The National Specificity of Horror Sources
in Asian Horror Cinema

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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this dissertation has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature:  

Date: 19 January 2012
Acknowledgments

When I embarked on this PhD journey, my former supervisor, Gary MacLennan, commented that 30% of the PhD candidates withdrew from their studies after the first year. He added that 90% of those who persevered would complete their dissertations. Whether Gary meant it as a warning or as an encouragement then, I do not know. During the past few years of my research, I began to understand what he meant, for the task was indeed daunting and the possibility of completing the dissertation seemed bleak at times. However, just when things appeared never-ending, I was encouraged and motivated by some important and wonderful people.

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Introduction

The television screen flickers. Soon the room is filled with a discomforting aura of light emitted from the television monitor. The unsuspecting victim is seated by his deck, clueless of his impending doom. Samara knows it is her cue. She climbs out of the well and crawls slowly towards the portal to the living room. Her victim finally sees hers but is petrified and is unable to flee. Samara's ghastly-looking hands reach towards the frame of the television and pull herself through the monitor. She lands on the floor with a loud thud. Menacingly, she crawls towards her victim in a motion that appears Kabuki-influenced. Suddenly, she gets up. She remembers she isn't an Asian ghost. Western ghosts don't crawl.1

This thesis explores the relationship between horror films and the national contexts in which they are produced by analyzing several Asian horror movies. Utilizing these films as case studies, the thesis examines the degree to which genre cinemas are nationally-specific, and the degree to which it is possible to make genre films that can enter international markets and be comprehensible in various national markets as well.

Horror cinema presents an interesting case study for issues of national specificity versus international legibility, because of the strong tradition of critical writing prevalent in horror films with a universal approach. Theorists claim that horror functions through the notion of the sublime as proposed by Edmund Burke, the concept of the grotesque per Mikhail Bakhtin or a philosophy of horror as Carroll purports (Boey 2009). Work like this emerges from a Western perspective, but makes the claim that horror functions universally. In this thesis, I demonstrate that such a claim is really not supportable. In fact, as I will argue, although the aim of horror films might be universal, straddling cultures (to scare audiences), the resources used

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1 I scripted this scenario as a parody on the Hollywood remakes of Asian Horror.
to achieve this end differ quite markedly in different national contexts. These elements are mostly drawn from cultural artifacts such as literature and mythology, which are nationally-specific. Therefore, I explore the genealogy of the sources of horror in a series of case studies of Japanese, Hong Kong and Thai horror cinema.

However, this is not to suggest that Asian horror movies are completely inscrutable to audiences outside of the national context of their production. The rising popularity of Asian horror films in the West, such as Gore Verbinski’s *The Ring* (2002) and its sequel has shown that the syntax of horror can appeal across cultural barriers. Bliss Cua Lim emphasizes:

> The internationalization of the Asian horror film prompts us to ask: How does the genre film manage to craft a version of the “popular” capable of producing recognition for a range of audiences from different classes, localities, and national groupings? (Lim 2007, p.119)

This phenomenon is not exclusive to the Asian horror genre. Some non-horror texts, for instance the *wuxia* (swordsman) genre in particular, as in Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), to name the biggest hits – have been targeted at an international Western market, and have won accolades from these foreign audiences. Therefore, whether national specificity is a factor involved in the appreciation and comprehension of such texts largely remains unanswered, especially when Asian texts are adapted and acculturated for the Western audience. To investigate the interplay of national specificity and international communication in greater detail in genre cinema this thesis explores the national specificity of Asian Horror in relation to the Asian culture and national identity.
In light of this, the research questions dealt with in this thesis are:

i) Which are the common elements of Japanese, Hong Kong and Thai horror films?

ii) What are the specific histories of horror in each of these countries?²?

iii) What can Hollywood remakes reveal about the national specificity of Asian horror films?

In answering these questions, the thesis makes a series of claims on the national specificity of genre cinema. I claim that the sources of frightening elements in horror films are nationally-specific. At the same time, it is possible to talk about a regional “Asian” horror because of the intertwining national histories and shared cultural elements across several Asian countries. Finally, Asian horror films can also be understood in a variety of national contexts (including Western contexts) because they deal with the basic emotional responses of fear and anxiety.

Japan, Hong Kong and Thailand have been specifically selected for the study because of their recent surge in horror productions and their significant popularity with international audiences. Between 1998 and 2004 particularly, films from these regions have entered the cinema theaters and television sets of foreign audiences, showcasing some of the most horrifying moments [Ringu (1998), The Eye (2002), Shutter (2004)] in cinematic history. The introduction of such films has revived the Asian horror genres. In fact, Asian horror films have been so successful that Hollywood recognized the potential in remaking them for the global market. Hideo Nakata’s Ringu (1998) was the first of a variety of Asian horror films to be remade by

² This thesis notes that Hong Kong is a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China, but shall refer to Hong Kong, along with Japan and Thailand, as countries for the convenience of language.
American production houses. DreamWorks earned US$129 million domestically and US$249 million (Box Office Mojo 2010) worldwide, when they released their version in 2002. These remakes provide a clear insight into the question of what is nationally-specific in genre cinema and what is transportable across national contexts. On the play of globalism and regionalism, Lim declares:

The discourse of exceptionalism that underwrites most Hollywood studio rhetoric on the Asian Horror remake cycle is caught between two moves, emphasizing the cultural-specificity of the Asian horror film while imputing a cultural neutrality that guarantees its appeal, and global audiences. (Lim 2007, p. 117)

Producers and distributors simultaneously emphasize the familiarity and difference of these films, describing them as both “different from all other generic fare, and at the same time … exceptionally rootless, deracinated, globalist” (Lim 2007, p. 117). The “cultural-specificity” that can be brought into these remakes works well for Hollywood in a period when Western horror cinema had become stuck in a vicious feedback loop of uninspired sequels reiterating the same tired formulae, or mired in a kitschy postmodern self-referentiality that winked a little too obviously at its own cleverness as it simultaneously mocked and celebrated the plurality of clichés their narratives ironically, and inevitably, reproduced. (McRoy 2008, p. 99)

The remakes are particularly useful in supporting the purpose of this thesis because they show us practically what elements need to be changed to make a film accessible and appealing to international audiences, and what elements already display “cultural neutrality”.

The first chapter addresses the methodology of the thesis. The paradigm of this work is cultural studies. This approach explores the relationship between culture and power, particularly focusing on how the texts are created and consumed. My
theoretical framework is genre studies, and I am specifically interested in showing how genres function to mediate between producers and consumers. My research method is textual analysis, and I have employed detailed analyses of the texts of the horror films themselves in order to examine how these texts try to balance the relationships between the industry and the audiences they seek to reach. The final part of my theoretical apparatus is a study on the national identity and how it is constructed. All these approaches together constitute a research method that enables a study of the relationship between Asian horror cinema and the national contexts in which they are produced.

While much has been written about Western horror films, research on Asian horror has been relatively insignificant, until recently. Chapter 2 reviews the core arguments that have been posed regarding Western Horror, such as genre studies, psychoanalytic approaches and identification theory. It then constructs the theoretical framework of this research by examining several related studies on how representations in contemporary Asian horror texts from Japan and Hong Kong are linked to the national contexts.

In Chapter 3, the national specificity of horror in Asian horror films is examined by tracing the genealogy of horror in art. The religion, mythologies and literatures of some Asian countries bear strong resemblances to one another. The thesis explores the extent to which, the cultural heritage of each of the case studies in this thesis – Japan, Hong Kong and Thailand - is nationally-specific. While tracing the genealogy of horror, a number of Asian horror archetypes have been proposed: vengeful female ghost, tianshi, diviner, substitute-seeking ghost, jiangshi (hopping vampire), the possessed, demon, spirit, scholar, unsettled ghost and spirit of nature (kami).
Chapters 4-6 deal only with case studies. Each provides a historical overview of the development of the horror genre of a specific nation, and explores the relationship of that country’s cinema to its national context.

Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on Hollywood remakes of Asian horror films, and uses these as a means to explore the specific elements of a national genre cinema that are comprehensible to international audiences. This is done by the textual analyses of three Asian horror films (The Ring, The Eye and Shutter) and their Western remakes, while highlighting the elements that are problematic in Western remakes of Asian horror films.

The question raised regarding the degree to which the elements of genre cinemas can be nationally-specific is an important one in a production context that is increasingly globalized. More audiences across the world are now more aware of the production of other, non-American countries than has ever previously been the case. Low cost technologies for shooting and editing films, and the distribution possibilities offered by the Internet clearly indicate that it is now easier than ever for genre films to be made and viewed from anywhere in the world. But what are the implications of such changes for the national specificity of films? This thesis will provide some insights on this important issue.
Chapter 1
Methodology

This thesis takes a cultural studies approach to the relationship between horror films and national identity. Cultural studies is a multiperspectival approach that examines the text, the audience and the industry at various levels – representation, power, ideology, semiotics, national identities and even psychoanalysis, among others. Tony Bennett writes that cultural studies is concerned with all those practices, institutions and systems of classification through which particular values, beliefs, competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct are inculcated in a population (Bennett 1998, p. 28). As a paradigm for research in film and culture, cultural studies enables the researcher to examine how film, culture and society interact with each other to produce shared social meanings. This does not imply is the presence of only one common way for audiences to read films, or that there is only one reading of a film for all audiences; rather, cultural studies guides us to understand the various ways we make sense of the world. As defined by Graeme Turner,

"cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field, where certain concerns and methods have converged … to understand phenomena and relationships that were not accessible through the existing disciplines." (Turner 2003, p. 9)

Although cultural studies explores why meanings are created at the moment of production, it should be clear that it is not reducible to a social formation.

"The processes of political economy do not determine the meanings of texts or their appropriation by audiences. Rather, political economy, social relationships and culture must be understood in terms of their own specific logics and modes of development." (Barker 2008, p. 9)
Otherwise stated, we need to individually address the idiosyncrasies or cultural specificities of society, in terms of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nation.

Adopting cultural studies as the paradigm, the research uses case studies as the primary approach to study the interrelationship existing between horror film, audience and industry. This is necessary as film is a cultural construct within which the society’s values, practices and experiences are depicted or embedded. Through film, the existence of social groups is revealed; this existence includes their formation, maintenance, and definition against external groups. Horror, as a theme/genre, is a manifestation of the society’s consciousness that is often presented via media such as film. By using case studies as an approach, we can more clearly understand the shared cultural experiences amongst various people. Also, cultural studies enable us to understand

how groups get to know themselves as groups (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) through cultural activity; (Frith 1996, p. 111)

and “to investigate the deep ambivalence of identification and desire” (Hall 1996, p. 444). Adopting the cultural studies interpretive paradigm, this research aims at identifying the culturally specific elements of horror and relates them to the audience’s cognition of culturally embedded meanings. It seeks to explain both the national specificity and cross-national elements of horror, and explore the possibility of convergence or reconciliation between these two opposing concepts.

Besides this, the case studies also emphasize “material contexts of constraint and empowerment in everyday life… (which) draws deeply on geographic and historical ways of understanding culture” (Frow and Morris 2000, p. 318). As such, “spatial and temporal framings of experience are equally important to contextual
analysis, which seek to grasp the complexity of the mundane processes…in which identities are formed and transformed” (Frow and Morris 2000, p. 318). The research will engage in the study of horror films in the light of historical and geographical contexts. Through temporal and spatial framings of horror, the research aims to examine the relation of horror to culture and the core humanity that we all share. We are interested in discovering how we identify with horror sources, from which cultural identities are then constructed.

Kellner proposes that case studies should encompass perspectives of different disciplines (Kellner 1997, p. 12). This “multiperspectival” approach is necessary because of the disparities of the structures the cases studies have to contend with.

