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# Noodle Western: Asian Gunslingers, Swordplayers, Filmmakers Gone West

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## I. Introduction

Pivotal in fashioning the U.S. national identity,<sup>1</sup> classic Westerns by John Ford and John Wayne, circa 1950s, evolved into Sergio Leone's and Sergio Corbucci's Spaghetti Western featuring Clint Eastwood and Franco Nero a decade or so later. Beyond Italian films, cross-fertilization occurs between Hollywood and Japanese samurai film auteur Akira Kurosawa, among others. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, global cinema witnesses an exponential hybridizing and genre-bending across the Pacific, Italian Spaghetti now remade into Asian-style Noodle Western. From Hollywood studios, the *Star Wars* franchise (1977–2015) arrives with a battery of samurai paraphernalia. *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) draws from anime and techno-Orientalism, evidenced by Morpheus' samurai sword and Seraph's fists. Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill I* and *II* (2003, 2004) not only quote freely from Japanese samurai, Hong Kong kung fu, and Spaghetti Western films but plays with, even parodies, these elements. American "top gun" and Neo the One have gone East and gone native, equipped with long and short swords in *The Last Samurai* (2003) and *47 Ronin* (2013). AMC TV series *Into the Badlands* (2015) transposes into a sci-fi future the blood and gore of martial arts films, with a touch of Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), except Southern slave plantations grow poppies for Oriental opium trade rather than cotton. One common denominator in the wide variety of millennial filmic representations appears to be the heroic crossing of swords and guns. Whereas knife-throwing graces some Westerns, such as James Coburn in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), Westerns as a genre

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1. Robert Burgoyne in *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (1997) writes that "In the twentieth century United States, the narrative forms that have modelled national identity most profoundly are arguably the western and the war film" (8).

thrives on the gun fetish. Swords, particularly the samurai's long and short swords, are a distinct feature of Noodle Western, both from Hollywood and from East Asia. In our global village, however, gunslingers and swordplayers increasingly engage one another as frenemies.

All across East Asia, cowboys, frequently in contestation with swordplayers, populate action comedies reminiscent of the triple stock characters of Spaghetti Western. Japan's *Sukiyaki Western Django* (スキヤキ・ウエスタン ジャンゴ, 2007) unabashedly stir-fries samurai and cowboys. Inspired by the tripartite naming of spaghetti Western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), Korean film *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (좋은 놈, 나쁜 놈, 이상한 놈, 2008) features gun-toting cowboys in a Wild Wild Manchuria. *Ninja Assassin* (2009) transports Japan's mythical killing machines to Western metropolis. Zhang Yimou (张艺谋)'s *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (三枪拍案惊奇, 2009) remakes the Coen Brothers' *Blood Simple* (1984) in the barren landscape of China's frontier where one three-shot pistol acquired from a Persian trader trumps broad swords and arrows. The "Weirdo" in the 2008 Korean film morphs into a cowboy clown in the Chinese film *The Chef, the Actor, the Scoundrel* (厨子·戏子·痞子, 2013). Borrowing from the trans-Pacific motif of the TV series *Kung Fu* (1972–1975) with David Carradine, Korean film *The Warrior's Way* (2010) lands the Asian swordsman in the American West, pitting samurai swords against guns and explosives in a computer-generated landscape.

The evolution from classic Western since the mid-twentieth century renders the genre less "pure," less white, less racist and patriarchal. The compression of globalization has increased the symbolic capital of cross-cultural hybridity. Yet racial, sexual, and class stereotypes continue to mark these supposedly new creatures, either Asian cowboys or American swordsmen. Their alleged newness masks what East Asia perceives to be American brashness, even folly, and what America perceives to be Asian mystique, even folly. Both are new bottles for wine so perfectly aged that it resembles a sleeping draught for consciousness. Given that the Western defines white masculinity against materialistic odds, the racial other, and women, millennial Asian cowboys, both heroic and comedic, appropriate the frontiersmen image as a boost and a buffoon in this unsettling era of global flow of capital and insecurity. Given that the Asian martial arts film defines Asian masculinity against materialistic odds, the racial other, and women, global cinema wills itself to believe in a mythical world of *qi* (breath) and spiritual transcendence where the fastest sword or punch, not gun, reigns. The world misses myth like home, a home-

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made comfort food of spaghetti or noodle.

