Miramax's Asian Experiment: Creating a Model for Crossover Hits

Lisa Dombrowski , Wesleyan University, US

Prior to 1996, no commercial Chinese-language film had scored a breakout hit in the United States since the end of the 1970s kung fu craze. In the intervening period, the dominant distribution model for Asian films in America involved showcasing subtitled, auteur-driven art cinema in a handful of theaters in New York and Los Angeles, then building to ever more screens in a platform fashion, targeting college towns and urban theaters near affluent, older audiences. With the American fan base for Hong Kong action films steadily growing through video and specialized exhibition during the 1980s, Miramax chieftain Harvey Weinstein recognized the opportunity to market more commercial Chinese-language films to a wider audience outside the art cinema model as a means of generating crossover hits. Beginning in 1995, Weinstein positioned Miramax to become the primary distributor of Hong Kong action films in the United States.

Miramax's acquisition and distribution strategy for Hong Kong action films was grounded in a specific set of assumptions regarding how to appeal to mass-market American tastes. The company targeted action-oriented films featuring recognizable genre conventions and brand-name stars, considering such titles both favorites of hardcore Hong Kong film fans and accessible enough to attract new viewers. Rather than booking its Hong Kong theatrical acquisitions into art cinemas, Miramax favored wide releases to multiplexes accompanied by marketing campaigns designed to highlight the action and hide the "foreignness" of the films. Miramax initially adopted a strategy of dubbing, re-scoring, re-editing, and often re-titling its Hong Kong theatrical and video/DVD releases in order to make them more appealing to mainstream American audiences. Though the company later reconsidered the value of subtitling, it maintained its hands-on approach to re-tooling films throughout the tenure of Weinstein. "I have always tried to expand the boundaries of film and broaden the audience for non-Hollywood fare, not ghettoize it," Harvey Weinstein claimed. "Every step in this brave new world of bringing Asian cinema to a wide commercial audience is an experiment" (Weinstein, 2004: 15).

Miramax's involvement with Hong Kong action cinema is part and parcel of the unprecedented exchange of resources and products between Hollywood and local Chinese-language film industries that has taken place over the last decade. Globalization has not merely brought Hollywood to Hong Kong and Chinese-language cinema, it has also brought Hong Kong and Chinese-language cinema to Hollywood. Actors, directors, craftspeople, films, stories, genres, martial arts forms, visual styles, financing -- all have journeyed between Asia and America, participating in a transnational flow of cultural product. Christina Klein has characterized this exchange as a process of "material and stylistic integration" that is marked by "frissons and resistances" (Klein, 2004: 362). Applying the work of scholars who highlight the often-contradictory results of globalization (Ang, 1996; Appadurai, 1996; Hall, 1997; Staiger, 2002), Klein argues that the traffic between Hollywood and Asia has produced not only homogenization in cinema, as Hollywood absorbs the best of Asia while simultaneously dominating its screens, but also heterogenization, as larger audiences are

introduced to Asian culture and Asian filmmakers distinguish their product by emphasizing the local.

Miramax's Asian experiment and its varied reception by audiences and filmmakers is a vivid example of the often-competing effects of the global trade in film culture highlighted by Klein. On the one hand, Miramax's acquisition and distribution strategy, and the resulting multiplication of Hong Kong action films in American theaters, on video/DVD, and on television and pay-per-view, undoubtedly succeeded in introducing millions of viewers to the stars and excitement of Hong Kong cinema -- Americans who may have resisted seeing a subtitled foreign-language film in an art theater. Jackie Chan and Jet Li finally broke through in the United States, while theatrical exposure to new Chinese-language films sent many Americans in search of older Hong Kong titles on DVD. Both directly and indirectly, then, Miramax increased the diversity of film stars, stories, and styles available to American viewers. At the same time, however, Miramax's "Americanized" releases lacked much of the cultural specificity inherent to their original versions, angering fans of Hong Kong cinema and alienating some directors. While Miramax sought to appeal to a wide audience by reducing the formal and cultural distinctiveness of Hong Kong action films, its efforts sparked opposition by those who prized precisely the differences the distributor attempted to minimize. Miramax's Asian experiment illustrates how globalization has complicated the age-old balancing act faced by cultural purveyors who seek to expand their audience by providing a product that is familiar yet different. The full effects of this negotiation are best understood as mixed, uneven, and fluid, shaped by an ongoing dialogue between filmmakers, distributors, and audiences within the media and the marketplace.

The Hunt for a Crossover Model

In the early 1990s, Miramax was a "major independent" distributor, recently acquired by a conglomerate and eager to develop crossover hits (Wyatt, 1998). The company had an established record of success in marketing foreign-language art films in the United States, with its most profitable Chinese-language film, *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), grossing $5.2 million. After its purchase by Disney in 1993, Miramax received a fresh source of funds for acquisitions, development, production, and marketing, prompting an aggressive buying spree (Biskind, 2004: 156-157; Wyatt, 1998: 84). Among those titles Miramax began targeting were Hong Kong action films. Miramax's interest in acquiring and distributing commercial Hong Kong films originated with conversations between director Quentin Tarantino and Harvey Weinstein. Tarantino, a former video store clerk and rabid Asian-film fan, focused Weinstein's attention on the rapidly expanding American fan base for Hong Kong action films.

