

Dong Hoon Kim

The Making of Transnational Action Genres

An Interview with Filmmaker Chung Chang-Hwa¹

In 1973, an action film from Hong Kong became a surprise hit at the American box office, making the weekly top ten box office list and also topping the weekend box office. Along with Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* that was released later in the same year, *Five Fingers of Death* (also known as *King Boxer*, 1972) opened the gate for Hong Kong martial arts and action movies to reach American audiences and quickly generated a new cinematic and cultural phenomenon in the US. Although *Five Fingers of Death* has become an icon of 1970s American popular culture and a cult classic, many people are still mistaken in believing that this decade-defining film was directed by a Chinese filmmaker. In fact, the film's opening credits present the director as Cheng Chang Ho, a Chinese name. Yet Cheng Chang Ho was not actually Chinese, but Korean whose Korean name is "Chung Chang-Hwa"; Cheng Chang Ho was the Chinese pronunciation of his original name, given by Shaw Brothers studio, the production company of *Five Fingers of Death*.

As the story of *Five Fingers of Death* evidently demonstrates, Chung Chang-Hwa's career as a transnational author and the global impact of his works illuminate the essentially transnational nature of Asian action cinema. Born in 1928, Chung started his film career as an assistant director to director Choi In-Gyu and debuted as a director in 1953 with *Final Temptation*. Chung explored a wide range of genres from melodrama to social problem film but soon became a leading action film master during the 60s, a decade often referred to as the golden age of South Korean



Director Chung Chang-Hwa (Photo by Soo-Jin Hwang)

cinema. His 1960 film *Horizon*, an action film about Korean independent movement activists fighting the Japanese imperial army in Manchuria under the Japanese imperial rule, gave a birth to a new genre called the "Manchurian western" (*Manju Hwalgeuk*) or "continental western"

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(*Daeryuk Hwalgeuk*). This Koreanized western, which has been recently revitalized by renowned filmmaker Kim Ji-Woon's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2007), became a major genre of the decade, attracting domestic audiences back to Korean films. Despite being the pioneer of the genre, Chung did not make any more Manchurian westerns but instead explored different action styles and genres in such films as *Murder Order* (1965), *Swordsman in the Twilight* (1967), *The Secret of Affection* (1968), and *A Wandering Swordsman and 108 Bars of Gold* (1968).

In 1967, Shaw Brothers studio head Run Run Shaw invited Chung to Hong Kong. Chung was recruited to direct “modern action movies” that indicate films set in contemporary time periods, as Hong Kong filmmakers had little experience in making such films. For the next ten years, Chung redefined the identity of Hong Kong action cinema and also put it on the global map along with such Hong Kong action cinema filmmakers as King Hu, Chang Cheh, Wei Lo, and Liu Chia-Liang. His 1969 *Temptress of a Thousand Faces* was the first Hong Kong film theatrically released in Europe. His influence reached American shore with the immense success of *Five Fingers of Death*. After this film, Chung moved to Golden Harvest studio, founded by Raymond Chow, a former Shaw Brothers producer. Until 1977, when he returned to South Korea, Chung made a total of sixteen films in Hong Kong. In South Korea, Chung established his own film production company and worked as a producer throughout the 1980s. Although retired from filmmaking, Chung, who now lives in San Diego, is still actively involved in various international film festivals in Korea, such as the Busan International Film Festival and the Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival, which makes him restlessly travel back and forth across the Pacific. This interview was conducted exclusively for this volume of *Spectator* in February 2009.

Dong Hoon Kim (KIM, henceforth): *Chung Chang Hwa, Cheng Chang Ho and Walter Chung—I think these three names of yours characteristically summarize your incredible journey as a transnational filmmaker. You must have some interesting anecdotes or stories involving your three names.*

