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The Ghostliness of Genre: Global Hollywood Remakes the 'Asian Horror Film

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# The Ghostliness of Genre: Global Hollywood Remakes the "Asian Horror Film"

BLISS CUA LIM

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1 Rooney, "Remake Wranglers Mine Asia South America," 14.

2 Richards, "The Eye," 80.

3 Rose, "Nightmare Scenario," 11.

4 Corliss, "Horror," 76.

5 Some accounts date the beginning of this trend to DreamWorks' purchase of remake rights to Hideo Nakata's 1998 Japanese horror film *Ringu* in 2001, others to Miramax's acquisition of remake rights to Jo Jing-yu's South Korean action-comedy *My Wife is a Gangster* in the same year. See Friend, "Remake Man," 43-33; and Chute, "Spotlight," C1.

#### Remaking the New "Asian Horror Film"

Starting around 2002, trade publications and mainstream journalism began to take note of a brief but furious burst of transnational exchange between Hollywood and what has been dubbed the "Asian horror file-a new regionalist appellation less inclusive than it sounds, since it consists chiefly of a limited slate of Japanese, South Korean, Hong Kong, and Thai horror films. In 2003 Variety quipped, "In the Hollywood remake kitchen, French is no longer the *cuisine du jour*, Italian has lost some of its flavor, Latin dishes may be starting to tickle taste buds, and Asian fusion is so hot it's smoking."1 A year earlier, one reviewer wrote that Hideo Nakata's Ringu (1998), Takashi Miike's *The Audition* (1999), and the Pang Brothers' *The Eye* all "confir[m] Asia's position at the vanguard of modern horror cinema."<sup>2</sup> Rights to The Eye (dir. Oxide Pang Chun and Danny Pang, 2002) were bought by Tom Cruise and Paula Wagner for a remake at Paramount, released in 2008. The Pang Brothers' The Eve was among several "original Asian horror films" that American studios saw as "reviving" the "creatively dead" Hollywood horror film, whose own slasher film sequels had run out of steam. One reporter wrote, "Hollywood's horror industry is running scared. The formulas and franchises have been squeezed dry. And now Hollywood is turning to Asia to restock the cupboard."<sup>3</sup> Nakata's 1998 Ringu, a filmic adaptation of the 1991 novel by Suzuki Koji, is often positioned as the progenitor of the Asian horror remake trend, sparking generic repetition across Asian and Hollywood film industries, a regional-international cycle replete with its own conventional iconography: "girls with long hair hiding their malevolent faces, dotty old ladies, child zombies caked in white-all of which you can expect to see in the Hollywood remakes."<sup>4</sup> Beginning around 2001, and continuing for about five years, Hollywood was caught in the grip of an Asian horror remake frenzy. Witness DreamWorks' remakes of the Ringu cycle (The Ring [2002] and The Ring 2 [2005]), Senator International and Paramount's remake of Takashi Shimizu's Ju-on: The Grudge (2003) as The Grudge (2004), and Disney-based Pandemonium's remake of Nakata's Dark Water (2005), to name only a few.<sup>5</sup> By 2003, at least eighteen remakes of films from South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong were either completed or in the works at various studios: DreamWorks,

Paramount, Miramax, Warner Bros., United Artists, Fox, Universal, and MGM among

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them;<sup>6</sup> and in 2004, with the cycle's momentum still unchecked, one writer noted, 6 What follows is a partial list of Asian films-"The list of remake options seems to get longer by the week."7

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Hollywood's recent crop of remakes is certainly not confined to Asian horror alone; nor is the current preponderance of horror on studio slates surprising. In 1999, with The Blair Witch Project and The Sixth Sense, Hollywood horror films turned a profitable corner, away from previously exhausted genre trends (1980s slasher films and their ironised 1990s counterparts, e.g., Scream [1996]).8 By 2002, Variety was reporting a wave of new and upcoming Hollywood horror releases.<sup>9</sup> In 2003, Sight and Sound remarked the popularity of remakes and sequelizations of 19705 Hollywood horror classics. Like 1980s horror films-that revisited 1950s movies, remakes such as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003), "a hallmark 1970s horror product cunningly rebranded for a jaded 21st-century audience," testify to what has been called horror cinema's "regurgitative" impulse, an "enthusiasm for devouring and regurgitating its own entrails."10