The audience for Hong Kong action films in the United States developed in the 1980s at the grassroots level among a subculture of fans, festival programmers, and critics (Bordwell, 2000; Logan, 1995; Chute, 1998). Primed by the wave of kung fu films that had both swept through theaters in the previous decade and remained a late-night fixture on many local television stations, action film enthusiasts sought out Hong Kong titles in Chinatown shops and in double bills at Chinese-language movie theaters. The Hong Kong practice of subtitling all local film releases in English substantially eased access for non-Chinese speakers, as even bootleg videos could be expected to carry subtitles. Fanzines and film magazines such as *Asian Trash Cinema*, *Hong Kong Film Connection*, and *Hong Kong Film Magazine* created a lively forum for fans' passionate reviews and recommendations. By the middle of the decade, film festivals and independent art cinemas began to program Hong Kong films, bringing them

to the attention of "fan aesthetes" (Bordwell, 2000: 95), film journalists who championed Hong Kong action cinema with the wild enthusiasm of a fan and the aesthetic appreciation of a cinéphile. The explosive arrival of John Woo's *The Killer* (1989) in art houses and on college campuses generated new audiences for Hong Kong action cinema, and, in director Woo and actor Chow Yun-fat, produced two of its breakout stars. When promoting his crime thriller *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), Quentin Tarantino widely acknowledged borrowing ideas from an iconic Chow picture, *City on Fire* (1987), becoming the most visible proponent of Hong Kong action cinema in America.

Tarantino functioned as a trendspotter for Weinstein, and the director's superstar status among young male filmgoers seemed to promise a pool of viewers for whatever films he recommended. Weinstein had already heard about the fan base for Hong Kong action films thanks to coverage by critics Jay Carr and Dave Kehr, and during the production of *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Tarantino began screening Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Tsui Hark, and King Hu pictures for the studio mogul (Weinstein, 2004). The two men's first attempt to bring a Hong Kong film to American audiences did not rely on the appeals of the action film genre, however. Tarantino convinced Weinstein to purchase the American rights to Wong Kar-wai's breakthrough, *Chungking Express* (1994), and to distribute it through the director's short-lived label, Rolling Thunder. Clumsily marketed and haphazardly distributed to no more than twenty screens at a time, the uncut, subtitled *Chungking Express* grossed only $417,000 in theaters and landed in the bottom quarter of Miramax releases for 1996. Wong's dreamy, unconventional romance contained neither the costume picture exoticism familiar to American art film audiences from *Farewell My Concubine* and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), nor the creative action choreography so dear to hardcore fans. Weinstein had to look elsewhere for a model crossover hit.

Rumble in the Bronx (1995), featuring the wildly appealing superstar Jackie Chan, provided the key to unlocking a broader American market for Hong Kong action films. After more than a decade of trying to earn American box-office recognition, in 1995 Chan capitalized on the rising interest in Hong Kong action films to negotiate deals with New Line Cinema and Miramax to distribute several of his titles in the United States. New Line acquired the North American distribution rights to Chan's most recent film, *Rumble in the Bronx*, while Miramax purchased the equivalent rights to two earlier Chan pictures, *Crime Story* (1993) and *Drunken Master II* (1994). Meanwhile, Chan began a media campaign to increase his visibility in the United States, landing a tribute in *Time* and an MTV Lifetime Achievement Award. New Line built on this publicity, introducing middle-America to Chan through a distribution and marketing campaign designed to present the actor in a context that would be familiar to viewers. Although set in New York City and shot in Vancouver, *Rumble in the Bronx* was a Hong Kong production, and the version that played in New York's Chinatown after its initial Hong Kong release was not the same as the version that New Line distributed to more than 1,500 American theaters in February 1996. The film's original Cantopop soundtrack was replaced by alternative rock, scenes were cut, and Chan re-recorded much of his dialogue into English. As Steve Fore argues in his analysis of how Jackie Chan marketed himself to the American audience, New Line re-tooled *Rumble in the Bronx* "to reduce the anticipated viewer experience of cultural difference" (Fore, 1997: 249). The new version of the film grossed $32.3 million in the US, establishing an important model for how Hong Kong action films could be widely distributed in the United States.

Rather than investing in art house fare like *Chungking Express*, Miramax adopted the model of *Rumble in the Bronx* and transferred its support to more commercial prospects: Hong Kong

films containing stars beloved by the hardcore action fan base and genres that translated easily across cultures. The $16.2 million earned by Miramax's April 1996 release of a re-scored, re-edited, and dubbed version of Jackie Chan's *Supercop* (1992) clinched the company's initial acquisition and distribution strategy regarding Hong Kong films: namely, purchase the North American theatrical and video/DVD rights to completed pictures with proven stars and lots of action; announce theatrical and video/DVD release dates; release a handful of those announced, and shelve the rest. To those pictures destined for distribution regardless of format, dub into English, add new titles and scores heavy with hip hop and rock, and edit scenes deemed confusing, distasteful, or unnecessary. Then, release. Titles distributed on video/DVD by Miramax or its genre label Dimension using this approach include the Jet Li pictures *Fong Sai-yuk* (1993), *Bodyguard From Beijing* (1994), and *Swordsman 2* (1992); and Jackie Chan's *Armour of God* (1987) and *Project A* (1983). The dubbed, re-named, and re-scored version of Chan's *Drunken Master II* earned $11.5 million at American theaters in 2000.

