

A Study in Pluralities: The “Recreation” of *Detention*

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This essay delves into an exploration of the intersection and interaction of adaptation and history in the context of the Taiwanese film *Detention*, which is based on a video game of the same title. The narrative, set against the backdrop of Taiwan’s martial law, invites its audience to confront this dark chapter in Taiwan’s history. The study focuses on the pluralities inherent in such an inter-semiotic translation at both the textual and contextual levels, in terms of the sources, textual meanings, and audience’s reception. *Detention* might be primarily a game-to-film adaptation, but the relationship between the game (what one might think of as source text) and the film (what one might think of as target text) is far from straightforward. The film incorporates multiple sources other than the game, including film traditions and historical references, to create a multi-layered narrative. In the same vein, textual meanings and reception shift in accordance with the audience’s experience and ideological inclinations, among other factors, showing that the interpretation of a particular text, in this case, *Detention*, is not merely a reflection of history but is deeply rooted in the evolving present and the changing dynamics of Taiwanese society. Ultimately, *Detention* prompts a reevaluation of the hegemony of History and advocates for a view of histories in the plural. Challenging this hegemony also allows one to problematize the binary polarization of source/text, history/literature, and victim/victimizer, in the process acknowledging the inherent complexities of these explorations and underscores the value of initiating dialogues about historical trauma and memory.

Keywords: *Detention*, inter-semiotic translation, game-to-film adaptation, histories, plurality

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多「源」改編：《返校》電影的改編

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本文探討改編自同名電玩的臺灣電影《返校》背後，改編及歷史的交織與互動。《返校》以戒嚴時期為背景，帶領玩家及觀眾分別透過電玩與電影，正視臺灣歷史的這個黑暗篇章。本研究重點在於探索從電玩到電影的符際翻譯，討論文本及語境層面蘊含的「多源」與「多元」。具體而言，這種多源／元性體現在「原文」、文本意義、觀眾反應各面向。雖說《返校》是電玩到電影的改編，但電玩（所謂「原文」）和電影（所謂「譯文」）之間的關係並不單純。電影除了改編電玩，同時也取材自臺灣電影史、歷史事件等，使作品層次更多元。再者，文本意義和觀眾反應也隨觀眾的經歷、意識形態等因素而改變，顯示觀眾對文本（此為《返校》）的詮釋不僅反映歷史脈絡，而深植於流動的當下與社會的變遷。《返校》的分析可促使我們重新審視歷史霸權，同時提倡「多元歷史」的思維模式。挑戰此霸權也讓人得以挑戰原文／譯文、歷史／文學、受害者／加害者的二元對立，認知對話中所隱含的複雜性，並凸顯正視歷史創傷和歷史記憶的價值。

關鍵詞：《返校》、符際翻譯、電玩改編電影、多元歷史、多元性

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Introduction

“Have you forgotten, or are you too afraid to remember?”¹ When confronted with one’s nation’s dark past, does one choose to forget, suppress painful memories, or accept them?

That is the question posed by *Detention* (H. C. Hsu, 2019). The film, which has been adapted from a video game of the same title, offers Taiwanese society an avenue to discuss a dark period in its contemporary history—martial law (from 1949 to 1987). Having ended less than four decades ago, martial law was the backdrop against which a significant proportion of Taiwanese people, those that are likely 40 and above, grew up or grew old; on the other hand, to the younger generation in Taiwan who did not experience martial law firsthand, this event might have only been a history examination topic or once-upon-a-time stories told by their parents or grandparents.

“An adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (Hutcheon, 2012, p. 9). Indeed, when discussing works of adaptations, many tend to compare source and adapted products and discuss the fidelity of the adaptation. As Jellenik (2017) points out:

The fidelity urge has proven so difficult for the field of adaptation studies to shake because our very definition of what an adaptation is emerged from reading adaptations through a fidelity lens. We recognize an adaptation as an adaptation only through the act of comparing it with its source (and finding it wanting). The game is rigged; the question of fidelity is begged. (p. 15)

However, absolute fidelity is absolutely impossible, be it in linguistic or cross-medium adaptations, which Hutcheon (2012) sees as “inter-semiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)” (p.

¹ Translated from Chinese: 「你是忘記了，還是害怕想起來？」.

6). Even though video games and film “share a visual grammar” (Moore, 2010, p. 185), their protocols differ, resulting in differing levels of agency between the audience and the text. In other words, games and film are different semiotic systems with vastly differing modes, so a transposition from game to film is an inter-semiotic translation.

Further, this transposition is far from a simple process, as it involves not just the movement of signs across two (or more) different systems, but might also involve a complete restructuring of the narrative in accordance with factors such as the respective medium affordances, target audience, and, importantly, the intention of the auteur, referred to as an interpretant by Venuti (2007).