**Research Method**

Cultural studies encompasses mainly qualitative approaches to explore the cultural meaning. Of these methods, textual analysis is often used in the study of film and television. Alan McKee describes textual analysis as a data-gathering process, for researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live. (McKee 2003, p.1)

Unlike quantitative methods such as content analysis, textual analysis strives to identify idiosyncrasies, rather than making generalizations about the social phenomena. Its exploratory nature enables the researcher to be self-reflexive, hence making it ideal for the critical evaluation of cultural texts. Emphasizing the usefulness of textual analysis as a method of studying cultural texts such as film and television, Turner writes “semiotics breaks with an esthetic mode of analysis and its relative independence from notions of authorial intention are valuable” (Turner 2003,
Textual analysis formulates assumptions, rather than an assumption about the relationship between the text and the author. Using this approach, we accept that there can be multiple readings of a text, and all these readings can be accurate. However, this does not imply that all claims (derived through textual analysis) are acceptable. To be acceptable, the basis of such claims needs to be plausible.

Adopting a post-structuralist position, McKee describes textual analysis as a data-gathering method that “seeks to understand the ways in which these forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world they reveal” (McKee 2003, p. 17). He explains that the foundations for thinking on what reality is and how it works are based on the facts we have different values of judgments, that abstract and concrete things exist, that relationships develop between things, between reason and thinking, and how we perceive things (McKee 2003, p. 5-8). In brief, post-structuralism lies at the heart of understanding diverse realities and the culture-specificities that exist within them.

This research focuses on the textual analysis of three Asian horror films – *Ringu* (Japan), *The Eye* (Hong Kong) and *Shutter* (Thailand). Through this textual discourse, the study attempts to study the horror film as an intricate textual construct, and understand “watching horror films” as a “form of popular culture directly interrelated with other cultural forms and with an economy of representations and practices that make up a way of life” (Frow and Morris 2000, p. 326).

As mentioned earlier, the research approach is based on multiple interpretive practices. This is because current qualitative research activities no longer favors a single methodological practice over another (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, p. 6). Multiple interpretive practices are necessary because the diversity of these research practices “can provide important insights and knowledge” (Nelson et al. 1992, p. 2).
Although this research does not involve participants, and as such has eliminated ethical considerations in conducting research, such as voluntary participation, harm to participants, anonymity and confidentiality, and deception, the ethical issues in analyzing and reporting communication research are faithfully followed. These ethical principles apply to both quantitative and qualitative research. Baxter and Babbie state:

Even in a qualitative impressionist tale – the narrative form that most reads like a fictionalized story – the researcher is obliged to do his or her best to capture the phenomenon under study with utmost honesty and integrity. Falsification is simply not allowed in good communication research. (Baxter and Babbie 2004, p. 91)

Honesty and integrity are key ethical obligations that all participants, self-included, and the research community, are implemented in this research through truthful analysis and reporting.

Theoretical Framework

Genre Theory

Genre is commonly defined as “a system of codes, conventions, and visual styles which enables an audience to determine rapidly and with some complexity the kind of narrative they are viewing” (Turner 2006, p. 119). Through the genre classification system, the industry is more likely to reach box-office success by replicating materials (in a new film) that appeal to an eager target audience. However, this simplistic definition does not illustrate the epistemology of genres, their industrial status, and how they change. Geraghty and Jancovich state that the recycling of genre materials is not a straightforward process – it does not just represent past materials, it also re-contextualizes them (Geraghty and Jancovich 2008,
Certainly, genres are more than just categorization of codes, conventions and stylizations; they are cultural constructs derived from the interrelationships existing between cultural texts, audience and industry. Genre theories are abundant; however, most of them challenge each other at different levels of criticism, while at the same time agreeing on some core aspects of the genre. Thomas Schatz proposes that genre studies provide a framework for examining films because a genre approach assumes that filmmakers capitalize on proven formulas to economize and systemize production, recognizes that audience play a significant role in shaping story formulas and production practices, treats film as a storytelling medium, and assumes that cinema artistry is determined by how well filmmakers recreate established formal and narrative contexts (Schatz 1981, p. vii).

The shift from asking “What” to “Why” questions in a genre approach is essential to perceiving and understanding genre as a social construct. Rick Altman accurately summarizes two millennia of genre study approaches in ten points, in the opening chapter of his book *Film/Genre*, but concedes that the summary fails to answer some important questions about genre:

1. Does genre exist in a pre-existing pattern, in texts, in criticism, or elsewhere?
2. Are genre convenient classifications or are they representations of reality?
3. What differences do genres make?
4. How and to whom do they make that difference? (Altman 1999, p. 12)

The ambivalence of the meaning and purpose of genre has created discussions and debates on genre study approaches.

Altman proposes several hypotheses on how genres are created. First, he claims that “films often gain generic identity from similar defects and failures, rather than from shared qualities and triumphs” (Altman 1999, p. 33). Commenting on
musicals, Altman notes that music was not recognized as a genre in its own right in the early films due to its association with other sources and the secondary roles they play. The musical genre was created as a reference to films with music that decreased towards the ’60s. Altman also proposes that

the early history of film genres is characterized…not by purposeful borrowing from a single pre-existing non-film parent genre, but by apparently incidental borrowing from several unrelated genres. (Altman 1999, p. 34)

These films, showing traits of various unrelated genres would need to be either amalgamated or dissolved for an independent genre to be established.

Altman also suggests that “even when a genre exists in other media, the film genre of the same name cannot simply be borrowed from non-film sources, it must be created” (Altman 1999, p. 35). Altman’s hypothesis claims that genres are not directly adapted from established ones across media. This suggests that the development of a genre is as intricately dependent on the media as it is on the codes and conventions. He further claims that

before they (genres) are fully constituted through the junction of persistent material and consistent use of that material, nascent genres traverse a period when their only unity derives from shared surface characteristics deployed within other generic contexts perceived as dominant. (Altman 1999, p. 36)

These nascent genres undergo a refinement period during which key markers of the genre are clearly defined and undeniably unique from other existing genres. Hence, even when genres are established, they continue to evolve. Altman points out that “films are always available for redefinition – and thus genres for realignment – because the very process of staying in the black involves reconfiguring films” (Altman 1999, p. 43). The need to redefine/reconfigure films is driven by commercial
interest. Altman terms this phenomenon as the “Producers’ Game” in which film companies identify a popular film based on its box-office success, determine the elements that made the film successful and produce another film based on the speculated formula for success (Altman 1999, p. 38). The process continues indefinitely while simultaneously refining the genre. The business of assessing a film’s success, followed by remodeling its success through a new film is analogous to applied criticism (Altman 1999, p. 44). In light of this, Altman identifies some similarities between a producer and a critic. First, the producer needs to create a reading position through the critical dissection of a film. He then reinforces that position through film production. Eventually, this reading position should earn broad industry acceptance (Altman 1999, p. 46). This process is both self-reflexive and revealing of the interrelationship between the author, the audience and the text. Hence, genre as a system of categorization appears to be in a constant flux; its instability stems from the indefinite reconfiguration that is required of the genre through time, place and culture.

The refining process depends as much on the audience as on the producer. Schatz comments:

The level of active but indirect audience participation in the formulation of any popular commercial form is itself a function of the studio system’s repeating and handing down, with slight variation, those stories that the audience has isolated through its collective response. (Schatz 1981, p. 12)

Although Schatz acknowledges the audience’s contribution towards the reconfiguration of a genre, he perceives this as a passive commitment on their part. He appears to suggest that the industry alone plays an active role in the process of remodeling the formula for a successful genre. Turner, however, thinks otherwise.
He claims that “genres depend on the audience’s competencies and experience: on the skills they have developed in understanding films and the body of similar experiences they draw upon” (Turner 2006, p. 120). This indicates active participation on the audience’s part in stabilizing genres. Genres, hence, are social constructs created through continuous negotiations between the audience and the industry.

**National Identity**

Assuming that film is a social construct of the negotiation between the audience and the industry, the homogeneity of collective thoughts shared by members of the society is questioned and challenged. Does everyone really think alike and share the same social meanings, thus carrying the same national identity? It is true that an individual in a society would never get an opportunity to know other members in his/her lifetime, leave alone interact with them. Therefore, it is quite impossible to share the same perceptions and thoughts about issues, whether prominent or trivial, unless they are imagined. Benedict Anderson proposes that the nation “is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1991, p. 6). This approach presents a paradoxical view on how social meanings are created and shared. On the one hand, subjectivity is involved in the process as a person may see things and arrive at a conclusion based on his/her knowledge and experiences. However, as this knowledge and these experiences are built socially, he/she is likely to assume that the majority of the people are likely to share the same beliefs. Although this behavior is presumably a conscious effort, it is paradoxically an imagination.
In the context of film production, distribution and consumption, it is not only the audiences that imagine their national identity. The industry, if we narrow it down to the filmmaker, the producer or the CEO of the film production company, still relies on individuals within the larger community. As discussed in the section on genre theory, genre development involves the industry as much as it does the audiences. Similarly, the industry imagines the national identity for the audiences. Therefore, the formation of national identity can be said to be a result of the combined effort of the industry and the audience. The product of this collaboration is in turn facilitated by the mass media. Commenting on the theorizing of identity in Taiwan, through the press, Mark Harrison explains, “Taiwanese readers, who are themselves imagined by the institutional practices of the media, read the narrative of their own national identity in the daily press” (Harrison 2009, p. 64). In another context, Anderson suggests that national consciousness in Europe before the 14th century is almost non-existent before the advent of print-capitalism (Anderson 1991, p. 38). He concludes that

the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation. (Anderson 1991, p. 46)

The newer mass media, such as film and television, have performed equally, the role of distributing and promoting national identity. A good example is how broadcast media creates imagined communities during political elections. Despite the diversities of race, ethnicity, gender and educational background, voters create shared meanings and forge relationships with one another, although the majority of them may not have known one another during and possibly after the elections. Somehow, they are able to adopt the same national identity despite their political
differences. Although this national identity is not arbitrary, as it is a collective agreement of the state of things among all members of the community, it may be temporary. For example, voters may share the same concerns over specific issues in the country and have a specific political candidate/party in mind who can offer a solution. However, this national identity becomes displaced once the elections are done. Their concerns, adopted from the euphoria surrounding the election campaigns, may shift towards nonpolitical areas. Therefore, should the elected candidate/party be unable to deliver their promise, a new imagined community – one that now gives the non-confidence vote, may emerge.

Globalization has also affected the way we imagine our national identities. James H. Mittleman claims:

If globalization is understood to mean the compression of the time and space aspects of social relations, then regionalism may be regarded as but one component of globalization. In this sense, regionalism is a chapter of globalization. But regionalism may also be a response or a challenge to globalization. (Mittleman 1996, p. 189)

Contrary to the claim that globalization is a homogenization of cultures, regionalism can be construed as an antagonistic response to globalization and cultural imperialism in particular. Jonathan D. Mackintosh, et al. states that “the global, far from being homogenic, is a contested site where resistance and subversion generate cultural diversity and complexity” (Mackintosh et al. 2009, p. 8). Regionalism, in recent years, has become more crucial in affirming national and cultural identities amidst the fluid transnational exchanges via mass media. Laikwan Pang opined that “national identity continues to matter in transnational cultural flows, both in national economy and affects in identification” (Pang 2009, p. 128). Citing the pirating of Japanese animation films in China as an example, Pang narrates the challenges and
controversies faced by creative industries as they attempt to find equilibrium on economic and ideological grounds. On the one hand, the Chinese government wishes to curb the overwhelming popularity of Japanese animation in China to safeguard their national interests. Pang explains:

> Creative industries have largely been a policy product and are intimately related to national economies, and there is a strong tendency among creative industries to produce and protect national identities. (Pang 2009, p. 128)

At the same time, the Chinese Government also aspires to develop the Chinese animation industry, and in implementing measures to curb the inflow of Japanese animations, they face the dilemma of shortchanging their Chinese artistes, who are involved in the production of several Japanese animations. The reinforcement of national identity in the cultural industries serves both an ideological and economic purpose, although in this case the latter is being compromised.

