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A Different Fate of Two Dubbed Versions of a Film: The Case of *Five Fingers of Death* and *Iron Man*

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Abstract

This article explores how translation recontextualizes films for different national audiences, focusing on the contrasting fates of *Five Fingers of Death* and its Korean-dubbed version of *Iron Man*. By conducting a historical analysis of both the English and Korean dubbed versions, the study shows how the transnational journey of the film has influenced the development of these two versions. The analysis presents the marginalization of director Chung Chang-Wha's contributions to the global success of *Five Fingers of Death*. *Iron Man* represents a case of "fake" Korean and Hong Kong co-productions, and this fabrication has impacted multiple dimensions of the film. Additionally, *Iron Man*, though overlooked in Korean cinema history, holds value as a reflection of how films were adapted for local audiences. Lastly, the article conducts a comparative analysis to uncover the ways in which the Korean adaptation has been recontextualized, particularly in terms of its dialogue, paratextual elements, and editorial changes.

Key words: *Five Fingers of Death* (1972), Chung Chang-Wha, fake Korean and Hong Kong co-production, recontextualization, film dubbing.

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Introduction

During the 1970s, martial arts cinema experienced a surge across Asia, a phenomenon often referred to as the "kung-fu craze." This craze can be traced back to the influence of Hong Kong cinema, which, at the time, dominated the Asian film market. A seminal film in this environment was *Five Fingers of Death* (1972), directed by Chung Chang-Wha, whose work was crucial in spreading the kung-fu craze beyond Asia. The film's success prompted American media conglomerates to shift their focus to Asia to capitalize on the global distribution rights of kung fu films (Lee, 2019). This expansion led Hong Kong film producers to collaborate with South Korea, whose film industry was adept at rapidly producing high-quality martial arts films.

In South Korea, *Five Fingers of Death* was released under the title of *Cheol-In* (*Iron Man*, 철인). The film stands as a primary example of the "fake" Korean-Hong Kong cooperative film production efforts that flourished during the 1970s. Produced by the esteemed Shaw Brothers Studio and directed by Chung Chang-Wha, a South Korean filmmaker who became a key figure in the genre, the film is notable for its transnational journey through translation. Originally produced in Chinese, the film was dubbed into both English and Korean, with each version offering distinct variations in content. This article shows these adaptations reflect a deeper desire for "national cinema" through translation and localization, as each version is tailored to appeal to its local audience.

This phenomenon demonstrates how transnational cinema can be reshaped through translation. Indeed, early film translations involved significant changes, referred to as recontextualization, to adapt films to different cultural contexts (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019; Tsivian, 1996; Usai, 1996). For instance, the English dubbing of martial arts films often changes character relationships and downplays historical significance (Yoon, 2024). This raises important questions about how *Five Fingers of Death* was recontextualized for different national and historical settings. When the film unexpectedly became a box office hit in America in 1973, a Korean local newspaper lauded the film as an "Eastern Macaroni Western without any guns" (Chosun Ilbo, 1973) without acknowledging its connection to *Iron Man*, which had been released a year earlier in South Korea. Despite *Five Fingers of Death* becoming a classic of Asian martial arts films, *Iron Man* remains largely overlooked in the history of Korean cinema.

This article examines the ways in which translation alters films to cater to diverse cultural and national audiences, with a specific focus on the differing fates of *Five Fingers of Death* and its Korean-dubbed version, *Iron Man*. Through a historical analysis of both the English and Korean dubbed versions, this study explores how the film's transnational journey altered the destiny of the two versions. *Iron Man* is a product of "fake" Korean-Hong Kong co-productions, with this deceptive practice affecting numerous aspects of the film. Furthermore, by comparing the two versions, this article investigates how the Korean version was recontextualized, particularly in its dialogue, paratextual elements and editorial changes.

1. Transnational Cinema and Fake Korea-Hong Kong Cooperative Film Production

Film, inherently a transnational medium, has always crossed national borders since the dawn of cinema. In the late 19th century, Hollywood films gained influence as global power shifted from European-centered imperialism to American hegemony. The transnational nature of film was evident as Hollywood productions spread across cultures and regions, influencing many aspects of the world as "a form of media imperialism" (Maisuwong, 2012, pp. 3–4).

The term "transnational" is sometimes used merely to refer to international co-productions among film industry workers from different parts of the world, often without much in-depth scrutiny. In the inaugural issue of *Transnational Cinemas*, Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim advocated for a "critical transnationalism," (2010, pp. 8–9), challenging the prevailing habit of using the term broadly, loosely, and often without clear definition. Following this, Sangjoon Lee (2011c) summarized the results of transnational film history research and proposed three major categories to suggest the possibilities for future collaborative research: co-produced films, diaspora/exile films, and international organizations and film festivals. Across these categories, research on co-produced films has long been a challenging area for nation-based cinema researchers due to their ambiguous and cross-cultural nature. Nonetheless, this same ambiguity makes them an ideal "laboratory" for transnational film history research (Lee, 2011c, pp. 48–51).