Owing to these factors, an adaptation can exhibit polysemy at the textual and contextual levels. Rawnsley (2011) performed her analysis on two levels: an external historical context and an internal textual analysis. We will adopt the same framework for the current study, in which textual polysemy refers to how elements of the film can simultaneously stand alone and also refer back to the video game, whereas contextual polysemy refers to how they can function independently yet also refer to the adaptation’s sociopolitical and sociohistorical backdrop. More specifically, we will first introduce the historical context of Taiwan’s film industry, before moving on to textual analysis, and finally engaging in a discussion of how pluralities exist at both the textual and contextual levels.

Taiwan’s Film History

One of the most important phases of Taiwan’s film history is what has been termed New Taiwan Cinema, referring to the period between 1982/1983 and 1987 (Rawnsley, 2016), though some scholars also designate the period between 1987 to the early 2000s as the Second Wave of New Taiwan Cinema, or the Post-New

Cinema period. Despite the lack of consensus on the precise definition of the New Taiwan Cinema period, scholars have agreed that movies produced during this phase constitute “a movement detailing indigenous sociopolitical issues from local Taiwanese viewpoints” (Yeh & Davis, 2005, p. 1), and that films produced during this period expose “the traumatic scars of Taiwan’s postwar and postcolonial histories” (K. Y. C. Yang, 2015, p. 45).

The early 2000s saw another shift in cinematic themes in Taiwan. R. S. R. Chen (2013) points out that *Blue Gate Crossing* (《藍色大門》) (released in 2002) marks a turning point for Taiwanese cinema, in that its success creates a “youth nostalgia” genre that markedly differs from those produced in the 1980s (p. 62). *Blue Gate Crossing* and later youth nostalgia films such as *Eternal Summer* (《盛夏光年》) (released in 2006), *Secret* (《不能說的秘密》) (released in 2007), *Winds of September* (《九降風》) (released in 2008), *You Are the Apple of My Eye* (《那些年我們一起追的女孩》) (released in 2011), and *Our Times* (《我的少女時代》) (released in 2015) are characterized by their high school settings, depoliticized narratives (R. S. R. Chen, 2013), and often hopeful endings.

Returning to *Detention*, the film merged the features defining both major waves of Taiwan’s cinematic stages by telling a story of a national trauma through its high school protagonists. *Detention* director Hsu was born in the early 1980s, during the New Taiwan Cinema period, and mentioned in an interview that his “childhood was filled with movies” (Wu, 2019, para. 6). He went on to major in Film Studies in university, during which he was exposed to a large number of films. He is not unfamiliar with the films of that period, and even mentioned that he referenced Edward Yang’s (楊德昌) *A Brighter Summer Day* (《牯嶺街少年殺人事件》) (released in 1991) when preparing to film *Detention* (H. T. Weng, 2019). Hence, we believe it is reasonable to deduce that the traditions of New Taiwan Cinema had a huge impact on Hsu, which later led him to create a story in which the nation’s trauma and youth protagonists take centerstage.

What Is *Detention* About?

Detention (Red Candle Games, 2017) started off as a video game published in 2017. Set in Taiwan in the 1960s during the martial law period, the titles of the game, in both English and Chinese, play on textual polysemy. *Fan xiao* 返校 literally means “return to school.” As the game starts, players see two students, Chung-Ting Wei (魏仲廷) and Ray-Shin Fang (方芮欣), trapped in school after school hours by a storm, so one might assume that the title refers to their staying behind. This is the first level of meaning. Toward the end of the game, players realize that Fang would keep returning to the school in an endless loop unless and until she could face up to the consequences of her actions. At the end of the game, players who have beaten the game will see Wei return to his high school as a middle-aged man (second level of meaning) to seek closure for what happened there when he was a student. By this point, the game has revealed its true message, which is to expose the sufferings of the people who lived during martial law, so the “return” could also mean an invitation for Taiwanese society to revisit the events of this historical period (third level of meaning) and face the hurt that has been suppressed head-on. Thus, in this sense, the meaning of “return to school” is elevated from the literal sense of the phrase to a more abstract and figurative one.

Meanwhile, in English, *Detention* also plays on the polysemy of its title——“*Detention*,” when carried out by a school refers to the punishment of keeping students in school after hours; when carried out by the state, the act of detaining someone in official custody, such as in the case of persons suspected of illegitimate political activities. Players start the game playing as Wei before switching to Fang, through whose eyes they learn about the dark past of the school and the guilt she has been harboring for being complicit in the persecution of her peers and teachers. As such, as a player, we progress from the first meaning of “detention” to the

second as the story unfolds. In other words, the game developers cleverly elevate the story of a handful of students to bring issues related to martial law to light with this play on the title.

