

IT'S...



CHOW TIME!



Hong Kong action hero **Stephen Chow** is set to steal Jackie Chan's

chop-socky crown with a mix of slick moves and the appliance of science >

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DESMOND MUCKIAN / FASHION BY CATHERINE HAYWARD / WORDS BY NICK SCOTT

“EVEN THE TRIADS DON'T BOTHER WITH HONG KONG CINEMA ANY MORE – THERE'S NOT ENOUGH MONEY IN IT. THE ONLY WAY FOR US IS TO BREAK THROUGH INTERNATIONALLY”



Cotton polo shirt, £89; cotton tracksuit trousers, £129, both by **Boss Hugo Boss**. Trainers, £35, by **Converse**. *Previous pages*, cotton V-neck, £67, by **John Varvatos**. Cotton tracksuit trousers, £40, by **Puma**. Trainers, £35, by **Converse**.

Pre-Revolution China. Axe-wielding gangsters in top hats and morning suits

terrorise a down-at-heel housing complex in a whirl of *Crouching Tiger-meets-Bugsy Malone* choreography. Reinforcements arrive on the scene with pavement-shattering leaps from the sky. A hefty strum from a pair of blind harp players sends invisible blades and tortured apparitions hurtling towards a pair of frail but potent adversaries, who hit back with blasts of breath that remove the demon's flesh from their bones.

Stephen Chow, Hong Kong cinema's biggest writer, director and star – best-known here for last year's *Shaolin Soccer* – didn't get where he is by becoming bogged down in realism. And *Kung Fu Hustle*, his martial-arts action-comedy set in Thirties Shanghai, and a decent punt for surprise UK box-office hit of the summer, is phantasmagorical even by his standards. And he admits it. Kind of. “What you see in the movie is just an exaggerated and symbolic version of Chi,” he says. “I'm a big believer in ancient Chinese philosophies. Chi does exist in the human body, and Chi-gong [energy practice] is the way to learn how to control it.”

Chow plays Sing, a hapless bum who tries to worm his way into the aforementioned band of dapper mobsters – the notorious Axe Gang – only to get caught in the crossfire of their high-kicking showdown with a ramshackle but mysteriously agile group of tenement-slum residents. Reference-spotters will catch satirical riffs from *The Shining*, *Gangs of New York* and *West Side Story* (and that's just for starters) but the story is really just a platform for some frenetic, highly watchable martial-arts action. (A tip for the weak-bladdered – duck out during the schmaltzy sub-plot with the mute ice-cream seller.) The movie really belongs to choreographer Yuen Wo-Ping, the king of eye-popping wirework making his first move following the *Kill Bill* and *Matrix* series, and Chow himself, who is being tipped – no, begged – to fill Jackie Chan's well-scuffed plimsolls.

Perhaps because he grew up in poverty (“You saw the housing estate in the movie was called ‘Pig Sty Alley’? The idea of this came directly from where I lived in Kowloon as a kid”), the 43-year-old Chow has a humility more befitting his background than his stardom. “When I was

growing up,” he says, “there was a whole bunch of young men all trying to imitate Bruce Lee with their – how do you call two sticks with a chain between? I'm just one of them.” In fact, in contrast to other proponents of the Eighties “Bruce-ploitation” movement (are you listening Bruces Le, Lai, Thai and Leung Siu-long?), Chow is credited with creating an entire comedy genre, known as “Mo Lei Tow” – a rambunctious spoofing rampage throughout the Nineties that knocked Western cinema stalwarts from *Psycho* to *The Terminator*. Considering he started out in showbiz praying his mates weren't watching as he presented Hong Kong kids' TV show *430 Space Shuttle*, Chow is these days palm-slapping way above his weight. Think Keith Chegwin's career mutating into Steve Coogan's.

But back to the matter at hand. “How do I give you any one specific translation of Mo Lei Tow?” says Chow. “It means ‘nonsense’ and ‘crazy’ and ‘different’ and ‘illogical’ and ‘abnormal’, all at the same time.” Hence the movie's heavy stream of turbo-powered slapstick, which comes mainly at the expense of Chow's comedy antihero, Sing: one moment, a snakebite causes his lips to puff up into a rubberised, Daffy Duck pout; the next, he launches into a chase with run-on-the-spot, Captain Caveman leg-whirls, eyeing his pursuer's reflection in the knives embedded in each shoulder by a hapless accomplice.

But there's more to Chow's trademark comedy than pratfall; it's about childish insults, sarcasm, surreal sight gags, bizarre non sequiturs, anachronisms and, above all, puns – machine-gun Cantonese innuendo, in fact. A language in which the word “shu” can mean book, uncle, neglect, ransom, ripe, comb and a thousand lavatorial colloquialisms, depending on pitch and inflection, is seriously rich soil for wordplay. In Hong Kong, *Kung Fu Hustle* recently eclipsed *Shaolin Soccer* as the most successful domestically produced film of all time, but how does this wash with a Western audience? “If you have too much punning with Cantonese slang, it makes it limited to the local people,” he says. “That's why I've tried to replace this with more action and visual humour. Thanks to piracy, lack of funding and so on, there's not enough money in Hong Kong cinema – even the Triads don't bother getting involved any more. We can't rely on our local market. The only way for us is to break through internationally.”

If, as he hopes, *Kung Fu Hustle* dwarfs the moderate international success of *Shaolin Soccer*, we may be in for some Jackie Chan-style

STEPHEN CHOW



Do the hustle: above, Chow shows his sensitive side with ice-cream seller Huang Sheng Yi; top, a shop-owner from the Pig Sty Alley slum area takes on the Axe Gang

retrospective interest in Chow's hefty back catalogue. But don't expect to find more of the same: as well as a revamp of the humour and commercially sound pacing, Chow's new-found success owes much to a more revolutionary tool – CGI. “It's very difficult to make something as funny and entertaining as your imagination pictures with just a camera,” says Chow. “There are many subject matters you just cannot fulfil with traditional ways of filming. How do you visualise a concept like Chi without help from a computer?” Good question. But if *Kung Fu Hustle* is the result, here's to a continued happy marriage between ancient and modern. 📺

‘Kung Fu Hustle’ is out on 24 June

Grooming: Georgie Hamed at Premier using Dermologica skincare
Photographer's assistant: Jack Hobhouse
Fashion assistant: Rhianna Rule