Miramax's American distribution strategy for Hong Kong films reflected both industry-wide assumptions regarding the challenges of marketing foreign-language films in the United States and a hands-on approach to post-production distinct to Miramax and championed by Harvey Weinstein for a wide range of films. The consensus within the film industry through the 1990s suggested that subtitles were a turn-off for most Americans, and would limit the profit potential of any foreign-language release (Major, 1997). Box-office numbers supported the argument. Prior to 2000, the highest-grossing foreign-language release with subtitles was Best Foreign-Language Film Academy Award winner *Life Is Beautiful* (1998), with $57.5 million; the next two top grossers brought in less than half that amount: *Il Postino* (1995), $21.8 million, and *Like Water for Chocolate* (1993), $21.7 million. All three were released by Miramax. Though their grosses were unusually high for foreign-language releases, they nevertheless paled next to the more than $100 million domestic box-office of *Pulp Fiction*. Dubbing a film -- a common practice around the world for foreign-language movies -- seemed to promise a wider audience than subtitling. Re-scoring films similarly opened new avenues for commercial exploitation, allowing distributors to select music designed to appeal to the target audience that could then be sold on a soundtrack album. While dubbing and re-scoring foreign-language films intended for wide release were conventional industry practices, Miramax's re-editing of its acquisitions was more uncommon. Miramax maintained a post-production facility that frequently re-cut its foreign-language acquisitions under Harvey Weinstein's supervision, earning Weinstein the nickname "Harvey Scissorhands." In defense of the practice, Weinstein memorably claimed, "I'm not cutting for fun ... I'm cutting for the shit to work" (Auletta, 2002: 74). Miramax's editors typically cut Hong Kong releases to address issues related to content, pacing, and style, thereby bringing the films into closer alignment with Hollywood storytelling conventions that value efficiency, cohesion, and verisimilitude. The re-editing of Hong Kong action films by Miramax reflected an institutional goal to create a product whose distinctiveness was balanced by its accessibility.

Miramax's aggressive moves to acquire and distribute Hong Kong action films to a wide American audience -- even those films it never intended to release theatrically -- were motivated by two long-term goals: to build an extensive film library of profitable titles, and to ease entry of Miramax products into the Chinese market. A studio's film library, or back catalog of titles it holds the rights to, is one of its most valuable assets, providing an ongoing source of revenue through video/DVD rentals and sales, merchandising and licensing fees, and sales to broadcast and cable television, pay-per-view, and airlines. A relatively young company with a limited film library in comparison to the major studios, Miramax identified

star-driven, action-oriented Hong Kong films as capable of adding value to its back catalog. Distinctive enough to generate excitement yet familiar enough to be accessible to a broad-based American audience, these films provided Miramax and Dimension with the opportunity to rapidly expand their holdings and identify their brands with the rising popularity of martial arts. At the same time, Miramax sought to establish itself in China, one of the last unconquered frontiers for American films. In 2001 Miramax hired Dee Dee Nickerson, an experienced film executive who speaks fluent Mandarin, to head the company's Asian acquisitions and development arm and lobby on its behalf in Beijing. Due to the country's restrictive import quotas, Miramax had difficulty distributing its films there, and China's 1.3 billion citizens presented a tantalizing consumer base seemingly waiting to be tapped. Weinstein hoped to open up the Chinese theatrical, video, and cable market to Miramax products, and to take advantage of production opportunities in China for Miramax films: "Obviously if we do a good job of promoting Chinese films [in the Untied States] that are fully financed by Chinese money, maybe we could find a way to get our films shown there" (Goldstein, 2001: F1).

The production and reception of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) changed the landscape for the distribution of foreign-language films in the United States. *Crouching Tiger* was a truly transnational effort designed for global consumption, involving international financing; production and post-production work in China, Hong Kong, and the United States; Taiwanese and American screenwriters; Hong Kong, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Malaysian stars; and a Taiwanese director long settled in the United States (Klein, 2004: 360). Director Ang Lee and writers James Schamus and Wang Hui-ling consciously applied classical Hollywood screenwriting conventions to the Chinese *wuxia* genre, producing a martial arts swordplay film in which the action was integrated with the narrative and characterization developed to an extent rarely seen in Hong Kong filmmaking (Klein, 2004; Teo, 2001; Landler, 2001). Lee compared the filmmaking team's strategy of combining Chinese and Hollywood conventions with that adopted by Chinese restaurant owners eager to introduce their cuisine to the West: "At the early stage, you offer some chop suey. And little by little you present more delicacies until they become dainty eaters of Chinese food" (Elley, 2001). Sony Pictures Classics, the art film subsidiary of Sony Entertainment, released *Crouching Tiger* in the United States with a $15 million marketing campaign designed to whet the appetites of five types of viewers: art cinema attendees, young people, women, action fans, and mainstream moviegoers (Pappas, 2001: S2). *Crouching Tiger* opened on sixteen screens in a platform release, slowly building on word of mouth and critics awards before adding additional venues, finally topping off at over 2,000 screens after winning the Best Foreign-Language Film Academy Award. Schamus argued that the film's American success was grounded in its ability to tell a new story in a recognizable way:

> I think Western audiences were amazed to walk out of the movie theatre after two hours with some cognizance, even a conscious understanding, that they had just seen a Daoist action movie, and that's a fundamentally different experience from the crap they get from Hollywood. And I think that here in the States it was precisely this difference -- but still a film that speaks a universal film language -- that got people excited. (Teo, 2001)

Though debates raged in the U.S. and overseas regarding the film's originality and "authenticity" (Elley, 2001; Landler, 2001; Teo, 2001; Rushdie, 2001), its $128 million U.S. box-office gross and additional $112 million in video and DVD rentals and sales powerfully demonstrated new box-office potential for subtitled foreign-language films. If a foreign-

language film could tell a local story in a universally accessible way, and appeal to a range of demographic groups, it could become a mainstream American hit.

The massive success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* prompted film executives at Miramax and elsewhere to rethink the common adage that subtitles inherently limited the audience for foreign-language films in the United States. Industry executives and critics agreed that the tremendous success of *Crouching Tiger* was due to its crossover appeal, as it brought in not only the older art house audience that traditionally supports subtitled foreign-language films, but also the young people that are America's most avid moviegoers. Hollywood lore always insisted that teenagers wouldn't read subtitles, but *Crouching Tiger* suggested otherwise. According to Michael Barker, co-president of Sony Pictures Classics,

> It was the kids that got *Crouching Tiger* up to $128 million. My feeling is that, having grown up with the Internet and instant messaging, they no longer have a problem reading subtitled text. In fact, we got reports back from kids saying the subtitles were cool." (Goldstein, 2001: F1)

Barker's co-president Tom Bernard suggested the acceptance of subtitles went beyond youth, crediting not only the internet but also computer use and the graphic design of television sports and news shows: "Millions of people are now used to typing and reading one or two sentences at a time that quickly disappear from their view while they're paying attention to the rest of a much larger screen" (Pappas, 2001: S2). Whereas subtitles had previously been used primarily for films intended for art house release, *Crouching Tiger* opened the door for their appearance in more commercially driven foreign-language films.

