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## Dubbese fu: The kung fu wave and the aesthetics of imperfect lip synchronization

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### ABSTRACT

Dubbese fu recuperates the dismissal of the 'poorly dubbed' English-language voice tracks in the Hong Kong kung fu films that became globally popular and profitable starting in 1973 as a position that improperly valorizes only the perfect lip synchronization version of the audiovisual contract. Instead of one, there is a total of three possibilities with Italy representing a looser version and the films of Hong Kong's kung fu wave representing the imperfect version. The internationalization strategy adopted by Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest identified the necessity of voice dubbings into the target market's language, which in the case of the United States, required English dubbings. ~~the goal was to become appealing to mainstream rather than art cinema audiences. The history of English dubbing studios in Hong Kong, the key individuals who made it happen, and the working conditions of the dubbing process are recreated to uncover how imperfect lip synchronization became a new aesthetic norm, despite valiant efforts to attain perfect lip synchronization.~~

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### Dubbese fu

Hong Kong cinema's sudden, unexpected rise to global popularity in 1973, introduced the rest of the world to an exciting mode of filmmaking that valued action over dialogue: Visually, Hong Kong's kung fu films showcased, with minimal obfuscation, elaborately choreographed fight sequences performed largely by Chinese actors trained in the Chinese martial arts. Its audio component, on the other hand, featured postproduction dubbed dialogue tracks that revealed noticeable lip lag, an imperfect technical side-effect of post-synchronization. This issue, especially in Anglophone markets, led many to dismiss these films for their 'otherworldly dubbing' (Bordwell 2000, 207) with some critics going so far as to write them off as 'hilarious' (Hammond 2000, 86) or even 'dreadful' (Logan 1995, 20). Nevertheless, this imperfection impeded neither the box office performance nor the global popularity of the kung fu wave, and, as Bey Logan correctly states, it has 'long been a source of joy for fans of the genre' (20). Together, these two components have come to define the aesthetics of the kung fu wave. One cannot exist without the other.

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I advance dubbese fu as a means of conceptualizing Hong Kong cinema's version of the audiovisual contract, whereby its aesthetics of imperfect lip synchronization highlights rather than hides the artificiality of lip synchronization to pluralize the range of viable enactments of the audiovisual contract. Dubbese fu is a combination of 'dubbese', the dialogue recorded after the film's production, and designed as much to match the labials and fricatives of the moving lips in the target language, as to translate the content of the original

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dialogue, and the kung fu film genre. Dubbed fu gained global recognition as a defining feature of the Hong Kong kung fu wave when it entered Anglophone territories, and before long became an accepted part of the genre, even with audiences more attuned to films with perfect lip synchronization (e.g. Hollywood films).

### Hong Kong's audiovisual contract and imperfect lip synchronization

Most mainstream sound films match sound with image to create the illusion of a diegetic reality. While the image track is single, the sound track is layered, with voice, music, and effects all recorded on different tracks. Given the anthropocentric nature of the cinema, the human voice is granted primacy in what Michel Chion terms vococentrism and verbo-centrism (1999, 5–6). The technical challenge of matching moving lips to the words that are enunciated took priority because its success promotes the strategy of invisible editing, which, in turn, enhances cinema's claim to audiovisual realism. Imperfect lip synchronization disrupts the 'naturalness' of this approach. Yet, rather than alienate audiences, Hong Kong's kung fu wave gained a global following (Desser 2000) that embraced imperfect lip synchronization as a valid cinematic aesthetic, although at times aligned with comedic campiness.

Rick Altman describes the ensuing game of matching the spoken words with the speaking image as the 'ventriloquist imperative' (1980, 74, emphasis in original)—an extension of a sound hermeneutic played out as a game of 'Marco Polo' between image and sound. Altman asserts, '*The image, in terms of sound, always has the basic nature of a question. Fundamental to the cinema experience, therefore, is a process—which we might call the sound hermeneutic—whereby the sound asks where? And the image responds here!*' (74, emphasis in original). Thus, as Robert Bresson has observed, 'A sound always evokes an image; an image never evokes a sound' (Quoted in Burch 1973, 90).

The manner in which the speaking image is synchronized with spoken words takes one of three forms: perfect, looser, and imperfect. Michel Chion identifies the first two in his formulation of the audiovisual contract, whereby, 'the audiovisual relationship is not natural but rather a sort of symbolic pact to which the audio-spectator agrees when she or he considers the elements of sound and image to be participating in one and the same entity or world' (Chion 1990, 222). For Chion, Hollywood and France represent perfect cases, with Italy representing the second, looser model of up to a tenth of a second (65). Chion's analysis does not address Hong Kong, so it becomes necessary to add a third element, that of an imperfect template, running in excess of a tenth of a second, to augment Chion's notion of the audiovisual contract.

An audience becomes accustomed to the dominant model of sound in its domestic cinema, which, in turn, becomes the global norm for that particular audience. Thus, for those who have Hollywood as their primary point of reference, perfect lip synchronization seems natural, even to be expected. So what is technically artificial and specific to each of the three situations becomes, through repetition, natural, and then, universal fact. Such is the case with the many Western pundits who denigrated the Hong Kong kung fu wave as being 'poorly dubbed'.

Nevertheless, if one takes either the looser Italian or the 'imperfect' Hong Kong version of the audiovisual contract as a model, perfect lip synchronization is not a priority and obsessing about it becomes a distraction to the cinematic pleasures inherent in experiencing

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aesthetic

a film. Additionally, as the popularity of Hong Kong kung fu films spread across the United States and the rest of the world, audiences used to perfect lip synchronization found ways to adapt to and even embrace imperfect lip synchronization.