While Japanese pop culture is ideologically rejected in China, Korean pop music, TV dramas, fashion and other cultural products are not. Rowan Pease comments that the “authenticity and nationality are closely linked for fans of South Korean popular culture in China” (Pease 2009, p. 151). Writing on the Korean wave discourse, Pease suggests that the Korean popular culture, among other factors, enjoys success in China because of its infusion of Confucianism (Pease 2009, p. 159), a philosophy of values that has been posited at the core of Chinese communities for over 2,500 years. Yet this explanation is ironical, as the same set of Asian or Confucian values are seen in Japanese texts much before the Korean wave stole the limelight. Further, there are also small differences between the music genres offered in Japan and Korea; in fact, both comprise mainly Pop, R&B and Hip Hop music. So why is the Korean, but not the Japanese, popular culture integrated
into the Chinese national identity? The Sino-Japanese War has caused anti-Japanese sentiments amongst the Chinese.

The above discussions have posed a few assumptions about the national identity. First, national identity is a social construct of the audience and the industry; it is represented and distributed in the mass media. Second, it is an imagined community, conceived and propelled by subjective views of what the “real” nation/community is about; hence the imagined community is not a mirror, but multiple, accurate representations and interpretations of actual events. Third, national identity may change over time, especially when the imagined community is no longer perceived as current and/or relevant. Last, regionalism is a response to globalization and cultural imperialism; therefore, it is within this response that we can identify the national specificity. As national identity is a figment of imagination and subject to interpretations, we must examine it in the contexts of time, place, culture and society.

In the domain of Asian horror films, a strong and a weak version of a claim for cultural-specificity can be advanced. First, in most Asian countries (Japan, China, and Thailand) the production of horror films, unlike Hollywood “runaway” productions, is based on local, regional or national specific myths and literature; therefore, horror would appear to be national specific. This impression can be reinforced by text-based approaches to the films. The general approach to studying Asian films (particularly academicians from a Western/European background) is ethnocentric, as evaluations are mostly based on the critic’s cultural experience, while displacing/ignoring important cultural beacons embedded in the texts. Yoshimoto in *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* identifies two dominant trends in the Western and Eurocentric approaches to the study of Japanese cinema:
Firstly, the focus on universal themes – the humanist approach – which negates cultural-specificity; and secondly, the concentration on the differences between Japanese and Western cinemas – the Orientalist approach – which ends up confirming Western stereotypes around Japan's exoticism and irreducible difference. (Yoshimoto, quoted in Balmain 2008, p. 3)

Both trends are illustrative of callous efforts in interpreting texts that are obviously encoded with nationally specific symbols, ignoring the fact that differences are not merely relative, but are constructs shaped by a particular cultural, historical and social setting. At the very heart of Orientalism lies the assumption that the Orient is inferior to the Occident and such inferiority is justifiably subject to criticisms from the West. "These conclusions constructed Japan as a 'shame' culture in opposition to the "guilt" culture of Western societies, and through the process of Orientalism and self-Orientalism (or complicit Orientalism), became a mechanism through which to distinguish Japan from the West, and indeed the West from Japan" (Balmain 2008, p. 27). Therefore, identifying that distinctiveness so characteristic of Japanese society works within the pre-existing Orientalist assumptions about Japan and the Japanese, rather than differing from them.

We found that the approach to studying Asian films under such pre-existing Orientalist assumptions is flawed in two aspects. First, it disregards the national specificity, which is detrimental to the level of interpretation of the specificity of the national texts. Second, Orientalism presupposes Asian regions as a collective unit, ignoring the differences in culture and religion between them. Although the Eurocentric approaches to studying the Asian texts have provided interesting claims about Asian elements as the Other, they are unfortunately reductive and unable to promote a clear understanding of the relationship between the creation and consumption of the text, and their national context. Therefore, by examining the
national identities in films, we are then able to identify issues related to national specificity.

Adam Knee’s textual analysis of *Suriyothai* and its international makeover *Legend*, explores the national identity in the original film and presents an interesting claim on the manner in which the film is modified to appeal to a larger audience, resulting in the displacement of the cultural specific elements. Knee suggests that *Suriyothai* addresses several traits of national identity characteristic of Thailand – family, politics, foreign affairs and gender relationships (Knee 2008, p. 127). For example, the depiction of internal struggles within powerful families resonates with the general audience because it is a pivotal theme dominant in soap operas, both local and foreign. In terms of domestic affairs, *Suriyothai*’s struggle to unite the empire is an almost a candid reflection of the constant political unrest in Thailand. Knee also notes that “Thai audiences would be readily able to perceive, in the film’s depiction of administrative corruption, favoritism and intrigue, an analog for a range of like problems plaguing many modern Thai government administrations” (Knee 2008, p. 127). Knee’s understanding of *Suriyothai* is based on the assumption that the motifs of national identity in the film are nationally-specific.

Referring to the peculiar intertextuality of the nostalgic imagination in Hong Kong films in the 1990s, Vivian P. Y. Lee states:

If nostalgia, as manifested in Hong Kong cinema, constitutes a form of social memory, this memory, or its cinematic evocation, is less rooted in actual events than in a shared cultural imaginary (“hence the collective unconsciousness”) and a shared sentiment when experiencing, and re-experiencing, images from the past. (Lee 2009, p. 9)
Lee’s approach to finding nostalgia or national identity is different from Knee’s in that she does not focus only on what actually happened, but on how the audience remembers the style and images of the past. This imagined past in turn opens up an avenue for cultural critique and subversion. Lee opined that

cinematic nostalgia in its high and low forms invites critical re-appraisal as a self-reflexive mode of historical representation characterized by self-consciousness theatricality and a creative engagement with pre-existing images and texts. (Lee 2009, p. 10)

Adam Lowenstein also claims that the quest of finding national identity in cinema should be an active process. He states that the allegorical moment shifts the film’s relation to history from compensation to confrontation; it departs from the generalized statements about film and history “in favor of national specific, historically contextualized cases where the intersections of cinema and trauma can be investigated” (Lowenstein 2005, p. 8).

The methodologies adopted by this study aim to show how screen horror is nationally-specific, despite possessing some cross-national elements. The research process is formulated to enable the researcher to understand, particularly by using case studies, the national specificity of horror and how these sources are articulated within a culture.

*Defining Asian Horror*

Japan, Hong Kong and Thailand have been specifically chosen as case studies in this research because of their shared commonalities under the term “Asian Horror”. One might object to the use of the term “Asian Horror” to generalize the horror films produced by these countries, particularly due to the language differences. However,
despite such differences, the commonalities that these pan-Asian regions share are clearly noticeable. Pan-Asian countries share many centuries old cultural traditions, which include:

Confucian ethics, based on filial obligations and loyalty between rulers and their subjects, and between family members and friends; Buddhism; supernatural beliefs; classical theater and Chinese classical painting, characterized by the subordination of figures to landscape and the absence of the illusion of depths. (Chaudhuri 2005, p. 93)

The creation of the term “Asian Horror” has also been accused of a regionalist/globalist attempt to downplay the differences between horror genres of Asian regions (Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand) so as to establish a wider appeal for the global market. Commenting on the reception of “Asian Horror” cross-nationally, Bliss Cua Lim argues that:

Regionalist framing encourages us to downplay the differences between Hideo Nakata and the Pang Brothers, directing us instead to make sense of them as part of the same phenomenon. In effect, to global (read American) audiences, the coinage “Asian horror film” affords an abstracted measure of cultural distinction. (Lim 2006, p. 117)

Here, Lim suggests that the rhetoric of a generalized term Asian Cinema has betrayed and displaced the cultural/national identity specific to each of these countries. In the process, national specificity is subsumed by a seemingly universal and culture-neutral appeal. Under this assumption, the use of the term “Asian Horror” in this dissertation instantaneously becomes a paradox as the term itself challenges to topic of national specificity. However, I wish to clarify that the use of the term “Asian Horror” in this dissertation has no intention to efface the differences in horror conventions of nations such as Japan, Hong Kong and Thailand. Rather, the term is used for two purposes: i)
to recognize is the presence of some degree of uniformity between these region-specific horror sources, and ii) as a counter-point to Western Horror.

Chapter 2, presents a review of the literature on horror films. Providing the fundamental basis for discussion, this research traces the development of the “Asian Horror” genre and identifies the relevance and/or discrepancies to the Western horror genre. While tracing the genealogy of “Asian Horror”, Japan, Hong Kong and Thailand have been specifically chosen because of a) their proximity in location yet possessing cultural differences; b) the popularity of their horror films and their impact on horror industry; and c) similar themes and horror archetypes adopted by their horror films.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Although horror films from Hollywood were at one time marginalized or even avoided by film scholars, the popularity of these films across the world has evoked much attention from members of a once-conservative academia. Steven Jay Schneider notes that the number of studies published on the horror genre in recent years, which include historical survey, sociocultural analyses, philosophical investigations, psychoanalytic and gender studies, and catch-all anthologies, would seem to suggest that “the horror film’s oft-noted propensity for redundancy, sequelization and overkill has found its non-fictional correlates in the world of the academia” (Schneider 2004, p. 131). While the variety of topics linked to horror cinema is endless, the issues concerned usually define the genre, explaining the archetypes of horror (i.e. what each type of monster means from a cultural point of view), and the appeal of horror, which, most often, employs an analytical approach based on psychoanalytic theory.

Early Writing on Horror

The tradition of academic writing on horror films began with early research on American films. One of the pioneers in this field, Andrew Tudor, has written extensively on the American horror genre from 1931 to 1984. He studied the horror genre from a non-reductive approach. As horror films are “one aspect of the social construction of the fearful in our society”, it is necessary to actually enquire into the “social phenomenology of the genre an account of the fundamental terms within which genre-artifacts are made to make sense by the consumers” (Tudor 1989, p. 5).
In his study of the horror genre, Tudor develops a categorical system to analyze the deep structure of the genre – supernatural/secular, external/internal and autonomous/dependent (Tudor 1989, p. 5). These paired oppositions present dichotomous alternatives within the genre from which the archetypes of horror are derived.

Using Tudor’s classification system, the American horror-movie history has been reconstructed and organized into three sub-genres: “those deriving their threat from science, those in which it derives from supernature and those where its source is the psyche” (Tudor 1989, p. 12). Each of these subgenres comprises distinctive patterns, both narrative and stylistic, that evolve over time. For example, the mad scientist/monstrous creation movies in the 1930s, typified by the early Frankenstein films, often contained these narrative elements: an obsessed scientist, a monster created by an experiment gone wrong, a crippled assistant or retainer, young “threatened innocents”, an isolated laboratory setting, and a community of bourgeois authority and a population of potential victims (Tudor 1989, p. 29).

This period’s characteristic image of mad science revolves around inhuman ambitions which, by their very nature, give rise to inhuman threats. In seeking to interfere with the fundamental processes of life, science is trespassing in areas forbidden to it. (Tudor 1989, p. 141)

The popularity of mad science horror films during the 1930s may be attributed to the belief that science is as dangerous as the malevolent inclinations of ghosts, ghouls, vampires and zombies (Tudor 1989, p. 133). This happened during a period when scientific breakthroughs in atomic energy eventually led to the development of weapons of mass destruction in the 1940s.
Vampires, werewolves, mummies and zombies are generally considered the icons of Western Horror. For a long time, these supernature-based horror films captured a substantial market share of the Western horror industry; supernature “is clearly both the genre’s most pervasive and its most stable fount of disorder” (Tudor 1989, p. 159). Tudor further distinguishes this subgenre into three types – manipulative, coexistent and invasive. He claims that the shift in the volume of films made under these categories coincides with “the genre’s root conception of the supernatural” at the given period; “its assumption of a separate and autonomous order of reality is the conceptual baseline from which the other two variations are constructed” (Tudor 1989, p.180). For example, knowing that the supernatural can be controlled, the concept of the supernature shifted from coexistent to manipulative in the 1960s and 1970s, producing more satanic and witchcraft themed films as a result (Tudor 1989, p. 181).

