



Episode 63 – Donnie Yen | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey, there, everyone its episode 63 of whistlekick Martial Arts Radio, the only place to hear the best conversations about the martial arts, like today's episode all about famed martial arts actor, Donnie Yen

I'm the founder here at whistlekick, but I'm better known as your host, Jeremy Lesniak. whistlekick, in case you don't know, makes the world's best sparring gear and some awesome apparel and accessories for you traditional martial artists. I'd like to welcome our new listeners and thank all of you returning fans.

If you're not familiar with our products, you can learn more about them at whistlekick.com. All of our past podcast episodes, show notes and a lot more are at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Today's episode also has a full transcript with lots of photos, videos and links on the website. If you're listening from a computer, you might want to follow along with everything we've posted.

And while you're over there, go ahead and sign up for our newsletter. We offer exclusive content to subscribers and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests.



Episode 63 – Donnie Yen | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Donnie Yen, as we all know, is all over Hollywood these days. Of his 69 acting credits, 22 are from 2010 or after. But who is he? Where did he come from and how did he become the most sought-after martial arts actor in the US in such a short time. Well, I'll tell you.

Donnie Yen was born Yen Ji-dan in 1963 to a newspaper editor father and martial arts grandmaster mother. His mother, Bo-sim Mark, started his training when he was only four. His early teaching was in Chinese martial arts but by 9 he was learning karate. At 11 he and his family moved from Hong Kong to Boston, Mass. Where he not only excelled in martial arts, but also learned to play the piano and started dancing.

At 14 he dropped out of school and started practicing wushu very seriously, but also spent time learning other martial arts from his friends and visiting their martial arts schools. Of course, even a martial arts kid that drops out of school tends to end up in rough areas, and that was exactly what was happening to young Donnie. He was part of a Chinatown gang and had quite the reputation as a street fighter.

Wanting to head off any major issues, his parents decided he should go to China for a couple years and train Wushu under the Beijing Wushu Team and Master Wu Bin, the very same team and coach that trained Jet Li. At 18, after his two years were finished, he was scheduled to return to the United States but made a quick trip to Hong Kong.

It was there he accidentally met action choreographer Yuen Woo-ping, who had a role in Jackie Chan's success, including the film *Drunken Master*. Yen was offered a screen test, which he passed, and then a 4-picture deal, which he accepted. His first role ever was as a stunt double in the movie *The Miracle Fighters*, while his first credited acting role was in *Drunken Tai Chi* in 1984, when he was only 19.

It wasn't until 1992 that Donnie Yen had his breakout role, when he starred opposite Jet Li in *Once Upon a Time in China II*. We linked a great fight scene from that movie when we did our profile on Jet Li, you should check it out. The two appeared together again in the 2002 movie *Hero*, and we were all treated to some amazing onscreen combat.

In 1995, he starred in a TV series remake of the Bruce Lee movie *Fist of Fury*, playing the same character – Chen Zhen. He played the same role again in the 2010 movie *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen*. He's a big fan of Bruce Lee, some even say he considers him an idol. The movie had a fair amount of mixed martial arts in it, which Donnie Yen feels is consistent with what Bruce Lee would be doing, were he alive today.

It was around this time that Donnie and his girlfriend were harassed in a club, and this incident was documented by Hong Kong news channels, so we know it's true... A local gang wouldn't leave them alone, so they tried to leave. The gang wouldn't have it. The result? 13 members of that group went to the hospital. Sounds like one of his fight scenes, no?



Episode 63 – Donnie Yen | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

His first movie as a director was in 1997, when he started his own production company called Bullet Films. The movie was called Legend of the Wolf and Donnie Yen not only directed it but starred, handled the action direction, wrote and produced. It's not a highly reviewed film, but it does seem to have a following and the fight scenes are regarded as being top notch. You can find it online to buy, but I couldn't find anywhere to stream it.

Despite the quality of the early works from Bullet films, he nearly went broke. He was borrowing money from loan sharks and even from the production crew. Things looked dark, so Donnie Yen thought he'd try his hand at Hollywood.

He was as Jin Ke in the 2000 movie Highlander: Endgame which was not well received. Just a couple of years later, though, Yen would have the role that most feel set him on the track to stardom – Blade II. Not only did he act in the movie, but he was a fight choreographer and martial arts coordinator on the film. Interestingly, it was his skill as a choreographer that led to the acting – for both films he was simply intended as a choreographer, but when the directors saw how good he was, they found ways to work him into the movies.

When Jet Li was filming Hero in 2002, he went to the director and insisted that Donnie Yen be cast as the villain Sky. Jet Li personally invited him to become part of the movie, and if you've seen it, you know how good it was. We have some video from that fight scene over on our Jet Li show notes as well. Just a year later Donnie would have a similar honor with another famed martial arts actor when he played Jackie Chan's villain in Shanghai Knights.

Not limited to movie choreography, he did the choreography for the 2004 game Onimusha 3. Throughout the 2000s Donnie Yen acted in a bunch of Hong Kong movies and was nominated for quite a few awards, even winning several.

The movie that catapulted him into the limelight was, of course, 2008's Ip Man, the story of Yip Man, famous teacher to Bruce Lee. It was his highest grossing movie as a star to that point and made him a star in Hong Kong and China.

In 2011 he was invited to star in The Expendables 2, but rejected the offer. Later that year he starred in a couple comedies in Hong Kong that did very well, All's Well, Ends Well and the sequel.

In 2013 he was sought out to star in the sequel to Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. The producers made quite the effort to get him on board, even though he was nervous of tackling a sequel to such a legendary movie. He was quoted as saying: "...the first film is already such a classic. I am afraid of the pressure, that the original cannot be surpassed."

Of course, he did commit to the picture and had the chance to work with the man that discovered him so many years ago, Yuen Woo-ping. The female lead on the film, Michelle Yeoh, has said that Donnie



Episode 63 – Donnie Yen | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Yen is the fastest guy she has worked with. Both Jackie Chan and Jet Li have gone on to say that he may be the best practical fighter to come out of Asian movies.

In 2015 he starred in Ip Man 3 where he worked with Mike Tyson. Donnie's gone on record to say that he's a fan, and has seen all of his fights. The fight scenes got a bit intense on set and Donnie broke Mike's finger... I honestly don't know who I'd have my money on were that a real fight, but Mike has gone on record to say that if it were real, the 5'8" Donnie would definitely win.

Of course, we have a couple more big films out of Donnie Yen, Rogue One: A Star Wars Story and XXX: The Return of Xander Cage, but he's said that his days of Kung Fu movies are over. Hopefully that's not true...

He's a big fan of mixed martial arts and has said that if he didn't have a recurring shoulder injury, he would have liked to give it a try.

What's your favorite Donnie Yen movie? Did we leave one out that you absolutely love? Go ahead and leave us your comments on the website, wMAR.com or you can tag us on social media - we're on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest & Instagram - all with the username [whistlekick](https://www.instagram.com/whistlekick).

If you want to be a guest on the show or you know someone that has some good stories, please fill out the form on the website. And don't forget to subscribe to our newsletter so you can stay up on everything we do. You can learn more about our products at whistlekick.com.

Since you've already listened this far, I know you like the show...so please subscribe or download one of the apps so you never miss out in the future. We bring these shows to you twice a week, and while we'd love the support of your business, the main thing we ask for is a review. If you're an iPhone user, please leave us a review in iTunes, and if you're listening in some other way, please leave us a review or comment wherever feels appropriate. Thank you in advance.

So, until next time, Train hard, smile and have a great day.