For those involved in mainstream sound design, the highly synchronized suturing of moving lips to enunciation takes precedence as a marker of technical achievement. Before accepting the universality of the ventriloquist imperative enacted in sound cinema, Michel Chion's notion of *synchresis* offers a braking mechanism. Chion defines *synchresis* as

the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time. [...] *Synchresis* is what makes dubbing, postsynchronization, and sound-effects mixing possible, and enables such a wide array of choice in these processes. For a single body and a single face on the screen, thanks to *synchresis*, there are dozens of allowable voices—just as, for a shot of a hammer, any one of a hundred sounds will do (63).

Chion's notion of *synchresis* allows a plurality of potential pairings between the moving lips and the enunciated sounds of the speaking act. More importantly, Chion ruptures the ideology of the real by restating the very constructed-ness of how mediated sound effects become naturalized as a dominant cinematic practice within particular film industries. Chion's formulation also opens up the possibility of dubbing a foreign language track to replace the original spoken language track and, based on all three forms of lip synchronization, it is possible for any given audience to accept as fact that the on-screen actors are in fact speaking the dubbed language that the spectator is hearing in the cinema as natural, real, and original even if it is spoken by a separate voice actor, no matter what the language. It also paves the way for a disconnect when the image and sound just do not compute given cultural, ethnic, geographic, historic, linguistic and temporal conditions.

### **Dubbing and its history within linguistic nationalism**

The historical development of dubbing in the cinema brought with it a biased legacy supporting linguistic nationalism as a means to further cement the nation as a unified community speaking, perfectly, its own official national language. Often, nations choose only one official language (e.g. English in the United States) in an act of monolingual nationalism despite the fact that many of its citizens speak other languages. Nations with an imperial past, whose languages were also globally significant, favored dubbing as a means to exercise their imperial might in the home country and in all of their overseas territories. Because Hong Kong was a British Crown Colony until 1997, English was at first the only official language although its cinema operated in Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese, given its native population.

Robert Sklar (1993, 194) provides the origins of the term dubbing as one derived from 'vocal doubling' because it indicates 'the post-synchronization of a voice replacing the original'. Eithne O'Connell writes that the term 'dubbing' is

... generally taken to refer specifically to the preparation and recording of the target language voice track. But the strict meaning of the term dubbing is simply the laying down of a voice track, not necessarily a translated version (2007, 123–124).

Both definitions run counter to a common understanding of the term to mean the re-recording of a film's dialogue track from its original language into another. It is important to

note that as O'Connell's reminds us, dubbing also applies to the placement of dialogue in the original language. She also notes that despite the added cost and the extra time required, dubbing 'can reach a wider audience with low literacy rates, does not interfere with the visual integrity of the images on screen and allows for less concentrated, more relaxed viewing' (126). It is this appeal of a 'more relaxed viewing' experience that has resulted in the view that dubbing serves as a pathway to profit maximization at the mainstream box office.

John Kreng expresses it this way: 'Dubbed movies cater to an audience that does not like to read and that just wants to be entertained' (2008, 427). Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest Studios both understood this fact, and dubbed all of their pictures into English to reach the larger and more profitable Anglophone market, especially in the United States. More important, in the United States, a film market in which the presence of subtitles signals artistic foreign films, English-language dubbings were a necessity for a chance at mainstream box office success. Additionally, the other main European film markets operated in environments in which dubbing into the national language was a legal requirement designed to linguistically unify the nation.

Dubbing is also an act of linguistic nationalism, especially when it comes to those nations who favor dubbing over subtitling. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France follow a different logic from its three historically fascist peers of Italy (Patou-Patucchi 2009), Germany (Vöge 1977), and Spain (Danan 1999). The fact that these nations collectively represent some of the world's most important spoken languages is also an enabling factor (O'Connell 2007, 123). In the United States, officially a monolingual nation despite the presence of a multilingual population, Hollywood historically implemented an English only practice that transformed the cinema into a culturally and linguistically unifying force to acculturate immigrants. This practice also extended America's soft power globally by encouraging international viewers to identify themselves as culturally American because of the appeal of Hollywood's utopian depictions of the American Dream. Despite the fact that English originated in the United Kingdom, it was specifically, *American* English that became the *lingua franca* of the world after World War II, due largely to Hollywood's ability to entice the world, inclusive of the United Kingdom, to become 'American'.

### **Cantonese, English, and Mandarin, oh my!: film production in trilingual Hong Kong**

Hong Kong has never enjoyed the luxury of existing within a monolingual national context and thus, there are marked consequence in how it enacts Chion's audiovisual contract. Its status as a British Crown Colony up until 1997, when it became a Special Administrative Region of China, places it within, at minimum, a trilingual framework: Cantonese, English and Mandarin. Geographically, Hong Kong is part of the Guangdong region of southern China and therefore Cantonese reigns as the quotidian vernacular in Hong Kong. Politically, as a British Crown Colony, Hong Kong's only official language was, for most of its colonial period, exclusively English. Under this imperial system, English was the language of the colonizer, its colonized elites, and its subalterns but never for most of the colonized local population. This changed only in 1974 when traditional written Chinese characters and spoken Cantonese became the second official language in Hong Kong (Liu 2011, 13).

Historically, Mandarin entered Hong Kong's linguistic space on three separate occasions: First, when the Shanghai film industry relocated to Hong Kong to continue its commercial filmmaking business as a nationalizing cultural endeavor that accepted Mandarin as China's official national language. The Hong Kong film industry therefore partook in Chinese linguistic nationalism. Second, when refugees from across China fled to Hong Kong after the Chinese Communist Party defeated the Kuomintang in 1949. Finally, following the 1984 Joint Declaration that mandated the return of Hong Kong to mainland China as a Special Administrative Region for a fifty-year period. Henceforth, there could be no doubt that Mandarin will eventually overshadow Cantonese as the official and dominant version of Chinese linguistic nationalism. This reality was formalized in 1997 for Hong Kong and extended in 1999 to Macau when it also became a Special Administrative Region such that Mandarin, the spoken form of Chinese in Beijing, became the official version of Chinese for all of Greater China.<sup>1</sup> This includes mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

As a language-bound portion of world geography, 'Greater China' is an imagined space in which a Chinese nationalist imperative suppresses the existence of eight languages that comprise the Chinese linguistic continuum.<sup>2</sup> Chinese could only exist as a unified 'ethno-linguistic monolith' (Voegelin and Voegelin 1964, 19) by the shared use of a single system of written Chinese characters despite the myriad differences in pronunciation. In effect, even the official claims of a unified language under spoken Mandarin and a single unified written script, be it traditional or simplified characters, belie a nationalistic move to repress the linguistic evidence of a multilinguistic core to the various spoken Chinese languages and a plethora of local dialects that are practiced.