An exemplary instance of transnational cinema is the prolific Korean-Hong Kong co-produced films in the 1960s and 1970s. This period was marked by numerous collaborative efforts between the two countries. Shaw Brothers, an international cinematic powerhouse, were at the center of this movement (Magnan-Park, 2011, p. 263). While the Shaws actively incorporated various elements of Japanese films into their operations through personnel exchanges, co-productions, and film festivals, they also recruited South Korean directors like Chung Chang-Wha. *Five Fingers of Death* (1972) is a landmark film in this context. Its success not only in Asia but also in the U.S. market reveals the potential and impact of these collaborative efforts.

According to Shim and Yecies (2012), Korea's film co-production initiatives with Hong Kong started in the 1950s with *Love with an Alien* (1958), reached its peak in the 1960s, and waned in the 1970s. The ninth Asian Film Festival (1962) held in Seoul invigorated collaborative filmmaking between Korea and Hong Kong. Renowned South Korean director Shin Sang-Ok was enthusiastic about the co-production with Hong Kong, especially with Shaw Brothers. Both parties had mutual benefits in pursuing co-productions, inter alia, access to diverse locations, the exchange of professional manpower, and access to larger markets (p. 19).

Yet, this practice turned into what is known as "fake co-production" (Shim & Yecies, 2012, p. 23), spurred by a screen quota system that required a third of all films screened to be domestic productions. Since co-productions were treated as local films under the Motion Picture Law, producers could circumvent the hefty taxes imposed on foreign films. In fact, fake co-productions were also widespread in Taiwan and Malaysia, where major production companies, including Shaw

Brothers, often turned a blind eye to them (Korean Film Archive, 2024). According to the Motion Picture Law, meeting the minimum requirements for a co-production involved the participation of one Korean director and three Korean actors (Korean Movie Database, 2024). In reality, many of the co-production films from the 1960s and 1970s were primarily Hong Kong films, with only a few close-up shots of Korean actors inserted solely to fulfill the co-production criteria. A prominent case in point of fake co-productions is *Five Fingers of Death* (1972), which was released in Korea under the title *Iron Man* in the same year.

2. Hong Kong Martial Arts Films, Film Dubbing and Recontextualization

Co-production films raise critical questions about translation, not just of language, but also of cultural context, in the global dissemination of cinema. Films such as *Five Fingers of Death* demonstrate how films can be adapted to diverse cultural identities. *Five Fingers of Death* is the film that sparked the whole kung fu craze of 1973 in the United States. The success of the English-dubbed version of this film illustrates how the martial arts genre could be marketed in the United States (Desser, 2000, p. 24).

Hong Kong martial arts films were mostly translated through dubbing, with their intrinsic traditional value system, such as perseverance and discipline, adapted for Anglophone viewers (Song, 2023, p. 42). These films were set in a place colonized, marginalized, hybridized, and yet privileged by modernity (Li, 2001, p. 528). They were rooted in a particular historical time when the city was forced to react to a strong Western influence in a volatile climate of nationalist sentiments (Li, 2001, p. 516). As a British colony situated between the nationalistic ambitions of Taiwan and Communist China, Hong Kong encountered significant challenges. Rather than engaging in overt political conflict, Hong Kong left its imprint on global film history through kung fu films (Magnan-Park, 2011, p. 255). Despite the inherent difficulties in translating Hong Kong's traditional value system, the dubbing strategy adopted by Hong Kong film producers successfully conveyed these values to international audiences. However, while Hong Kong martial arts films enjoyed popularity in their home market, the reception of Hong Kong martial arts films in the United States was markedly different. A reviewer of *Five Fingers of Death* remarked that U.S. audiences might view the film as a joke (Bordwell, 2011, p. 56). Producer Run Run Shaw observed this contrast and recognized that while local audiences in Hong Kong took kung fu seriously, American viewers often saw it as comedic (Bordwell, 2011, p. 56). This divergent reception may have been driven by the style and quality of English dubbing. The dubbing style of Hong Kong martial arts films was often considered bizarre due to their snarling delivery, vocabulary drawn from the American vernacular, and erratically fractured phrasing (Jin, 2018, p. 200).