The film adaptation of *Detention* (H. C. Hsu, 2019), released in 2019, generated much conversation in Taiwan, both for its bold commentary on a sensitive issue and for being one of the few game-to-film adaptations made in Taiwan that has enjoyed box office success. In 2020, a series of the same title aired on Netflix and Taiwan’s Public Television Service. For the sake of brevity, the term Intellectual Property (IP) shall be used subsequently to refer to the *Detention* video game, film, and TV series collectively.

The succession of adaptations prompts a series of questions: What is each adaptation based on? What is the intertextual relationship of these adaptations? Taking it further, could adaptations ever be as simple as a linear transposition of one source text to one target text? If not, what considerations should we keep in mind when we study complex works such as these?

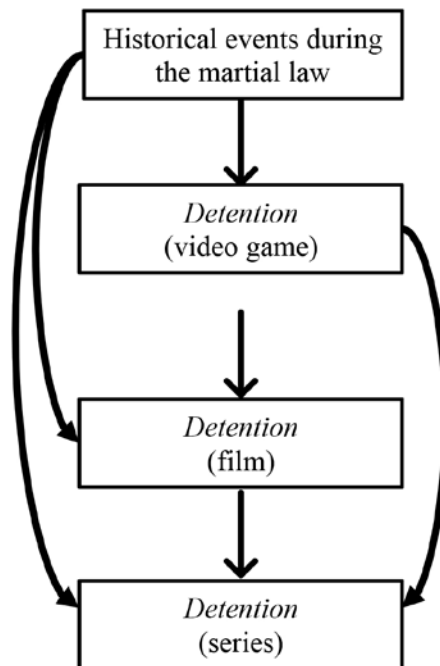
To start answering these questions, perhaps we could return to the video game. In an interview with *Bios Monthly*, Red Candle Games co-founder Coffee Yao shares that the materials in the story have been drawn from Taiwan’s history, culture, and the daily life of the Taiwanese people (*Bios Monthly*, 2019). The second product in the IP, the film, has been referred to as an adaptation of the video game right from the start. However, the director has also reworked the materials of the game with an eye on historical events that he deems crucial for Taiwanese society to address (Lu, 2019). As for the TV series, the latest product in the IP, it is set 30 years after the events of the film and provides closure for the character of Ray-Shin Fang.

The source materials of each adaptation can be represented by the figure below. While the figure risks an oversimplification of the adaptation process and

influences, especially in comparison with more detailed analyses of intertextual influence like that performed by Li (2022) and Kuo (2022), it serves to highlight the pluralities of sources, and that later products draw on earlier ones; the more recent the product, the more “source text(s)” it draws on.

Figure 1

Detention IP Products and Their “Source Texts”



In terms of storylines, the film follows the plot of the video game closely, despite some differences in the narrative structure and plot elements. Meanwhile, the storyline of the series is an extrapolation, taking place three decades after the events of the game and film. Hence, owing to the similarities between the film and the video game, this paper will focus on the adaptation from the video game to the film and leave the series out for future studies.

The Adaptation

Detention film director John Hsu is a self-professed avid gamer with 32 years of gaming experience. Like many others, he played *Detention* as a game in 2017 and was very moved by the story because:

Detention tells an astonishingly earnest story that belongs entirely to the Taiwanese people. [...] The very fact that historical events that have taken place on the land I now stand on can be transformed so brilliantly into a video game is so exciting that it gave me goosebumps. (J. H. Hsu, 2019, para. 4)

Thereafter, Hsu contacted Red Candle Games and proceeded to make a feature film based on the video game.

Prior to *Detention*, his first feature film, Hsu made a series of short films, such as *The 15th Server* (《第十五伺服器》) (released in 2004),² *Real Online* (《請登入線實》) (released in 2005), *Intoxicant* (《匿名遊戲》) (released in 2008), etc. From his choice of subject matter for these short films, it is evident that he has a keen interest in gaming and the online world, which led him to, subsequently, experiment with VR technology in the shorts *Your Spiritual Temple Sucks* (《全能元神宮改造王》) (released in 2017) and *Great Hoax: The Moon Landing* (《星際大騙局之登月計劃》) (released in 2020).

Over the years, Hsu had seen too many film adaptations of video games fail at what they set out to do, an observation shared by adaptation scholar Meikle in *Adaptations in the Franchise Era*, “video game adaptations can claim only a dubious legacy in the 2000s” (Meikle, 2019, p. 118). The differences in media posed such huge obstacles for the director that he describes the challenges and resulting stress of the task as a “herculean beast” (Bios Monthly, 2019, para. 25).

² No official translation can be found for this short film. This translation is the author’s own.