The linguistic drift in the evolution of Mandarin and Cantonese roughly reflects the north-south division of China, with the Yangtze River serving as a natural boundary. Thus it is possible to categorize Chinese into a tripartite language system: the Northern type, embracing all four of the Mandarin dialects—Northern, Northwestern, Southern and Southwestern; the Southeastern type, encompassing Yuè, Northern and Southern Mǐn and Kèjiǎ; and the Central type, a mixture of the Northern and Southeastern types, enveloping Wú, Gàn and Xiāng (Norman 1988, 181–244).

### The fundamentals of dubbing

Eithne O'Connell identifies a total of three stages when dubbing can occur during the full production process for both original and foreign films: pre-synchronization, direct synchronization, and post-synchronization (124). Pre-synchronization occurs when music tracks, on which the vocals have already been recorded, are played back during the film shoot. Direct synchronization is the ideal scenario, in which during the film shoot, the visual and sound elements are recorded simultaneously often on a sound stage where external sound can be largely eliminated. Post-synchronization is the industrial term for dubbing. It occurs after the visual track has been finalized. When original language dialogue must be re-recorded and placed into the soundtrack, the process is called Automatic Dialogue Replacement (ADR). Here, 'automatic' refers to the automatic mechanical replay of the segment of the film, usually 30–60 seconds long, that requires dubbing.<sup>3</sup> The original use of film spliced into a repeating loop gave the practice its more familiar name, 'looping'.

Nicholas Pasquariello interviews several prominent Hollywood sound designers who address the issues involved when pursuing perfect lip synchronization. Among these, Chris Newman discloses that Hollywood prefers to minimize ADR, ideally, to less than ten per cent of the final dialogue track (1997, 32). This is due to the fact that Hollywood's standard requires synch sound recordings during the actual production. When this fails, then ADR is introduced during postproduction to compensate for the segments of dialogue that, for whatever reason, did not record well during the regular production schedule. Mark Berger explains that action films can require up to 90% ADR due to the noise created on-set by explosions and gunfire during the film shoot, which would negate any recorded synched dialogues from the original on location footage (124-5). However, while ADR may allow a second chance at perfect lip synchronization, Berger bemoans that the necessity of ADR can delete upwards of 90% of the original voiced performance (124-5). Due to this reason, Hollywood does not favor ADR.

The insertion of another language from that of the original film is most often referred to in lay terms as dubbing and thus, will be referred to as such hereafter. With dubbing, there can be no pretense of perfect lip synchronization since the original language dialogue track is replaced by a foreign language track. Thus, the potential for temporal disjuncture of lip synchronization is exacerbated as films undergo this process. As a matter of course, Hollywood schedules two to six weeks to dubbing a film into one target language where the looped dialogue in ADR fashion could be automatically repeated a number of times until perfect lip synchronization along with the tonality of the vocal performance can be secured (Vivarelli 2007). Hollywood also contracts dedicated professional actors to become the target language's 'voice' for its English-speaking Hollywood A-list stars so that the star's foreign language voice remains the same from one film appearance to the next within that language. However, for the 'poorly dubbed' Hong Kong kung fu wave films, a different dubbing protocol was in operation.

Lora Myers elaborates on Hollywood's goal of attaining the elusive yet highly prized goal of 'perfect sync' in the dubbing of foreign films into English, usually from Europe, as one where,

[t]he English adaptation must be written to synchronize with the movements of the on-camera actors' lips. Lip movements are basically broken down into labials and fricatives: labials including plosives such as m's, b's and p's; fricatives comprising f's and v's, with w's and 'wah' sounds falling somewhere in between. Ideally the English dialogue should conform to these lip movements yet still retain the sense and feeling of the original dialogue (1973, 56).

Very often, the attempt to achieve perfect sync would necessitate the deployment of 'dubbese'—innocuous phrases designed to cover up gaps between the approximation of labials and fricatives (56). Here it is not so much an exercise in translation but rather one of transformation given the technical constraints in the creation of dubbese. In fact, the desire for perfect sync is driven by the preoccupation of American producers to avoid stigmatizing their imported foreign films as 'dubbed versions' despite their obvious dubbed-into-English status. It is the visual evidence of 'lip lag' (57), the misplacement of a few labials, which is held to be the kiss of death at the box-office as well as a sign of technical imperfection. Still, the difficulty and constraints in dubbing a foreign language film is not limited to just the English-speaking world.

Myers's elaboration of the ways and means that film dubbers go to minimize lip lag is just the tip of the dubbing iceberg. Istvan Fodor replaces perfect synch with synchrony along with three additional dubbing concerns: phonetic, character and content (Fodor 1976).

Phonetic synchrony replicates Myer's concern with fricatives and labials since the objective is to match the moving lips with corresponding enunciations. Character synchrony attempts to mimic the dubbing voice with the original actor to the fullest extent, inclusive of the audio physique of the two actors. Content synchrony seeks to secure a semantic match (Quoted in O'Connell, 10). For Fodor, the goal is to dub with all three concerns intact. Unfortunately, far too often, Fodor's ideal is not attainable. This is the case with dubbese fu.