Nonetheless, dubbing offers numerous advantages, including enhanced accessibility for audiences with varying literacy levels and the preservation of visual integrity on-screen (O'Connell, 2007, p. 126). This has positioned dubbing as a pathway to profit maximization at the mainstream box office. Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest Studios recognized the potential of dubbing to reach larger Anglophone markets and dubbed their productions into English to drive the global appeal of kung fu cinema (Magnan-Park, 2018, p. 222). In the context of the Shaw Brother's dubbing process, visual

storytelling and narrative continuity were prioritized over dialogue (Bordwell, 2011; Hammond, 2000; Logan, 1996). Specifically, dubbing dialogue post-production streamlined production processes and expedited the completion of multiple films within tight schedules (Bordwell, 2011). Furthermore, dubbing afforded filmmakers the flexibility to adapt films for diverse audiences without compromising visual integrity (Magnan-Park, 2018, p. 226). This industry standard in Hong Kong cinema allowed for slight modifications to reach various local audiences. Inevitably, the dubbing process entails a form of "de-odorizing," where studios modify or remove elements deemed potentially offensive or culturally specific to conform to mainstream tastes (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 27).

In particular, English-dubbed kung fu films, referred to as "Dubbese fu," (Magnan-Park, 2018, p. 241), have carved out a distinctive niche in global cinema. These dubbed kung fu films offer audiences a unique viewing experience characterized by imperfect lip synchronization and creative dialogue adaptations. While certain English dubbing of kung fu films may unintentionally render scenes comic for even their most devoted audiences, it appears that this dubbing effect induces a level of lowbrow pleasure that cannot be overlooked (Bordwell, 2011; Hunt, 2003). Despite initial skepticism, Dubbese fu, which denotes the unique dubbing style inherent to Hong Kong kung fu films, has gained widespread recognition as a defining feature of the Hong Kong kung fu craze and captivated audiences across Anglophone territories (Magnan-Park, 2018, p. 242). The imperfections in the English dubbing for these films have long been celebrated by enthusiasts of the genre as a source of joy for fans seeking cinematic thrills and entertainment (Logan, 1996, p. 20). The distinct combination of imperfect lip synchronization and innovative dialogue adaptations has English-dubbed kung fu films transcend linguistic barriers and become an accepted part of the kung fu genre. These dubbing practices are not isolated; they exemplify a broader practice in early film translation, where extensive adaptations were made to cater to the cultural needs of different audiences.

Significant changes were common in the translation of early films, which often resembled adaptations rather than straightforward translation (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). Local film production companies tailored content to suit different audiences, such as creating "Russian endings" for Soviet viewers who preferred tragic conclusions (Usai, 1996). Silent Soviet films were similarly re-edited to appeal to foreign markets (Tsivian, 1996). Even with the advent of sound, foreign films continued to be re-edited for local audiences, much like rewriting intertitles during the silent film era. These manipulations show how early film translation involved significant recontextualization. As such, recontextualization offers a valuable framework for understanding how films were adapted to diverse cultural contexts. Using this analytical tool, Miseon Yoon (2024) showed how the English-dubbed version of the Korean martial arts film *Returned Single-Legged Man* (1974) changed the original film's narrative, particularly in character relationships and plot dynamics. The English version downplayed the historical significance of Japanese colonization and the ethnic distinctions among characters. Yoon (2024) concluded that the kung fu craze of the time, which lacked specific national or historical context, encouraged Western audiences to lump all Asian martial arts films under a broad "Asian martial arts" category. This raises an important question regarding how *Five Fingers of Death* was recontextualized with respect to its national and historical context.

Five Fingers of Death appears to draw inspiration from *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), a blockbuster that achieved widespread success not only across East Asia but also in the United States. In a similar fashion, *Five Fingers of Death* was strategically produced by Shaw Brothers to define a martial arts genre aimed at global audiences. One key feature of the film is its lack of concrete contextual details, such as specific historical periods or events. This absence of temporal markers creates a setting that seems to belong to an undefined past, which situates the story in a vaguely traditional Chinese era without clear historical references. By using studio-based filming techniques, a signature approach of Shaw Brothers, the film constructs a world that operates within a timeless, almost mythic, framework. Such a setting not only expands the film's global appeal but also reflects its transnational heritage, drawing on influences from earlier classics like *The One-Armed Swordsman*.

In this self-contained, virtual world, the narrative structure of *The One-Armed Swordsman* offers a rich model that invites reinterpretation. The protagonist's journey, marked by the loss of an arm, departure, and eventual return, provides a flexible storytelling foundation that allows for multiple variations. This narrative flexibility not only connects with audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds but also encourages cross-cultural dialogue within the realm of East Asian cinema (Korean Film Archive, 2024). Furthermore, the motif of characters with physical disabilities, when viewed in light of the unique historical and cultural contexts of each region, emerges as a persistent theme within the transnational cinematic discourse of East Asia (White, 2022a). The motif of physical disability in *Five Fingers of Death*, demonstrated by the severe crushing of Ji Hao's hands and the graphic depiction of eye gouging, parallels themes in *The One-Armed Swordsman*, reinforcing the film's transnational identity.