The decline in science and supernature horror films towards the 1960s marks the beginning of what Tudor terms as “psycho-horror”. The post-1960 horror films present another type of threat, which can be construed as “expressing a profound insecurity about ourselves, and accordingly the monsters of the period are increasingly represented as part of an everyday contemporary landscape” (Tudor 1989, p. 48). Unlike the mad scientists, the psychotic antagonists of this sub-genre are “victims of overpowering impulses that well up from within”; they “murder, terrorize, maim and rape because of some inner compulsion, because the psyche harbors the dangerous excesses of human passion” (Tudor 1989, p. 185). As mad science is controllable whereas psychosis is ambivalent, Tudor hypothesizes that the latter is a more malevolent threat. Charles Derry also notes that, “what was horrible, however, was man. It was horror that was specific, nonabstract, and one that did not
need a metaphor” (Derry 1977, p. 18). Psycho-movies trade on “our fear of what is hidden within ourselves” and that any of us may be transformed, whether by circumstances or not, into unpredictable and inexplicable killers (Tudor 1989, p. 186). The horror-movie psychosis is timeless in terms of its appeal because it is “deeply rooted human malevolence made manifest” (Tudor 1989, p. 185).

**Psychoanalytic Approaches to Horror**

With the decline of mass-culture theories, “the model most commonly applied to the horror movie has been broadly psychoanalytic, the genre conceived as kind of collective dream world requiring analysis by a method derived from one or another tradition of psychoanalysis” (Tudor 1989, p. 2). In recent years, new psychoanalytic approaches, as well as new variations of existing ones, have continued to find use in the analysis of horror films, or the genre as a whole, and in depth-psychological explanation of “the symbolic/import of horror film monsters; of the horror effect and how it is generated; of the possibly perverse pleasures viewers obtain from being frightened by visible fictions” (Schneider 2004, p. 1). Carroll notes that although psychoanalysis may not be a comprehensive theory,

> psychoanalysis nevertheless may still have much to say about particular works, subgenres, and cycles within horror, if only because various psychoanalytic myths, images, and self-understandings have been continually and increasingly appropriated by the genre throughout the twentieth century. (Carroll 1990, p. 168)

Psychoanalysis is often adopted as a pivotal approach to answer the question “Why does horror appeal to the audience?” as opposed to “What is a horror film?” which is addressed by genre studies. This approach shifts our attention from understanding what horror films are to what they actually do to their audiences.
Robin Wood is one of the pioneers who laid important groundwork in the study of horror films based on the psychoanalytic theory. In his essay “An Introduction to the American Horror Film”, Wood suggests that the horror genre allows the American audience to subconsciously tame their repressed desires in a systematic way. He writes:

The true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and its happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression. (Wood 1985, p. 195)

Although Wood’s claim probes into the mechanics of the Western psyche, and is able to offer an interesting viewpoint on how the horror genre is consumed by the audience to address their latent desires, the approach is suspiciously nationally specific. Besides not addressing the appeal Western Horror has on the foreign audience, it also homogenizes Western audiences, failing to acknowledge the fact that we are not dealing with a collective people group, and that the American psyches are actually individualistic. Even more problematic is that it associates the appeal of horror with the audience’s repressed psyche, therefore, focusing only a single dimensional study of horror. However, the horror film industry has evolved into a system that is far more complex than what it had been before the transnational exchanges of cultural texts between regions and countries became common. Hence, the study of horror films can no longer be limited to using only psychoanalytic theories without understanding the interrelationship between the text, the audience and the industry.

The difference between “real” horror and screen horror opens up interesting questions regarding the audience's interpretation of screen horror. Two theoretical
frameworks, often used independently, have been applied to understand why and how the audience consumes the horror text. The debate between using cognitive studies and psychoanalytic theories as the basis to understand/explain horror films has been long and arduous. There is a fair amount of argument in favor of and against the use of psychoanalytic theories in the study of horror. At one end of the spectrum, the Freudians and Neo-Lacanians explain repression and anxiety as the basis for the horror being appealing (Schneider, 2004: 1). At the other end, critics like Tudor attack psychoanalysis because of its generalizing approach towards studying horror.

While an account of horror in terms of the “return of the repressed” may appear to relate certain features of horror texts illuminating to our presumed psychosexual constitution, it does not directly address the question of horror’s attraction. (Schneider 2004, p. 58)

The problem with the positions presented by the two schools of thought is that they are in essence attempting to answer two different sets of questions – why does horror appeal to audiences? How is the audience horrified?

Grotesque imageries have often been associated with the horror effect. Horror films that play on grotesque imagery have a tendency to illustrate deformed human bodyparts. This can appear in the form of a mutilated corpse, an alien with human parts, or a mutated “scientific-experiment- gone-wrong”. Linda Badley in her definition of “body fantastic”, also believes that horror is evolved in response to the “body, the iconography and…the apparatus” (Badley 1995, p. 4). She quotes from Philip Brophy’s 1986 article in Screen that “the modern horror film had become a series of scenes, each displaying a graphic sense of physicality and culminating in a gory display” (Brophy 1986, p. 8). She proposes that horror is “a fantastic “body language” for our culture in which a person’s self-concept has been increasingly constituted in the images of the body” (Badley 1995, p. 3).
The main point of view these scholars hold is that horror films serve as an avenue for psychological catharsis by the repressed, referring to the filmmaker, and for the repressed, who are the audience (Twitchell 1985, Creed 1993). Similarly, Carroll terms the effects of the horror genre as “art-horror”, which is an emotion “whose contours are reflected in the emotional responses of the positive human characters to the monsters in works of horror,” although he highlights that this emotional state involves both the physical and cognitive dimensions (Carroll 1990, p. 24). It is through the audience’s cognitive construal and evaluation of his/her situation that “art-horror” is experienced.

James B. Twitchell states that the attraction of horror can be understood in three ways (Twitchell 1985, p. 65):

1. as counterphobia or the satisfaction of overcoming objects of fear;
2. as the “return of the repressed” or the compulsive projection of objects of sublimated desire; and
3. as part of a more complicated rite of passage from onanism to reproductive sexuality.

Therefore, it is through this inner “compulsion to repeat” that horror conventions are established. Embedded within these conventions is a lexicon of repressed desires created by the filmmaker and consumed by the audience. The genealogy of horror and the uncanny can be traced to repressed infantile complexes. Twitchell, in explaining why the consumption of horror is a part of children's rite of passage, refers to myths as memories that “embody and convey the most sacred truths a society can first produce and then protect” (Twitchell 1985, p. 84). Commenting on Twitchell's work and others, Barbara Creed notes that these “theorists work from the Freudian position that woman horrifies because she is castrated”, and that the typical psychoanalytic theory, created under the patriarchal order, assumes that femininity is
devoid of all forms of aggressive, monstrous behavior (Creed 1993, p. 5). Hence most monsters, as claimed by Stephen Neale, “tend, in fact, to be defined as “male”, especially in so far as the objects of their desire are almost exclusively women” (Neale 1980, p. 61). However, Creed challenges the typical Freudian notion that “man fears woman because she is castrated” and proposes that “man fears woman because he might be castrated by her” (Creed 1993, p. 7). Creed's notion of the castrating female is significant in understanding the cultural aspects of horror as it recognizes the Other, in this case the female, as symbolically potent in evoking fear amongst the male audience.

Psychoanalytic theories are, however, criticized for attempting to generalize cross-cultural phenomena when the nature of the theories is in fact nationally-specific. Cosimo Urbano’s suggestion of a state of anxiety being the common product created in horror film audiences broadens the scope of psychoanalytic theories to include nationally specific and even personality specific studies. It also extends psychoanalytic theories to cross-cultural studies because it considers the external influences from the environment over time, rather than assuming that the human psyche is only internally developed based on a general, even singular, response to memories and experiences.

**Horror and Identification**

Another popular study of horror films often associated with psychoanalytic theories concerns character-identification in which we “fuse with the characters or become one with them, which would suggest, at least, that we duplicate their emotion states” (Carroll 1990, p. 96). One aspect of character-identification is the examination of the
intense gaze of the male upon the female body. Carol Clover offers a different perspective of character-identification through examining psycho-movies, commonly referred to as “slasher films”. Carol Clover describes the “slasher film” as “the bottom of the horror heap” and a mere exploitation targeted at junior horror fans.

The majority audience…was largely young and largely male – conspicuously groups of boys who cheer the killer on as he assaults his victims, then reverse their sympathies to cheer the survivor on as she assaults the killer. (Clover 1992, p. 23)

Clover argues that:

Unmediated by otherworldly fantasy, cover plot, bestial transformations, or civilized routine, slasher films present us in startlingly direct terms with a world in which…masculinity and femininity are more states of mind than body. (Clover 1992, p. 22)

Clover claims that slasher films have reflected the sexual attitudes of the general audiences they appeal to. Her principal interest in the slasher films lies in identifying the body and the gender-associated gaze between the audience and the characters. Contrary to earlier identification claims, she proposes that male audiences identify not only with the screen males, but screen females in horror films, especially when they are in fear and pain for “there is something about the victim functions that wants manifestation in a female, and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in a male” (Clover 1992, p.12). Hence, regardless of the characters’ sex, those who rescue themselves are male while those rescued by others are female.

Compared to other subgenres of horror like Hitchcock’s films, gender identification issues are particularly evident in slasher films in that the association of masculinity with the male body and femininity with the female body are often displaced. Clover notes that the presence of the male rescuer in slasher films had
almost disappeared towards the 1980s, leaving the “Final Girl” to save herself. It is at this point that the male audience loses his male identification, when his masculinity and heroism are displaced in the narrative. Clover explains:

Abject terror may still be gendered feminine, but the willingness of one immensely popular current genre to represent the hero as an anatomical female would seem to suggest that at least one of the traditional marks of heroism, triumphant self-rescue, is no longer strictly gendered masculine. (Clover 1992, p.60)

In slasher films, both masculinity and femininity are infused in a character that is anatomically female. Interestingly, Clover argues that horror spectatorship is registered as a “feminine experience”. Through empathy, the male audience identifies with the female protagonist’s fear and pain, thus adopting the feminine posture (Clover 1992, p. 62). While Clover specifically examines the identification process between the audience and the non-threatening (or threatened) characters, Noel Carroll advances the claim by considering how this identification process is associated with the threatening characters, that is the monsters. Although “our responses are meant, ideally, to parallel those of the characters”, they are also supposed “to converge” (but not exactly duplicate) those of the characters; for instance, among the characters we assess the monster as a horrifying sort of being (although unlike the characters in the film, we do not believe in its existence!) (Carroll 1990, p. 18). By assuming that the audience’s emotional responses parallel those of the characters only to some degree provides us with a model to formulate an objective claim about screen horror.

Rather than characterizing art-horror solely on the basis of our own subjective responses, we can ground our conjectures on observations of the way in which characters respond to the monsters in works of horror. (Carroll 1990, p. 18)
Carroll rejects character-identification as a model for describing the audience’s emotive responses to horror on screen. Parallel emotive appraisals (with the protagonist) of the threatening sources do not entail identification because it would assume that the relationship of the identity between the audience and characters’ emotions are symmetrical. Yet, generally, “the relation is asymmetrical; the characters, in part through their emotions, cause different emotions in spectators” (Carroll 1990, p. 96). Hence, the assumption that the audience consciously parallels the emotive responses of the characters, which then destabilizes the relationship of identity between the audience and characters’ emotion, poses a problem.

Generally, most horror films (whether Asian or Western) tend to depict an antagonist-protagonist relationship. This relationship is based on the good versus evil theme in which the victim is required to face the challenges of being terrorized by an aggressor. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Creed claims that the perceptual shifts are dependent on the degree to which the audience wishes to be terrified and/or to terrify (Creed 1995, p. 155). However, she does not explain under what circumstances the audiences do wish to be terrified and/or to terrify. The problem becomes more complex when we deal with horror films that portray evil against evil, monster against monster or ghost against ghost narratives.