### Shaw Brothers' subtitling and dubbing strategies

Hong Kong's trilingual context repeats the dilemma faced by all film industries with the arrival of sound cinema and its corresponding fatality of Babel. Hong Kong's polyglot status and its nexus for Chinese filmmaking outside of Communist mainland China and Nationalist Taiwan meant that those who came to Hong Kong to work in its film industry may have been ethnic Chinese, but they did not all speak the same dialect of Chinese. Even Cantonese could not be imposed on the film set. This meant that a simple question or instruction would require the intervention of several individuals who could translate what was said in as many languages as required, but due to the very nature of translations, these were never done to anyone's complete satisfaction. David Bordwell recaptures the studio norm at Shaw Brothers: When it came to scriptwriting priorities, 'Striking situations or gimmicks are most important, connective tissue comes next, and dialogue runs a distant third' (121). Once this kind of script was secured and the shooting team assembled, Bordwell continues, the 'typical film was shot according to a rough story outline, with little indication of dialogue. Many directors, including the kung-fu master Lau Kar-leung, simply asked their players to recite numbers during takes and dubbed in lines later' (121). In the case of Hong Kong action films such as those of the Hong Kong kung fu wave, the actors were there primarily to perform action scenes while a team of trained voice actors would dub their voices later during postproduction even for Cantonese and Mandarin. This became the studio standard starting in the late 1960s because it freed the screen actors to complete more films, often even more than one film at a time, by relying on voice actors to provide dialogue as well as facilitating the addition of last minute dialogue changes (126). In other words, the division of labor was that screen actors performed on the visual track, while voice actors performed on the dialogue track. It was extremely rare for one actor to perform both. then

David Chiang, most famous for his lead role in Chang Cheh's *The New One-Armed Swordsman* (*Xīn dú bì dāo*; Chang 1971) confirms that at Shaw Brothers, it was indeed the norm to shoot without synch sound since that would allow a film to be completed within three months on average, which allowed a star to complete at least four films per year (Bettinson 2011, 6–7). Insisting on synch sound would add an extra 2–3 weeks to the production schedule and so a separate voice actor was responsible for dubbing all of his spoken lines of dialogue be it for Cantonese, Mandarin, English or something else. It was not until 1975, when Li Han-hsiang, director of *The Empress Dowager* (*Qīng guó qīng chéng*; Li, Han-hsiang 1975), required Chiang to voice his own lines for the Mandarin language track that Chiang began to record, regularly, his own dialogue. This was because Chiang found it so easy to synchronize his speech with the movement of his lips onscreen (6). (b)

A major consequence of this praxis is that the action is freed from the constraints associated with shooting synch sound. Bordwell states,

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Since dialogue is not recorded during shooting (and often not written in advance), Hong Kong filmmakers have relied on conveying information visually. Directors can hustle actors around a set with no worry that they will move out of microphone range, and the editor can freely insert shots without regard for continuous dialogue (126).

A second benefit of dubbing is that it allows films the opportunity to be only slightly modified for numerous and diverse audiences. This Hong Kong industry standard gives credence to Chion's notion of *synchresis*, since Hong Kong cinema's local, regional and ethnic audiences did not object too much when they encountered these 'otherworldly' dubbing outcomes of imperfect lip synchronization because they understood that the cinematic pleasures were primarily visual with the audio a lesser concern.

The kung fu wave provided both dubbing and subtitles but the preference was for dubbing, especially for overseas markets in North American and Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> First Shaw Brothers and then Golden Harvest understood that their globalization strategy required dubbings into the target languages in order to maximize box office profits and minimize the alienation effect of a foreign film released in these overseas markets.<sup>5</sup>

The most outstanding issue for both the subtitled and dubbed English-language versions of these Hong Kong kung fu films is the issue of culture and the lack of cultural knowledge on the part of those who create the linguistic bridge that allows non-Chinese speakers of English to engage with these films, since by definition, these films were never designed at the start to exist as first and foremost English-language films. Michelle Gadpaille focuses on 'cultural knowledge' as the key missing link to what distinguishes an outstanding example of translation from one that makes you wonder why it was even attempted in the first place (2008, 77).

For Hong Kong, which falls under what Nick Ceramella identifies as a 'qualification-conscious society' where 'formal education accompanied by a systematic and appropriate academic training are two of the requirements needed to be officially recognized' (2008, 3) given its dual legacy of Confucianism and British elitism, it is odd that the individuals who entered the film industry as subtitlers and dubbers are all individuals with little or no formal training in these areas, or in translating Cantonese, Mandarin and English, for that matter. The actuality is one of happenstance dilettantism rather than professionalism—the result of the studio's efforts to minimize costs, maximize profit and forget about anything else.

The standard practice at Shaw Brothers was to grant the English subtitling company a copy of the Chinese script. However, this was not always the case. David Bordwell lays out the compromised practice of subtitling in Hong Kong as follows: The process of subtitling was initiated with an audiocassette recording of the completed film that was screened for this purpose. The recording was then farmed out to small companies, usually family run, that specialized in subtitles. The Chinese language dialogue is transcribed into English based on this audio recording alone without double checking the subtitles to match with the action in the film itself. This resulted in a number of odd translations especially when gendered pronouns were present since the same spoken sound and in the same tone in Mandarin, *tā*, could mean he, she, or it based on the context. Subtitling a film usually took two to three days for a fee of a few hundred US dollars (126).

This resulted in what Jeff Yang terms 'subtitle English', which became a distinctively acquired language of its own (2003, 68). Consequently, even the official studio sanctioned English subtitles were, as Yang asserts, 'Often hastily produced based on half-completed (or non-existent) scripts—and sometimes without even basic knowledge of the storyline—translations have ranged from amateurish to comical' (68). This has led to the creation of



many fan-initiated lists of comical English subtitles and dubs (Logan; Hammond and Wilkins 1996). Writing on behalf of the fan community, Stephan Hammond celebrates the 'magnificent manglings of the language perpetrated, unbeknownst, by the unsung heroes who subtitle Hong Kong films' (26).