This analysis proceeds in three parts. First of all, “Gunslingers Gone West, Figuratively” investigates how millennial Chinese and Korean Noodle Western borrows not only Spaghetti Western’s tripartite titles but also the trope of the West, pitting heroism against the environment and enemies. Secondly, “Swordplayers Gone West, Literally” follows ninjas and warriors as they migrate across the ocean to the West proper as part of the narrative and plot. Finally, “Filmmakers Gone Hollywood” looks “behind the veil” at Asian filmmakers beyond Noodle Western, whose directorial debuts in and for Hollywood mirror their filmic heroes’ journeys. That these Asian filmmakers merely dabble or even flop in their Hollywood productions suggests they are sojourners soon to be returned to their home base rather than conquerors like their screen doppelgangers. Noodle Western in this third and last segment expands, as Susan Kollin contends, from the film genre of Western to the West, the binary opposite to the East where these filmmakers originate.<sup>2</sup> Although some of them have not resorted to the Western genre per se, their westward movement to the capital of world cinema, Hollywood, manifests similar longing for the symbolic capital of the East’s dream-self, be it guns that annihilate, dollars that generate, or serial murderers who horrify and thrill us.

All three segments chart parallel trajectories of the millennial human mind. The West embodies for Asian cowboys, filmmakers, and audience—not to mention their counterparts in the West—less a place, a territory, than a state of mind, a dream of self-realization. Westerns represent a state of constant war, a fitting metaphor for the post-9/11 age of terror. Both Asian and American fantasies of cowboys and swordplayers mythologize power. The fetish of guns from Westerns crystalizes individual liberation in the wilderness, whereas the fetish of Japanese samurai and Chinese *wuxia* (swordplay) swords stresses transcendence through discipline. Despite their shared outcome of bloodshed, the former achieves the goal through, as it were, remote control, letting bullets fly, and through releasing heroic reserve, letting it go. Although knife-throwing

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2. Susan Kollin in *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West* (2015) links the West and the Western. The two allude to both the film genre and the East-West dichotomy. Kollin reads the West into many narratives in the vein of Mary Rowlandson’s captivity prototype. The West refers not only to “an American region” but also to a West “that is a key term in postcolonial studies, itself an imagined concept necessarily set in relation to a constructed and often vilified ‘East,’” or rather, Middle East in Kollin’s monograph (23).

and darts constitute part of a ninja's arsenal, the samurai and swordplayers traditionally prevail through self-control and restraint, holding it in until such point as to discharge the energy. Yet that unleashing of deadly force always proceeds as if in trance, as if the self is erased in favor of a greater, even cosmic, spirit. Guns from Westerns thrive on the power of the self, swords from the East on the myth of, in D. T. Suzuki's Zen terminology, "no-mind" or no-self.<sup>3</sup> Should the contrast of Western self-aggrandizement and Eastern self-effacement come across as a crass stereotype, such as it is in global cinema's productions, attesting to an asymmetry of the two hemispheres' symbolic capitals. This argument calls out the inconvenient truth of Orientalist and Occidentalst stereotyping in the so-called global hybridity. These stereotypes, like Marx's capitalist vampires, thrive precisely on their power to multiply, to attract their opposites as in magnetic poles. Western cowboys and Eastern swordplayers, in our global era, exert such force fields that they captivate their Other, those total strangers. The myth of Hollywood, on the other hand, beckons to Asian filmmakers as the acme of having made it in the profession, no different from Frank Sinatra's crooning in "New York, New York": "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere." Mythologizing universalizes; romanticizing inflates gunslingers, swordplayers, and filmmakers.

## II. Gunslingers Gone West, Figuratively

Rather than the Americanism of "Go West, Young Man!," millennial Asian gunslingers have already gone West figuratively, lured by the myth of Hollywood Western and global cinema. Chinese auteur Zhang Yimou does not set *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (henceforth *A Woman*) in the American West, but China's Western frontier of an earlier era, a Chinese filmic tradition of associating Westerns with *wuxia* films unfolding in China's westernmost Xinjiang province, a tradition founded by Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (卧虎藏龙, 2000). The bleak landscape and desert of and near Xinjiang invokes the American West where survival of the fastest gun, or sword, for that matter, is the law of the land. An ingenious Sinologizing of the thriller *Blood Simple*, Zhang weaves together the lawlessness of Western, Coen-

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3. D. T. Suzuki's *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (1949) epitomizes the Zen craze in the West, which is attracted to Eastern mystical vision of a cosmic mind.

style Texan “go it alone-ism” and “Chinese characteristics.” The last comprises an abusive patriarchal owner of an inn and noodle shop, his avenging wife with a gun, her timid lover, and a greedy soldier. The weapons and the perseverance of the soldier are no match for the gun: two bullets dispatch the patriarch and the last one reserved for his accomplice-turned-traitor, the soldier. The gun in the English title is the prop and the metaphor for coup de grace. The Chinese title (*Sanqiang pai'an jingqi* or *Three Shots and the Clash of Shock*) stresses the three bullets that constitute the climax of action. Zhang has tapped into not only the Western genre for the set, weaponry, and atmosphere, but also the Coen brothers’ global fan base to lubricate his own entry into the West.

