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Behind the scenes of Hallyu down under

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Recommended Citation

Yecies, Brian, "Behind the scenes of Hallyu down under" (2011). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 1070.

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Behind the scenes of Hallyu down under

Abstract

Like fusion cuisine, international film co-productions have become commonplace in the 21st century, but getting the balance of flavours right is still a challenge in the case of a couple of recent collaborations - especially where the creation of original and dynamic soundscapes has been a critical factor - a pinch of aussie technical skill and ingenuity has proven to be a key ingredient.

Keywords

down, under, hallyu, behind, scenes

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Yecies, B. (2011). Behind the scenes of Hallyu down under. *Australia Korea: 50 Years of Friendship*, 90-91.

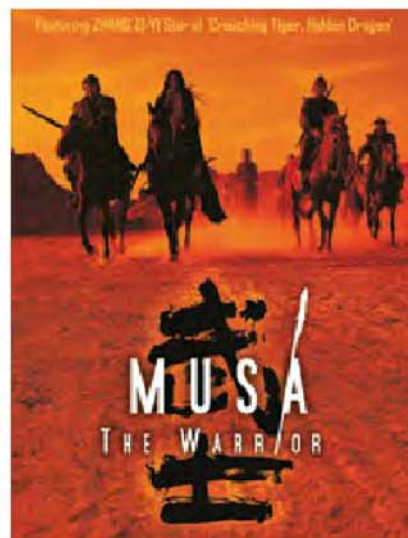
BEHIND THE SCENES OF *HALLYU* DOWN UNDER

LIKE FUSION CUISINE, INTERNATIONAL FILM CO-PRODUCTIONS HAVE BECOME COMMONPLACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY, BUT GETTING THE BALANCE OF FLAVOURS RIGHT IS STILL A CHALLENGE. IN THE CASE OF A COUPLE OF RECENT COLLABORATIONS – ESPECIALLY WHERE THE CREATION OF ORIGINAL AND DYNAMIC SOUNDSCAPES HAS BEEN A CRITICAL FACTOR – A PINCH OF AUSSIE TECHNICAL SKILL AND INGENUITY HAS PROVEN TO BE A KEY INGREDIENT.

Since the early 1990s, collaborative projects involving filmmakers from Australia and throughout Asia have grown in number and visibility. Several Indian films have been shot in Australia, such as *Salaam Namaste* (2005) and *Singh Is Kinng* (2008), while films such as *Hero* (2002) and *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) join a long list of films from Greater China that have employed Australian digital effects and post-production companies.

The flows of work and influence between Australia and Korea in particular have established a productive intercultural dialogue, while also transforming the ways in which each industry understands itself and its films. Two collaborative projects involving Australian post-production houses and Korean filmmakers shows some of the remarkable yet understudied history of cultural exchange between the two film and digital media industries.

Sound designers and editors working in Australia have expanded the global dimensions of the industry by developing a heightened sensitivity towards local cultural soundscapes. Their connections with the Korean film industry have provided opportunities for Australian filmmakers to express sound in new and different ways, as exemplified in the design and mixing of Kim Sung-su's *Musa* (2001) at Sydney-based Audioloc and Kim Young-jun's *Shadowless Sword* (2005) at Soundfirm. The producers of these films, which have both played a role in the spread of popular Korean culture (aka *Hallyu*) across the globe, looked to the Australian film industry because of its



skills and experience, resourcefulness and solid record of creating original and innovative movie soundtracks.

The sound mix for the historical epic film *Musa* was completed in six weeks in Australia by Audioloc in close consultation with the film's visiting Korean postproduction support team. *Musa* takes place during the closing years of the Koryo Dynasty (935-1392), a period when the ruling kingdom began developing unique cultural traditions distinct from other parts of East Asia.

The film was shot in China and Mongolia over a nine-month period.