Shu Kei, an established member within the Hong Kong film industry in a variety of roles, including translator and subtitles editor, provides personal testimony to the impossible subtitling environment in Hong Kong at the height of the kung fu wave: 'I am neither a professional translator nor a professional subtitler' (2009, 213). His first foray into the field happened in 1973 when he was offered a part-time position by a Warner Brothers publicity specialist to provide the Chinese subtitles for a Hollywood Western entitled *The Deadly Trackers* (Shear 1973). At that time, Shu was still in high school and the subtitles he provided for the film were dismissed for being 'too literary' to the point that he was never asked to undertake the job again (213). Shu reveals that back then, there was no professional subtitling program or a properly trained company undertaking this endeavor since those who were asked to complete this work were amateurs who, despite their best efforts, never reached professional competency. Often, someone on the distribution team was asked to complete this important task as a sideline part-time venture for some extra income rather than as a full-time professional gig (214). He himself honestly asserts that the dubbing was done 'often badly' (214) given that those involved in the film industry during the kung fu wave found themselves caught in an uncomfortable sense of 'the helplessness, as well as the haplessness, of being a subtitler' (214). He takes this position because 'the subtitler has very limited power' (214) since he is at the tail end of the process, plus being required to quickly complete a necessary task without the full benefit of time, support or the proper resources to complete the task with his honor intact. His personal experience reveals that he was not granted an opportunity to first view the film before undertaking the subtitling assignment. He was also required to abide by a 'basic word-for-word pattern' of translation that neglected the issues of timing, mood, social background, implications and references within the text. The technical limitations of subtitling include a large fixed font size which can occupy up to twenty per cent of the lower frame along with a maximum of fourteen Chinese characters inclusive of punctuation (216). Such a process clearly hindered Shu from observing what he mentions as a key element in the process of subtitling: '[taking] into consideration the interaction between cultures' (219).

What Shu Kei experienced is not unique to just Hong Kong but endemic to both subtitling and dubbing around the globe. Sergio Patou-Patucchi confirms that most individuals in the subtitling and dubbing professions are 'self-taught people. At best, and only for the luckiest of them ... they learnt their craft through the benevolence and disposability of some experienced colleagues' (2009, 140). Another issue is that inevitably, 'fidelity to the original text cannot but be accidental and fortuitous, as every departure from it will never be intentional, unless the adapter asked for a very good translation in the first place' (140). He also identifies two key compromises of a 'hypo translation' approach:

- (a) Unable to understand the real message of the source language and therefore limit their work to an act of simple lexical transfer, without paying any attention to the intelligibility of the text or the non-concordance of the semantic fields in the source and target languages;
- (b) Ignore the rules of the target language (i.e. their own language) and the grammatical structure of the source language (141).

All of these factors lessened the Hong Kong kung fu wave's quality of translation in both the dubbed and subtitled versions.

One key strategy to overcome the inherent foreignness of these Hong Kong films was to provide English dubbing so that at least to the ears, the spoken language would envelope them in a sonorous cocoon so audience members could focus their attention on the intricate fight choreography. Shaw Brothers made an important decision in 1965 that both had a direct impact on the issue of poor English dubbings, and also influenced the kung fu films of the 1970s: Recognizing that their prior export strategies to Japan and the United States were dismal failures, Shaw Brothers implemented a studio-wide policy prioritizing post-production sound. This was combined with the selection of acting talent based primarily on their physical prowess and athleticism (Armanet and Armanet 1988, 48). With this combination, Shaw Brothers was ready to conquer the export market with action-driven genre films emphasizing heroic individuals performing visible acts of physical valor. Action choreography, augmented by shooting and editing techniques that showcased the visual spectacle of heroic physical actions, captured the imagination of foreign cinematic audiences and resulted in repeat box office successes. Jimmy Wang Yu, the most prominent star of the *wūxiápiàn* (fantastic swordplay films) epitomizes this new emphasis. An accomplished swimming champion, car racing devotee, martial arts practitioner, and streetfighter, Wang starred in successive box-office hits and genre masterpieces as Hong Kong's leading action star before the arrival of Bruce Lee. He was most famous as the one-armed swordsman in Chang Che's *wūxiápiàn* films that became million dollar box office hits in Hong Kong and propelled Wang to superstar status. It was also Wang who directed and starred in *The Chinese Boxer* (*Lóng hǔ dòu*; Wang, Jimmy Yu. 1970), which officially inaugurated the *gōngfūpiàn* (kung fu films).

On the very heels of the highly successful *wūxiápiàn* were the *gōngfūpiàn* that truly went international as the kung fu wave and thus achieved a key aim of Shaw Brothers: the market domination of America's very own domestic screens. It was Chung Chang Wha, a South Korean director working at Shaw Brothers, and his film *Five Fingers of Death* (aka *King Boxer*, *Tiān xià dì yī quán*, 1972) that became the very first Hong Kong film to be released in the American market. It also reached the top spot in the American box office on March 28, 1973.<sup>6</sup> This film launched what David Desser terms the global 'kung fu craze', when on May 16, 1973, three kung fu films from Hong Kong, including *Five Fingers of Death*, held the top three spots, signaling the apogee of the kung fu wave (2000, 19). Like the *wūxiápiàn*, the films of the kung fu wave featured actors chosen primarily for their athleticism. In particular, their mastery of the martial arts and this became the driving criteria for their career advancement. These skills were then modified for the medium-specific requirements of the cinema with Bruce Lee serving as the genre's global superstar.