Named after the Spaghetti Western classic, both *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (henceforth *The Good*) and *The Chef, the Actor, the Scoundrel* (henceforth *The Chef*) are throwbacks to an earlier conflict, WWII and the Japanese occupation of East Asia. The Korean and Chinese films manifest millennial regional contestation amongst neighboring countries. The Japanese empire in the past becomes an allegory for the present jostling for nationalist dominance and ethnocentric sentiment. *The Good* is an action flick with forces vying over an alleged Japanese treasure in Manchuria of the 1930s, the Wild West of Asia.<sup>4</sup> The Hitchcockian MacGuffin treasure turns out to be an underground oil reserve.<sup>5</sup> The opening sequence of the train robbery pays homage to the very first hit film, and a Western to boot, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903).<sup>6</sup>

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4. Thomas Lahusen calls Manchuria of the turn of the last century “the site of competing colonialism and conflict between Russia/the Soviet Union, Japan, Western powers, and a China ravaged by warring factions, civil war, and invasion” (“Introduction”).
  5. Alfred Hitchcock describes “McGuffin” (or MacGuffin) in a 1939 lecture at Columbia University: “[We] have a name in the studio, and we call it the ‘MacGuffin.’ It is the mechanical element that usually crops up in any story. In crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers.” The mystery and thriller genre deploys McGuffin as the mover of plot, a treasure or secret protagonists and antagonists vie to obtain. Cf. Hitchcock, Alfred. Interview with Francois Truffaut. *Framing Hitchcock: Selected Essays from the Hitchcock Annual*, edited by Sidney Gottlies and Christopher Brookhouse, Wayne State UP, 2002, pp. 47–48.
  6. Cf. Corkin, Stanley. *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History*. Temple UP, 2004. Corkin notes that *The Great Train Robbery* was the first hit film of the new medium, signaling the serendipitous “concurrent emergence of the film Western and of film itself” (8). Train robberies have become such a formulaic opening in Noodle Western to denote faraway, even otherworldly, fantasies that in addition to the Asian films explicated herein, *Let the Bullets Fly!* (让子弹飞, 2010) also starts with a comic train

What unfolds after that homage expands on the Western genre, spicing it up with historical animosity against a disciplined and militaristic Japan from the world war, mounting fear of a predatory China in the new millennium, and traditional Korean slapstick skillfully delivered by the weirdo and his sidekick. The relentless, over-the-top melee of gun battles and explosions among Chinese warlords, Japanese Army, Korean mercenaries, and local bandits leave three Koreans standing, a wish-fulfillment of Korea's eventual triumph amidst superpowers. The three Koreans spin off its Spaghetti Western namesake: the good bounty hunter with a cowboy hat, a double-barreled shotgun, and a Winchester rifle; the bad, pathological, knife-wielding assassin; and the pathetic weirdo played by the mercurial Kang-ho Song (송강호). The film concludes with a three-way shootout among the Korean hero, anti-hero, and clown, unabashedly derivative of the ending of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

In comparison to *The Good*, *The Chef* is nationalistic by far, with less of the besiegement mentality, even when the Chinese protagonists are about to be overrun by overwhelming Japanese forces. Apparently, a rising China can afford to play with its erstwhile pain of the Japan-occupied China. In fact, China uses historical pain to fan anti-Japan sentiment and consolidate collective identity. The plot involves four Chinese communist agents in the guise of money-grubbing miscreants with the mission to trick the infamous Japanese Unit 731 cholera expert into giving them the antidote to cholera, which the biological warfare unit unleashes upon the Chinese civilian population, unexpectedly contaminating its own Imperial Army. The four agents pretend to be the three stereotypical characters in the title: the chef who is a Japanese "running dog" or collaborator, the actor in Beijing Opera costume and facial makeup, and the scoundrel who fancies himself a Western outlaw with a touch of Johnny Depp from *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003–2017). They are joined by a buck-toothed, dim-witted woman, the chef's wife. *The Chef* thus shuttles between two extremes: communist propaganda's superhuman heroism without fear and hesitation whenever they gather to strategize their next move versus Stephen Chow-esque nonsensical, ludicrous farces they put on to dupe the Japanese bacteriologist.<sup>7</sup>

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robbery. In *Let the Bullets Fly!*, the antagonist's self-emblem is a cowboy hat.