Chung Chang Hwa (CHUNG, henceforth): Actually, I do. I was invited to Hong Kong by Shaw Brothers head Run Run Shaw in 1967. When making a contract with him, I strongly insisted on including the use of my Korean name as part of contract, and we agreed to do so. However, I later found out that they used the Chinese pronunciation of my name when writing my name in English for my films' credits. I did not catch that for quite a while, since we just used Chinese characters for the Asian market, and thus I did not care about English credits. Then *Five Fingers of Death* became an international hit, especially in the US and UK, and I had a chance to observe the film prints for non-Asian viewers. I finally learned that Shaw Brothers studio spelled my name in English based on the Chinese pronunciation. So the studio broke the contract, so to speak. My name in English should be read “Chung Chang-Hwa,” but instead it was written “Cheng Chang Ho,” a Chinese name. As a result, to Western audiences, I became a Chinese director. As a matter of fact, Run Run Shaw always tried to “make” me a Chinese, as I became the face of the Hong Kong film industry. He wanted me to obtain Chinese citizenship for film promotional purposes. Anyway, I raised this issue as soon as I found out that they used a Chinese name. At the time, there were conflicts boiling between me and Shaw Brothers studio over many other issues besides this matter. For instance, I disliked the Chinese title of the film *Five Fingers of Death* and argued that the title should be “Iron Fist,” which, I believed, better reflects the content of the film. However, they gave the film the title “*Tian Xia Di Yi Quan*” (*The Best Fist of the World*) in order to cater to Chinese-speaking audiences. There are several titles for this movie, but this is the one I hate most. When Warner Brothers released the film in the US, they decided to go with *Five Fingers of Death* as an English title, following my suggestion. Another conflict with the studio emerged when Run Run Shaw fired producer Raymond Chow and appointed his second wife, Mona Fong, a well-known singer, as the new head of the studio. A serious argument with her erupted over the production costs when working on my next project after *Five Fingers of Death*. After this incident, I decided to leave Shaw Brothers as I did not want to waste my career, making films for someone who had no knowledge of filmmaking.

Then I joined Raymond Chow to found Golden Harvest. Initially, I expressed my concern to Chow about whether or not we could find investors. He asked me just to give him my word that I would work for his new studio and said he would take care of everything else. Chow managed to attract foreign capital from Southeast Asian countries, mostly from exhibitors and theater owners in Malaysia and Thailand. **With this investment, we were able to launch Golden Harvest.** Yet Golden Harvest made the same mistake; they also used a Chinese version of my name just like Shaw Brothers did.

About His Filmmaking Career across the Asian Film Industry

KIM: *Learning how Golden Harvest was founded, it seems the Hong Kong film industry of the 1960s and 1970s was already international, bringing in many talents from other Asian countries and attracting foreign investment. Can you tell us a little bit more about the cosmopolitan nature of Hong Kong cinema when you were there?*

CHUNG: As you said, Hong Kong cinema was quite international at the time. I was one of three directors who were first recruited by Golden Harvest. One of the two other directors was Wei Lo, who directed *Fists of Fury* (also known as *Big Brother*, 1971). When producing *Fists of Fury*, we had a hard time finding actors because all the major actors were under contract with Shaw Brothers. At a meeting to discuss this issue, a studio office member recommended an actor who was working for the American TV series *Green Hornet*. As you know well, that actor was Bruce Lee, and he was cast as a lead for *Fists of Fury*. So Bruce Lee's rise to international stardom was indebted to the shifts in the Hong Kong film industry. And the *Fists of Fury* staff went to Southeast Asia for location shooting because Golden Harvest did not have a set yet. In the meantime, I was working on *Dark Swordsman* (1973), a Hong Kong-South Korea co-produced work, which was also shot at various locations. This is how we survived during the early days of Golden Harvest.

KIM: *Let me ask you a question about your early career in South Korea. It is well known that South Korean*

cinema of the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by melodrama. What made you pursue action cinema, which was not an established genre in South Korean cinema?