The genre film is cannibalistic: "implicitly, each new genre film ingests every previous film."<sup>11</sup> The centrality of intertextual repetition in genre films is particularly pronounced in the cannibalism of a remake, which even more emphatically "ingests" its precursors. The names for intertextuality and generic exchange are many: remake, sequel, allusion, and influence retain, to greater or lesser degree, the more pejorative cast of rip off, steal, and copy. Their shared semantic horizon, of course, is repetition: a repetition often faulted both for lack of originality and for imitation found wanting. David Wills offers an incisive definition of the remake, writing that "what distinguishes the remake is not the fact of its being a repetition, rather the fact of its being a precise institutional form of the structure of repetition, what I am calling the 'quotation effect' or 'citation effection,' the citationality or iterability, that exists in and for every film."<sup>12</sup> As a precise institutional structure of repetition, the remake, like the sequel, has long stood accused as "an exploitative device, a cynical ploy to sell an inevitably inferior new text on the basis of an earlier work's success."13

Faced with such dismissals, it is helpful to bear in mind that the remake, which has also been productively defined as an intensified, hypervisible form of intertextuality, announcing and foregrounding its citational, allusive structure, actually "problematizes the notion of originality."<sup>14</sup> For instance, the sup-posed inferiority of 11 Altman, Film/Genre, 26. the imitative text in relation to a prior original is a difficult accusation to sustain in the wake of concentric influences that are transhistorical as well as transcultural. One of the blurbs on the DVD release of the U.S. Verbinski version of *The Ring* calls this remake "the best scary movie since The Sixth Sense" (fig. 42).

This line condenses the dense and dizzying tissue of global intertextuality subtending the film. The Ring, being a remake, quotes the Japanese Ringu; but the quotation doesn't end there. This film about children who personify occult forces also references the far-from-original The Sixth Sense (1999), which is itself indebted to a venerable Hollywood genealogy of the monstrous child from the late 1960s to the 19805: to wit, Rosemary's Baby (1968), The Exorcist (1973), The Omen (1976), and The Shining (1980).<sup>15</sup> This lineage is made explicit in several print advertisements for the 2002 theatrical release that prominently feature one reviewer's intertextual endorsement: "Not since 'The Exorcist' or 'Rosemary's Baby' has a movie been so truly frightening."16

Why horror? Why the remake? What accounts for the new conspicuousness of a genre (horror) and a generic practice (the remake) in transnational generic exchange between Hollywood and regional Asian cinemas? The answers to these

not confined to horror films alone-whose remake rights have been optioned by Hollywood studios. The list is organised by studio. DreamWorks: Ringu (Japan, 1999), My Sassy Girl (South Korea, 2001), and A Tale of Two Sisters (South Korea, 2003); Miramax: My Wife Is a Gangster (South Korea, 2001) and Shall We Dance? (Japan, 1996) Dimension: Teacher Mister Kim (South Korea, 2003) and Jail Breakers (South Korea, 2003); Warner Bros: Infernal Affairs (Hong Kong, 2002), Il Mare (South Korea, 2000)), Marrying the Mafia (South Korea, 2002), and Akira (Japan, 1988); United Artists: The Cure (Japan, 1997); Universal: Chaos (Japan, 1999); Radar Pictures: Yun (Japan, 2001); Paramount: The Eye (Hong Kong, 2002), (with Sam Rami and Senator International) Ju-on (Japan, 2000), and Ikiru (Japan, 1952); MGM: Hi Dharma (South Korea, 2001); Fox: Afterlife (Japan, 1998) and Tell Me Something (South Korea, 1999).

#### 7 Chute, "East Goes West," 10.

#### Lyman, "The Chills! The Thrills! The Profits!" 1

See Dunkely, "H'wood's Fright-Geist." Dunkler mentions the following releases: They (2002); Ghost Ship (2002); Van helming (2004); Darkness Falls (2003); The Exorcist: The Beginning (2004); Dreamcatcher (2003); Jeepers Creepers 2 (2001); Gothika (2003); Freddy vs. Jason (2003); Final Destination 2 (2003); Highwaymen (2003); and remakes of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003) and Willard (2003).

