This new edition of Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition updates the volume with an entirely new chapter, entitled ‘Wuxia and Kung Fu in the Blockbuster Era’. As the title indicates, the development of the martial arts genre has entered an era in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century that has become almost entirely associated with the blockbuster format. This phenomenon presents new considerations for scholarship and research of the wuxia genre. A rationale for this new edition is to look into the genre’s continuing relevance as the most popular and enduring form of the Chinese cinema. Over the last dozen years or so, the wuxia film has remained a vigorous form albeit within the medium of the blockbuster, entailing the expense of huge budgets, use of vast resources, and the deployment of CGI technology. Its base of production has also shifted, from its previous moorings in the Hong Kong film industry to the Chinese film industry in the mainland of China today. This has brought about a reinvention and rethinking of the genre in many ways, which I cover in the chapter within the purview of my analysis of John Woo’s Red Cliff (2008/2009) and Wong Kar-wai’s The Grandmaster (2013). These two films are ambitious in scope and in their spectacular design of production – thus making them typical blockbusters – as well as in their outlook on the themes and preoccupations of the wuxia genre.

This new edition then brings the wuxia genre’s development to its current phase, roughly spanning the period from 2008 to about 2014. The blockbuster phenomenon itself has actually been an unstoppable trend in the Chinese film industry from around the start of the new millennium, and the mode of
production itself will probably not go away any time soon, though not every blockbuster will necessarily be a wuxia film. The genre has adopted the blockbuster as a platform to reinvigorate itself, with a view towards spreading its wings around the globe – the blockbuster being thought of as an intrinsically transnational medium. In the process, it has become the instrument of China’s soft power objectives, fuelling some disquiet among certain critics and commentators who see more nefarious motives in the whole phenomenon. They liken the blockbuster wuxia to a form of propaganda of China’s rise and the assertion of its power (particularly military power). Historically, during the Qing dynasty era, wuxia fiction was banned for its capability to incite readers to rebel against the authorities. In the twentieth century, it was banned for spreading superstitious thinking. In the twenty-first century, it seems the genre is now entirely at the service of the Chinese government. The blockbuster, in its guise of a wuxia military-type epic, as represented by a work such as Zhang Yimou’s Hero (2002), has elicited much disparagement and summary dismissal by non-fans of the genre. Such reaction needs to be counteracted through greater constructive scholarship; fans and scholars need to reassert the value and importance of the genre to the Chinese cinema and world cinema in general; the space for discussion must be broadened, outstanding works must be identified, and the whole genre given regular check-throughs. In the present phase, it is imperative to examine the genre’s reliance on the blockbuster form and its impact on wuxia themes and conventions to determine its continuing relevance to contemporary cinema. In the newly added chapter to this volume, I discuss the two films, Red Cliff and The Grandmaster, which can contribute the most, in my opinion, towards a better appreciation of the genre and towards correcting the blinkered and often dogmatic assumptions of the critics and detractors.

The importance of the two films in focus in the new chapter lies in the way in which the directors, John Woo and Wong Kar-wai, have integrated their personal styles of cinematic storytelling, already well known to international audiences, with the standard themes of wuxia, in particular the notions of xia chivalry and honour. Wuxia’s capacity for spectacle and action is preserved by the use of the blockbuster format by these directors, but its values and codes (which are more traditional and often deemed to be incompatible with modernity) are ultimately ingrained in the systems of thought implicit in the genre. They still require a larger scope of analysis in order to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation. This necessity remains despite the genre’s growing familiarity with audiences around the world. Hence, the additional chapter reaffirms the book’s theme of examining how wuxia as a cinematic genre continues to exert its weight both as an action genre which is still commercially viable to industry and as a cultural and historicist artistic form which still obsesses Chinese filmmakers. The wuxia genre has gone through periodic setbacks in its historical
development within the sphere of Chinese filmmaking. It has moved its centres of production from its original base in China to Hong Kong and Taiwan and is now back in China once more. The ongoing thrust of its development suggests that it is a genre well capable of adjusting its form and conventions to synchronic currents of history.
This book is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother
Mary Chen Sing Chow