3. English-Dubbed *Five Fingers of Death* and "Foreign Mercenary" Chung Chang-Wha

Five Fingers of Death, released on April 28, 1972, in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Movie Database, 2024), remains one of the most commercially successful films in the history of Hong Kong cinema (Logan, 1996, p. 15). The film's success extended beyond Hong Kong, earning USD 3.8 million internationally (Gaul, 1997, p. 48). It was also the first film to ignite America's enthusiasm for Hong Kong martial arts cinema, appearing on Variety's box office chart on March 28, 1973. The following week, it reached the number one spot and remained there for seven consecutive weeks (White, 2022b, p. 98). Hong Kong martial arts films performed well at the box office, particularly among Black audiences in downtown areas (Kaminsky, 1974, p. 130). The films' strong appeal to Black youth was a key factor in sustaining the kung fu craze (Desser, 2000, p. 25). The marginalized experiences of the characters resonated with young African-American audiences, as they provided a venue to enjoy cinema while resisting the hegemony of Hollywood cinema (Zahnd, 2012, p. 103). A review of *Five Fingers of Death* suggests that the depiction of a "secret weapon," specifically the Iron Fist in the film, provided cinemagoers with an imaginary answer for how the Vietnamese peasant army could overcome America's technological and economic might (White, 2022b, p. 167). In the film, the protagonist Ji Hao suffers injuries to his hands from the villains attempting to weaken him before an important

competition. However, despite the setback, Ji Hao is given a secret manual on mastering the Iron Fist by his master, who sees great potential in him. The film's focus on discipline and physical mastery to unlock the power of the Iron Fist likely resonated with the prevailing desire for empowerment and resistance in the political climate of the 1970s.

Furthermore, *Five Fingers of Death* stands out for its editing technique. Young Jung Cho pointed out these techniques have become a hallmark of Hong Kong martial arts cinema. Director Chung describes the method as "punching at the camera" (Cho, 2003, p. 46), where characters strike with their hands or feet, with the camera positioned as the opponent receiving the blow. This technique became prevalent in all his films, but it is particularly notable in *Five Fingers of Death*, where the villain gruesomely plucks out the eyeballs of Ji Hao's colleague (Magnan-Park, 2011, p. 267). Bordwell also commended Chung's use of "constructive editing" (2011, p. 137), particularly during the climactic tournament between Ji Hao and his arrogant rival. In just seven shots, Chung creates a swift symmetry between the two characters, turning the challenge of presenting the fight in a single long shot into an artistic advantage (Bordwell, 2011, pp. 136–137). In addition, the film's score, drawn from the Ironside theme by Quincy Jones, perfectly complements the film's atmosphere and was later used by Quentin Tarantino in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) as an homage to *Five Fingers of Death*.

Regarding the title, this film has been known by several titles. Initially, Chung Chang-Wha selected *Iron Palm* as the title to reflect the protagonist's mastery of the Iron Palm technique, his signature martial arts skill (Korean Movie Database, 2024). However, Run Run Shaw opted for the Chinese title, *The Number One Fist Under Heaven* (天下第一卷; cheon-ha-je-il-gwon) believing it would appeal more to Hong Kong audiences (Magnan-Park, 2011, p. 272). In the United Kingdom and several European countries, the film was released under the title *King Boxer*. For the American market, the title was changed to *Five Fingers of Death*, which was closer to Chung's original focus on the fist or palm. Another title is *Invincible Boxer* (Bordwell, 2011, p. 52). The film's various titles, let alone the Korean one, suggest efforts to attract a diverse audience. Additionally, the European title, *King Boxer*, may reflect a colonial viewpoint. In the English-speaking world, the phrase "Chinese boxing" was frequently used to describe Chinese martial arts, particularly in the early stages of Sino-Western interaction (Song, 2023, p. 39). While this may seem understandable due to some surface-level similarities between Chinese martial arts and Western boxing, such as their shared focus on fight and action, it nonetheless conveys an underlying Eurocentrism.