10 See Kermode,"What a Carve Up!" The films Kermode mentions include recent remakes The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Dawn of the Dead [2004]; Amityville Horror [2005]; rereleases (Alien: The Director's Cut [2003]; The Exorcist: The Version You've Never Seen [2000]); sequelizations of 1970s horror classics (Land of the Dead [2005]); and 1980s remakes of 1950s horror (The Fly 1986]; The Thing [1982])

12 Wills, "The French Remark," 148 (my emphasis)

13 Budra and Schellenberg, "Introduction," 3-4

14 Horton and McDougal, "Introduction," 3.

22 Friend "Remake Man" 41-44

15 See Sobchank, "Bringing It All Back Home," for Vivan Sobchack's astute reading of the monstrous child as a figure of generic exchange.

Pat Collins and Ran as a blurb in U.S. newspaper advertisements for the film in 2002.

17 Dunkley, "H'wood's Fright-Geist," 1.

18 Dunkley and Swart, "Cannes Preview," B1; see also Klein, "The Asia Factor in Global Hollywood."

19 McNary, "Remakes Need a Makeover."

20 Klein. "The Asia Factor in Global Hollywood."

21 Harris, "You Can't Kill the Boogeyman," 98-99.

in the "genre space" of the midpriced horror film. "Horror films are often cheap to make, they are not usually star-driven, don't need a lot of expensive special effects and can be made in a tight locale."17 Senator International, one of the companies involved in the Ju-on remake, sees itself as playing in the "genre space" of horror and comedy, a "robust" clearing in the international film market for moderately priced fare (productions between USsio and \$40 million, at a time when production and marketing costs for Hollywood releases averaged around US\$90 million).<sup>18</sup> Second, remakes and sequels are at base financially conservative studio strategies, considered a "foolproof," inexpensive, alternative form of development, since the screenplay has already been proven market-worthy. In addition to being defined as an institutional structure of repetition, the remake can also be usefully considered as an alternative form of studio development. A Fox executive quips that remakes constitute "a different kind of development-not necessarily easier or harder." The hope, nonetheless, is that the remake delivers a "foolproof idea": by tinkering with a script that has already proven successful, studios can avoid lengthy and costly development.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the remake names a labor practice: in the context of globalised Hollywood production and distribution, the labor market has also become transnational. Christina Klein writes that when Hollywood studios purchase remake options for South Korean films, "in effect, they are buying the labor of South Korean screenwriters, which is much cheaper than that of American writers."20

questions are both generic and economic: first, the "value proposition" of playing

As scholars have pointed out, classical Hollywood horror was characterised by sequels. In the 1960s, sequelization was part of the conservatism of New Hollywood marketing.<sup>21</sup> Horror film remakes and sequels, then, are truly nothing new; nonetheless, the preponderance of Hollywood remakes of commercial Asian fare is a striking recent phenomenon. Of course, there have long been horror films produced in Asia. But what I am calling the new Asian horror film refers to the pronounced role played by horror, among other commercial genre fare, in the convergence of regional, "pan-Asian" cinema with global Hollywood initiatives from about 2001 onward.

Part of this story is already the stuff of recent American film-industrial legend. The New Yorker describes Roy Lee as the "remake man" who "brings Asia to Hollywood." By 2003, Lee, a Korean-American film producer working in a whiteruled industry, had sold Hollywood studios remake rights to eighteen Asian films, including Ringu and Ju-on. Test market studies for Hollywood films often come too late (after the film has already been financed and completed) and are frequently inaccurate (relying on small, unrepresentative audience samples). In this light, Lee's opportunistic pitch-telling Hollywood executives to regard an Asian movie as "a script that someone had taken the trouble to film, and that happened to have been tested and proved as a hit in its own country"-is extremely appealing to studios uncertain about market tastes.<sup>22</sup>

My analysis of generic-economic factors in Hollywood's remaking of the new Asian horror film as a regionalist-globalist phenomenon is confirmed by Roy Lee's own responses in an interview with Gary Xu. In Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema, Xu writes:

Why has remaking East Asian films become such a popular trend at the turn of the millennium? Conversations with Roy Lee yielded several interesting clues... First of all, Lee mentioned several times that he did not have a particular interest in Asian horror films. All