CHUNG: That is a good question. South Korean cinema of the 1960s was under the strong influence of Japanese cinema, and as a result, so-called "home drama" and melodrama genres imported from Japan directed the Korean film market. However, these genres were too "Japanese" in that they dealt with ordinary people (*shomin* in Japanese and *seomin* in Korean) in Japanese "home drama" traditions. In addition, these films relied too much on dialogue. For these reasons, although these films were quite successful when they were first introduced to Korean audiences, Korean film-goers were soon tired of them. Consequently, the domestic films quickly lost the favor of audiences to Hollywood western movies. **Acknowledging this change in film audiences' taste, I realized I should look for something different, something new.** I wished to make big-budget historical epics or spectacles, but it was an impossible dream to realize, considering the poor filmmaking conditions of Korea. **Alternatively,** I decided to explore action genre despite all kinds of discouragement I received from people in the film industry and film critics as Korea had no action cinema tradition at all. I had a chance to watch George Stevens' *Shane* (1953). I not only fell in love with *Shane* but was inspired by the film, which tells a very poignant and profound story with a restrained action style. **Thus I borrowed the film print of *Shane* from a theater, and I studied the editing, mise-en-scène, and choreography, shot by shot.** After watching the film over and over again, I reached the conclusion that I could make an action film like this. So I went on to direct the film *Sunny Field*, which was based on a popular radio drama. The film became a hit, as it was a totally new kind of Korean film with its speedy tempo and minimal dialogue, although it borrowed the style from American westerns. **For my next project, I decided to try something different and made *Horizon* (1960), another film based on a radio drama. The film's story revolves around a group of Korean resistance activists fighting the Japanese imperial army in Manchuria during Japanese imperialism. With this film, the so-called "continental western" was born.**

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Horizon was so successful that all the other major Korean filmmakers of the time directed at least a continental western movie or two during the 60s. As I was always interested in experimenting with new styles and genres, however, I did not make any more continental westerns. My following projects were all different genres.

KIM: *I think it must have not been easy for you to decide to go to Hong Kong after establishing such a successful career in Korea. What led you to work in the Hong Kong film industry?*

CHUNG: I am sure every filmmaker is looking for better working conditions. In the 60s and 70s, Shaw Brothers was one of the biggest studios in the world. It had “Shaw Movie Town,” which consisted of a number of sets with state-of-the-art facilities. The studio also ran about 1,270 theaters around the world. When I was given a tour of the studio after receiving an offer, I realized the fact that I made action films in South Korea was almost a miracle. So I made a decision to come to Hong Kong. I was hired mainly because I was known for action films with a contemporary setting, what we called “modern action films.” Until then Hong Kong action filmmakers only made the *wuxia* movies (historical martial arts films) and had no experience with modern action films. In 1967, I made the film *Crisis No. X7* which included the gun fighting sequence shot in the downtown Hong Kong. With the approval of the Hong Kong police, I used a hidden camera; when the shooting took place, people on the street did not know we were filming it, and they thought it was a real event. We were able to capture very raw responses from people. I used a telephoto lens to catch close-ups of people’s terrified reactions from afar. Run Run Shaw saw this film and was particularly struck by this sequence. Then he decided to invite me to his studio. Later, he said he had never seen this kind of direction from Hong Kong action films before.

KIM: *Hong Kong and South Korea co-produced a significant number of films in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, many Korean filmmakers and actors worked for films produced in Hong Kong. As far as I know, you personally invited many Korean filmmakers to Hong Kong and worked with them for your projects. Can you*

tell us why you constantly worked with a Korean staff in Hong Kong?

CHUNG: I wanted my experience in the Hong Kong industry to make some contribution to developing the Korean film industry in any form. I knew I had to return to Korea in the future and thus wished the Korean film industry as well as the market to stay strong so that I could continue to work. I also wished to have some talented and skilled staff around me when I returned to Korea. At first, I worked with a Japanese director of photography (DP), but soon I invited Korean DP Yoo Jae-Hyong and worked with him. I also brought in directors Shin Wi-Gyun and Kim Gi-Hyun as my assistant directors. I cast Korean actors, such as Shin Il-Ryong, Yoon Il-Bong, Ha Myong-Jung, Kim Ki-Joo and many others, as well. Hong Kong films were popular across Southeast Asia, and I thought if I made films with these Korean actors, the Korean film industry could take advantage of their stardom, and Korean films could easily appeal to Southeast Asian audiences.