However, quoting Rob Letterman, director of *Detective Pikachu* (released in 2019), a commercially successful game-turned-film adaptation, Hsu pointed out that game-to-film adaptations are getting better since the generation that grew up playing video games are now filmmakers (H. T. Weng, 2019).

To avoid replicating the lackluster performance of many earlier video game movies in his first feature film, Hsu revisited the horror game *Silent Hill* (《沉默之丘》) and its “source text” horror film *Jacob’s Ladder* (released in 1990), for references on how to create a psychological thriller. In addition, he also studied Taiwanese classics such as Edward Yang’s *A Brighter Summer Day*, also set in the 1960s, to learn how to tell a story set in an authoritarian regime, in the process of crafting *Detention* (H. T. Weng, 2019). Eventually, he decided that his approach was to “be entirely faithful to the essence, settings, and main plot of the game” (Jessica, 2019, para. 5) during the adaptation.

However, can a film adaptation be “entirely faithful” to the game it is based on? As Boozer (2017) writes, “any effort toward ‘genuine’ fidelity to the characters, plot, and spirit of the original will still require media transformational creativity” (p. 3). To a similar end, McFarlene (2007) also has written that “fidelity is obviously very desirable in marriage; but with film adaptations I suspect playing around is more effective” (p. 6). Indeed, as we will see, Hsu has deftly “played around” with elements at the textual and contextual levels in his adaptation.

Much has been said about the interactivity of video games and the relative passivity of the film audience. The participatory nature of video game narration allows the story to be more diffused, in the sense that players are not limited by time and the linearity of the narrative—some players might choose to spend a few extra hours exploring each element, hence creating an experience that branches out into more details, while others might opt to speed-run through the game and keep the experience relatively linear. Additionally, the relative open-endedness of video games, in general, has been played up in this game through the possibility of

two different endings, decided by the player’s choices in the last part, through a series of multiple-choice questions. In other words, the dovetailing of the game’s endings means that the game itself is not a simple singular text, and the plurality inherent in the game provides a well of materials for a film adaptor to tap on. Hence, even though the feature film only runs for around two hours and offers no opportunities for the audience to create their own narrative, the polysemic source text enables the creation of a nuanced narrative that concurrently integrates both endings of the game.

Additionally, commercial considerations also meant that the film has to target a wide audience, including gamers and non-gamers, young and old alike. How can the film appeal to gamers who are already familiar with the story? On the other hand, what aspects of the game narrative ought to be retained in the film, and what new elements ought to be added, so as to appeal to people who had no prior knowledge of the story? Our study of the IP has revealed that, at the textual level, the director has chosen to retain important motifs from the game. For the general audience, he has crafted a narrative that revolves around the themes of “freedom” and “memory,” two ideas pertinent to discussions of the impact of martial law, explicating these themes through the use of plot reconfigurations and dialogue. These themes not only form the core of the film’s narrative but also allow the film to engage contextually with Taiwan’s national dialogue.

Recreating Visual Motifs

A simple search online reveals that many fans, webizens, and even media professionals were impressed by the film adaptation for “recreating the game” *huanyuan* 還原. This can be seen from the titles of many of popular video responses on the film, such as The Storm Media (2019), among others. A similar pattern can be observed among film reviews. For instance, Cheng’s (2019) article contains phrases

such as “(the team) spent more than two years expanding the story and recreating the settings,” (para. 10) “perhaps only someone like Hsu who is both a gamer and a filmmaker can produce a film that recreates the game to such a high level,” (para. 12) and “in order to recreate the feel and settings of the White Terror period, John Hsu and his team visited numerous victims of the White Terror” (para. 22). Similarly, Ying-Joy Movie has an article that points out that “the recreated school is very similar to its game counterpart” (Ying-Joy Movie, 2019, para. 2).

Even though reviews are numerous, a common thread runs through many of them—the “recreation” that these writers are referring to is the recreation of certain visual elements from the game. As Meikle (2019) notes, “while game franchises offered producers more narrative—and simply more—sources to adapt, they also offered those producers more obvious visual referents for adaptation” (p. 100). As film is ultimately an audiovisual medium, recreating visual elements from the game is one relatively straightforward way to establish a quick sense of recognition among people who have played the game, and Hsu and his team did not hesitate to tap on visual referents from the game in their adaptation.

One way to recreate the visuals of the game would be to manipulate camera angles, for instance in how the film recreates the side-scroller effect of the game. In the game, the characters move left and right in a two-dimensional manner as they navigate their surroundings. In the film, scenes of Fang moving around in school are shot from afar as she walks left and right, giving these scenes a two-dimensional quality. In this way, the director utilizes the shared visual affordances of both game and film to create a palimpsest effect for those who are familiar with the game. Figure 2 below shows screenshots obtained from the video game (top) and film (bottom) respectively. Strong similarities can be observed between the camera angle and composition of the two screenshots.