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16 The guote is attributed to WWOR reporter

he saw was market potentials. If East Asian remakes become no longer profitable, he would easily switch to other venues for his film productions. Second, Lee emphasized repeatedly how cheap it was to make films in East Asia. East Asian filmmakers were all happy to sell the re make rights to Hollywood, for the fee paid by Hollywood studios (albeit a small portion of the cost of remaking the pictures) would most likely recoup what they originally spent on making the films. Third, Lee did not need to search hard for profitable East Asian films. The films came to him: filmmakers sent him videos, and they even asked him to read their scripts before their films went into production. It is thus not exaggerating to say that many East Asian films aiming at commercial success now have a built-in "remaking mentality" that self-consciously measures themselves against the Hollywood standard. Fourth, all of the originals of Lee's films had been tested well in the East Asian cinema markets: The Ring, The Grudge, My Sassy Girl, and Infernal Affairs were megahits in East Asia. Lee's trust in the testing effect of East Asian markets reveals an assumption that North America and East Asia share the same patterns of consumption.<sup>23</sup>

Together with generic and economic factors (the demonstrable market success of a relatively inexpensive foreign film, on the one hand, and the attractiveness of Hollywood's purchasing price for remake rights to Asian film producers, on the other), a deracinating, globalist pitch unites both players. As Xu notes, Asian filmmakers have begun to make films with an eye toward Hollywood uptake in remake form, a "remake mindset" among local filmmakers that represents an amplification and internalisation of Hollywood as a global norm, an institutionalised set of standards and expectations. Meanwhile, Hollywood players like Lee, who function as broker and liaison between international film industries and markets, also presume a deracinated, globalist horizon of reception, or, as Xu puts it, an assumption that what works in Asian markets will work in American ones.

I first began to work on Hollywood's spate of Asian horror remakes when it was gathering momentum; at this writing, the cycle appears to have run its course, with market exhaustion setting in for audiences inundated by a string of horror releases (not all of them remakes of foreign antecedents). Genre cycles always spiral toward decline: one journalist quips, "J-horror is dead. J-horror has never been bigger." This observation points to fears that Hollywood remakes are bound to "kill" or betray their source, even as the status of J-horror films declines, going from cult standing among cinephiles to "cash cow" once the remakes become high-grossing hits with mainstream U.S. audiences.<sup>24</sup> Cult aficionados of Asian horror, early adopters ahead of the studios' mainstreaming curve, have closely scruti-nized Hollywood's remake cycle. English-language fan reviews I have come across, whether in print sources or online, sound an unmistakable note of exasperation—ranging from skepticism to outright resistance—in relation to Hollywood remakes of beloved works drawn from the corpus of what has been called Asia's "dark cinema."<sup>25</sup>

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In June 2007 the *Los Angeles Times* noted wryly, "The chill is gone," adding: "Call it a market correction. Call it a slump. Call it audience fatigue with a subpar rash of crazed killers, wanton vampires and jiggling coeds, but horror, one of Hollywood's enduring staples, is tanking." Forty-some horror films were released in 26 "Consider the numbers. Last year, the studios released 23 horror movies. This year the tally will be 42, nearly double, and too often, the take at the box office has been anaemic, leaving studios and distributors with lots of red ink gushing through the bottom line... "The Grudge," released in 2004, is the last horror film to break \$100 million at the domestic box office. Horror has been faring even worse in the international market, which for typical studio films constitutes 60% of horror box office grosses" (Abramowitz and Crabtree, "Hollywood Horror Films Suffer Box Office Anemia," A1).

