street and a soldier was harassing the girl. The guy asked me for help, and I beat up the soldier. A director was around, saw the whole thing, and suggested I should try acting. I have to really say that in no way am I encouraging anyone to do something like that. I really must stress this.

**GR: Many martial artists become movie stars, but your performance in *Gallants* shows that you became a terrific actor. At what point did you get over the shyness and become interested in that?**

BL: Along with my life's experiences and so many years of making

films, there's a saying that goes "my skin has become thick." We try to use movies to display society's problems, its needs and thoughts. When I was young I used to use martial arts to express myself, but now society has gone through so many changes that I would like to try to do the same with acting.

**GR: Yet martial arts films never go out of style, right? Do you think they change to reflect contemporary society?**

BL: I think the reason they will always be around is because young audiences want to see action. They want to see fighting and energy in their movies. So the action movie will always be around. Audiences want a hero.

**GR: But there's such a difference in the action film of your youth and today's, especially because of the use of CGI. In fact, *Gal-***

***lants* is actually about the disparity. Do you think that reflects the youthful audience's own worldview?**

BL: There are way too many movies today that rely on computers, and the director of *Gallants* wanted to go back to the spirit of how older kung fu movies were made. That's why he mixed veteran actors who know kung fu and the younger generation. People seem to have forgotten about the nature of what their relationships to family and friends used to be. That was an idea we wanted to explore in the film, along with real kung fu. So we put the two together.

**GR: When working with younger actors, do you find they have a different attitude toward action and martial arts?**

BL: At the beginning of the shoot, I think the younger actors had a certain attitude. They'd see us old guys and think they could beat us any day. It's human nature. But in the end, we met halfway. We have experience, they have stamina, and we needed each other.

**GR: What about your days working as a Bruce Lee impersonator? You happened to be in a particularly strange and infamous one, *The Dragon Lives Again*, in which you play a dead Bruce Lee in hell who meets all sorts of famous people.**

BL: Oh, that's the movie I liked the least of all. I never set out to mimic or copy someone else, but that's what the producers and financiers in those days wanted to exploit and I needed a job.

**GR: Your career has had so many ups and downs. What are you really proud of?**

BL: The first was getting an award at a foreign film festival in Japan. The second was *The Fist*, a television drama that was very influential. And then I am just proud of having been in martial arts movies.

**GR: Was your part in *Gallants* written with you in mind? Who came up with the distinctive look of your character?**

BL: The character was written for me because the writer wanted someone with a real old-school kung fu background. As for the look of the character, I just wanted him to look like a really ordinary person. I wanted the audience to relate to him and think, "That could be me." If you dress a character up too much, he's going to look like James Bond. When a character looks ordinary, I believe the heroic aspect is stronger because you can identify with the person. Everyone lives with a sense of personal pressure, and when you see my character throw a punch you feel that pressure being released. I mean, do you think you look like Rambo? I think you can find a guy like this character all over the world. They may not use kung fu to express themselves, but they have the same feelings.

**GR: Can you tell us about working on Wong Kar-Wai's *Ip Man*, which stars Tony Leung?**

*Bruce Leung gives knuckles to the New York Asian Film Festival.*







BL: Ten days ago the producers came looking for me, and there was some pressure there. Tony Leung is not someone who knows martial arts, while all the best martial artists and some of the best choreographers worked on the competing *Ip Man* films [directed by Wilson Yip and starring Donnie Yen and Sammo Hung].

**GR: In all these years you've never stopped training. What have you learned about martial arts that you didn't know as a young man?**

BL: You must train the inner self through martial arts. Like our film says, "If you're not going to fight, then you can't lose. But if you're going to fight, you have to win." There's a meaning behind that. If you're afraid to lose, you will. When you're ready to fight, the confidence will make you win. At my age, when you can beat someone down, it doesn't mean that you've won. If I am going to fight someone for real, he has to have done something really bad to begin with, but aside from that I would want him to feel that he doesn't want to fight me again.

There are a lot of people in China who still challenge me to fight. My reply is that I am just acting. But they challenge me because they know I know real kung fu. If I were 20, I'd fight them! But at this age, I've already won because they want to fight me.

There are people who seek me out to be their sifu, and I always pose the challenge, "If you can beat me, I will accept you as a student." People are confused by that, and ask why it is required. Now, if you can't even beat me then I can't accept you as a student. A lot of people

don't understand this challenge. So they stop looking for me after a while.

**GR: Your knuckle calluses are extraordinary. Do you still stick to the same training routine?**

BL: My confidence is in my hands. All these years of kung fu have given me confidence, no matter what has happened in my career.

**GR: You once said that the reason you learned kung fu was to protect your grandmother...**

BL: At the age of 7 or 8, I started to really understand things. I was very young, and my family was two women: my aunt and my grandmother. I was the only man in the family, and they always used to get harassed. As a child, I thought, "When I grow up, I must protect them." The only way was to learn martial arts. I wanted to be like Wong Fei-Hung; if I saw injustice or people getting picked on, I wanted to be able to rise up and help them. And that's how I became an actor. 🤖

*Bruce Leung was lured out of retirement by Stephen Chow to play The Beast in Kung fu Hustle.*