Figure 2

Side-Scroller Effect in the Detention Video Game and Film.

Top: Fang in the Game. Bottom: Fang in the Film.



Note. Permission has been obtained from both Red Candle Games and 1 Production to reproduce the images from the video game and film respectively for non-commercial purposes.

As for visual symbols, *budaixi* 布袋戲 puppets feature prominently in both the game and the film as a symbol of Officer Bai, a military officer stationed in the school, and the violence he inflicts on the people as a proxy of the authoritarian government. *Budaixi* puppets are typically dressed in traditional Chinese opera costumes, so the existence of a *budaixi* puppet dressed in a military uniform (refer to Figure 3) calls attention to its unusualness and works at two levels. Within the game/film, it is a projection of the protagonist’s fear; to the player/audience, it becomes a symbol of the violence of the regime.

Figure 3

Top: Puppets in the Game. The Rightmost One is of Officer Bai.

Bottom: The Puppet on the Left Represents Officer Bai in the Film.



Note. Permission has been obtained from both Red Candle Games and 1 Production to reproduce the images from the video game and film respectively for non-commercial purposes.

Transforming The Motif of *A Flower on a Rainy Night* (Yu Ye Hua 《雨夜花》)

While some motifs have remained largely unchanged, others have been given different functions. Besides visual motifs, auditory ones have also been infused with polysemy.

One of these auditory motifs is the song *A Flower on a Rainy Night*, a well-known oldie composed in 1934 (Chuang, 2014). In the game, the song is tied to horror and persecution. It first appears when the player has to play the first line of the chorus on an old piano. After the player plays it correctly, the biggest jump scare of the game happens. The next time players hear this song in the game is toward the end when the now-aged Wei returns to the campus and plays the tune on the piano. Going back to the school is no doubt a painful remembering for him, recalling the persecution he and the rest of the Book Club faced, and also probably invoking a sense of survivor’s guilt.

In the film, the song’s symbolic function has more to do with the fragility of Fang’s romance and sanity. The first time we hear the song in the film is when Fang is in her room and she turns on the radio to mask the noise of her parents fighting. Shortly after, we see Fang teaching Chang how to play the song using a notepad. The next day, Chang is in the school’s Music Room playing the song on the piano. The final time we hear the song in the film is after Fang executes Cui-Han Yin (殷翠涵), her imagined love rival, in her limbo state. Only this time, the music is distorted, symbolizing the trauma caused by her act of condemning all the members of the Book Club to persecution. In the earlier parts of the film, Fang’s limbo state and memories are clearly separated, but as the film progresses, the line between these two states becomes increasingly blurred. Limbo and memories merge into one after Fang realizes that she caused the death of so many people. Hence, the distorted song at the start of this scene symbolizes the disintegration of her romantic relationship, her sanity, and her life.

In short, the song is primarily used to create eeriness in the game. In the film, the song is used both diegetically and non-diegetically, with the diegetic level associated with the mental state of the protagonist and the non-diegetic one reinforcing the connection between the narrative and the historical context. Besides

existing as a song, *A Flower on a Rainy Night* (Shao & Xin, 1956) also existed as a film. Released in 1956, the film was, as described by the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute, the first modern Taiwanese language film and one of the top-grossing films of martial law, thus providing further evidence of the link between this auditory motif and martial law. As such, the spotlight on the term *A Flower on a Rainy Night* in *Detention* can also be seen as the director's intention to establish a covert link between the film and Taiwan's film history for those in the know, at the same time highlighting the pluralities of the sources of this element in the film, simultaneously drawing from film history, music history, and the game.

Freedom and Memory

A commercially successful film would seek to attract as wide an audience as possible. A limited audience might not only be commercially disadvantageous, but also curb the reach of the message that Hsu wishes to share with the Taiwanese audience at large. In an interview with Commonwealth Magazine Video (2019), Hsu, who sees *Detention* as a story “that really belongs to the collective memory of the Taiwanese people” (05:04).

A film based on a popular video game might draw a younger crowd to the cinema, even if some of these young viewers were not familiar with the game. On the other hand, transitional justice and martial law are heavy materials that might be deterrents for younger viewers considering stepping into the cinema. To appeal to younger movie-goers, Hsu shared that he performed an act of “transmutation” when adapting *Detention* to the screen (Lin, 2019) in service of his goal of “wanting to share the story with more people” (H. T. Weng, 2019, para. 9).

Meanwhile, there are still survivors of political persecution during the martial law period among us, some of whom might have been whistleblowers or victims,

such as Wei, who have survived when their peers have not. Both groups of victims might have been living in guilt all these years, whether it is guilt over causing harm to their peers or survivor’s guilt, and the IP plays a part in promoting transitional justice for these victims.