After the success of *Crouching Tiger*, Miramax distributed its next Hong Kong picture, *Iron Monkey* (1993), with subtitles rather than with dubbed dialogue. Said Mark Gill, President of Miramax, Los Angeles, "*Crouching Tiger* was the point of critical mass where nobody could disagree anymore and had to admit there was something [appealing] there. And with that audience acceptance, there comes new opportunities to try new things" (Major, 2001: F11). Miramax widely publicized the money and care that went into the American release of *Iron Monkey* (Major, 2001: F11; Goldstein, 2001: F1, Weinstein, 2004: 15), a martial arts costume picture directed by Yuen Woo-ping, newly hot in the U.S. following his action choreography work on *Crouching Tiger* and *The Matrix* (1999). The distributor spent roughly $10 million restoring *Iron Monkey* (Goldstein, 2001: F1), composing and recording a new orchestral score, adding a new stereo soundtrack and special effects, and, in places, cutting material deemed excessively violent or unnecessary to the plot. The film opened in over 1,200 U.S. theaters and grossed $14.7 million -- not bad for a subtitled film without a star widely known in America, but no better than Miramax's dubbed Jackie Chan releases and only a modest return on its investment. Rather than convincing Miramax to abandon its hands-on reshaping of Hong Kong films, *Iron Monkey* merely introduced an alternative -- re-tooling plus subtitles.

In addition to prompting Miramax to rethink subtitles, *Crouching Tiger* also spurred the company to broaden the scope of its acquisitions in an attempt to corner the market on Asian martial arts pictures. On a mission to purchase all things *Crouching Tiger*-like, Miramax dug into director Tsui Hark's library, picking up his special-effects-driven epics *Zu: Warriors From the Magic Mountain* (1983) and the remake *The Legend of Zu* (2001), starring *Tiger*'s Zhang Ziyi. Miramax also bagged the rights outside Asia to *Flying Dragon, Leaping Tiger* (2002), a romantic martial arts film in the *Crouching Tiger* mold (Goldstein, 2001: F1).

While acquiring the *Zu* pictures was part of Miramax's plan to cash in on the *wuxia*-flavored success of *Crouching Tiger* via films with established brand names, buying *Flying Dragon, Leaping Tiger* reflected the company's increasing attempts to -- in the words of Weinstein -- police the market (Goldstein, 2001: F1). By aggressively paying for the rights to Hong Kong films -- even those it never planned to release theatrically -- Miramax built up its film library while insuring that no other American distributor would profit from the films.

One of Miramax's primary acquisition strategies involved purchasing the rights to blocks of older hits starring Hong Kong's hottest action talent, a move that enabled the company to dominate the American video/DVD market for films starring Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Michelle Yeoh. At the urging of Quentin Tarantino, Miramax announced in 2001 the addition of a new star to its slate: action-comedy sensation Stephen Chiau. Miramax purchased the worldwide distribution rights outside of Asia to three titles directed by and starring Chiau: *The God of Cookery* (1996), *The King of Comedy* (1999), and *Shaolin Soccer* (2001), a record-breaking box-office hit in Asia. Miramax's handling of the theatrical release of *Shaolin Soccer* was suggestive of the challenges it faced in its continuing search for a distribution model that could maximize a commercial Hong Kong film's crossover potential. Hoping to appeal to a family audience, Miramax cut twenty-five minutes from the picture's full-length Hong Kong version, including trimming the opening sequence, dramatically reducing the role of the female lead, and eliminating the comic outtakes that frequently close a Hong Kong film. The new eighty-six minute cut offered more tonal consistency, concentrating on Chiau's kinetic comedy while minimizing the original's intermittent attempts at pathos. Miramax dubbed the new version, with Stephen Chiau providing his own voice, and digitally added English signs and graphics into the mise-en-scene to make the locations more recognizable. The original score was retained, however, with only the American disco hit "Kung Fu Fighting" added over the closing credits. A plan to increase the film's appeal to American audiences by dropping the reference to Shaolin Temple and renaming the film *Kung Fu Soccer* was scrapped after resistance from Chiau (Lau, 2002: 1). Miramax originally announced an April 2002 theatrical bow at approximately 1,000 venues, but poor test screenings of the dubbed American version prompted a series of changes in the release date (Kehr, 2004: E3; Thompson, 2005). While Miramax withheld its version of *Shaolin Soccer* from theatrical distribution, its parent company, Disney, threatened American DVD retailers with court suits if they sold the Hong Kong version available since 2001 on imported discs. In the meantime, Chiau signed with Columbia Asia and Sony Pictures Classics to produce and distribute his next picture, *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), providing Miramax with even less incentive to promote *Shaolin Soccer*, lest the build-up generate a future audience for Sony. In April 2004, the American version of *Shaolin Soccer* finally opened on six U.S. screens, featuring all the previously made changes but sporting subtitles rather than the dubbed dialogue. The picture never played on more than fourteen screens at a time, and ended its twenty-one week run with a paltry $489,000, only one percent of its overall worldwide gross. As it had with *Chungking Express* a decade earlier, Miramax opted to limit the release of a film it couldn't figure out how to market, hoping merely to attract the hardcore fan base and to generate name recognition for an eventual DVD release.