7. Stephen Chow has perfected a Hong Kong version of slapstick, screwball comedies on exaggeration, obscenities, nonsensical plot, dialogues, and action in a series of films, including *Shaolin Soccer* (少林足球, 2001) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (功夫, 2004). These

The rapid-fire, breathless action opens yet again with a nod to Westerns. The scoundrel character, in a droopy cowboy hat, brandishing a makeshift pistol, robs the carriage transporting the cholera vaccine. Comedian Huang Bo (黄渤) who plays the scoundrel moves his body in imitation of Johnny Depp the drunken pirate, speaking in a heavily accented dialect. The idiosyncratic, slapstick style shifts between the scoundrel waylaying the cholera expert and animated sequences. The irreverent style deploys revolving camera, extreme close-ups, fisheye cinematography, split screens, rustic dialects, and a collage of music quotations, including solemn classical symphonies for the most hilarious moments—all for caricature and comic effect. Both *The Good* and *The Chef* are parodies of classic and Spaghetti Westerns. Yet their *modus operandi* remains a theoretical one-upmanship over Western inspirations. By playing and satirizing cowboys, Asian gunslingers fancy themselves of having prevailed, blithely oblivious to the irony of having gone West in the first place to secure not only the trope of trickster but also box office receipts, more domestically than internationally, though.

### III. Swordplayers Gone West, Literally

Although *Ninja Assassin* (henceforth *Ninja*) was directed by an Australian, James McTeigue, and *The Warrior's Way* (henceforth *Warrior's*) by a Korean, Sngmoo (sic) Lee, their plots are amazingly similar. Rather than diversity and innovation, global cinema showcasing Asian swordplays evinces formulaic uniformity. Both films feature Korean protagonists playing Japanese assassins: K-pop icon Rain as ninja and Dong-gun Jang wielding a long samurai sword. Given the unremitting tension between Japan and Korea, Korean performers and director assume the identity of their nemesis on screen most likely for practical reasons: Global fascination with Japanese samurai promises a bigger draw in the box office. Both protagonists venture to the West, Europe in *Ninja* and America in *Warrior's*, from a mythical Orient in rebellion against their clans, who pursue these “traitors” with a vengeance. Both revolt because of the assassins’ tribal cruelty. The films share the same device of flashbacks not only to the punishing, near sadistic, training, but also to their masters’ heartlessness in having forced them to kill the ones they loved—an innocent escapee and

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turn-of-the-century comedies are followed by lackluster films.

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a pet dog. Jang's master in *Warrior's*, in one such flashback, compelled the child Jang to kill his dog to toughen him up, who "has the perfect body for an assassin, but the heart of a priest."

Among the Orientals, only a handful are good, set against an overwhelming number of evil ones. These evil Asians are largely masked, as though they were faceless killing machines. Even when the brutal masters' faces are shown, the archenemies invariably look stern, cold, in wrath, even inhuman. *Ninja* actually begins by referring to the assassin as "it." The Oriental otherworldliness detaches and desensitizes audience in their normalcy from the screen violence from elsewhere. Tarantino in *Kill Bill* has adroitly managed to smuggle into global cinema such excessive bloodbath as beheading, scalping, amputating, slicing in half, and quartering swordsmen and one swordswoman (Lucy Liu) in the name of a make-believe Orient, complete with Japanese anime. *Ninja* reprises much of Tarantino's body mutilation. The protagonists, on the other hand, seldom betray human emotions, blank faces in the midst of sword fights and gun battles, blanker still when they are kissed by their love interests. The protagonists are killing machines with a golden heart. Whether Australian or Korean, both directors elect identical Oriental stereotypes of emotionally repressed, robotic, yet likable super killers for their lead roles. Against whom, of course, are arrayed more Oriental super killers so unlikable as to be repellent. This is Orientalism redux, new millennium style. One good Oriental, a mere nod toward political correctness for global consumption, is pitted against an evil mass.