To this end, Hsu plays up the cultural and historical elements of the film in order to create a film that speaks to the general audience in Taiwan meaningfully, beginning from one of the most important sets itself. During the making of the film, Hsu and his team embarked on multiple study trips to actual historical sites such as the Jing-Mei White Terror Memorial Park (Bios Monthly, 2019), which was formerly the Jing-mei Military Detention Center, where political dissidents were imprisoned during the martial law period. The Jing-Mei White Terror Memorial Park later became a key set in the film, where the members of the book club are tortured and killed. The scenes, shot at an actual site where such interrogations took place decades ago, convey a sense of uncanny horror to the knowing audience.

In addition, Hsu has also included numerous historical references in the film. Many “reference hunters” have, since the release of the film, spotted many historical Easter eggs, with the ones shared below being references that are only present in the film and not the video game. For instance, the film has retained the names of game characters that contain historical references, such as Chung-Ting Wei³ and Cui-Han Yin.⁴ Other than drawing on the stories of real victims of the martial law period, the film also changed some details of the game to create more references to historical events. Fang’s student ID in the game is 5350126, and it has been changed to 493856 in the film to point to the start of martial law in Taiwan in 1949, and the total duration of the martial law period being 38 years and 56 days.

³ Chung-Ting Wei is a reference to Taiwanese human rights activist Ting-Chao Wei (魏廷朝), who was arrested by the Kuomintang government several times and spent one-third of his life in prison.

⁴ Cui-Han Yin is a reference to Taiwanese writer Hai-Guang Yin (殷海光), who, like Cui-Han Yin, died of cancer after their exile from Taiwan.

Wei's student ID number in the game is unknown, but he is given 501014 as a student ID in the film as a reference to the 1947 Keelung High School incident, which saw the arrest of headmaster Hao-Tung Chung (鍾浩東) for the publication of *Kuangming News* (《光明報》). Chung was later executed on October 14, 1950.

These and the many other historical Easter eggs hidden in the details of the film strengthen the ties between fiction and history by channeling what Spivak (2006) refers to as “the effect of the real” (Chapter 14). Discussing Mahasweta Devi's “historical fiction,” Spivak (2006) states that Devi's “repeated claim to legitimacy is that she researches thoroughly everything she represents in fiction” (Chapter 14). Similarly, as can be seen from the examples above, Hsu has put extensive effort into historical research, which has in turn given the film a character of authenticity and legitimacy.

With the visual features supplying the aesthetic appeal of *Detention* to gamers and historical references grounding its narrative for the Taiwanese audience, the film then requires a storytelling process that brings all these elements together in a fictional narrative. Kuo (2022) writes about the audience-fictional text-historical memory connection, making the point that even though the story might be fictional, it can nonetheless play a role in crafting the collective historical memory of a people.

With this in mind, Hsu has chosen to highlight two themes in his adaptation—memory and freedom. The former is evident from the movie tagline “Have you forgotten, or are you too afraid to remember?” and the latter is discussed extensively in the film.

In service of these themes, Hsu elected an explication process in his work, because “in the game, a lot of things were expressed indirectly through the use of symbols and visuals. However, to make a film that caters to the mass market, you have to move towards explication” (Chiang, 2019, para. 6). In his discussion of

media transformational creativity, Boozer (2017) mentions several ways this could take place, one of which is “exteriorization of thought into dialogue or images” (p. 3).

One of the most prominent ways the film foregrounds the message of freedom is through dialogue that directly verbalizes its value and how the authorities took that away from the people during the martial law period. The lines examined in this section are new creations of the team behind the film and do not exist in the game, i.e., theme-explication and links to the socio-historical context introduced by the auteur.

Ming-Hui Chang (張明暉) is the character that embodies the idea of freedom and is thus given most of the lines revolving around this theme. In the final conflict in Fang’s limbo, Chang says to Fang, “Anything dead, you can’t bring back to life. It’s a shame. We didn’t get to live to see freedom” (H. C. Hsu, 2019, 01:21:18). Later, he urges Fang to help Wei break out of the limbo, “Someone has to live to remember how difficult it has been to get freedom” (H. C. Hsu, 2019, 01:21:44). At the end of the film, Chang’s letter to Fang is worded, “I’ll wait for you in our next life. To freedom” (H. C. Hsu, 2019, 01:35:25). Hsu’s *Detention*, described as a “love letter to freedom” (Cheng, 2019), extended both the screen time and agency of Chang, who is but a passive NPC (non-player character) in the game, in the film adaptation, in order to highlight the theme of freedom.