At the same time as Miramax continued to purchase the distribution rights to completed Hong Kong films, it also expanded into co-financing and co-producing original Chinese-language films, much as Sony Pictures Entertainment did with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Miramax spent $21 million to outbid Sony and obtain the distribution rights outside Asia to *Hero* (2002), producer Bill Kong's $30 million follow-up to *Crouching Tiger*. Another historical epic mixing martial arts with romance, *Hero* starred Miramax favorite Jet Li and

Crouching Tiger's Zhang Ziyi, and was directed by Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou, best known in the United States for *Raise the Red Lantern*. *Hero* provided Zhang with an opportunity to break out of the art houses, while Miramax hoped to repeat the worldwide success enjoyed by *Crouching Tiger*. Like Schamus and Lee before him, Zhang developed *Hero* with Western viewers in mind: "I tried to get across themes that would be understood by a Western audience. There are elements that are purely Chinese, but I made an effort to keep a balance between the two" (Smith, 2004: E5). When Miramax requested Zhang remove twenty minutes from his original edit in order to speed the film's pace and better appeal to American audiences, Zhang complied; in later interviews he explained the pressure to cooperate with American distributors in order to succeed in the large and influential U.S. market (Smith, 2004; Spletzer, 2004). *Hero* broke box-office records on its release in China, racking up more than $100 million in Asia alone, but Miramax shelved it for a year and a half in the United States. Unable to release the film quickly enough to take advantage of its 2002 Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign-Language Film, and unwilling to compete against Jackie Chan's *The Medallion* (2003) the following summer, Miramax waited to incorporate *Hero* into the wintertime theatrical and DVD promotional campaign for Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004). Hoping to capitalize on Tarantino's credibility among Asian film fans and a presumed overlap between the *Kill Bill* and *Hero* audiences, Miramax attached trailers of *Hero* with the imprimatur "Quentin Tarantino presents" to *Kill Bill* prints and DVDs (Weinstein, 2004: 15; Cheng, 2004: 12). Supported by an extensive television ad campaign, *Hero* finally opened in the U.S. at the end of August 2004 on just over 2,000 screens, a release strategy more akin to that used for a Jackie Chan picture than the platform model of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a further indication of Miramax's confidence in *Hero*'s appeal to action fans. After producing the highest American opening weekend ever for a live-action Asian film, *Hero* went on to gross $53.6 million in the U.S., well less than half the earnings of *Crouching Tiger* but just below those of *Life Is Beautiful*, the second-highest-grossing foreign-language release in the U.S.. While *Hero* drew fewer of the women and older art film goers who broadened the audience base of *Crouching Tiger*, its strong, nation-wide support among young male audiences ('Hero's Welcome,' 2004; Cheng, 2004) demonstrated widespread willingness among action film fans to embrace Chinese-language productions.

Miramax continued to purchase the rights to commercial Hong Kong titles up through the departure of Harvey and Bob Weinstein in 2005. This was where the company's strength lay -- not in its theatrical releases, and not in Asian co-productions, but in its Hong Kong film library. Following the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Miramax accelerated the purchase of North American DVD rights to pre-Golden Era Hong Kong productions, including late 1970s action classics and early Jackie Chan pictures acquired from Media Asia. In 2003, Miramax announced an agreement with Hong Kong's Celestial Pictures to acquire rights to titles from the substantial Shaw Brothers library, containing some of the most acclaimed martial arts films in the history of Chinese-language cinema. The agreement provided Miramax with English-language territory DVD rights to fifty films, North American video-on-demand rights to the entire 760 film library, and English-language remake rights to two films (Rooney, 2003). Miramax's acquisition strategy enabled the company to dominate the market for commercial Hong Kong cinema in the United States, and make inroads on much of the world outside of Asia. While some top titles were released theatrically and on video/DVD in altered form, the vast majority of the company's Hong Kong film library remained legally unavailable to the public, sitting on a shelf waiting for theatrical, video/DVD, or cable release. As of 2003, Miramax's library included over 170 Hong Kong titles (Eller, 2002: C1; Rooney, 2003).

Familiarity vs. Difference

Although Miramax's re-styled releases have broadened the American fan base for Hong Kong cinema, the pictures tend to lose many of the characteristics that mark them as products of Hong Kong's commercial film industry, an industry with its own unique aesthetic sensibility that is often at odds with Hollywood conventions. Miramax's revisions do not simply replace one musical score and language with another; they often affect the very fabric of the films. Utilizing a popular metaphor, David Bordwell has described Hong Kong cinema as a lot like Chinese cooking, blending together many different flavors in wildly inventive and often surprising ways (Landler, 2001: E2). Hong Kong action films tend to be more vivid than coherent, sporting both universal generic conventions and local cultural references, expressive physicality and extreme sentimentality, sophomoric silliness and brutal violence, bizarre plot twists and shamelessly politically incorrect humor. In an apparent effort to have their Hong Kong releases adhere to the presumed expectations of mainstream American audiences, Miramax diluted many of the contrasting flavors that make these films so distinct. Miramax's American versions frequently excise plot exposition, digressive episodes, local color, prolonged slapstick, graphic violence, and potentially offensive or culturally confusing sequences; alter the rhythm of scenes and the pacing of the film; and reorient character motivations and relationships. The end result is a product that can be marketed as different from what Hollywood offers yet similar enough to appeal to the average young male action fan.