23 Xu, Sinascape, 155.

27 Wong, "Cities, Culture and Cassettes," 102–104

24 Derakhshani, "Hollywood Not Scared Off by Talk of J-Horror's Death," E7

25 This term is used by Patrick Galloway (see Galloway, Asia Shock).

2007, more than doubling the numbers for the year before. It had been three years, however, since a horror film earned more than \$1.00 million in domestic box office receipts in the United States. That film was a remake of a Japanese thriller cycle with origins in video: *The Grudge*.<sup>26</sup>

### Deracinating Genres: From Hong Kong Action to Asian Horror Cinema

Any notion of the distinctiveness of national cinema (whether formal, culural, economic, or historical) must contend with Hollywood's voracious capacity to *deratinate*—that is, uproot, efface, and delocalizse—such forms of distinction. Historically, Hollywood's deracination of "Asian cinema" has taken aim at the genre film: first, "Hong Kong action film style" from the 1990s on; and second, the appropriation of "pan-Asian" horror cinema in the following decade. The recent emergence of a generic practice, the remake, as a vehicle for Hollywood's globalist deracination of Asian genre films points to the recruitment of generic intertextuality for flexible accumulation. Generic repetition and influence are here a function of the speed with which film industries respond to their rivals by mimicking and deracinating their local, cultural, or national signatures onscreen. The recently minted "Asian horror film" and globalist profiteering of Asian commercial cinema as at once culturally specific and culturally neutral, hence immensely appealing to audiences worldwide.

Hollywood's once-furious remaking of Asian horror films was composed of two moments: a first moment of triumph for local Asian film industries, whose inexpensive genre films outdid high-dollar Hollywood productions domestically; and a second, bleaker, moment, when Hollywood remade these modes of resistance into global profits, outperforming domestic productions once again by retooling the Asian horror film as a cultural key to enticing Asian markets.

In an article first published in 1999, Cindy Wong writes presciently of the "sinister globalism" that subtends Hollywood's interest in Hong Kong cinema. "By taking over Hong Kong," she warns, "Hollywood ultimately denatures and denies it... Hong Kong films may be different from Hollywood, but as Hollywood analyzes what sells in Hong Kong film, it finds that it can appropriate these features and sell them better." That year and the following, *The Matrix* (1999) and *Charlie's Angels* (2000), two films that notably did not feature Hong Kong stars or directors, premiered. With the help of two prominent Hong Kong action choreographers, the brothers Yuen Wooping and Yuen Cheung-yan, both films arguably found "what sells in Hong Kong film" and "sold them better" to audiences the world over, fulfilling Wong's prediction that "the general audience may see a Hollywood movie with or without knowledge of its Hong Kong connections at all."<sup>27</sup> Such films did not originate in the Hong Kong film industry but brandished a set of cinematic strategies (editing, action choreography, cinematography) formerly identifiable as stylistic signatures of particular Hong Kong action film genres.

Through *The Matrix, Charlie's Angels,* and a host of others in their wake, including the global blockbuster/art film coproduction *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), global Hollywood has invoked, with great success, a deracinated understanding of "Hong Kong cinema" as a style, an aesthetic, a mark of polish in certain high-concept action films. This makes it possible for "Hong Kong cinema" to be in the room, so to speak, in a film starring Cameron Diaz, even for an audience unaware of action choreographer Yuen Woo-ping's lineage in Hong Kong martial arts film production nor his status as Hollywood filmmaker-émigré. (Nonetheless,

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in a dual-tiered mode of address, publicity around both *The Matrix* and *Charlie's Angels* was poised to draw the interest of knowing Hong Kong film buffs as well.) The appropriation of Hong Kong action films by Hollywood productions is not new, nor is it the first time that Chinese martial arts genres have been absorbed into American action films in the service of American stardom.<sup>28</sup>

An unmistakable aspect of this earlier moment of deracination was its generic stamp, its reductive caricature of Hong Kong cinema as "action film style." Stephen Teo calls the international misrecognition of Hong Kong cinema as action film the "supreme irony in the history of Chinese cinema," given that martial arts films were on the wane for domestic Hong Kong audiences at the time of Hollywood's infatuation with the genre in the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> Critical ambivalence toward the *wuxia* or martial arts genre has long structured debates on the "quality film," first in mainland China in the late 1920s and early 19305, then in Hong Kong via Shanghai expatriate filmmakers in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup> The deracination of Hong Kong action cinema was a "prequel," so to speak, for the current deracination of Hong Kong genre movies under the banner of the Asian horror film. In hindsight, what is most striking about Hollywood's deracination-andappropriation of Hong Kong genre cinema (and soon after, of "Asian" genre cinema) is the speed with which it was accomplished. In 1996, Time magazine asked: "Will Hollywood Ever Make a Place for Hong Kong Cinema?" The question referred to the hesitant overtures of Hong Kong film luminaries John Woo and Jackie Chan to the U.S. film market. At that time, a Hong Kong genre, the action film, was also being touted as Hollywood's much-needed "shot of adrenaline," echoing more recent rhetoric hailing the new Asian horror film as a tonic for another depleted Hollywood genre.<sup>31</sup>