This Oriental puppet show orchestrated by Westerners comes through blatantly in *Warrior's*, which opens with the voice-over of Oscar-winning Geoffrey Rush in the role of a drunkard-sharpshooter Ronald: "This is a story of Sad Flute . . . A long, long time ago, in a land far, far away." Following Rush's Southern twang, a ventriloquist's dubbing or a conductor's baton, as it were, the fairy tale unfolds. Sad Flute, otherwise nicknamed Skinny by Lynne, his potential lover, is the assassin who, in one fell swoop akin to cartoon, disposes of "the greatest swordsman in the history of mankind" as well as his entire clan but one—"a laughin' baby," in Rush's southern accent. While becoming "the greatest swordsman," Sad Flute's sparing of the baby is considered a betrayal to be avenged by other assassins all called Sad Flutes. True to the age-old stereotype of "Orientals look alike," these masked assassins are garbed in black leather and cape, plus a conical coolie hat, all computer-generated images straight out of video games. They are led by Saddest Flute played by Hong

Kong veteran actor Di Long. The name “Sad Flute” derives from the sound a person supposedly makes when the throat is cut. The proclivity to aestheticize violence spreads from the musical, flutey naming to nearly every moment of the film: cinematography, yellow filter for the finale of a sunset duel, computer-generated sets and sequences, Western film music of flourishes of trumpets and electric guitar as well as whistling to punctuate heroic bravado, and more.

But this aestheticizing of brute force is accomplished in part by its light-hearted, comic, somewhat Gothic tone. Rush hems and haws in his opening narration, right around the ellipsis in the earlier quote, which undercuts the solemn story he is about to share, literally rendering it a sob story. The intertitles of “the greatest swordsman” fade in and out, with the letters rearranged beside the former and, subsequently, current swordsman, like a running joke bouncing around two butts. Rush clowns about in his inebriated state in the first half of the film, aided by a gallery of “broken people” or circus freaks. The townspeople’s dream of a boom, including a circus with a half-finished Ferris Wheel, had gone bust when the railroad was built far away. This broken dream is inherent in the myth of Westerns:<sup>8</sup> some fantasize striking it rich in the gold rush; others fancy a second chance in the mirage of an open, boundless space;<sup>9</sup> finally, one anonymous Korean director with a nearly unpronounceable first name of “Sngmoo” debuts in the West with the star Dong-gun Jang—in South Korea and East Asia at least—only to sink back into oblivion again.

With very few lines, and those uttered in heavily-accented English, the protagonist played by Jang may as well be pantomiming to Rush’s narration, an Oriental body dramatizing the omniscient voice-over. Such duality surfaces indisputably when they reveal their true killer identity to defend the town

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8. Stanley Corkin in *Cowboys as Cold Warriors* sees the high point of Hollywood Westerns between 1946 and 1962 as a time when films “metaphorically narrate the relationship between the United States and the world” (3), that is as cold warriors. The U.S. as the superpower after WWII, Westerns graft “the historical onto the mythic” (3). By the same token, millennial decline of the U.S. is also reflected in Westerns.
  9. Austin Fisher in *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema* (2011) remarks that the myth of the American West is borrowed to depict the rural and backwards southern Italy. The South is treated as “an ‘Africa’ or an ‘Orient’ as northern momentum gathered behind this nation-building project” and “a vast safety valve for social tensions, offering boundless opportunities for rebirth and enterprise” (47, 48). Cf. Fisher, Austin. *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema*. I. B. Taurus, 2011.

against two impending enemies. Rush reminisces his past of giving up his guns as a promise to his beloved Beth, which foreshadows Sad Flute's decision to leave Lynne and the baby girl he spared in order to draw the horde of avenging assassins to himself and away from them. Just as Rush tells his past and Sad Flute's future, his Oriental counterpart busies himself in weeding and tending his flower garden in the middle of the ghost town, a *de facto* desert. The futility of growing flowers there epitomizes the thwarted love between Sad Flute and Lynne, in addition to Sad Flute's dream of a new life. Sad Flute remains reticent throughout this tête-à-tête, or, more precisely, Rush's talking head-à-Jang's listening head. If Sad Flute has any emotion at all, it is muted, repressed, as "Orientals" are prone to do, according to Sngmoo Lee's self-Orientalizing.

The twin enemies comprise "Colonel" and his pillaging gang from the West and Saddest Flute and his army of assassins from the East, coming all the way from the mythical Orient in response to the sound when Sad Flute, to save the town and Lynne from Colonel's slaughter, breaks the molten seal on his sword. Sad Flute smashes the seal with a laundryman's iron, which subsequently serves to fend off a thrust, in slow-motion, as the long sword glides off and grates against the flat bottom. This prop brings up yet another stereotype of Oriental restaurateurs and laundrymen, two professions that had sustained the Asian working class in the United States, from the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad and the xenophobic backlash to the present time. Sngmoo Lee chooses this survival strategy as a device for comedy. Sad Flute flees to the West because his friend Smiley, a Chinese laundryman, invited him. Yet Smiley passed away, leaving behind intimate photographs of him with various ladies of the night and a Lynne whom Smiley had taught swordsmanship haphazardly. Smiley is the other good Oriental, the clown to Sad Flute's deadpan. Good Orientals belong to either the Charlie Chan comic type or the Bruce Lee killer type. Sad Flute, in a straight face, inherits the laundry, providing some comical moments. The hilarity comes nowhere near Rush's slurring, bumbling drunkard with his posterior half exposed. So when a laundryman is transformed back to the greatest swordsman that he is, which the audience already knows, it pales in comparison to Rush's metamorphosis from an alcoholic to a sharpshooter.