Besides “freedom,” another core message of the film is “memory,” as shown by the many lines spoken by the characters revolving around the theme of “remembering” and “memory.” When Fang is determined to remember and face her sins, Officer Bai says to her, “Whatever’s gone is gone. Just let bygones be bygones. Don’t listen. Don’t recall anything. Leave all the pain in the past. It’s easier to forget, isn’t it?” (H. C. Hsu, 2019, 01:24:34). His words can be interpreted as what the oppressive government wanted the people to do—to forget, so that it is easier to comply. Up to this point in the film, Fang has indeed been suppressing

her memories because they are too painful. However, this time around, Fang replies, “I don’t want to forget. I won’t forget anymore” (H. C. Hsu, 2019, 01:25:00). Fang then continues to help Wei escape, and her final words to him are, “You need to live to remember this” (H. C. Hsu, 2019, 01:27:14). At the end of the film, the last thing that middle-aged Wei says is, “I’ll remember. I’ll always remember” (H. C. Hsu, 2019, 01:35:56).

As mentioned, other than being the chosen themes of the film, “freedom” and “memory” have also come to the forefront of the Taiwanese consciousness in recent years. In other words, not only are these ideas key to the narrative, but they are also important links to the current context in which *Detention* is sited.

The Plurality of histories⁵

At the time of *Detention*’s release, transitional justice had been a key issue in Taiwan’s national dialogue for years, with the promulgation of the Act on Promoting Transitional Justice (Ministry of Justice, Republic of China, 2017) in 2017 and the establishment of the Transitional Justice Commission (TJC) in 2018. Since its inception, TJC has worked to exonerate political convictions, remove symbols of authoritarianism in some public places, and carry out public education activities such as guided tours to sites of injustice, including detention centers and mass graves used during the martial law period. As a result of their efforts, a growing portion of Taiwanese society has begun to actively engage with a part of history that had formerly been shunned in conversation, and questions of collective historical memory and the suppression of historical events have come to the

⁵ “histories” is not capitalized here to bring attention to the challenge that alternative versions of histories pose to a hegemonic view of History. If the capital H encapsulates such a hegemony, then the rejection of the capital letter subverts the power of a hegemonic discourse.

forefront of societal consciousness. Building on the work of TJC, the *Detention* IP can be said to work in service of the same goal through a different approach, using video games to appeal to the younger generation. The interactivity and immersive nature of video games provide players a new way to approach history (C. Y. Weng, 2019), and the way that *Detention* highlights fictionality and entertainment value increases the youth generation’s willingness and interest to learn more about history (Kuo, 2022).

By playing a common game, the players are creating a shared memory. Wang and Wang (2020) point out that some scholars are concerned about the homogenizing and stereotype-creating potential in video games, which can lead to a warped view of history. However, we find ourselves agreeing more with Fang (2019), who posits that shared memories challenge that very homogeneity. Fang believes that, in the case of *Detention*, the shared memory allows players to reclaim the interpretive rights to the history of Taiwan’s martial law, which challenges the relatively homogeneous interpretation provided by state education. It is also this challenge to “state version” History can provide a possible explanation for the polarizing effect of the *Detention* film. On the one hand, Hsu’s work has been lauded by many, and he had even “met aunties and uncles in their fifties and sixties during many post-show Q&A sessions” (Bios Monthly, 2019, para. 26) who were in tears after watching the film. On the other hand, comments such as “Why is the film made to be so political and horrifying? This is nothing like how we felt in those times” (Lin, 2019, para. 1) have also surfaced from people who have lived through that era, commenting that *Detention* has blown the horrors of martial law out of proportion. The disparity in reception among the audience leads us to a discussion about the plurality of histories.

Hence, rather than focus our discussion on the fidelity of Hsu’s adaptation to the video game or history itself, we are inclined to adopt a view of history and

adaptation that supports pluralistic referents and interpretations. Interviews conducted by Kuo (2022) revealed that many interviewees opined that what is at the center of the film is not the game itself; instead, it is the history of Taiwan's White Terror. This shows that even laypeople are consciously aware of the multiple source texts inherent in this adaptation. Following from this observation, if sources can be multiple, does it not challenge the unidirectionality and exclusivity of source-target relationships, as well as the singularity of the product of interpretation?

The plurality and indeterminacy of history have been addressed by many other scholars such as Tutan, who writes on the intersections of history and adaptations, "Hence we have histories in the plural; we frequently speak of alternative histories battling against History with a capital H; we see novelists posing as historians and historians as novelists" (Tutan, 2017, p. 1). In our context, we also wish to adopt the idea of "film-maker as public historian" (C. F. Chen, 2022, p. 1), which suggests that film-makers act as the bridge between the elites and the masses and to "translate" history for the general public. In this vein, as each adaptation is "a particular interpretation of history" (Hutcheon, 2012, p. 18), every telling and retelling of history through film involves the "(public) historian," in this case, Hsu, to apply their own interpretant to historical elements. Rather than see Hsu's double roles as both "historian" and "film-maker" as a contradiction, we prefer to see history and fiction as a spectrum, for "that history deals with real events and literature with imagined ones may now be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind" (Spivak, 2006, Chapter 14), nor whether the film has remained "faithful" to its source materials. Rather, it is to examine how the author has drawn from a variety of sources and produced a text that speaks at multiple levels.