Hollywood's uptake of Japanese and South Korean genre films happened quickly as well. To take the example of South Korean commercial films: in 2001, when Miramax paid \$950,000 for remake rights to My Wife Is a Gangster, trade journalists were still regretting that "South Korea's movie miracle"-powerful domestic box-office successes that outshone Hollywood summer blockbusters-"largely remains a secret reserved for its 45 million people." Said Variety, "The irony is that all this success, which mirrors other celluloid renaissances in Thailand and Hong Kong, is little appreciated beyond home turf." While "Korea Fever" for popular music, television, and film ran strong in the region (especially in South Korea's most lucrative entertainment market, Japan), the window of opportunity to Western audiences appeared narrow owing to the lack of a clearly identifiable generic trend and Hollywood's limited slots for Asian films: "With the West able to absorb only a handful of Asian pics every year, Korean cinema still lacks a popular hook in audience's minds. Chinese cinema is martial arts extravaganzas and arty peasant dramas, Wong Kar-wai and Zhang Yimou. But Korean? Even upscale Western auds would be hard-pressed to name a single director, let alone a popular genre, that identifies Korean cinema."32

Hence, for *Variety* in 2001, the "global breakout" "eyed" by Korean cinema still seemed to be a question of gaining international legibility through a single signature genre or via globally recognized stars and/or directors. Yet by the end of the decade, South Korean cinema emerged at the forefront of the Hollywood remake fever: Universal is at work on a retooling of Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003),<sup>33</sup> and *The Uninvited*, DreamWorks' remake of *A Tale of Two Sisters* was released in 2009.<sup>34</sup>

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28 David Desser writes that when the kung fu craze spearheaded by Bruce Lee movies subsided, a deracinated martial arts genre continued to be popular in late 1970s American Vietnam War films. According to Desser, such films saw "the rise of white male martial arts starts who, in a sense, co-opt Asian martial arts for the American action hero, for the American movie star, for the American man." See Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze," 39.

29 Ironically, when *Iron Monkey* came out in Hong Kong, that film style was going down," says the film's star Donnie Yen. "But Woo-ping's fight standards are so high" ("Hollywood Embraces Three Legendary Hong Kong Film Directors").

30 Teo argues that this reduction of Hong Kong Cinema to wuxia overlooks achievements in other genres, especially the *wenyi* [realistic, socially conscious] melodrama acclaimed by local critics. Subsequently banned by the Guomindang government of pre-Second World War China, the wuxia revived in postwar Hong Kong, where it soon became a generic staple. See Teo, "Hong Kong's Electric Shadow Show," 19, 24. For more on Hollywood's "selective uptake" of Hong Kong Cinema see Cheung, "Hong Kong Filmmakers in Hollywood: Terence Chang," 130-31, According to Cheung, "When Hong Kong Cinema was in fashion in Hollywood, many directors made their U.S. debuts: and stars like Chow Yun-fat and Michele Yeoh were cast as leads in Hollywood A productions. The Hong Kong style of action has been adopted in the hugely popular The Matrix, choreographed by Yuen Wooping, setting off a new 'kung fu craze.' However, this by no means shows that Hollywood has accepted Asians and Chinese language films; only that it is being very selective about certain elements of Hong Kong Cinema."

31 Corliss, "Go West, Hong Kong,"67

32 Elley, "South Korea,: 20,25

#### 33 James, "Cinematic Seoul,: 42-43

34 According to Han Cinema: The Korean Movie and Drama Database, the screenplay was adapted by Craig Rosenberg (whose other writing credits include *Jurassic Parks*), and the film marked the directional feature debut of the British brothers Tom and Charlie Guard. Remake rights were purchased in 2003 by DreamWorks for 1 million U.S dollars. See "A Tale of Two Sisters," at *Han Cinema: The Korean Movie and Drama Database*, www. hanCinema.net (accessed January 29, 2007)

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