Massive battle sequences and dialogue recorded in three languages challenged Audioloc not only to create a soundtrack with high production values within a limited budget and timeframe, but also to design a dynamic soundscape that reflected the historical atmosphere of the piece and reflected its diverse cultural nuances. The project was brought to Audioloc based on the relationship formed between the firm's managing director, John Dennison, and Kim Yang-il, an experienced film editor, after the pair had worked together on the *Ginkgo Tree Bed* in 1995. Kim had also worked on other Korean projects in Australia such as *A Man Holding Flower* (1997), *A Petal* (1996) and *Chun Tae Il* (1995) – all of which were edited at Audioloc's rival company, Soundfirm.

As a large-scale historical epic, *Musa* elicited an unfamiliar sense of time and place that demanded a 'big' soundtrack, one which could stimulate and meet the diverse emotional expectations that would be placed on it.



“For *Shadowless Sword*, Burgess was challenged by the director’s desire to create action sequences with a sense of muffled implosion, as opposed to the overt explosions common in Hollywood films”

Dennison and director Kim Sung-su dedicated a full day to assessing all of the mood changes in each shot to get the atmosphere in each scene just right, drawing on existing sound library resources as well as seeking out authentic new sounds representing seasonal wildlife (birds, insects, even native plants) and a variety of weather conditions (extreme heat, sand storms, coastal snow blizzards). *Musa* begins in the Gobi Desert and then tracks through dense forests and waterways across all four seasons. Insights from entomologists, ornithologists and botanists aided the sound designers in constructing a layered mix full of dramatic life and natural sound, and designed to create a sense of mystery and suspense.

To cover the plethora of detailed effects, atmospheres and props, a giant crate filled with handmade leather armour, weapons and costumes was sent to Sydney from Korea. Then dialogue had to be reshaped for an international audience, with additional dialogue re-recorded in multiple languages. Above all, director Kim wanted to set the film in a larger diasporic and universal context by avoiding the exaggerated sound designs found in the conventional action scenes in Hollywood films. Instead, he aimed to create a set of intimate

emotional expectations in the audience by infusing the action with a sense of sheer physical strength and horror. The primary goal was to create a believable soundtrack rather than some cheap imitation of ‘Koreanness’.

Shadowless Sword is a very different kind of historical action film from *Musa*. This frenetic action swordplay film follows the journey of a female warrior sent to protect an exiled prince – the last of his royal bloodline – who is returning to the Balhae Kingdom in 927 AD to reclaim his throne. The heroic duo are forced to defend themselves against hordes of aerodynamic rogue swordsmen led by the commander of the Killer-blade Army.

Over the years Soundfirm’s audio mixers such as Steve Burgess have also built close personal relationships with Korean and other Asian filmmakers and have become very skilled at designing Asian sounds in Australian soundscape laboratories. For *Shadowless Sword*, Burgess was challenged by the director’s desire to create action sequences with a sense of muffled implosion, as opposed to the overt explosions common in Hollywood films. Key recurring details such as characters maneuvering through the air and blood spraying from severed limbs required an ‘Asian’ touch. In *Shadowless Sword*, one particular technique used to create a more dynamic or ‘dirty’ soundtrack in some fighting scenes was to desynchronise the audio and images by a few frames as an effective means of animating the sword battles. This creative approach also facilitated the manipulation of body movement, including the sounds of fabric rippling through the air.

In these two film collaborations, Australian and Korean filmmakers have developed local and international stories that speak to diverse communities. They have become part of a global diaspora of screen culture that complements Hollywood mainstream cinema by taking audiences to new places, and demonstrating that the Australian–Korean filmmaking connection packs a bigger – and more cosmopolitan – punch than may meet the eye or ear. As we enter a new era of global media production, distribution and consumption, an understanding of the history of these Australian–Korean film encounters will give us a better appreciation of the potential for future collaboration in today’s highly competitive global film and digital media industry. 🌐

Brian Yecies is senior lecturer in media and cultural studies at the University of Wollongong. He researches and teaches the history of the film and digital media industries in Austral-Asia. His Routledge book, *Korea’s Occupied Cinemas, 1893-1948* (with Ae-Gyung Shim), is supported by the Academy of Korean Studies and the Korea Foundation. The Australia-Korea Foundation is supporting his forthcoming book, which celebrates important aspects of Australian and Korean film as part of the 2011 Year of Friendship campaign.