The arguments levied against psychoanalytic theories sometimes suggest that they are inadequate when compared to physical or biological sciences. The key argument made against psychoanalytic theories, by Stephen Prince, Jonathan Crane and Noel Carroll is that psychoanalysis is “unscientific” (Schneider 2004, p. 35). According to Levine,

until recently, most, but by no means all, philosophical work in connection with Freud has been concerned with the question of
whether Freud’s work was scientific – whether it was testable, verifiable or falsifiable in accordance with accepted procedure. (Levine 2004, p. 36)

Hence, the use of psychoanalytic theories to comprehend horror film spectatorship has often been pitted against scientific approaches, such as cognitive studies. Several suggestions have been made to address the inadequacy of the psychoanalytic theories. Should psychoanalytic theories be supplemented, like Carroll suggests, with a strong scientific approach like cognitivism (Carroll quoted in Levine 2004, p. 48), and more radically, should psychoanalysis be treated as a cognitivist study approach, as believed by Freud and most psychonalytic theorists (Levine 2004, p. 36), to begin with?

Citing the problem of using methodological and theoretical perspectives such as structuralist, new historist, psychoanalytic theories and Marxist approaches to study horror films, Steffen Hantke argues that:

An intense focus on genre tends to blur critical vision to the peculiarities of the medium. This theoretical blindness is all the more problematic because horror is one of the rare genres that are defined not primarily by period or formal idiosyncrasies, but by the effect they produce in the audience. (Hantke 2004, p. viii)

The inadequacy of using psychoanalytic theories to examine horror films, as proposed by Hantke, presents a failure in taking the audience's cognitive processes and decisions into consideration, presupposing that sexual complexes and repressed desires lie at the root of the appeal of horror to all audiences. Certainly not all audiences are attracted to horror because of their innate sexual complexes and repressed desires – no Freudian theorists, not even Freud himself, would make such a claim. Noel Carroll further notes the interpretation of horror as an intricate process which requires the examination of the function of the narrative. He claims that:
we are attracted to, and many of us seek out, horror fictions of this sort despite the fact that they provoke disgust, because that disgust is required for the pleasure involved in engaging our curiosity in the unknown and drawing it into the processes of revelation, ratiocination, etc. (Carroll, quoted in Jancovich 2002, p. 37)

Outside of Freudian thought, the appeal of horror is not exclusive to sexual complexes and repressed desires, which are, in reality, no more than socio-cultural idiosyncrasies. Therefore, to understand how a general audience, as opposed to their idiosyncratic counterparts, is horrified, a cognitivist approach may be more appropriate.

By asking the question “How does horror appeal?”, Carroll offers an answer in his examination of the paradox of fiction. The paradox of fiction is underlined by three propositions, which when combined presents a contradiction (Carroll 1990, p. 87):

1. We are genuinely moved by fiction
2. We know that that which is portrayed in fiction is not actual
3. We are only genuinely moved by what we believe is actual

Carroll proposes the thought theory of emotional responses to fiction to explain why the audience can be horrified despite knowing that the threatening characters are fictional and will not pose a “real” threat, at least one that will not cause physical harm. He criticizes the pretend theory of fictional response for failing to explain “why beliefs about what is make-believedly true only give rise to quasi-fears and pretended emotions rather than genuine fears and emotions” (Carroll 1990, p. 79). If the audience’s responses to horror films are pretended emotions, they can be controlled and moderated at will, but this is not the case because the horror viewership experience is not built on only a specific moment of a threatening situation.
faced by the characters, neither is the plot transparent to the audience so that he/she is able to plan and time his/her pretended emotions. One can, however, argue that since the genre narratives are formulaic, they allow the audience to predict the impending threatening situations. Even so, it will take a lot of conscious effort to appropriate their emotions to what is happening on screen.

**Horror and National Context**

In this thesis I am not addressing the question of individual responses to horror films; therefore, I am limiting myself to one side of this literature. The tradition of writing on horror that links representations in horror to the national context in which it is produced is more relevant to my work. As discussed in the earlier portions, cinema engages the viewer because of his/her willing suspension of their disbelief and tendency to identify with their characters and settings. Still, Barry Grant argues that what is more important is that films can be categorized into genres, in which the generic works as a

“secular myth, and the assumed contract between the filmmaker and the film viewer that allows for their existence – their system of production, distribution, and consumption” (Grant 2003, p. 116).

The filmmaker exploits the viewer’s emotions assuming as

their recurrent theme, the psychological/sociological dimension of the viewing experience, and often are structured in such a way as to depend upon audience identification and involvement for their meaning. (Grant, 2003, p.115)

This explains why representations in horror are contextualized and infused with a sense of national identity.
Genre films are lived and shared experiences of their viewers; their traditions and conventions are linked to the viewers’ communal values. Grant claims that while most filmgoers do not go to the literal extreme of attempting to live generic conventions directly, audiences do model their values and behavior to a significant degree according to those conventions. (Grant, 2003, p. 116)

Hence, genre films are a by-product of “continuous and cumulative interaction of the organic self with the world in which the conventions themselves live in the life of the community” (John Dewey, quoted in Grant 2003, p. 118). More specifically on the horror genre, Bridget Cherry addresses the need to examine horror films historically and culturally to determine how horror cinema engages national anxieties. She argues that beyond the identity and background of the viewer are “coded reflections of social anxieties which contribute to the themes and narrative subtexts of horror films made in particular national and historical moments” (Cherry 2009, p. 210). These socio-cultural and ideological sets of meanings may explain

why certain kinds of horror are produced at specific times and places, thus explaining the developments in national horror cinemas and the evolutionary changes that take place within the genre. (Cherry 2009, p. 210)

When considering the manner in which accounts of horror have taken political ideology into consideration, Jancovich’s analysis of Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) suggests that the film can be viewed as both anti-communist and anti-McCarthyite. These opposing viewpoints are possible because they are linked to “Cold War ideology, fear of Soviet aggression, xenophobia and the unquestionability of authority”, in which “both political systems seek to impose conformity on their populations” (Cherry, 2009: 171). However, in the 1993 (Body Snatchers) and 2007 (The Invasion) remakes, the political undertones in the films remain current, as they
address America’s respective historical moments such as the end of the Cold War, the first Gulf War, George Bush Sr.’s clashes with environmentalism, and the 9/11 incident. The emphasis of both films on the connection between militarism and the aliens sends a message that “wars, humanitarian disasters and social injustice only have a solution in a depersonalized world where human beings cease to be human” (Cherry 2009, p. 172).

The concept of the monster (or any form of monstrosity), which confronts the dominant ideological stance, is conceived from “social and cultural anxieties surrounding the outsider or those who are socially marginalized (the Other)” (Cherry 2009, p. 176). These anxieties are rooted in the many markers of identity differences that threaten mainstream society, of which Cherry identifies race, sexuality and class as being central to the British, American and European horror genres. Besides, horror films also deal with “everyday experiences or the sociocultural contexts of many people’s lives” and “one aspect of everyday life that has been key in contemporary horror cinema is technology and the new media culture that has been engendered by the Internet, games consoles, mobile phone communication and multi-channel television” (Cherry 2009, p. 180). This technologically-specific everyday experience is addressed in films such as Blair Witch Project and Ringu, which carry themes of technology and the media being alienating.

Cherry also notes that a history of social anxieties about violence has been prevalent in the history of horror. She argues that the horror genre has often been linked to what is construed as “the decline of moral values and subjected to media or political campaigns calling for it to be controlled or banned” (Cherry 2009, p. 200). The attention appears to be more focused on the general criticisms on violent entertainment rather than more deep-seated problems, especially those linked to
sociopolitical issues such as unemployment and family disorder. Horror films thus serve as a scapegoat for the actual violence that currently plagues our society.

**Japanese Horror**

Asian horror films have provided one of the classic case studies of horror films and national identity – the relationship between Japanese Horror and the atomic bomb (for example, Balmain 2008).

The revival of the horror genre in Asia is apparent as a significant increase in horror film production I seen particularly from countries like Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand. Despite the prominent influences of these films on popular culture, few attempts have been made to study this often-marginalized genre in the Asian context, until recently. Due to the lack of literature in this area, studies on the “Hollywood” horror genre were often used to help understand Asian Horror. However, recently, the success of Asian horror cinema has invited more interest and curiosity in this specific field of study. The review will explore the current studies on Asian Horror, which include issues concerning national identity and adaptation in light of the increasing cross-fertilization between the Asian and Western cultures.

Jay McRoy in *Nightmare Japan: Contemporary Japanese Horror Cinema*, claims that the themes and esthetics in Japanese horror cinema are highly contextual and nation-specific. They take consider:

both the radical economic and political fluctuations of the last half-century, and an ever-emerging politics of identity informed by shifting gender roles, reconsiderations of the importance of the extended family as a social institution, and reconceptualizations of the very notion of cultural and national boundaries. (McRoy 2008, p. 5)
McRoy’s socio-cultural analysis of Japanese horror films is based on a framework of genre studies, which allows us to find national identities, those both current and in transition, within the Japanese horror conventions. On comparison of modern Japanese horror films with those that predate Ringu, he claims that the recent revisions of the vengeance-seeking ghost, which was featured in the early Japanese horror films such as Kobayashi Masaki’s Kwaidan (1965), and their motive for revenge, provides “valuable insights into the historical, political, gendered and economic logics revealing the current socio-cultural tensions between nostalgic imaginings of “traditional Japanese” past and the equally illusory threat and/or promise of an ever-emerging technological, global, and postmodern Japan” (McRoy 2008, p. 76). Also, McRoy notes that industrial capitalism and the structural shifts in the “family” of modern Japan have been reflected in contemporary Japanese horror, which depicts single mothers as heroines. Citing the heroines in Ringu and Dark Water as examples, McRoy draws analogies for “Japan’s protean economic and familial landscape” and the “emerging neo-conservative ideologies that threaten to re- imagine the notion of equal rights for men and women from a more “conventionally Japanese’ perspective” (McRoy 2008, p. 76).

Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, however, suggests that Japanese Horror consists of textual elements that are particular and universal. The use of urban topography, capturing facets of modern Tokyo, creates “a uniquely urban sense of fear attached to the possibilities of the megalopolis of and mythos” (Wada-Marciano 2009, p. 18). The familiarity and remoteness of these areas give the films “a sense of spatial and temporal reality, as well as a mythical undercurrent related to the remnants of pre-modern culture lurking in rural locales” (Wada-Marciano 2009, p. 19). Although the settings are location specific, they are likely to appeal to international audiences just
as well as the modern Japanese landscape is globally recognizable. However, the appeal of the topography to international audiences and to local audiences is different. While the former may find the scenes of Tokyo familiar because they have visited there or have seen similar images via the various media prior, this sense of familiarity is different from that the one experienced by the local audience, who have been part of the Japanese spatial and temporal reality. International audiences may tend to see this typography as belonging to the Other. Its appeal to an international audience, therefore, “rests on the realism of its depiction of locales, images that resonate with a sense of Japan as a repository of the “antiquated’ and the “mysterious” (Wada-Marciano 2009, p.19).