The dissolution of the hegemony of a grand history into histories is a reminder for students and scholars of inter-semiotic translation, in that the historical moment

at which an adaptation emerges creates a palimpsest effect on the work, intentional or not. In his interview with Punchline (H. T. Weng, 2019), Hsu mentioned how Germany and Japan have produced good works addressing the injustices of the past because they have properly dealt with their histories, and these examples have also become part of his references in the making of the film. Hence, it can be said that Hsu’s “source texts” include not just the game and Taiwan’s history, but also those of other countries. In this way, Hsu’s text forms a complex intertextual web with real-life events, having referenced not just the game, Taiwan’s history, but also the recent discourses of Taiwan and various countries.

The acceptance of the plurality of sources, histories, and meanings can, in turn, inform a more nuanced attitude toward the healing process sought by transitional justice. If it can be accepted that the relationship between conventionally paired elements such as source/target and history/literature is neither straightforward nor binary, the victim/victimizer polarization can also be rethought. The character of Fang in *Detention* embodies this notion, for she is both the victimizer of the Book Club and a victim of circumstances. This breaking away from a binary paradigm could thus be a force for social reconciliation in a fragmented society.

It would, undoubtedly, be over-simplistic and naïve for one to claim that a video game or a film has changed the fabric of Taiwanese society. Undoubtedly, there is still much work for the society at large to do for political victims of the martial law. Nonetheless, the surfacing of these issues can at least initiate and ignite a process of healing for society. In other words, *Detention* can be said to have offered the Taiwanese society an inroad into dialogue about its history.

The film has provided a point of entry for Taiwanese society to enter into dialogue with its dark past. TJC members, for one, have taken the film as a starting point and written essays to share their work and thoughts. For instance, acting TJC

chairperson C. Yang (2019) wrote an essay titled “Please Try Hard to Remember: *Detention* Kickstarts Work in Transitional Justice” in October 2019, a month after the film was released. A month later, the New Taiwan Peace Foundation (2019) organized an event named “After *Detention*: The Unfinished Journey of Transitional Justice.” This, and other similar events, invite the Taiwanese public to participate in a learning and reflection of its history. In other words, if Hsu’s primary goal in making this film adaptation was to stimulate a national conversation about the wounds of its past, he has accomplished what he set out to do to a considerable extent.

Conclusion

Detention is the first of its kind in Taiwan in many ways, especially in the field of game-to-film adaptation. The multi-layered narrative created as a result of incorporating multiple sources, including film traditions, the video game, and history, among other elements, has turned *Detention* into a multi-layered palimpsest.

In the “good ending” of the game, Wei’s notebook contains a number of pages that speak directly to the political victims of the martial law. The notes contain messages such as, “Thought I would rot in jail. I didn’t expect to live past martial law. People say I am a victim of politics. My crime was written off, but my youth is long past, something lost can never be regained” (Red Candle Games, 2017).⁶ It is these notes that left Hsu, and probably countless other players, in tears after they finished playing the game. These words do not only tell the story of Wei, but also that of numerous other victims of political persecution, whether during Taiwan’s

⁶ The wording of the English version of the notes is taken from the English version of the game.

martial law or in another time and space.

It would seem that the Taiwanese society is now at a stage where people are willing to face the hurt of the past, so that the society can heal and move on, all the while remembering the lessons of history. In the words of Brown (2004), “culture and ancestry are not what ultimately unite an ethnic group or a nation. Rather, identity is formed and solidified on the basis of common social experience, including economic and political experience” (p. 2). While the experience might be shared nationally and historically, its impact and experience are subjective. Hence, while some might see *Detention* as a “restoring” of history, others might see it as a “re-storying.” Regardless of which stance one might take, the position chosen is not merely about history; it is, at the same time, rooted in the present, in the changing society, Taiwan or otherwise.

Just as the adaptation process of *Detention* prompts the problematization of a simplistic correspondence between sources and targets, its content elicits a rethinking of the hegemony of History. Though the answers might be even more complex than these investigations, beginning such dialogues alone can prove meaningful. Like Wei’s notes in the game’s finale concede, “something lost can never be regained,” and an acknowledgment of historical trauma can never make up for all that its victims have lost. However, even if such efforts only provide a sliver of warmth and solace to those still living in pain, it is still worthwhile.

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