Interactions with Hong Kong Filmmakers

KIM: *Hong Kong cinema during the 1960s and 1970s saw many talented filmmakers, such as King Hu and Chang Cheh, who produced remarkable martial arts and action films. Did you have a chance to work with them?*

CHUNG: In fact, I was pretty close to King Hu. I had a lot of respect for his work. Personally, I like an action film that explains why characters have no choice but to turn to violence. That is why I liked King Hu’s films. Although King Hu was the master of martial arts films, all of his works are very poetic. And he was erudite like a scholar, and thus I enjoyed having conversations with him. As I was unfamiliar with the filmmaking system in Hong Kong, I often sought his advice. So we were quite close. Let me tell you an anecdote. While I was in Hong Kong, I always wanted to visit Kunlun, the most dangerous part of Hong Kong, as I was curious as a filmmaker about all the aspects of Hong Kong. Yet nobody wanted to accompany with me because they thought it was too dangerous to wander around Kunlun, a notorious drug market. It was King Hu

who came with me in the end; he even got us a “guide” who showed us around the area, which was like a maze.

Meanwhile, I did not really appreciate Chang Cheh’s films. His films are too gory and violent, always filled with too much blood. Although I am an action filmmaker, I never liked the goriness. That was completely opposite to what I was pursuing in my films. In addition, his works reflect his versatile personality. For these reasons, we did not really develop a relationship. Another filmmaker I befriended was Li Han Hsing, a renowned director specializing in historical epics and melodramas.

KIM: *Around the time you left Hong Kong, a new generation of filmmakers began to emerge in Hong Kong. In fact, right after you left, such young directors as John Woo, Tsui Hark and Chung Si Ting completely changed the styles of Hong Kong action cinema. For instance, John Woo introduced Hong Kong noir and Tsui Hark twisted the wuxia conventions by incorporating fantasy and science fiction elements as well as technological special effects into his films. Did you follow all of these changes in Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s after returning to Korea? If so, what did you think about them?*

CHUNG: Of course, I paid keen attention to Hong Kong cinema even after I returned to South Korea, since I spent ten years there. John Woo was an assistant director to Chang Cheh when I worked for Shaw Brothers. The first action film I directed for Shaw Brothers was *Temptress of a Thousand Faces*. The film was completed in 1968, but Run Run Shaw did not release the film for a year. Instead, he ordered the directors and screenwriters of his studio to study my film in order to get an idea of how to make a modern action film. John Woo once visited me and said that he was interested in the modern action genre. So I told him to study *Temptress of a Thousand Faces*. A few years later, John Woo joined Golden Harvest as a director. Since Golden Harvest was a new studio, we were always short of staff. Hence filmmakers helped each other on productions. John Woo assisted me on my projects a few times, and I often helped him. One day, he came to me with a script and asked me to help him direct the film. I read the script, and the

story was about a female *Taekwondo* (traditional Korean martial art) master. I was not sure about the project, but John was very adamant about it, asking me to talk to Raymond Chow on behalf of him. So I persuaded Chow to finance the project, and the project finally got the greenlight. I also contacted South Korean film companies and filmmakers and was able to attract investment, about USD 30,000. Thus this film, *The Dragon Tamers* (also known as *Belles of Taekwondo*, 1975), became a co-produced film. I was working on my own film when John’s project was in progress, but I just could not let him go to Korea alone. I stopped my project for a while and helped his production. I was on the set of *The Dragon Tamers* all the time when they were filming in Korea. Since then, John Woo has publicly acknowledged me as his master. As for Tsui Hark and Chung Shi Ting, I only knew them through their works, as they debuted after I left Hong Kong. Led by John Woo, these young filmmakers changed Hong Kong action cinema in the 1980s.

On the Recent Transnational Flows of Action Genres

KIM: *Recently, young South Korean filmmakers, such as Park Chan-Wook and Ryu Seung-Wan and action choreographer Chung Doo-Hong, have become internationally renowned figures with their action and martial arts films. Some of these filmmakers have often expressed the difficulties in their pursuit of a distinctive “Korean” action cinema style, lamenting over the lack of an action genre tradition in South Korea, unlike Hong Kong, China or Japan. Do you think there exists such a thing as a “Korean” action style? And do you have any advice for these young directors?*

CHUNG: I do not have any intention to critique these young Korean filmmakers’ desire to search for a distinctive “Korean” style. Throughout my career, I have always tried to look for something new. It is good for them to have a dream and be ambitious. I think it is essential for young filmmakers to pursue their dreams. However, I do not agree with the idea that we should discover “Korean-ness” just because we are Korean filmmakers. They should look beyond Korea, setting their eyes on the world market, especially considering how global the world has become. Besides, I have always thought that the ideas of nationalism and national spirits are not

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only bigoted but dangerous. I hope young Korean filmmakers examine the globalization carefully and think about the global market instead of staying in the small Korean film industry.