A comparison of the Hong Kong and American versions of *Fong Sai-yuk* illustrates the impact of Miramax's tinkering and its effect on the viewing experience. Directed by Corey Yuen Kuei and starring Jet Li, *Fong Sai-yuk* involves the youthful adventures of the titular hero, a legendary Cantonese martial artist who was trained by his mother and inspired several series of films. Miramax released its version on DVD through its Dimension label, re-titling it *The Legend*, cutting approximately ten minutes, and adding a new score and dubbed dialogue. An analysis of two sample scenes -- one involving changes in music and dialogue, the other also featuring excised material -- suggests that the American version is not only more taut, inoffensive, and consistent in tone than the Hong Kong original, but also offers a substantially different interpretation of character motivations and relationships. It is also simply not as funny.

Early in the film, Sai-yuk and his friends are released from jail after getting into a fight; while no actual footage is cut from the American version, the scene's effect on the viewer changes significantly due to the alteration of the soundtrack. The original scene offers an excellent example of the frequent use of reflexive humor in Hong Kong films. Sai-yuk rattles off a list of aliases that he provided to the police for him and his friends, and the names he uses include the director of the film and a popular Hong Kong star. The effect of the joke is heightened by the musical cue and fighting stance that Sai-yuk adopts as he draws out the last name, "Wong..." The knowing viewer anticipates the name of Wong Fei-hung, a legendary hero that the same actor, Jet Li, plays in the *Once Upon a Time in China* series, from which the musical cue and the fighting stance originate. But instead, Sai-yuk completes the line with a playful "Jing!" thereby referencing Wong Jing, a prolific director and producer renowned for his bawdy sense of humor. In the original, the joke's on us -- and Wong Jing. In the American version, there is no joke. The absence of the musical cue and the voice actor's failure to draw out the name of Wong Jing undermine the punch line and the entire reflexive nature of the scene. In addition, a slight alteration in the surrounding dialogue soft-pedals Sai-yuk's often physical relationship with his righteous father and trickster mother. In the

original, one of Sai-yuk's friends warns that it will be troublesome if Sai-yuk's father discovers they've been in jail, and Sai-yuk leaves his friends with, "I have to go home now, or my mother will teach me a lesson." Both lines of dialogue allude to the possibility that Sai-yuk's parents may physically punish him, a possibility that is not only made manifest on more than one occasion in the original, but is also played as a source of comedy. In the Miramax version, the dialogue in the scene changes to conform to American standards on childrearing, eliminating the reference to Sai-yuk's father and ending with the benign, "I have to go home now, my mother is waiting for me." The American version plays it safe, ignoring the role corporal punishment plays in the expression of authority (and love) within a film family defined by its martial skills.

The tendency to dampen the hierarchy of power within the family and to obscure familial beatings continues throughout the American version, muddling the narrative significance of several scenes and playing havoc with character relations. An example occurs a bit later in the film, after Sai-yuk and his mother have been beaten by Sai-yuk's father due to their troublesome behavior. Changes in the dialogue, as well as a small cut in the scene, illustrate how Miramax's editors tend to eliminate elements that may be viewed by American audiences as offensive, and to avoid the sudden shifts in tone that can be quite frequent in Hong Kong popular films. The resulting scene alters the character psychology displayed in the original and the nature of the relationship between Sai-yuk's parents. In the original version, Sai-yuk asks his mother why she lets his father beat her if she is so good at kung fu. She replies that she accepted her husband's beating because it gave him respect in front of the neighbors and protected his status as the patriarch of the family. Assuming that a husband beating his wife would not be considered appropriate by American viewers, the Miramax version changes the dialogue of Sai-yuk's mother to: "Your father's pride is bigger than mine. And besides, he's always careful not to hurt me." The dialogue change downplays the beating and the importance of traditional gender roles within the family, while at the same time fails to highlight one of the most significant aspects of the mother's character: her willingness to go to any length to protect her family -- especially her son.

Following this exchange between Sai-yuk and his mother, Sai-yuk leaves the room as his father enters. In the original version, Sai-yuk's father chides his mother for raising Sai-yuk so poorly, prompting her to angrily complain that he only cares about his business. "You listen to those gossiping fools and beat me up in front of everybody. You don't treat me as your wife at all!" Her husband replies by reciting a love poem that causes her to swoon and break into a slow-motion hypnotic sway, exclaiming, "I can't stand it! He's too smart, too romantic, so great! Every time he recites poetry, I'm so excited I feel dizzy." Her humorous love-struck dance complete, Sai-yuk's mother admits that her husband was not wrong to scold her, and meekly yet eagerly follows him to bed. The sequence requires Josephine Siao, the actress playing Sai-yuk's mother, to shift suddenly from expressions of anger to love, serious drama to silly physical comedy, a tonal shift common in Hong Kong films but less frequently employed in Hollywood. In the Miramax version, the dialogue of Sai-yuk's mother turns her anger into the petulance of a bored housewife: "Every day is the same. You don't care about me. And you're always late for dinner!" The excision of her love-struck dance after her husband recites his poem suggests a concern that her sudden swooning may confuse the American viewer's understanding of her displeasure with her husband. Additionally, the scene ends with Sai-yuk's father sounding a more contrite note before calling his wife to bed: "Are you still angry with me? Do you like my poem?" By altering the exchange between husband and wife from one involving first scolding, and then lovemaking in the original, to one involving scolding, then an apology, the American version of the scene fundamentally

changes character motivations and smoothes out sometimes contradictory behavior. And yet again, the scene's humor falls flat.

Not only much of the comedy, but also the emotional heart of the film are lost in Miramax's translation. In particular, the performance of Siao, a gifted comic actress, suffers terribly in *The Legend*. In their determination to streamline the film and avoid politically incorrect humor, sudden shifts in tone, and cultural confusion, the Miramax editors cut many of Siao's best comic bits, including several sexually indelicate scenes in which she pretends to be Sai-yuk's brother, and other sequences demonstrating the often absurd hardships she will endure in order to keep her family safe. These changes do not merely eliminate excessive violence and local color, and bring the Hong Kong original into conformity with the more tightly plotted, evenly toned films of Hollywood -- they actually alter the story that is being told, and the emotional effect the film is having on the viewer. This is what most irritates fans about Miramax's American versions: all too often, the viewer is watching a fundamentally different film.