Sad Flute and Lynne's so-called romance is perhaps the only place where Korean drama's staple of repressed masculinity and sexual abstinence (tease, rather) finds its way into this Korea-New Zealand production intended for global distribution. Rather than the Hollywood formula of "boy + girl = kissing

while disrobing,” Korean and Asian soap opera sexuality favors repression more akin to a medieval knight’s chivalry for his lady. Accordingly, the affectless Sad Flute never wavers in several of his physical contacts with Lynne. Instead of dancing, Sad Flute gives Lynne a lesson in swordplay, a sword de deux. Even when Lynne kisses him, Jang’s eyes remain wide open, ever vigilant of imminent danger. His expression stays blank, sad, forever onto himself, or onto selflessness consistent with pop psychology of Zen enlightenment. Giving up the self is allegedly how Tom Cruise manages a tie with a much stronger samurai in *The Last Samurai*, and that is also how Lynne finally masters knife-throwing. With her eyes blindfolded, Lynne is instructed by Sad Flute to use “her heart” to aim the knives. On the eve of the showdown, Sad Flute takes the initiative to go to Lynne, moving close to her for the first time, only to finger the points of her body that bring instant death—temple, neck, and heart. Asian version of unrequited love, of masculinity holding back emotions, has such appeal to Asian audience that it is a tear-jerking, heart-wrenching motif shared by Japanese samurai, Korean swordplay, and Chinese *wuxia* films. In *Warrior’s*, the thwarted romance has the added effect of shunning miscegenation, or love and sex across racial lines. Guns and swords may clash; the blood of masked ninjas may mingle with that of masked cowboys; yet never shall the twain of white and yellow bodies meet and coil in lovemaking. Such is the taboo of miscegenation. Nonetheless, superhuman restraint and self-denial are perhaps the only way to make the myth stick, lest one find the climax of Sad Flute’s sword faster than Colonel’s six-shooter incredulous. As Colonel pulls the trigger and the hammer hits home, Sad Flute leaps into the air in slow-motion, cutting his revolver barrel in half, the bullet yet to make its way out. The finale of *Ninja*, however, culminates in the destruction of the ninja clan with their swords, darts, and mystical power by a SWAT team with machine guns, explosives, and electronic tracking device. The gunfight intercuts with the sword duel between the rebel played by Rain and his one-eyed master. Swordplay is far more physical and visceral than bullets and bombs, a nostalgic regression to face-to-face combat and old-fashioned heroism at a time of remote controlled drones and precision-guided smart bombs.

#### **IV. Filmmakers Gone Hollywood**

*Warrior’s* is the Korean filmmaker Sngmoo Lee’s fast track to the global

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market via New Zealand, without much prior directorial output as collateral while launching his world debut. This is decidedly not the standard career path from the periphery to the heart of world cinema. Normally, only those Asian filmmakers who have enjoyed some degree of international success with their Asia-based films are nudged toward (by others, by themselves, or by both) the U.S.-oriented global cinema circuit. A wink from Hollywood may prove irresistible to Asian showbiz ever sensitive to financial gain and fame. Joon-ho Bong (봉준호) thus “jumps species,” all the way from the Han River monster in *The Host* (괴물, 2006) across the Pacific to a post-nuclear dystopia of *Snowpiercer*, one reminiscent of the barren, windswept, Darwinian West. Bong’s fellow Korean auteur Chan-wook Park (박찬욱) also remakes his revenge trilogy and K-Horror as the thriller *Stoker* with Australians Mia Wasikowska and Nicole Kidman, and Englishman Matthew Goode. This trajectory is no different from, a decade ago, John Woo’s Hong Kong gangster films remade in Hollywood, nor from the Pang brothers’ Southeast Asian horror and thrillers adapted as *Bangkok Dangerous* (2008) starring Nicholas Cage, nor from Ang Lee’s Taiwan family trilogy in the 1990s whitened and mainstreamed from *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) to *Life of Pi* (2012). Far from clean breaks from their Korean or Asian oeuvre, they transpose their distinct styles and even film crew to a largely Caucasian cast and Western set. Granted, neither Bong nor Park deploys the Western genre’s cowboys and gunfights. Yet an undercurrent of kinship runs just beneath such apparent differences, namely, Asian filmmakers have gone West, if not the Western genre per se, for the gravitas this act alone symbolizes.