Marilyn D. Mintz gives voice to the appeal of these Hong Kong kung fu wave films:

The essential aspect that differentiates the martial arts film from all other film is the emphasis on fighting ability. The appeal is primordial—the individual against great odds, having to rely on his own spiritual and physical capabilities to survive and endure. Bruce Lee personified a dynamic, universally recognizable hero. His technique and magnetism, as well as his film sense, helped establish the Chinese martial arts film in the West as an exciting style that provides extraordinary possibilities in movement. The overwhelming international acceptance of the films came at a time of increasing East-West understanding and cultural exchange (Mintz (1978, 219).

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¶ In other words, those who became enraptured by the kung fu wave understood that focusing on the otherworldly dubbing meant that you were missing the genre's key attraction: the performance of intricately choreographed kung fu action. John Kreng would go so far as to argue that Hong Kong's approach to fight choreography transcends language since it serves as non-verbal dialogue (2008). The other consequence of Shaw Brothers' 1965 decision is, of course, the adoption of the most liberal version of the ventriloquist imperative via imperfect lip synchronization.

### English-language dubbing in Hong Kong as a tale of two Thomases

The dubbing of English-language dialogue tracks for the Hong Kong kung fu wave films for both the Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest was largely completed by two unrelated British men who shared very parallel lives. Ted Thomas and Rick Thomas (screen name, Rik Thomas), were both former members of the British military, who also by happenchance ended up in Hong Kong and were invited, out of the blue, to give dubbing a try. The two became the leading English voices of the kung fu wave and many other genres from numerous Asian and European film industries.

Ted Thomas is the senior of the two by at least a decade. In two separate interviews conducted in 2011, first by Steve Ryfle and then by Brett Homenink, the following facts emerge. Ted Thomas joined the Royal Navy first as a radar specialist on the HMS Eagle before being reassigned to naval intelligence and stationed in Hong Kong to help enforce a United Nation embargo of strategic resources to China. He started his radio broadcasting career with the British Forces Broadcasting Station before undertaking the same position for Radio HK, which is now RTHK, as a side job. In 1957, he retired from the military and worked full-time at Radio HK. 1957 is also the year when he became Run Run Shaw's top English-language consultant and began his foray into a vibrant and lucrative second career as an English-language lip-synch voice actor at Sir Run Run Shaw's invitation starting with the Japanese *Zatoichi* (Misumi 1962) film series before moving on to dub films from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, South America, Europe and even from Yugoslavia. Radio Hong Kong granted him a number of assignments, including a series of interviews, sometimes featuring film stars. In 1967, when television was introduced to Hong Kong, he was sent on a globetrotting tour to learn the finer art of television broadcasting in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Upon his return to Hong Kong, he specialized in radio and television interviews, including a radio interview of Bruce Lee in 1972 as Lee's career was skyrocketing after the box office success of Lo Wei's *Fists of Fury* (*Táng shān dà xiōng*, aka *The Big Boss*, 1971). In the mid 1960s, he founded Axis International, the first English-language lip-synch dubbing studio in Asia. Ted Thomas and Axis International were perfectly poised to assist Sir Run Run Shaw's strategy to conquer the global market by producing action films with English-language dubbed dialogues starting with the *wūxiápiàn* to limited success before hitting the gold mine with the *gāngfūpiàn*. His voice and company would go on to enable other national film industries to conquer the English speaking global film market including Japanese collaborations with Toho and its *Godzilla* (Honda 1954) franchise along with Daiei and its entire run of the *Zatoichi* film series of the blind swordsman (Ryfle 2011; Homenick 2011). Thomas also had a number of minor onscreen roles in films such as *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (King, 1955) and *The World of Suzie Wong* (Quine, 1960) (Ryfle).

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The second Thomas, Rick, provided Daniel Wu of *Giant Robot* magazine a rare interview in 2003. He disclosed that his first career was as an officer of the British Special Forces with tours of duty in Vietnam and the Congo. He retired at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and settled in Hong Kong in the early 1970s. In 1972 while sharing a pint of beer at a pub, a stranger asked him if he wanted to give dubbing a try. He accepted the challenge and a new civilian career was born. Before starting his own dubbing company, he worked for Ted Thomas. Rick Thomas lays claim to dubbing the English-language dialogues to many of the Hong Kong kung fu films that had 'One-Armed Swordsman', 'Wu Tang' and 'Shaolin' associated with its export oriented English-language title. This would automatically include nearly all of the top *wūxiápiàn* and *gōngfūpiàn* films that were exported overseas. After the kung fu wave collapsed, he established Omni Productions as the second major Hong Kong based English-language lip-synch dubbing powerhouse with a stable of 15–20 voice actors under contract. The company expanded to dub into English other Hong Kong film genres, Japanese TV drama such as *The Transformers* TV series (1984–1987), and even Communist propaganda films (Wu 2003, 48–49).

Some of the other English-language voice actors include Vaughan Savidge, who self-identifies as the dubbed voice for Jimmy Wang Yu in *The One-Armed Swordsman* (*Dú bì dāo*; Chang, 1967) (Homenick 2010), which contradicts Rick Thomas's claim. Ted Thomas also identifies the male voice actors Chris Hilton, Jack Murphy, Warren Rooke and Ian Wilson, along with the female voice actresses Angel Chapman, Mandy Cooke, Linda Masson and Lynn Wilson as the uncredited English voices featured in early Hong Kong action films (Homenick 2011). However, because most of these voice actors and actresses were never given screen credit for their work, their full contribution in this important endeavor to make these Hong Kong kung fu films accessible to an Anglophone audience will never be fully disclosed.