In response to Miramax's consistent re-tooling of its Hong Kong releases, hardcore fans and some filmmakers have pushed back, withdrawing support from Miramax in favor of distributors that maintain the integrity of the films they acquire. The internet has been a key component of a countervailing trend that embraces popular cinema's heterogeneity. By the time Miramax began acquiring Hong Kong action titles in earnest in the late 1990s, the locus of the hardcore fan base had shifted to the internet, dramatically increasing communication between fans and access to films. Fanzines begat websites and discussion lists; ebay opened the door to acquiring videos, DVDs, and VCDs directly from Hong Kong; and American online retailers such as HKFlix made Hong Kong titles available in their original versions even to areas of the country barely exposed to foreign-language films in theaters. The arrival of Tai Seng, an American-based video/DVD distributor of Hong Kong films, further eased access to titles. The internet enabled the educated, opinionated hardcore fan base to multiply its film knowledge and thrive, while serving as an important reference and retail tool for those new to the peculiarities of Hong Kong action cinema. Fans and neophytes alike tracked new Hong Kong releases, and after Miramax began acquiring and distributing Hong Kong films in America, the company quickly became a target. Multiple versions of some Hong Kong films had long circulated on video, as Hong Kong producers allowed foreign distributors the right to re-cut films for their territories (Bordwell, 2000: 89-90), but fans found Miramax's systematic re-editing egregious and disrespectful. Other Miramax practices that drew ire included delaying or withholding release dates and squelching the sale on DVD of original Hong Kong versions of films acquired by the company (Numskull, 2002; Hyde, 2003; Love and Bullets, 2004; Johnson, 2005).

Miramax's distribution tactics so enraged some American Hong Kong film fans that they began a grass-roots campaign in 2002 to encourage the company to change its ways. Distraught by the poor handling of *Shaolin Soccer*, Hong Kong action fans banded together online to boycott Miramax's "Americanized" product. A group called the Alliance for the Respectful Treatment of Hong Kong Films drafted an online petition to Miramax, employing the rhetoric of auteurism to call for the preservation of each director's artistic vision and -- at the very least -- the release of original, subtitled versions of Hong Kong films alongside Miramax's dubbed and cut versions (Appeal to Disney). The group hoped Miramax and its parent company, Disney, would re-think their current distribution strategy, as they had in 1999 when Miramax released Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) subtitled on DVD -- a concession to anime fans who complained about the dubbed theatrical print -- and

rolled out subtitled versions of three older Miyazaki films. The Alliance gathered over 14,000 signatures on its petition and sparked positive coverage in *Variety*, *Time Out New York*, and on MSNBC. In a show of fraternity, some online Asian film retailers encouraged consumers not to buy Miramax's Hong Kong titles by highlighting all of the changes made to the original films and/or directing customers to the online petition (Paz, 2003). A legendarily obsessive bunch given to enthusiastic proselytizing, hardcore American fans used their power as consumers to appeal to a wider audience and make the case for popular Hong Kong cinema as art. Miramax's American versions stripped the Hong Kong originals of many of the unique qualities enjoyed by fans. In valuing the difference inherent in the original versions, American fans demonstrated localized resistance to the homogenization of popular cinema.

The increased American interest in Asian cinema over the last decade has been vitally important for Hong Kong and mainland-Chinese talent given the simultaneous production decline within their native film industries (Zhang, 2004: 260-263, 281-284; Berry and Farquhar, 2006: 205-206). Miramax's deep pockets and promises of widespread distribution in the potentially lucrative American market have been a strong economic inducement for directors and producers to sell film rights to the company and trust its judgment on release practices. Tutored by their producers to accept the recommendations of distributors regarding how to appeal to individual overseas markets, Hong Kong and mainland-Chinese filmmakers have historically acquiesced to requests for cuts before a film is complete, and accepted changes and dubbing once distribution rights are sold. While Hong Kong and mainland-Chinese filmmakers have a vested interest in ensuring distribution of their films in the American market, a few have reconsidered working with Miramax -- and more recently, Harvey Weinstein's newest outfit, The Weinstein Company -- given Weinstein's penchant for hands-on creative control.

Some directors with box-office track records now look beyond Miramax and Weinstein for American distribution, partnering with smaller firms that combine the desire for a crossover hit with a respect for the director's vision cultivated through years in the art cinema market. After the botched American release of *Shaolin Soccer*, which even Weinstein characterized as a "misstep" (Weinstein, 2004: 15), Stephen Chiau took his follow-up, *Kung Fu Hustle*, to Sony Pictures Classics, which released it with subtitles, no cuts, and a massive promotional campaign. Reflecting on his experience with Miramax in interviews, Chiau admitted he trusted the distributor's knowledge of the American market, but was unhappy with the English language version of his film (Reid, 2005: E17; Rose, 2005). Comparing his experiences with Miramax and Sony, Chiau noted, "With [Sony Pictures] everything was discussed. It wasn't about them saying, 'We are going to do this and that,' but about hearing my ideas -- a real collaboration" (Reid, 2005: E17). Zhang Yimou also took *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) to Sony Pictures Classics after releasing *Hero* with Miramax, while in early 2006 Chen Kaige and his producers pulled out of a deal with The Weinstein Company for North American distribution of Chen's period fantasy *The Promise* (2005), eventually placing it with Warner Independent Pictures. The Weinstein Company planned to change the film's title, cut nineteen minutes, and offer a small, limited release, concessions unacceptable to Chen's team (Sun, 2006: 2). Like Zhang, Chen's filmmaking experience is rooted in the world of art cinema, where the director's vision has long been held sacrosanct. Just as Hong Kong action fans now insist that popular cinema be afforded the same respect as art cinema, increasingly directors intent on capturing a broader audience question how much they are willing to accommodate distributor demands.