The national specificity of topography is suggested in Wada-Marciano’s explanation of why the spatial and temporal reality has been displaced in Verbinski’s The Ring. She notes that the film does not represent the “actual topography”. Rather the representation of space in this film is:

only a geographic device for the narrative development. Strengthening the characters and the narrative causality…allows the audience to identify with the characters and their predicament rather than Ringu’s identification through the shared knowledge of topography. (Marciano 2009, p. 18)

Replacing national specific topography is a Hollywood-specific narrative style – one which highlights character and narrative development; one which is cross-national. Chika Kinoshita argues that unlike Hollywood horror films, which capitalize on what Carroll terms as the complex discovery plot, Japanese Horror “undermines, sabotages, or at least frustrates this structure of horror premised upon the play of knowledge” (Kinoshita 2009, p. 112). Ringu, however, is an exception, which may explain the reason why it can be adapted for the international market with a few alterations.
Horror cinema as an allegory of the Japanese national identity is also discussed in Adam Lowenstein’s reading of Kaneto Shindo’s *Onibaba*, a horror film, set in 14th century Japan. Although the film does not bear any textual relevance to Hiroshima, Lowenstein claims that it has theoretically legislated cinematic representations of the city that was destroyed by atomic bombing in 1945, “with particular attention to the then political issues of victim consciousness, war responsibility, and the construction of gendered models of Japanese national identity” (Lowenstein 2005, p. 83). The national victimhood of Japan is symbolized by images of the blameless, self-sacrificing maternal female. This cinematic rendering of Hiroshima is brought about by mythic “figures such as the Japanese “A-bomb maiden”, a tragic young heroine suffering from atomic-related illness” (Lowenstein 2005, p. 86). The images of the traditional women symbolize victimization, which, therefore, enables a historical narrative of forgetting (Lowenstein 2005, p. 86).

Lowenstein also proposes that *Onibaba* questions the Japanese national identity on the fronts. Although capitalizing on Noh as a sign of Japanese national identity, its conventional stylistic representation is intentionally traumatized by the unconventional treatment of the text. Lowenstein notes that the “desire to posit Noh as a timeless, authentic national essence” is subverted by “unmasking (both literally and figuratively) the characters of *Onibaba’s* allegorical representatives of Hiroshima’s traumatic modernity” (Lowenstein 2005, p. 101). Also, the open-ended conclusion of *Onibaba*, in not revealing the fate of both the protagonist and antagonist, is also a rejection of “Noh’s dominant impulse to resolve the struggles of its ghostly, spiritually possessed characters by releasing them from their tortured state (whether through salvation, enlightenment, or defeat in combat)” (Lowenstein 2005, p. 102).
However, recent work has forced us not to make simplistic attempts to categorize films into national contexts. The reading of Japanese Horror should perhaps consider that these texts are distributed as DVDs internationally, rather than through cinema theaters. Hence, Wada-Marciano proposes that J-horror should not be analyzed as films as the horror genre has been reconfigured as a result of the blurred distinction between the modes of distribution. Wada-Marciano argues that in the case of Japanese Horror,

the dominance of DVD in the marketplace has produced a new genre system in post-filmic distributions. It is a system with more generic terms, but at the same time it resembles the genre categories of Hollywood cinema. (Wada-Marciano, 2009: 35)

She suggests that the shifting of genres between film and DVD through digital technology has displaced the historical cultural context in films. The national identity in Japanese Horror becomes blurred when multiple formats with multiple layers of ownership rights are released. In this sense, the Japanese Horror discourse “involves the filmmakers’ self-reflexive consciousness of globalization and the international film market” (Kinoshita 2009, p. 121). It reveals “its emphatically modern interest in the uncanny, the medium specificity, technologies of mechanical reproducibility, everyday life, and implicitly, the changing gender roles and family” (Kinoshita 2009, p. 122).

**Hong Kong Horror**

Paradoxically, Hong Kong horror is unique because of its heavy borrowing of narrative, stylistic and thematic elements from non-horror genres, regional and Western Horror.
What makes this particular instance of cinematic borrowing so distinctive, however, is that the source text in question appears to have generated such a singular fascination, and its resonance for the Asian context is therefore something that calls for examination in greater detail. (Knee 2009, p. 70)

As it is difficult to define Hong Kong horror as a specific genre, narrative prototypes such as ghost erotica and vampire have been suggested, although these prototypes are less prominent in more recent Hong Kong horror films. The proliferation of Hong Kong Horror, after the success of Japanese Horror, may seem to be a response to the growing popularity of horror films worldwide. However, some have noted that the new brand of Hong Kong Horror is “distinct in its impulse to render a deep political anxiety and identity crisis” (Yeh and Ng 2009, p.146), which are linked to socio-cultural issues because of Hong Kong’s return to China. Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Neda Hei-tung Ng’s analyses of Three: Going Home (2002) and Three Extremes: Dumplings (2004) argue that the new treatment of ghost and ghostly bodies are “latent representations of Hong Kong’s increasing desire for a “home” and “mother” previously feared” (Yeh and Ng 2009, p. 146).

By the interpellation of the “motherland”, Hong Kong’s return has been framed as a long lost child’s homecoming, a “natural” and emotional reflex, adding complexities to an already entangled political integration. (Yeh and Ng 2009, p.148)

Vivian P.Y. Lee also agrees that Going Home’s “nostalgic invocation of the dead as an image”, or more precisely the “living dead”, examines the relation between the ever-changing city and the desire to return home (Lee 2009, p. 201). In her reading of Going Home, she argues that the “binaries of modernity and tradition, illusion and reality, scientific knowledge and superstition within the horror convention” are reflected through the conflict between a Traditional Chinese Medicine trained doctor and a Hong Kong policeman, which “reveals the film’s
skewed perspectives on China as a ghostly an uncanny presence” (Lee 2009, p. 189). Lee proposes that the nostalgia in films takes on three forms: the present seen through a hallucinatory reconstruction of the past (horror and supernatural thrillers); a hallucinatory projection of the present as a moment of impending crisis and ruin (John Woo and action cinema); and the past as an amalgamation of past images being rediscovered as a source of collective cultural memory (popular nostalgia) (Lee 2009, p. 5). In the case of horror films, nostalgia is imagined through the juxtaposition of images from the past and present, the dead and the living. Adam Knee also agrees that the broad “thematic repercussion of the narrative device of having the dead visible amongst the living is a heavy emphasis on the coexistence and close interrelationship of the past and the present” (Knee 2009, p. 73). His reading of The Eye outlines instances of polarities that signify nostalgic imaginations – Hong Kong’s modernity against the underdeveloped rural areas in Thailand, the blurred imaginations of Mun with those of Ling, interaction between different national and regional cultures, and linguistic valences of characters. Although Lee associates this form of nostalgic imagination with horror, it is not exclusive to horror films.

“Asian” Horror?

The current trend in writing on Asian horror films appears to be particularly interested in nostalgic imaginations in relation to their respective national identities. Very few attempts have been made to define “Asian Horror” as an established and encompassing genre; most of the national horror cinemas are discussed in isolation of the bigger Asia. I would argue that Asian Horror be studied from a pan-Asian perspective, as this would embody “contemporary regionalism and globalization within the range of intra-, inter-, and extra-textual levels” (Knee 2009, p. 69).
specifically, a genre studies approach is required to examine the intertextuality in Asian horror films, and not just specific national horror cinemas.

Defining the horror genre is one of the more regular exercises practiced by the academia when interest in this genre was first sparked. In fact, this practice appears more like an instinctive and systematic approach gathered from the traditions of studying the earlier arts such as literature and painting. Genre definition is made with the assumption that the genre, as a supertext, is

an abstract of the most significant characteristics or family resemblances among many particular texts, which can be accordingly analyzed, evaluated, and otherwise related to each other by virtue of their connection with the supertext. (Cawelti 1985, p. 56)

Genre study, according to this prescription, encourages genealogical research of the film in question, rather than taking an epistemological approach. Thus, the focus will be on detecting the similarities (in terms of horror themes and imageries) a film has with all other horror films. At most, genre study may also focus on slight changes/discrepancies in these themes and imagery to explain auteurship. Although drawing boundaries for the genre is necessary, as the horror film (and film itself) is a fairly young art, it may distract from understanding important issues such as the mechanics of the horrifying process. Further, a rigid definition of the horror genre would mean the exclusion of many films (especially Asian horror films) as they do not contain the cultural, social and thematic similarities with the supertext. When writing “The Aesthetics of Horror”, I found it difficult, if not impossible, to scrutinize Asian texts, such as Ringu, within the framework of the Hollywood horror genre, where there are no blood-sucking vampires, transforming werewolves or flesh-eating zombies. Using a Western genre framework to study Asian Horror also becomes inaccurate and erratic, as demonstrated in Kevin Heffernan’s essay Inner Senses and
the Changing Face of Hong Kong Horror Cinema, where he erroneously relates Chinese Ghost Story, a film adaptation of Pu Songling’s Liaozhai stories, with the supernatural martial arts horror comedies of the 1980s (Heffernan 2009, p. 61), and The Bride with White Hair, a wuxia (swordman) film, with the Asian supernatural cinema (Heffernan 2009, p. 68).

Contemporary academics, such as Jonathan Crane and Mark Jancovich have, however, realized that it is impractical to attempt to define the horror genre because the horror film is gradually evolving to cater to the taste of popular culture. Therefore, changes in the genre are inevitable. Crane argues that, when genres are treated like long chains of immutable codes, important historical shifts (or drastic mutations) are treated as little more than minor variations, which have no significant bearing on the fundamental meaning or constitution of the genre in question. (Crane 1994, p. 23)

Hence, the resolution for most contemporary scholars is to shift their focus towards specific issues concerning the genre. The study of horror archetypes is one of those issues. The move to study the archetypes of horror appears to be an obvious solution if one is still reluctant to relinquish the urge to classify horror films. From macro to micro classification, film scholars now report on the variety of monsters and how these monsters are culturally symbolic to the audience. In Children of the Night: the Six Archetypal Characters of Classic Horror Films, Randy Loren Rasmussen writes that monsters are highly stylized characters that are more likely than heroes and heroines to survive changes in genre taste…Their power, malevolence, suffering and anger are greater than what is permissible in their normal companions…But whether they are demonized portraits of evil or martyrs to exploitation, monsters are charismatic rock stars of their genre. (Rasmussen 1998, p. 194).
Rasmussen has made an acute observation in pointing out that the monster is the key feature of the horror genre. It is perhaps the only similarity one can find in all horror films, transcending even nationalities. Of course such a claim can be sustained only when we define the term “monster”. If “monster” does not only refer to the creature, usually huge and grotesque, with brute strength and an appetite for destruction, but instead alludes to a being that dwells on the edge of humanity and finds the meaning to its existence by antagonizing the protagonists, it is possible to apply the explanation of this archetypal horror in studies involving Asian texts. However, it is clear that archetypes developed in Western horror genre are based on national specific experiences, such as European literature. These archetypes offer little contribution to knowledge in the domain of Asian Horror.

The problem with studying archetypal horror is that we are simply returning to the basics. In defining the archetypes of horror, we are actually trying to give form to the tangible and intangible traits of the characters appearing in horror films. This can be an erratic exercise, as the product achieved at the end of the archetype could as well be present in other genres. For example, while Rasmussen’s archetype of the monster can be used to describe The Incredible Hulk, it does not classify the film under the horror genre. The same problems recur when defining genre in archetypal studies when attempts to consolidate similarities fail to address even the finer differences. Therefore, archetypal studies are only meaningful when we trace the creation /development of the archetypes back to their origins, as such an exercise will determine whether the archetypes are national specific. Currently, only limited studies trace the origins of horror archetypes (werewolves, vampires, zombies, mad scientists). Studies focused on Asian horror archetypes, and genre, are even fewer.
Recently, attempts have been made to study archetypes specific to Asian Horror. The vengeful female specter archetype, particularly, is notably distinctive from Western Horror as she is portrayed more as a predator than a victim. Jay McRoy claims that horror films featuring vengeful female specters, such as *Onibaba*, *Kwaidan* and *Ringu*, draw on a multiplicity of religious traditions such as Shintoism and Christianity, plots derived from traditional literature and theater, which include Noh theater’s shunen [revenge] and shura-mono [ghost-plays] motifs, and Kabuki theater’s tales of the supernatural [kaidan] (McRoy 2005, p. 3). He notes that prominent features associated with the woman as the “avenging spirit” include long black hair and wide staring eyes (or, in some instances, just a single eye), as long black hair is often symbolic of feminine beauty and sensuality, and the image of the gazing female eye (or eyes) is frequently associated with vaginal imagery. (McRoy 2005, p. 3)

Although McRoy acknowledges that the vengeful female specter archetype is derived from religious traditions (although Buddhism, despite its importance, is left out), the emphasis on the gazing eye and its association with vaginal imagery transpose the argument back to a Western/European perspective, one that is deeply rooted in the psychoanalytic theory and fails to address national identities in Asian Horror. 