Despite the film's remarkable success and historical significance, it has not received the recognition it deserves in the history of Hong Kong cinema. Stephen Teo characterizes the film as a primer for kung fu cliché and conventions, but he also notes that it is merely one of Shaw's films hastily put together (2009, p. 104). Teo fails to acknowledge that the film's director is Korean, instead implying that he is one of Shaw's Chinese filmmakers. In fact, Chung was an established filmmaker with extensive filmography in South Korea before being scouted by Run Run Shaw in 1967 to relocate to Hong Kong. From 1953 until his move, Chung produced 39 films, including his debut film *The Final Temptation* (1953) and *Special Agent X-7* (1967), which caught Shaw's attention (Smith, 2012). In Hong Kong, he directed six films with Shaw Brothers and five films after joining Raymond Chow at

Golden Harvest. After returning to Seoul, he made 28 films as a producer in the 1980s. Nevertheless, as Sangjoon Lee (2011a) points out, Chung Chang-Wha's contributions prior to 1968 have been omitted in the history of Hong Kong cinema, while his work after 1967 is similarly overlooked in Korean cinema.

Indeed, Chung Chang-Wha has been largely underestimated. He is described as a "forgotten man" (Logan, 1996, p. 88) in the history of Hong Kong cinema and just a "journeyman" (Bordwell, 2011, p. 137), whose identity is deemed irrelevant. This diminishment of Chung has led to undue criticism of his work. Leon Hunt argues that *Five Fingers of Death* is "virtually a remake" of Wang Yu's *The Chinese Boxer* (1970), pointing out the similarities in the protagonists' mastery of the Iron Palm technique to face Japanese sword fighters (2003, p. 9). This "remake" label has been perpetuated without revision in the Hong Kong Movie Database of the film (Hong Kong Movie Database, 2024). Yet, *Five Fingers of Death* exhibits an editing technique that far surpasses *The Chinese Boxer*, and it is Chung's film that sparked the international kung fu craze. Magnan-Park asserts that this reflects "Sinocentric exclusion of Chung from Hong Kong historiography" (2011, p. 257). The reason Chung was relegated to "a mere footnote" (p. 256) in Hong Kong cinema history lies in the industry's "enclosed, Sinocentric, 'members only' mentality" (p. 258) of the 1970s. In addition, Chung also disclosed that Run Run Shaw discouraged him from publicly revealing his Korean identity (Cho, 2003, p. 53).

Law Kar describes Chung as a "foreign mercenary" (2003, p. 36), though not in a derogatory sense. Instead, he commends Chung's mindset as that of an "invited professional" (p. 40) driven by a love for exploration and adventure, with a deep commitment to filmmaking. Kar's use of the term "mercenary" conveys Chung's dedication to his work. He also notes that later film directors, such as Jackie Chan, were able to achieve global success by following the path Chung paved as a foreign mercenary. In *Five Fingers of Death*, Chung's outsider status allowed him to imbue the film with new elements, resulting in a crossover hit that appealed to both Asian and Western audiences. Chung stated that he pioneered the use of trampolines in action scenes to enhance jump sequences and applied powder to create a dramatic effect upon impact (Korean Film Archive, 2008, p. 112). His perspective as a foreigner gave the film a distinct energy and may have contributed to its unique appeal and role in launching the international kung fu craze.

4. Korean-Dubbed *Iron Man*: How Translation Reshapes the Film

The martial arts craze lasted until the mid-1970s, first sparked by King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (1966), the first Hong Kong film to be publicly distributed in South Korea. Between 1960 and 1967, virtually no martial arts films were produced in Korea. However, in 1968, there was a sudden surge, with nine martial arts films made in that year alone (Lee, 2011b, p. 189). This figure increased to 18 by 1970. The martial arts fever began with *Come Drink with Me* and continued with the following Shaw Brothers films, reaching its peak in the late 1960s. It continued for almost a decade, only subsiding in the mid-1970s when audiences grew fatigued with the repetitive plots of translated and

imported films. Amid this craze, *Five Fingers of Death* was imported and released as an official Korean and Hong Kong co-production, strategically aimed at meeting the soaring demands in South Korea.

To fully comprehend the alterations that the film underwent, it is essential to first examine South Korean film laws and the role of Shin Films. In 1962, the government introduced co-production policy guidelines established under the Motion Picture Law, which mandated that any co-produced film required an approved script, contract, and consent from the collaborating country (Shim & Yecies, 2012, p. 18). The collaboration between South Korea and Hong Kong was mutually beneficial, combining expertise and resources and captivating audiences with elaborate visuals and sets (Shim & Yecies, 2012, p. 18). Shin Films, which monopolized the distribution of Shaw Brothers, held tight control over the martial arts film market (Lee, 2011b, p. 179). To satisfy both the government mandates and its agreement with Shaw Brothers, Shin expanded its operations. Under the revised Motion Picture Law of 1963, Shaw Brothers and Shin Films had to produce at least 15 films annually to maintain their registration with the South Korean government. Exceeding this quota earned them extra import licenses. Shin Films aimed to produce more than 40 films, with the primary benefit being the ability to import Hollywood films. Since distributing Hollywood films was substantially profitable for local importers, these licenses became a crucial driver for the production of low-budget martial arts films.