KIM: *I have one final question. We have witnessed increasing numbers of Asian filmmakers coming to or getting invited to Hollywood over the past decade. In addition, remaking Asian genre films has recently become an essential part of Hollywood filmmaking practice. Can you tell us about your opinion on this issue?*

CHUNG: In fact, I was once invited by Warner Brothers to direct a film right after the success of *Five Fingers of Death*. After much thought, I declined the offer. I realized that it would be almost impossible for me to stay in Hollywood as a director due to the language barrier and radically different working and living environments. I went to Hong Kong because I could speak Chinese, and Hong Kong was part of Asia, so I did not have many difficulties adjusting. If I had come to Hollywood, that would have been a historical event for Korean film history, but I did not come because of my personal reasons.

I think Hollywood hires Asian filmmakers because it needs their talents. Look at Yuen Woo-

Ping; he has been working for almost all of the recent major Hollywood action films as an action choreographer. I think this trend will continue and ultimately benefit both Hollywood and the Asian film industry. It is wrong to jump to the conclusion that we Asian filmmakers are simply exploited by Hollywood. If we are capable enough, we could co-exist with Hollywood. Also, as I said earlier, filmmakers should constantly pursue something new. Even mimicking others could be an act of creativity if you are able to translate their styles into your own and produce something new. For instance, I permitted Quentin Tarantino to use materials from my film when he was working on *Kill Bill* (2003). I attended my retrospective held in France a few years ago and had a chance to talk with audiences. They were very critical of Tarantino, critiquing him for taking advantage of the legacy of *Five Fingers of Death*. I told them that becoming an auteur is about how to turn others' styles into your own in a creative way. So I vouched for what Quentin Tarantino did with my and other Hong Kong action films in his works. I believe the exchanges between Hollywood and Asian film industries could be mutually beneficial. There are many Korean students studying filmmaking in the States. I am sure they will make huge contributions to the Korean film industry.

Selected Filmography of Chung Chang-Hwa

Broken Oath (Pojie, 1977); *The Double Crossers* (Guiji Shuangxiong, 1976); *The Judge* (Simpanja, 1976); *Black Knight* (Heukmusa, 1974); *The Skyhawk* (Huang Fei-hong xiao lin quan, 1974); *Dark Swordsman* (Heukyagaek, 1973); *Five Fingers of Death* (Tian xia di yi quan, aka *King Boxer*, 1972); *The Swift Knight* (Lei ru fung, 1971); *Valley of the Fangs* (E lang gu, 1970); *Temptress of a Thousand Faces* (Chinmian Monu, 1969); *A Wandering Swordsman and 108 Bars of Gold* (Nageune Geomgaekgua Hwanggeum 108 gwan, 1968); *Passion* (Jeongyeom, 1968); *Crisis No. X 7* (Uigi Je 7ho, 1967); *Swordsman in the Twilight* (Hwanghonui Geomgaek, 1967); *Full Danger* (Uibeomeun gadeukhi, 1967); *A Dangerous Youth* (Uiheomban Cheongchun, 1966); *Murder Order* (Salin Myeongryeong, 1965); *The Great Plains* (Daepyeongwon, 1963); *The Great Story of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryon* (Dae Jang-hwa Hong-ryon Jeon, 1962); *Bonanza* (Nodaji, 1961); *Horizon* (Jipyongseon, 1961); *Sunny Field* (Haetbit sodajineun Beolpan, 1960); *Nostalgia* (Manghyang, 1958); *Street of Temptation* (Yubokui Geori, 1954); *Final Temptation* (Choihui Yubok, 1953)

NOTES

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