Using genre studies as the primary approach, the next chapter will trace the genealogy of Asian Horror by identifying the common horror archetypes of the genre, and examining how the genre is used in nationally specific ways.
Chapter 3
Asian Horror

As discussed in Chapter 2, horror films can be related to the national contexts in which they are produced. In this chapter, I begin by mapping a series of cultural elements that are common across a range of Asian countries, and suggest how they might be related to Asian Horror as genre.

A few studies have been done that have focused on defining the Asian horror genre. The term “Asian Horror” is loosely used to categorize horror films that are produced in East Asia and Southeast Asia (Thailand to be more specific) without recognizing that there are common elements across horror films from these regions. Rather than merely functioning as a supra-category that encompasses the numerous national cinema, Asian Horror should register “the changing landscape mediascape and the increasing interdependence of local [Asian horror] cinemas with the Asian region” (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009, p. 2), for beneath these cinematic texts lie nationally specific elements. Interestingly, another term “New Asian Horror” is used to recognize the content and visual styles that have evolved over the last decade, and have found usage as a term of reference for audiences that have found these so-called “New Asian Horror” films appealing. However, the “narratological and visual tropology on display in these works has long been a primary component of cinematic traditions that are only now getting the critical attention they have so long deserved” (McRoy 2008, p. 1). “New Asian Horror” largely serves as a term to describe a genre that was coherent decades before it gained international attention.

Prior to examining specific national case studies this chapter delineates some common genealogical elements of horror, across various Asian countries. These
shared elements result from the interactions among different cultures, which are made possible due to their spatial proximity and cultural kinship (Choi and Wada-Marciano 2009, p. 2). Among these shared elements are religion, mythology and literature, which will be examined in this chapter, to trace and understand the genealogy of Asian Horror. The influences these elements have on Asian Horror will show the interplay between regionalism and national specificity in Asian horror sources.

Religion

One of the main sources of images and narratives for horror films is religion. Although religion has provided spiritual comfort for its followers, the restraints its dictates have imposed on them creates anxieties; followers are encouraged to fear the wrath of gods and demons, retribution, Armageddon and Judgment Day. Such themes are often rooted in literature, art and film

Substantial literature is present on the development and social function of religion. David Hicks writes that the concepts of religion and the sacred are associated with morality “to suggest that they connote such qualities as holiness or godliness and to distinguish religion from magic” (Hicks 1999, p. xviii). This association is a common characteristic also seen in Asian religions, particularly in Buddhism and Taoism, whose rites and scriptures have a moralistic tone. This provides one way to understand the common elements across various Asian cultures.

Another common attribute of religion is its rigid classification of all things into two contrasting groups (e.g. good/evil, yin/yang, form/formless):

All known religious beliefs...presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated
well enough by the words profane and sacred. (Durkheim, quoted in Hicks 1999, p. 8)

The attempt by religion to distinguish between the extremities establishes the existence of the profane and sacred. It also attempts to create a sense of awe for the sacred. Religion, in guiding its believers towards the path of enlightenment, employs vivid images of the profane, death and the devil. While emphasizing the doctrines of the good and enticing followers with the benefits of piety (Heaven, Nirvana, Enlightenment), religion also makes the effort to warn its students about violating the precepts.

Buddhism, although widely known for its didactic teachings in compassion and benevolence, does not spare its followers from the torment of reincarnation. In Buddhism, life itself is a suffering; to be reborn as a human being in the next life is, in a way, a light punishment. The degree of punishment one faces is determined, on Judgment Day, by the quality and quantity of wrongdoings the deceased commits during his lifetime. For example, depending on the seriousness of crimes, one may be imprisoned in one of the eighteen levels of Hell instead of being reincarnated. According to Buddhism, the torments and sufferings increase proportionally with each lower level. For specific crimes such as lying and stealing, the deceased may also be expected to have his or her tongue removed (for lying) and limbs amputated (for stealing).

To escape the sufferings of life and death, early Buddhist followers immersed themselves in practices such as meditating over decomposing corpses, with the ultimate aim of transcending the cycle of life and samsaric suffering. The purpose of such extreme methodologies can be better understood when we examine the dharma of Buddha, which is summarized in his Four Noble Truths:
(1) All life is suffering. (2) The cause of suffering is desire. (3) The way to make suffering cease is to stop desiring. (4) The way to stop desiring is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path of right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. (Carmody 1996, p. 64)

The last two aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path reflect the need for meditation to achieve deliverance. Through practicing Buddhism, followers remove all objects that are materialistic and beautiful, and at times subject themselves to the grotesqueness of the profane. One such methodology, fujokan, was documented in medieval Japanese prose narratives such as Hosshinshu (A Collection of Tales of Religious Awakening) and Kankyo no tomo (A Companion in Solitude).

Fujokan, the meditation over decomposing corpses, originated from Indian Buddhism. Rajyashree Pandey in “Desire and Disgust” writes that the medieval Buddhist monks observed in detail the various decomposition stages of a corpse as part of their religious training. This is because Buddhaghosa claims that meditating on the “bad stench” that emerges from a “festering corpse” is beneficial… for those who lust after the sweet-smelling body of a person who uses flowers and perfumes. Meditating on a worm-eaten body that now belongs to a manifold variety of worms is a cure for anyone who is attached to his/her own body, thinking, “It is mine”’. (Pandey 2005, p. 198)

The concept of meditating on a decomposing corpse being beneficial may appear bizarre to modern readers. Nevertheless, this practice is an example of Buddhist beliefs shaping the way Asian cultures perceive the concept of the body. That is, the body, despite our relentless effort to preserve it, is actually infused with filth and potential decay. In canonized texts such as Anguttara nikaya and Commentary on the Great Wisdom Sutra (Sk. Mahaprajnaparamitopadesa, Ch. Ta-chih-tu-lun, Jp. Daichidoron), the body is referred to as “an infected wound that never heals, as a boil
with nine openings out of which foul and evil-smelling matter constantly oozes”, and the body is foul from the moment of conception to after death, respectively (Pandey 2005, p. 197). However, the Buddhist notion of the body being a bag of filth and decay transcends the concept of grotesque as it removes the emphasis on the visual elements. Rather than experiencing the repulsiveness of the body, Buddhist practitioners train (e.g. fujokan) to relinquish their desire for the body, and in its course comprehend the synonymy of form and formlessness. In the quest for enlightenment, profanity can be misconstrued as the opposite pole of sacredness and everything that represents goodness. It is based on this misunderstanding that horror sources in literature, art and film are drawn from religious texts.

One distinctive trait of Asian horror films (and literature) is the omnipresence of the female antagonist, usually in the form of a ghost, witch or demon. Unlike its Western counterpart, Asian Horror usually downplays the significance of male antagonists or monsters as commonly referred to in writings on Western Horror. Substituting for excessively male-oriented monsters and phallic creatures are female - but nonetheless equally (if not more) deadly and powerful - fiends. It could be argued that this is linked to the long history of women being marginalized in Asian societies (Hankte 2005, p. 54) – although the connection may not be simple. Richard J. Hand attributes the origins of the female antagonist to the monstrous women, akuba (evil women) and dokufo (poison ladies), in the Noh and Kabuki theater, who are “motivated through revenge or grief, or are, especially in the case of the supernatural female, inherently evil” (Hand 2005, p. 24). Further, Samuel L. Leiter explains the rationale for the empowerment of these female antagonists as follows:

One of the chief ways in which women who have been trampled on become empowered is to turn into vengeful spirits after they have died. The entire world of selfish, unfaithful husbands and lovers must take
cover when one of these women comes back from the other world to seek revenge on those who have wronged her. (Leiter 2002, p. 225)

Although both claims have provided a possible connection between Noh and Kabuki theater and the horror sources in Japanese horror cinema, these simplistic approaches do not explain why women are constructed and represented negatively in horror and even theatrical texts. If Noh and Kabuki theater have influenced Japanese horror texts, what were the factors that influenced the former? Further, even if the claims on these influences hold, they are only specific to the Japanese context. They do not explain the prolific use of female antagonists in other Asian horror texts, and certainly do not address the two key physical characteristics of the female horror archetype – filth and profanity.

Although Kristeva’s work on the abject in relation to religious discourses suggests that the construction of the monstrous in modern horror can be traced to ancient religious notions of abjection, especially in relation to religious “abominations” such as bodily wastes and the feminine body (quoted in Creed, 1993: 9), she does not link the feminine body to filth and bodily wastes. The view that women are filthy and profane can be traced to Buddhist scriptural position. Muju Ichien, a thirteenth-century monk, wrote on the seven grave sins of women in Tsuma kagami (Mirror for Women):

Women have no compunction about arousing sexual desire in men. They are particularly given to jealous… are deceitful… expend their energies in self-adornment in order to seduce men…Uncontrolled desire leads them to shamelessness and delusion…Their bodies are unclean and foul due to pregnancy, childbirth, and regular menstrual discharges. (Ichien quoted in Pandey, 2005: 203)

These negative constructs of the female body, which are often illustrated in Asian horror texts, can be traced to the tribulations of Sakyumoni, the founder of Buddhism.
It is documented in *Buddhacarita* that Sakyumoni, in his quest for enlightenment, meditates under the bodhi tree, which serves as a sacred circle against the assaults of evil. During the final stages of attaining nirvana, Mara, the Indian Satan, sends his ravishing daughters to seduce Sakyumoni. Calm and devoid of lust, Sakyumoni’s determination does not waver. He “looked at the luscious ladies, realized that they were in fact skin bags of bone and excrement, only temporarily delightful, and saw them decay into repulsive old hags. Mara was vanquished” (Carmody 1996, p. 68). It is provocative to claim that Buddhism intentionally advocates the marginalization of women, but it is a fact that women were discouraged from practicing Buddhism until recently. Even when nuns are accepted into the order, they are deemed inferior in the hierarchy of Buddhism and have to accept extra rules.

The marginalization of women, resulting in the construction of women as the epitome of evil, can be seen in *fujokan*. According to Pandey, there is often a shift from a discourse on the impurity of the body to a discourse on the impurity of, specifically, the female body in Buddhist narratives. In the eyes of ardent Buddhist practitioners, women’s bodies are foul beneath the illusion of their beauty. Succumbing to earthly attachments such as the desire for beauty of the female body, men become the victims of such vices and, therefore, distract themselves from enlightenment. The notion of the female body being vile is so convincing that some women accept this Buddhist representation of themselves. This phenomenon can be seen in the verses of *Therigatha* (verses written by nuns in the Theravada tradition), which illustrated the nuns’ descriptions of their own bodies as impure and disgusting (Pandey 2005, p. 199). Just as the monks did, the nuns too would meditate over female corpses as part of the process of achieving enlightenment.
The Buddhist interpretation of the female body impacted the Asian horror genre which is significantly constructed around the female body. The resemblance the decomposing corpses in *fujokan* bears to the female antagonists in Asian Horror is uncanny; it suggests that horror images are intertwined with religion. The female ghost/demon portrayed in Asian Horror usually has two forms: the human and the spectral. The human form, which is seductively beautiful, allows the female antagonist to exist comfortably among human beings. Her beauty is often a more lethal weapon than her destructive powers; the prey usually succumbs to her looks without much resistance. The deceptive talent of the female antagonist reinforces the Buddhist notion that women are evil and sinful. In Ricky Lau's *Mr. Vampire* (1985), the spirit, Xiao Yu, is a good representation of the archetype mentioned above. In her human form, Xiao Yu is both demure and sexually alluring. However, beneath that deceptive beauty is a hideous and decomposing face, one that can only be seen by a Taoist master when he enlightens his eyes using a magic spell.