Against this backdrop, the film's release in South Korea unfolded under unfortunate circumstances that were completely outside of Chung's control. *Five Fingers of Death* premiered on December 2, 1972, attracting a total of 31,809 viewers (Korea Movie Database, 2024). However, in the following interview, it was revealed that the film had been distributed without Chung's knowledge or consent.[1]

> The problem in Korea was this. [Yes.] To import a feature film in Korea at that time, due to the quota system, you had to pay an enormous amount of money: about 300 million won per quota. So, Director Shin Sang-Ok brought it in through a loophole. He made it seem like a co-production with Hong Kong film studios. Even before *Five Fingers of Death*, I cast many Korean actors in my films. My intention was: If I leave Shaw Brothers and return to Korea to open up the Asian market, wouldn't that provide an opportunity for Korean films to enter the international market? That's why I used actors like Nam Seok-Hoon, Shin Il-Ryong, and Yoon Il-Bong, among others. In this film as well, I cast Nam Seok-Hoon, Kim Ki-Ju, Jin Bong-Jin, and Hong Seong-Jung, these four actors. [Yes.] At the time, the requirements for co-production were that if you used more than three actors, it would qualify as a co-production. [(Laughs) Ah, I see.] On top of that, I, being a Korean national, directed the film, so Director Shin brought it in under the guise of a co-production. [Yes.] Under the military regime, films like this were subject to strict censorship, so in order to pass, they re-edited it, making it somewhat different from my original version. They even released it under the title *Iron Man*. I was furious because of that title, *Iron Man*. I didn't even know that Director Shin had brought it in as a co-production. [I see.] Later, when my fellow directors in Korea called me to tell me what had happened, I found out and called Director Shin, asking him, "What on earth is *Iron Man*? Why

[1] The texts within the brackets are the reaction from the interviewer, Park Seon-Young.

did you change the title like that?" We argued about it, but by then, the film had already been released, and it was already too late.

Unknown to Chung, Shin Sang-Ok arranged the distribution of *Five Fingers of Death* in South Korea, sidestepping the high import tax. During this period, a policy allowed film producers to receive a foreign film import quota by exporting three domestic films abroad, a practice that led to widespread exploitation by some businesses (Korean Film Archive, 2008, p. 96). A single foreign film import quota in the 1970s was worth 300 million won (USD 228,000). Co-produced films between Korea and Hong Kong were treated as domestic films. Therefore, to avoid these costs, Shin falsely claimed *Five Fingers of Death* as a legitimate co-production between the two countries (Korean Film Archive, 2008, p. 96).

Shin Sang-Ok's scheme was based on two factors (Magnan-Park, 2011, p. 273). First, his reputation for having worked with Shaw Brothers on six co-productions, beginning with *The Last Woman of Shang* (1964) and concluding with *The Ghost Lovers* (1974), enabled him to falsely market Chung's film as yet another partnership with Shaw Brothers. Second, the film technically met co-production requirements since it featured a Korean director and four Korean actors. When the edited Korean-dubbed version, titled *Choel-In* (*Iron Man*), was finally released, it saw decent box office success. However, it fell far short of the global acclaim the film had garnered elsewhere. Chung had originally intended the film to be titled *Iron Palm* to reflect the protagonist's mastery of the Iron Palm technique, which serves as a main theme of the film (Korean Film Archive, 2008, p. 113). In an interview, Chung admitted that he avoided watching the Korean version of the film, which had been conveniently edited for local interests, because he knew that it would infuriate him (Korean Film Archive, 2008, p. 114). In the end, Shin's financial schemes denied South Korean viewers the opportunity to see the original version that ignited the international kung fu phenomenon, and Chung's contributions to action cinema were largely unrecognized in his home country.

Figure 1

The Korean Version Features Distinct Credit Listings for the Film Editors, Art Director, and Sound Engineer.

Note. On the left, the top title shows sound engineer Yu Cheong-Guek, with film editor Kim Hyun listed below. On the right, the lower title features art director Park Seok-In.

Furthermore, the Korean-dubbed film's paratexts were significantly altered to give the Korean audience the impression that it was primarily a domestic production. A prime example is the alteration of the opening credits. For instance, in the English and Chinese versions, the film's editors are credited as Ching Hsing Lung and Fan Kung-Wing. However, in the Korean-dubbed version, the editor is listed as Kim Hyun (김현), a name distinctly different from the original editors. Similarly, while the art director and sound engineer in the English and Chinese versions are credited as Chen Chi Jui and Wang Yung Hua (Hong Kong Movie Database, 2024), their Korean counterparts are given as Park Seok-In (박석인) and Yu Cheong-Geuk (유청극) (see Figure 1). The modifications extend beyond the credits. A South Korean local film company also changed the original film dialogue.