### Dubbing conditions in Hong Kong during the kung fu wave

Dubbing conditions in Hong Kong before, during, and after the kung fu wave of 1973 reveal a spartan industrial approach in which not many resources were deployed, with the objective focused primarily on quantity, completion speed, and cost minimization when faced with the technical complications that arose from the unique challenges inherent with analogue technology.<sup>7</sup> Ted Thomas recounts the actual dubbing practices in place during the Hong Kong kung fu wave. First, he would view the film, determine the number of actors that would be required for the dubbing session, calculate the actor's fees, and contact his team. During that same initial screening, Ron Oliphant, a senior government official who would undertake this task after work, created a ¼ inch audiocassette recording of the full film. Oliphant would then work at home to create the lines of English-language words and phrases for his dubbing actors to vocalize the next evening. However, he had to perform a type of linguistic magic since at best, his 'original script' was from a rough English translation of the Mandarin dialogue, if one was even available. The resulting English language dubbing script focused on a syllable-by-syllable match, paying special attention to the closed mouthed b, m, and p utterances, which only addressed the labials but not the fricatives. This new dubbing script was then matched with 30–60 second segments of the film that were looped and projected onto a large screen in front of the voice acting team. Oliphant's contribution was to reduce the time required to dub a 90-minute film from 20–30 hours down to 5–6 hours

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(Homenick 2011). In this respect, Oliphant followed the best practices in play within the international film community.

Ted Thomas continues by describing the next stage, which involved the dubbing process itself. The image of the moving lips were as large as ten feet wide horizontally to aid the voice actors to match their lines of dialogue with the mouth movements they were seeing on the screen. Each loop was played as often as necessary until the team secured the right vocal performance. The goal was to have the Anglophone voice actors, usually from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada but not from the United States, create 'believable' emotive performances, which, when achieved, could cover up the unavoidable out of synch final print that resulted when the magnetic tape recordings of their performances in the dubbing studio were transferred to the optical track of the 35 mm film print. This meant that despite achieving perfect emotive lip synch in the dubbing studio, the transfer process often nullified their aim at lip synch perfectionism (Gorizard 2017). It was this technical issue that created the imperfect lip synchronization effect that defined the audio aesthetic of the kung fu wave.

On average, each film required 12–20 hours to complete with six to eight-hour afternoon dubbing sessions starting at 6 pm and running usually until midnight but ending no later than 2 am. The recording studio was never state of the art and lacked proper soundproofing. The studio itself was just 200 square feet composed of a set of adjoining studio apartments. The team of up to ten voice actors worked in a cigarette infused environment with nicotine helping them to concentrate since many of them had already worked a regular full-time day job. The dubbing sessions began with the scenes requiring the most number of actors in the big crowd segments since this allowed the supporting actors to clock out earlier and thereby cut down on voice actors fees (Gorizard).

Graham Earnshaw provides a second account of film dubbing practices in Hong Kong. In 1977, Earnshaw joined Ted Thomas' dubbing team as a temporary replacement dubbing script writer and director when Ron Oliphant went on vacation. Earnshaw's account verifies Thomas' account outside of a few details that complicate Ted Thomas' more seamless presentation. For Earnshaw, he remembers using a large reel-to-reel tape recorder, dialogue loops running one to two minutes in duration, each loop would end with a loud beep and this was indicated in the dubbing English-language script to aid the dubbers, lip synchronization focused on matching 'lip-flaps' with varying degrees of success, post-dinner sessions created a challenge due to frequent gastrointestinal sounds erupting unexpectedly, and the addition of X-rated loops for versions of the films in more permissive film markets. As the dubbing script writer, his primary challenge was to make an accurate translation based on lip movements between the two languages. But due to the differences between Chinese and English in words, lip movements, sentence structure and length, dubbing was not an easy enterprise. Unlike Oliphant, Earnshaw was bilingual in English and Chinese (Earnshaw n.d.).

Ted Thomas defines a good dubbing voice actor as someone who could perform three or four distinct voices and even accomplish the difficult task of performing a solo dialogue exchange between two characters in the same scene. A really talented voice actor could perform up to eight different voices (Homenick 2011). However, with each voice actor responsible for multiple voices, retaining consistency of vocal performance regarding timing, pitch and accent was always an issue, especially when the dubbing session required more than a single six to eight hour session. One of the reoccurring vocal motifs in Axis

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International's vast output for both Hong Kong and Japanese films is the overuse of 'but still'<sup>8</sup> and 'so then' as automatic generic fillers when a two-syllable utterance was required but the dubbed English translation had nothing proper to provide in the translated dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

Ted Thomas claims to be the first English-language voice actor in Hong Kong to introduce Hollywood's Mid-Atlantic English accent into the colony's dubbing profession (Ryfle). This is a wise strategic decision given that these Hong Kong films aimed to conquer both the British and American English-language markets. However, the delivery of his Mid-Atlantic English accent was fundamentally compromised since the original lines of dialogue were not originally in English nor spoken by him. This is the opposite case of Hollywood where actors delivered their own lines of dialogue in this geographically neutral accent and recorded anything that did not record well with their own vocal performances via the ADR process. Consequently, those who experienced an English-dubbed Hong Kong film from this period heard not so much a Mid-Atlantic English, but rather dubbese English, since what was said came across as otherworldly and at times even unworthy.

One of the distinguishing features of Mid-Atlantic English is the prominence of the articulated 'R', which for a Chinese speaker of English as a second language is one of the most difficult sounds to enunciate correctly since it comes across as an 'L' and sometimes as a 'W'. When these films then reached American cinemas, the effect was alienating since most individuals may have mistaken the voices to emanate from ethnic Hong Kong Chinese voice actors speaking those English-language lines of dialogue in a form of British colonial English as practiced and perfected for broadcasting purposes in Hong Kong. Additionally, these Hong Kong Mid-Atlantic accents still retained too much of a British articulation such that they came across as stilted, unnatural and alienating for an American ear. These are some of the factors that led to the otherworldly nature of these English-language dubbed films of the Hong Kong kung fu wave.