Bong’s global-trotting, ever moving train *Snowpiercer*, the only safe place in a new Ice Age, harks back to the silent film *The Great Train Robbery*. Bong’s computer-generated monster in *The Host* morphs into the monstrosity of the train and its first-class “haves” enslaving the serfs crammed in the rear freight cars. Individual heroism of the rebel leader spearheads a revolt that results in a crash. The sole survivors are the Korean girl played by Ah-sung Ko (고아성) and an African American boy. Ko and her father played by Kang-ho Song are Korean holdovers, in addition to the director’s film crew, from *The Host*. Whereas Song’s comic, klutz role in *The Host* complements a long versatile career in Korean cinema, including *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, he is reduced to awkwardly holding an automatic interpreter box close to his throat as he speaks in Korean to await others’ response in English, which amounts to a roundabout translation for the audience. Otherwise, his daughter would

render it in her English, which is quite admirable for a non-native speaker, if all too brief and infrequent in comparison to her maternal protectiveness as she enters the monster's bowels, literally, in *The Host*.

Global cinema is hybridized by definition, yet it privileges English-speaking, Anglo-American casting. To gain access to the West at all, Asian performers must become contortionists, to adapt by twisting, forgoing a major part of their body—their voice—in a mime of their previous Korean-speaking roles. Which part of the body do Asian filmmakers sacrifice to get in? Shrouded within their Hollywood coming-out parties lies a trace of self-betrayal, a shadow of the elegy of Psalm 137: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.” Korean performers of *Rain*, Dong-gun Jang, and Kang-ho Song have indeed given up their mother tongue and spontaneous expressiveness in crossing the River of Babylon to reach Hollywood; Asian filmmakers have likewise disarmed, amputated themselves. *Snowpiercer* originates as a French graphic novel in 1984, adapted by a Korean filmmaker by integrating Western and sci-fi elements, employing an international cast and crew, meant for worldwide distribution. Noodle Western is but one phase of the Western genre's long evolution: Asian filmmakers are riding into the tinsel town, ready to substitute Western staples of cowboys and Indians with their signature style, such as Chan-wook Park's vampiric horror. This last example on Park takes leave of Westerns proper, as Park siphons off other symbolic capital of the West, particularly its Gothic tradition of vampires. Park's approach gestures toward potential directions as the Asian film industry lists toward the West in the new millennium. Evidently, Noodle Western has begun mutating, or aging into Park's blood-wine Westernization, a natural corollary of his K-horror.

In *Stoker*, Park's serial killers join bloodthirsty Western outlaws with murderous psychopaths. Even the film's title *Stoker* claims its lineage in Bram Stoker, the author of *Dracula* (1897). Moreover, the serial murderer Charlie Stoker is a stalker of his niece India. Charlie's ambiguous relationship with India's mother after her father's mysterious death is further satirized as “stroker” by bullies at India's high school. In the hip, stylized cinematography and editing of his vengeance trilogy, Park resorts to expressionistic filming and disjointed editing for this thriller. The camera jolts, shakes; it circles around characters and objects; the music envelopes and abruptly halts—all in concert with the protagonist India's psychological discord, an eccentric young adult

with a repressed Electra Complex, which her uncle titillates and nurtures through bloodshed. Charlie began his trail of blood when he buried alive his toddler nephew to monopolize his older brother and father figure Richard's love. Having committed himself to a mental asylum for decades and upon learning of Richard's decision to send him away from his niece India, now eighteen, Charlie murdered Richard, followed by the housekeeper of the Stoker estate and Aunt Gin, both of whom may expose his past to the authorities.

