Some Asians have left an indelible mark on the world. LifeStyle gives its take on the top 10 Asian icons

Lee Sze Yong

You know you have made it big when people commission not one, but two statues of you.

Bruce Lee, arguably the most famous martial arts actor, was immortalised when two statues were unveiled last month in his honour.

One is a 2.5m-tall, 600kg monument on the Avenue Of The Stars in his hometown Hong Kong. The statue honours the 65th anniversary of the legend’s birth.

The other is a life-sized bronze statue, erected in the war-ravaged town of Mostar in Bosnia. He is held there as a symbol of unity for Roman Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosnians, traditionally enemies.

Lee might have started out as a movie star in the Chinese-speaking world. But his influence has spread beyond the realm of entertainment to stand for the victorious fight against oppressors.

In short, he is now an icon.

According to the fifth edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, an icon is defined as “a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol of a culture, movement, etc”.

Dr Ooi Kee Beng, a fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies in Singapore, says the concept of an icon can be subjective.

“What I see as an icon may not be what you see as an icon. While some people may perceive an icon to be positive, others wouldn’t agree.”

He adds that the modern-day icon is a creation of the mass media.

“The mass media simplifies the person such that only certain qualities are in the spotlight,” he says. “His qualities become so easily identifiable that he, in a way, is no longer flesh and blood, but a symbol.”

Dr Paulin Straughan, a sociologist from the National University of Singapore, says an effective icon “would invoke an imagery that it is intended to invoke”.

Think Princess Diana and the notions of philanthropy and elegance come to mind; she is royalty and poise personified.

The mention of Madonna evokes the image of a liberal woman.

But they are personalities from the West. Besides Lee, are there other icons of Asian descent?

LifeStyle did a straw poll last week. Of the 80 Singaporeans surveyed, some were hard pressed to name an Asian icon.

Undergraduate Shi Liteng, 21, says: “The region has such diverse cultures, how do you find an icon that represents Asia?”

Hong Kong actor Jackie Chan, Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi and the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong and political leader of India Mahatma Gandhi were names that popped up.

Culturally significant items such as rice and dragons were the answers of 17 of those surveyed. Another 25 named Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew as their icon. Train officer Suderman Jumadi, 42, says: “People everywhere respect his opinions.”

Associate Professor Alfred Choi from Nanyang Technological University’s School of Communication and Information says having an icon helps instil pride in a country or a region’s people. “If the icon is well-respected, it boosts the citizens’ sense of belonging and establishes an identity for the people.”

Here is LifeStyle’s take on the top 10 Asian icons.
Hitting the list

Granted, it is not a politically correct list. There are revolutionaries like Mao Zedong and Aung San Suu Kyi. Included also are pop culture figures such as Lee and Bae Yong Joon.

There are controversial ones like Osama Bin Laden and Kim Jong Il.

Four of the five academics interviewed challenge some of these choices.

Sociologist Dr Habibul Khondker, for instance, took issue with our choice of Osama the terrorist. "He is pure evil. Surely there are other more worthy Asian icons," he says.

Cantopop pioneer Sam Hui, business tycoon Li Ka-shing and Indian actor Amitabh Bachchan are some of the names sorely missed by these academics.

LifeStyle, too, had a hard time deciding on its list.

In fact, when making the selection, the heated debate on who should be included spilled out of meeting rooms and into dinner conversations.

But the final list stays true to the following criteria:

- The icons may or may not be revered, but their faces are instantly recognisable to people worldwide.
- They have enduring appeal and remain a talking point today.
- Their influence crosses not only geographical limits, but also social, cultural and political boundaries to become part of the popular consciousness.

Admittedly, our picks courts dispute. But as Associate Professor Dawn Dele who teaches American studies at the Singapore Management University puts it: "The list won't sit well with some people, but a little controversy goes a long way to spark debate. We'll all be wiser after that."

If you disagree with our list or want to suggest other names, e-mail stilfe@sph.com.sg.

Additional reporting by Benson Ang

Made in Asia

Thanks to shrewd marketing, McDonald's and Mickey Mouse have become icons. Here are our top picks of their Asian counterparts

HELLO KITTY
The cat without a mouth is the grandmother of the Japanese kawaii (cute) industry. The most popular fictional character produced by Japan's Sanrio company, Hello Kitty products — from stationery to furniture — are sold in more than 30 countries, including Argentina and Bahrain. It even made a guest appearance in an episode of the animated sitcom, The Simpsons.

GODZILLA
The monster is actually a metaphor for the destruction caused by the atomic bomb in Hiroshima. Born Gojira in a 1954 Japanese movie of the same name, it shot to international fame in Hollywood's 1998 remake, Godzilla.

INSTANT NOODLES
This 47-year-old product has crossed geographical and cultural boundaries to become a symbol of the fast-paced world. The first packet of instant noodles — chicken flavoured — was produced by Nissin in Japan. It has become the staple food for time-strapped folks.

NINTENDO
Nintendo is to video games what Pampers is to diapers. The brand has usurped the product's generic name. Set up in 1983, the oldest game console company has sold more than two billion games worldwide.