Korean-dubbed dialogue

Jin Lang: 중요한 사실을 당신에게 알려드리려려 하오.

Ji Hao: 중요한 사실?

Jin Lang: 세놈의 일본놈이 저 숲속에 숨었소. 당신을 죽이려 하오.

Ji Hao: 그런걸 왜 나에게 알려줘?

Jin Lang: 난 비로소, 일본놈의 앞잡이 노릇을 하는 내 자신이 비겁하다는 걸 깨달았습니다.

Ji Hao: 이제야 눈을 떴구만.

Jin Lang: 오늘부터 난 맹동산과 손을 끊겠소. 그리고, 그 세놈은 모두 칼을 가지고 있소. 자, 이걸 가져가시오.

Ji Hao: 고맙소.

Jin Lang: 그럼 다음에.

Back translation of Korean-dubbed dialogue

Jin Lang: I have something important to tell you.
Ji Hao: Something important?
Jin Lang: Three Japs are hiding in that forest. They're planning to kill you.
Ji Hao: Why are you telling me this?
Jin Lang: I've just realized how cowardly it is to be working as a puppet for the Japs.
Ji Hao: You've finally opened your eyes.
Jin Lang: From today, I'm cutting ties with Meng Dong Chan. Also, all three of them are armed with knives. Here, take this.
Ji Hao: Thank you.
Jin Lang: See you next time, then.

English-dubbed dialogue

Jin Lang: I have something important to tell you.
Ji Hao: Tell me then
Jin Lang: There are three Japanese guys. There're waiting for you in the woods. They'll kill you.
Ji Hao: Why are you telling me this?

> Jin Lang: I suddenly realized what it means three Japanese guys fighters are when I couldn't work with him anymore.
> Ji Hao: So there is some decency left in you.
> Jin Lang: This day on and through with Meng Dong Chan's crowd, all of them those Japanese around with swords. With these, you'll have more attack.
> Ji Hao: Thank you.
> Jin Lang: I'll see you later.

The Korean-dubbed version takes creative liberties in recontextualizing the narrative, especially in Jin Lang's pivotal line, underlined above: "I've just realized how cowardly it is to be working as a puppet for the Japs." This rewording reinterprets the film's political context in a way that resonates more closely with South Korean audiences who suffered from Japanese colonial occupation. Conversely, the English-dubbed version renders Jin Lang's realization in a vague manner, with his line "I suddenly realized what it means three Japanese guys fighters are when I couldn't work with him anymore." It is not clear what his realization means and why it leads to the decision to help his former rival. Thus, the English version is more concerned with Jin Lang's personal decision to break from Meng Dong Chan's control rather than the historical context of Japanese colonialism.

By contrast, the Korean-dubbed version sharpens this moment by directly addressing Jin Lang's collaboration with Japanese figures, unequivocally condemning his previous actions as dishonorable. The use of the term "puppet for the Japs" in the Korean version evokes strong anti-Japanese sentiment rooted in Korea's colonial past under Japanese rule. This choice repositions Jin Lang's character archetype: turning his personal awakening into a broader critique of Japanese imperialism, thus enhancing the film's nationalistic associations, which are clearly absent in the English-dubbed film. In addition, Ji-Hao's line, "You've finally opened your eyes," differs between the original screenplay and the screenplay prepared for censorship. In the original screenplay (Korean Film Archive, 1972a), the line was "Now you've realized your nationality! (당신도 이제야 민족을 깨달은 모양이구려!)." Moreover, in the screenplay for censorship (Korean Film Archive, 1972b), it was altered to "You still have a bit of national spirit left in you" (너도 민족정신이, 조금은 있구나). Although the Korean-dubbed version omits the explicit reference to nationality or national spirit due to lip-syncing constraints, both scripts clearly demonstrate that the line was intended to invoke nationalistic sentiments.

The Korean dubbing not only reframes Jin Lang's betrayal of Meng Dong Chan but also recontextualizes the larger conflict within the film. This recontextualization of film dialogue is deeply connected to Korea's historical struggle against Japanese colonial forces. In this way, the Korean version infuses the martial arts action with additional political meaning. It turns a simple act of defection into a symbol of national resistance. More significantly, Jin Lang, portrayed as Chinese in the English version, is reinterpreted as a Korean character with a sense of national pride in the Korean-dubbed version. This choice places the film more closely in line with South Korean historical narratives and cultural sensitivities.