Since he and his brother separated from Miramax in 2005, Harvey Weinstein has continued his mission to become the primary distributor of Hong Kong action films in the United States via The Weinstein Company. While The Weinstein Company engages in many of the same acquisition and distribution practices once utilized by Miramax, it is also striving to win back the support of Hong Kong action film fans. When the Weinsteins left Miramax, they also left the company's film library, arranging only to transfer the rights to the Shaw Brothers titles and to share with Disney genre franchises associated with Dimension (Carr, 2005: C1). Using the Shaw Brothers films as the basis for its new catalog, The Weinstein Company quickly negotiated rights deals on blocks of additional action titles, including forty-nine films from the Hong Kong companies Fortune Star and Mei Ah Entertainment and several John Woo pictures (Frater and Mohr, 2006). The company hired former stuntman, scriptwriter, and producer Bey Logan as its Hong Kong-based head of Asian acquisitions and co-productions, and in May 2006 announced the creation of Dragon Dynasty, a DVD label dedicated to Asian action films. Dragon Dynasty is the latest example of the Weinsteins' ongoing effort to rehabilitate their image in the eyes of Hong Kong film fans, a process begun while they were still at Miramax. In the Dragon Dynasty press release, The Weinstein Company promised to "redefine the presentation of Asian Cinema on DVD," releasing special editions of significant titles and stocking discs full of extra features, trailers, interviews, commentaries, and both subtitled and dubbed versions of films (The Weinstein Company, 2006). Dragon Dynasty's first release, *S.P.L.* (2005), featured a new title but remained uncut. By positioning Dragon Dynasty as an Asian action series analogous to the well-regarded Criterion Collection, The Weinstein Company is both distinguishing its film library within the marketplace and attempting to assure hardcore Hong Kong fans that its new label means quality. The initial response of fans and fan aesthetes has been cautious, however, given the Weinsteins' track record. As *Variety*'s Asian film blogger Grady Hendrix notes, "They've spent years selling their brand as the one that means re-edits, dubs, and cut versions. Changing that perception is going to take more than a year and a couple of titles" (Hendrix, 2006).

Conclusion

The increased circulation of Hong Kong action films within America in print and video/DVD form has provided opportunities, risks, and trade-offs for all involved. American distributors built on the rising wave of interest in Hong Kong films during the 1980s and 1990s to develop and exploit a new trend in action cinema, but had to negotiate how much "foreignness" mainstream American viewers would accept in a foreign-language film. Miramax's acquisition and distribution strategies display an evolving attempt to understand what American audiences want, and how to balance the simultaneous allures and obstacles produced by cultural and aesthetic difference. Based on their companies' Hong Kong shopping sprees, the Weinsteins clearly think that Hong Kong action films contain some flavors that will appeal to American audiences. But they seem unsure about whether or not American audiences are eager to experience *all* of the competing flavors of Hong Kong popular cinema. Maybe America just wants chop suey. There is an economic value to finding the right recipe and to associating a distributor's brand with success. The Weinsteins' most recent moves suggest a new attentiveness to fans who charge that chop suey is not enough -- though there are few signs of a full conversion.

American studios' increased involvement in the distribution of Hong Kong action films has multiplied awareness of Hong Kong actors, directors, and film history while complicating access issues for fans. Even as the American fan base for Hong Kong films grew, its hardcore wing repudiated Miramax's role as cultural gatekeeper, fighting its tendency to block viewers'

ability to purchase original versions of films while offering access to the same titles only in a compromised form. The long-time fans of Hong Kong cinema and their allies in the media introduced a conversation about the cultural value of popular foreign-language cinema, assigning it equal standing with the art cinema that long defined what Americans understood a foreign-language film to be. The fans' rejection of "Americanized" versions of Hong Kong pictures and the recent box-office success of subtitled Asian action films in the United States provide an example of how the global trade in film culture is expanding the tastes of American audiences -- though this expansion seems limited to the action genre. At a time when distributors are releasing ever fewer imported films in the United States, East Asian martial arts pictures occupy six of the top fifteen box-office rankings for foreign-language films, prompting one critic to suggest "kung fu may be the only way left [for foreign-language films] to get American audiences' attention" (Kaufman, 2006: B23). The martial arts film has served as an important conduit for the expression of cultural and aesthetic difference within the American mainstream -- even when that difference may not be as authentic as hardcore fans would like.

While Hong Kong filmmakers have greater access to American audiences than ever before, they face the difficulty of weighing the economic necessity of exporting their work against the possibility of losing creative control. For some, the concessions requested by hands-on distributors like the Weinsteins are negligible compared to the benefits. For others, the attempt to work with distributors like Sony Pictures Classics that release films untouched reflects a desire to protect not only their art but also their identity. As Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu argues, transnational film trade does not necessarily lead to "the disappearance and homogenization of cultural and ethnic identity," but can also "strengthen and reassert a sense of cultural selfhood" (Lu, 1997: 16-17). The challenge of presenting content both familiar and distinctive is a long-standing characteristic of popular cinema, and raises particularly thorny questions for filmmakers and distributors eager to bring foreign-language films into the mainstream American market. Rather than affirming the ability of American studios to dominate local film industries and dictate audience tastes, this study suggests that the increased circulation of Hong Kong action films in the United States has produced a more complex set of consequences and sparked an ongoing examination of the relative value of cultural and aesthetic difference to distributors, audiences, and filmmakers.

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