The "family" education of India the incipient serial murderer begins when Charlie deliberately gives hint as to the missing housekeeper, whose remains are kept in the basement freezer. He subsequently initiates India by sharing with her his food and red wine, body and blood of an anti-Christ, with uncanny echoes of Count Dracula breastfeeding his victim and "bride" Mina Harker in *Dracula*. This echo is not a remote one, given the actual breastfeeding with blood in Park's *Thirst* (박쥐, 2009), an Asian vampire film that bespeaks Park's obsession with the intersection of the Freudian oral stage and the rite of transubstantiation in Catholic sacrament. Indeed, the four-hand piano played by Charlie who grazes India's hands and neck and hair is so eroticized that close-ups of India's crossed, tightening legs and ecstatic face suggest an orgasm. Finally, Charlie's hands-on instruction of India culminates with his strangling of Whip, India's high school classmate, lying on top of her in an attempted sexual assault. Charlie never seems to eat, sustaining himself through bloodletting. India then follows Charlie's footsteps in shooting him dead just as he garrotes India's mother with Richard's belt, and then stabs a sheriff in the neck. The future is modeled after the past: Charlie over the years had pairs of his two-tone wingtip delivered as birthday present to India, who had mistaken them to be her father's gifts. As India lays in bed surrounded by boxes of shoes of shrinking sizes, that visual spectacle copycats Park's 2003 film *Oldboy* (올드 보이)'s horrifying denouement when the protagonist realizes through the family album of a maturing girl that his lover is in fact his long-lost daughter. Incest secretes itself in the genre of horror, from Greek tragedy *Electra* to *Stoker*. The incest taboo forbids India to consummate with her father Richard, displacing her desire onto hunting trips with him and bird taxidermy. Rejecting a father replacement, India shoots Charlie with the hunting rifle, and goes on her killing spree armed with "my father's belt, my mother's skirt, and my uncle's shoes," a hybridized regression to infantile oneness, the source of incestuous neurosis.

In this global era, Noodle Western as a volatile film genre is increasingly

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a staple for world consumption. Noodle Western draws from erstwhile Orientalism and millennial multicultural fusion in the same way noodles today combine old flavors and new packaging and presentation. As a result, noodles have been mainstreamed, taken for granted. Proof of the popularity of noodles lies not just in the eating of instant noodles but also, metaphorically, in *The Matrix*. “What’s really going to bake your noodle,” quips Oracle to a Neo taken aback by her foretelling of what is to come, “is would you still have broken it [her vase] if I hadn’t said anything?” Oracle’s vision and the expression of it exemplify verbal transposition and temporal warp. She sees into the future, thus breaking linear time as much as Neo’s mental conceptualization of the world. Her words are made flesh, or fragments on the kitchen floor. Neo’s brain, in the American slang for over-exertion, is fried, like a frying pan pasted on the bottom with a burned, blackened, overcooked crust. In her jazzy drawl, Oracle transposes “bake” for “fry your brain/noodle” because she happens to be baking cookies in her oven, not frying on her stove. The smashing of her vase, the disruption of the flow of time, and the rhetorical substitution based on her here and now converge to enlighten Neo, who is the One if only we break the order—spatial as well as temporal—of the anagram n-e-o. Neo’s brain and worldview have already been scrambled when he rides with Trinity, after having been “unplugged” by Morpheus. Neo points to a spot they drove by along the busy street and muses nostalgically: “I used to eat there. Really good noodles.” Whereas noodles, with stereotypical Oriental mystique, serve twice as Neo’s proverbial door of perception to the alternate universe, Noodle Westerns open likewise many career paths for Asian filmmakers and performers. Classic and Spaghetti Western are indeed in the rearview mirror now; Noodle Western in its ever-multiplying recipes will continue to bake our noodle and beguile our senses for years to come.



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## Abstract

Pivotal in fashioning the U.S. national identity, classic Westerns, circa 1950s, evolved into Spaghetti Western a decade or so later. At the turn of this century, global cinema witnesses an exponential hybridizing and genre-bending across the Pacific, Italian Spaghetti now remade into Asian-style Noodle Western. All across East Asia, cowboys, frequently in contestation with swordplayers, populate action comedies reminiscent of the triple stock characters of Spaghetti Western, resulting in Korea's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008) and China's *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop* (2009), and *The Chef, the Actor, the Scoundrel* (2013). Hollywood's *Ninja Assassin* (2009) and Korea-New Zealand production *The Warrior's Way* (2010) cash in on the Ninja and samurai mystique, crossing samurai swords with guns and explosives in a computer-generated landscape. This analysis proceeds in three parts. First of all, "Gunslingers Gone West, Figuratively" investigates how millennial Chinese and Korean Noodle Western borrows not only Spaghetti Western's tripartite titles but also the trope of the West, pitting heroism against the environment and enemies. Secondly, "Swordplayers Gone West, Literally" follows ninjas and warriors as they migrate across the ocean to the West proper as part of the narrative and plot. Finally, "Filmmakers Gone Hollywood" looks "behind the veil" at such Asian filmmakers as Joon-ho Bong and Chan-wook Park beyond Noodle Western, whose directorial debuts in and for Hollywood mirror their filmic heroes' journeys.

**Keywords:** Noodle Western, Asian gunslingers, Asian swordplayers, Asian filmmakers

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