The 'R' matter could also be used as a weapon to position a Chinese actor to lose face when required to pronounce words containing this letter. Bruce Lee experienced this in full force on the set of *Enter the Dragon* (Clouse 1973) because the film's director and scriptwriter conspired to intentionally embarrass Lee by forcing him to pronounce in English the challenging surname of 'Braithwaite', the name of the British agent who recruits his character to infiltrate Han's island (Thomas 1994, 175 and 179) along with 'Roper', the easier to pronounce name of the white American martial arts competitor in the tournament. Lee was unnerved since this was the first kung fu film that he performed where he recited his original lines in English.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

While the concept of dubbese fu originates with the kung fu wave since this was the global film event that introduced and popularized imperfect lip synchronization as a valid form of the audiovisual contract, it is a phenomenon that is not limited to just this genre or to merely the Hong Kong film industry. The audio component of dubbese fu expanded beyond the kung fu wave to also become an identifiable aesthetic practice that proliferated as a result of the concentration of affordable English-language dubbing studios headquartered in Hong Kong. The voice actors employed by Axis International and Omni Productions became the vocal signatures for countless films produced in non-English locations that sought international box office profits in Anglophone markets by securing a dubbed

English-language voice track for their non-English dialogue films. This list naturally includes, but is not limited to, nearly every film from Hong Kong, the *Zatoichi* and *Godzilla* film franchises from Japan, communist propaganda films from the Second World, and even some films that were not designed specifically for release in Anglophone markets. The small set of English-language dubbing companies in Hong Kong also provided the same familiar voices for television series, such as the original animated *The Transformers* from Japan. So while Carl Douglas celebrated the visuality of the kung fu wave with his hit song 'Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting' (1974), in reality, everybody was even more engaged with the aurality of the kung fu wave by way of dubbese fu listening.

## Notes

1. Official Mandarin is also referred to as Modern Standard Chinese. Five other signifiers for spoken Mandarin exist, each connoting a different perspective on the national language: *hànyǔ* (the language of the Han Chinese, the dominant ethnic group in China comprising 95% of the total population), *pǔtōnghuà* (the common speech as instituted by Mao Zedong in mainland China), *guānhuà* (the language of officialdom referring to the *mǎndàrén* (the high officials that served under the Manchurian Qing Dynasty), *huáyǔ* (refers to the full range of Chinese dialects depending on the speaker's primary dialect such that someone from Hong Kong would mean Cantonese) and *guóyǔ* (the national language). Since the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the capital was moved to Beijing, Mandarin served as China's official language for both the Ming and Qing dynasties although no effort was made to disseminate it to the masses. Mandarin was popularized during the Republican Era (1912–1927) but resulted in limited success due to internal political divisions and warfare. The Chinese Communist Party promoted Mandarin as the standard vernacular in 1955 and it took on national permanence when Mao Zedong ordered all cadres to learn *pǔtōnghuà*.
2. Under linguistic categories, Chinese is a member of the Sino-Tibetan family. Sino-Tibetan languages are characterized by the occurrence of tones in the phonological system, the prevalence of monosyllabic morphemes and monomorphemic words, and the tendency to employ syntactical devices in grammar. Mandarin has four tones and Cantonese eight. Sino-Tibetan stands as the second most populous language family in the world after Indo-European. The eight languages that determine the Chinese continuum include Mandarin, Wú, Yuè (Cantonese), Southern Mǐn, Xiāng (Hunanese), Kèjiā (Hakka), Gàn and Northern Mǐn (Merritt 1987, 143). In 1987, out of a total of 927 million speakers of Chinese, 680 million spoke Mandarin, 69 million Yuè, 53 million Southern Mǐn, 36 million Xiāng, 29 million Kèjiā, 28 million Gàn, 21 and 11 million Northern Mǐn (143).
3. I thank Rick Altman for this clarification.
4. Subtitling poses its own set of challenges and constraints that revolve around the necessity to place time and space constraints prior to that of verbatim translations. These include (1) 1.5 feet of film is required for each 10 letters and spaces in the title or one second per word plus five seconds for slow readers; (2) nuances of the original are lost along with their emotive enunciations; (3) white subtitles become invisible against white sections of the film; and (4) it requires some mastery of speed-reading or an overemphasis on merely enjoying just the visual images. See Myers 1973, 58; and Vanderplank 1998, 961–964.
5. There are three main strategies for releasing a film into a foreign market that speaks a different language with different degrees of retaining the film's inherent foreignness with an eye for box office success: subtitles, dubbing, and remakes. Subtitles retain the full foreignness of a film, both in the visual and audio realms, that also requires a literate audience willing to read the subtitles. This works best for art films that have won critical accolades from prestigious international film festivals. Dubbing provides a compromise by retaining the foreignness of the

visual while domesticating the audio by changing the vocal track to match the target language. This is the case with the kung fu wave. Remakes provide the most extreme case where the foreign is eradicated both visually and aurally to create a new completely domesticated film for the target audience, which often betrays the aura of the original film.

6. For details on Chung Chang Wha's film careers in South Korea and Hong Kong, see Magnan-Park 2011.
7. Dubbese fu in France provides an even starker situation. See Anon 1984.
8. Film critic David Chute called these Hong Kong films 'but still' movies due to the overuse of this phrase (Hammond and Wilkins 1996, 204). Craig D. Reid provides the actual Chinese phrase that resulted in the English 'but still' as *kěshi*, which usually translates to 'but'. However, since it is a two-syllable utterance in Mandarin, the one-syllable 'but' would create an extra set of silent mouth movements in the dubbed English-language dialogue. To account for this extra second syllable, 'but still' became the automatic dubbed preference. See Reid 2017.
9. 'Ted Thomas presents both 'but still' along with 'so then' as the favored two-syllable fillers. See Homenick 2011.
10. Bruce Lee was bilingual in both Cantonese and English. As Kato in *The Green Hornet* television series (1966–1967) along with a number of guest appearances in numerous other American television series, Lee performed his own lines of English dialogue without mishap. However, the American releases for his Hong Kong kung fu films all featured an English-language voice actor who dubbed his lines. *Enter the Dragon* is the only film that featured Lee's own voice in the original English-language dialogue track. See Gaul 1997, 170.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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