A further key editorial modification involves the depiction of a female character. In the English version, the narrative introduces a young female street singer, Yen Chun-Hung, whom Ji-Hao rescues from Meng's thugs. She falls in love with Ji-Hao, yet he remains committed to the master's daughter, Yin-Yin. When Ji-Hao's hands are shattered by Meng's thugs in an attempt to prevent him from entering the tournament, he is nursed back to health with help from Chun-Hung, whose life he had once saved, and he soon resumes his training to compete. In contrast, the Korean-dubbed version exhibits significant editorial modifications that disrupt this narrative. Four key scenes featuring Chun-Hung were excised: (1) a scene where she sings a traditional Chinese song with her band (see Figure 2) while being harassed by Meng's thugs; (2) a scene in which she flees to a pub, prompting a brawl where Ji-Hao intervenes; (3) a scene where Ji-Hao and Chun-Hung's band travel by wagon to another city; and (4) an overnight scene in which Chun-Hung attempts to approach Chi-Hao, only to be rejected.

Figure 2

Chun-Hong and Her Band Perform With Traditional Chinese Instruments.

These deletions, despite Chun-Hung's narrative importance, result in her abrupt introduction in the Korean version. In the English version, the Chinese songs performed by Yen Chu-Hung remain undubbed, preserving their original Mandarin vocals with traditional string accompaniment. Due to the overtly Chinese aesthetics of the costumes and instruments (see Figure 2), these songs could not be effectively localized, which explains why the rendezvous scenes between Ji-Hao and Chun-Hung were entirely removed in the Korean adaptation.

5. Conclusions

The historical analysis of both the English and Korean dubbed versions of *Five Fingers of Death* reveals how the film's transnational journey significantly affected the fate of the two versions. Despite its global success, Chung Chang-Wha has been largely left overlooked in Hong Kong cinema history, often reduced to a "forgotten man" or "journeyman." Critics argue that Chung's work has been unfairly labeled as derivative, yet his innovative filmmaking techniques and outsider perspective were instrumental in sparking the international kung fu craze. The marginalization of Chung's contributions to Hong Kong cinema, due to a "Sinocentric" mentality, stresses the need to recontextualize his work within the broader context of transnational cinema. Although *Five Fingers of Death* is acknowledged as a kung fu classic, it is crucial to further recognize the influence of non-Chinese filmmakers, such as Chung, in making the genre a global success. The Korean version, *Iron Man* (Cheol-In), was a product of "fake" Korean and Hong Kong co-productions, a fabrication that impacted several aspects of the film, primarily in its title. While *Five Fingers of Death* became a global martial arts classic, *Iron Man* was largely overlooked in Korean cinema history.

In *Iron Man*, recontextualization is evident in the nationalist themes embedded in the dialogue and opening credits. A key example is the line delivered by Jin Lang. This line introduces an anti-Japanese sentiment and shows Korea's historical and cultural tensions with Japan, which were absent in the English version. It repositions Jin Lang's character as one who experiences a political awakening and turns the film into a narrative of national pride and resistance. Beyond dialogue, the Korean version modified its paratexts by replacing the original editors' and crew members' names with fictional Korean names to reinforce the impression of a domestic production. This editorial strategy reflects a broader strategy within the South Korean film industry during that period, where Hong Kong kung fu films were presented as co-productions to bypass government regulation and secure Hollywood film import quotas. In addition, key scenes featuring the street singer character and her interactions with Ji-Hao were excised, leading to her abrupt introduction in the Korean version.

The case of *Five Fingers of Death* and *Iron Man* shows the flexible nature of transnational cinema, molded by political, economic, and cultural forces. The local newspaper's failure to recognize the connection between *Five Fingers of Death* and *Iron Man* (Chosun Ilbo, 1973) was not surprising, given that local production strategies intentionally concealed this relationship. The findings indicate that the Korean version was modified to cater to the needs of local productions and audiences. According to the Korean Movie Database (2024), *Iron Man* is classified as a Korean film, but it includes a footnote stating that the film is "actually an imported film under the guise of co-production." Does this mean *Iron Man* lacks cinematic significance? On the contrary, *Iron Man* holds historical value as a reflection of Korean and Hong Kong co-production practices, particularly the "fake" collaboration strategies. Moreover, the film illustrates how translation recontextualizes content for its local audience.

This study does, however, have limitations. While it focuses on the recontextualization of two specific dubbed versions, it does not explore other regional adaptations of *Five Fingers of Death*, including

the Chinese version, which could offer additional insights into how various cultures have interpreted the film. Furthermore, this research predominantly relies on archival materials and film analyses, but it would benefit from more audience response data, particularly from South Korean and Western viewers. Understanding how these films were received by different audiences could deepen the understanding of how recontextualization influences viewer interpretation. Future research could expand by comparing *Five Fingers of Death* with other martial arts films that underwent similar recontextualization processes and further investigate the political and economic strategies behind these adaptations, especially in contemporary cinema.

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