The negatively constructed body of the female, influenced by Buddhist concepts, serves as a generic archetype in Asian Horror. One prominent branch of the female specter is the vengeful ghost archetype. Although the vengeance theme is not exclusive to Asian culture, it is quite obvious that Asian horror stories are extensively narrated with vengeance as the central theme. Their power and existence in the human realm is fueled and sustained by their grudge – the desire to take revenge on the perpetrators of their plight.

The prominence of the grudge culture in Asian societies can be related to tolerance, one of the more highly regarded Asian values. This phenomenon can be explained by examining two religious systems – Buddhism and Taoism. One of the beliefs of Buddhism which makes it different from other religions such as Islam and
Christianity is the cyclical nature of life and death. At the heart of reincarnation is what Buddhists refer to as ying guo (cause and effect). It is believed that ying guo is omnipresent. Ying guo can take place within one’s lifetime. A person who has done many good deeds will be duly rewarded before he or she dies. By virtue of the same logic, if he or she commits crimes and causes harm, retribution will befall upon him or her. This moral equation forms the core of Asian religious teachings; it is this law of nature that becomes the governance of man’s capability to differentiate between right and wrong.

The problem with ying guo arises when the guo (effect) is absent due to external and random forces. The power of Nature is not so absolute and evil people can get away with the sins they commit. Hence, the grudge theme in horror films operates readily in situations when the effect is absent and the causes of grievances are so apparent, that something beyond Nature’s forces has to be done to balance the equation. In many Asian horror stories, the grudge of the deceased becomes the principal reason of her existence in the mortal world. This is evidenced by her refusal to reincarnate because of her strong desire to seek revenge on those who caused her death. Only by achieving her goal will the cycle of ying guo be completed, and her grudge be appeased.

Ying guo may also happen across many lifetimes. The grudge can be brought over to the proceeding lifetime whether it is has been resolved or not. This is possible because in reincarnation, the soul is not born into a completely new person. It brings along with it an accumulation of lifetimes of right and wrong doings, which are believed to be deeply buried within the subconscious mind or soul. The intensity of the grudge usually dissipates across several lifetimes. Hence, the reincarnation theme is central in most Asian Horror/ghost stories, in which the ultimate goal of the specter,
or the final resolution to grudge and vengeance, is to reincarnate. Stephen Teo also notes that “the reincarnation theme is the backbone of all (Asian) ghost stories”, which distinguishes the Asian from the Western horror genre (Teo 1997, p. 221).

While Buddhism offers a radical system of managing grievances, Taoism advocates a non-violent approach in appeasing the human desire to seek revenge. With no teachings that inculcate punishments, Taoism emphasizes the principles of Tao (the Way, Li (Ritual), Ren (Goodness), Xiao (Filial Piety) and Wu Wei (Non-action) and their significance in everyday life. Unlike Buddhism, the intention of practicing Taoism is not about achieving enlightenment. Rather, it offers methodologies for practitioners to unravel the cosmological myth by understanding how nature works and how the self is part of nature. Taoism neither recommends punishment nor does it advocate extreme asceticism. A system of thoughts drawn from the cosmic laws of the universe is instead used to guide humanity along the moral path. Opposing Mencius’ view that humanity was born good, Hsun-tzu claims that “the nature of man is evil; his goodness is only acquired through training”. Indeed, he believes that

Man originally is envious and hates others. If these tendencies are followed, injury and destruction follow…Therefore, the civilizing influence of teachers and laws, the guidance of rules of proper conduct and justice are absolutely necessary. (Hsun-tzu quoted in Carmody 1996, p. 108)

Although Hsun-tzu proposes that the inborn evil of humanity can be reconditioned through socializing agents such as the Analects and wise masters, he does not offer any resolutions for cases when the evil cannot be tamed. What happens when nurture is defeated by nature? In Taoism, there is a marked absence of an almighty being to judge people's actions. This lack of intervention from an Almighty may perhaps
explain why grievances are suppressed, and sheds light on how the grudge culture is developed in some Asian societies.

*Wu wei*, another principle of Taoism, has also inadvertently shaped the grudge culture of its believers. This principle of active passivity advocates non-action protocols towards matters, situations and problems in life, politics and nature. Denise Carmody suggests that “Taoists...think that most problems will settle themselves if one proceeds patiently, working behind the scenes”. As she puts it:

> As water wears away the rock, an infant dominates a household, a woman influences a man, a valley succeeds better than a mountain, so does nature operate: subtly, indirectly, patiently, by moving with the grain or the current rather than against it. (Carmody 1996, p. 104)

Taoism emphasizes achieving holistic balance through minimal action. It is believed that any conflict, even when at its extreme, can be resolved over a period of time. Hence, Taoism offers no concrete solutions to those who have been wronged; its methods are passive. Rather than approaching a problem and solving it, Taoists are taught to restrain their anger and frustrations, in the hope that time and patience will heal. Tolerance is easier said than done; it also has a low threshold. The fact that Taoism offers no recourse to reconcile grievances via religion may explain why grudge and vengeance are central in Asian cultures.

**Mythology**

A second common cultural factor across several Asian countries is mythology. This also provides an important cultural context for the production of Asian horror films. The creation of the “Chinese world” bears a strong resemblance to the creation myths of other cultures. However, unlike the creation story from the Old Testament of the
Bible, the story of Pangu and the creation of the World did not evolve into a
canonized religion. Religion and mythology are closely associated, and although they
do not serve the same social function, they can both inspire worship. Many Asian
worshippers pay tribute to Supreme Beings who are not part of their religious belief
systems. For example, in East Asia and Southeast Asia, it is common for Buddhists
and Taoists to give offerings to folkloric deities and fantastic beings that are not part
of their religion. Mythology has also been used to educate the young, inculcating
highly esteemed values that were once held by venerables such as Huang Di (The
Yellow Emperor), Da Yu (The Great Flood Controller) and Guan Yu (God of War
and Literature). Mythology is most often orally transmitted from generation to
generation. Fictional stories are used to transmit advice from the elders to the young.
Twitchell writes:

Modern ethnologists have shown that myths in all their manifold forms
from sophisticated religious ceremonies and complex magic to animal
masks and mundane drinking cups, are not just adaptive; they are
prescriptive. Myths inform an identifiable audience about a particular
problem at a specific time. (Twitchell 1985, p. 85)

Therefore, myths are not only representative of a particular culture belonging to a
particular time, they also serve as rites of passage in which choices and meanings on
life are socially learned. Within these myths lies an abundance of information on the
traditions and national identity of the community.

Mythological stories are not limited to only tales of goodness and remarkable
deeds. Many relate to demons, hell and persecution. Horror sources are often derived
from canonized mythologies. Among the various mythological concepts, Priesthood
and Shamanism, and Superstitions have produced several distinctive Asian horror
archetypes.
Categorically, Priesthood and Shamanism are different although both involve a designated individual closely associated with the occult. The word priest denotes a religious expert with the ability to “communicate with the divine, devoted especially to cultic worship, and belonging to both a profession and a class” (Ching 1993, p. 38). In some cultures, such as the Chinese and Japanese, priests may also function as mediums, magicians, diviners, exorcists and even medicine men. Today, priests are less influential and mystical than those in the past. Priests have been known to hold high governmental positions during the pre-modern era. However, despite the decline in their contributions to society, priests are still sought after for occult-related services, particularly conducting funeral rites. The shaman, on the other hand, is one who has mastered the art of controlling spirits. The shaman is also known for his ability to commune with deities, spirits and gods through “initiatory ecstatic experiences such as pathological sicknesses, dreams and trances, followed by theoretical and practical instruction” (Ching 1993, p. 41). The modern-day shamans, just like priests, are apparently less powerful, but they continue to serve as a medium between the living and the dead. The specialized roles priests and shamans play in ancient, and also modern, cultures are important in Asian horror narratives because they are iconic representations of the elites who accessed the occult in the past.

The priest, as a generic archetype, produces several sub-archetypes such as the tianshi (a cross between an exorcist and a vampire slayer) and the diviner. The tianshi (Heavenly Master) serves as a counterbalance for the antagonists in horror narratives. In Chinese horror stories, the tianshi refers to a class of people who supposedly possess strong foundations in Buddhism or Taoism. Until recently, he (the tianshi are usually males) is trained in magic and martial arts, and is often revealed as compassionate. The tianshi is usually good and chivalrous, but may sometimes be
evil. Should he be evil, there will be a good counterpart to oppose him. The main attribute of the tianshi is his ability to exorcise evil. Essentially, ghosts and demons are his nemeses, although from the 1980s onwards, nemeses have also included hopping corpses and evil sorcerers. The appeal of the tianshi’s exorcism powers stems from the elaborate methods used to annihilate evil. These methods include blessed objects such as Chinese coins and wooden swords, which are common items found in Chinese mythologies.

The tianshi archetype is not exclusive to Chinese horror stories. In Japan, the onmyoji (aka yin yang shi in Chinese) is also a highly popular character in medieval horror stories. The onmyoji is one who practices onmyodo (way of Taoist magic), which is a form of Chinese astrology with associated divination techniques. The practice eventually degenerated and was absorbed by native Japanese folk beliefs and superstitions (Bush 2001, p. 142). Just like his Chinese counterpart, the yin yang shi possesses remarkable skills in annihilating demons and evil spirits. Although not a martial arts expert, the yin yang shi excels in spells and incantations, and is usually protected by magical weapons. In Thailand, the priest archetype takes on a more devious character – wushi (sorcerer). The wushi is often sinister and mercenary; he harms people for materialistic gains rather than for revenge. His methods are extremely unorthodox, and consist of magic and sacrificial rituals that are linked to demons and the devil. Due to the malevolence of the wushi, the character is often depicted as an antagonist in Thai horror stories.

The diviner (also known as soothsayer) plays a less active role in Asian Horror. The diviner, who can be either male or female, usually does not wield exorcism or offensive powers. Nevertheless, it is a critical character in horror narratives because of its ability to foresee impending disasters and/or sense the
presence of paranormal beings. Although the diviner is not the center of appeal, he provides an excellent narrative foreplay by creating questions for the subsequent scenes to answer. The diviner, at his extreme, may be deemed a curser—one whose solemn utterance can invoke supernatural powers to inflict harm or punishment on another person. Instead of warning others about impending dangers, he becomes the perpetrator, whether directly or indirectly, of his enemy’s catastrophic doom.

The shaman, by nature, is a darker figure than the priest because of his constant dabbling with the dead. He is believed to have

the ability of having visions, of seeing the spirits, whether of deceased humans or of animals, and of being able to communicate with these in a secret language…They are also described as being able…to make magical flights into the sky and magical descents into the underworld, to have mastery over fire and to cure sicknesses. (Ching 1993, p. 41)

The distinctive attribute that separates the shaman from the likes of the priest is his ability to raise and manipulate the dead. Therefore, what is actually terrifying about the shaman is his obsession with the dead, and the monster he has created as a result. Although my purpose in this chapter is to trace common cultural elements across Asian horror films, at this point it is worth noting the link between Asian and Western traditions in the use of such figures. The shaman is in many ways similar to the mad scientist in American horror narratives like Frankenstein (1931). In Children of the Night: the Six Archetypal Characters of Classic Horror Films, Randy Rasmussen describes the mad scientist archetype as a deifier of God, Fate, Chance, the Law and Tradition who is often,

a brilliant but flawed innovator, misunderstood by other people who cannot see what he sees and too intoxicated with the beauty of his private vision to recognize its potential for disaster. His quest for
knowledge and power, always more complexly motivated than he realizes, isolates him from society. (Rasmussen 1998, p. 129)

In essence, both the shaman and the mad scientist are driven by their necromantic abilities, particularly the ability to raise the dead, to play god. Quite often, their downfalls are brought about by their underestimation of their creations/resurrections (E.g. Frankenstein's Monster, jiangshi).

In Asian Horror, the shaman plays a lesser role than the priest; the limelight instead is on his unholy creation – a resurrected corpse garbed in a Qing Dynasty official robe. Jiangshi (hopping corpse) is the most renowned unholy creation in Chinese horror stories. Very closely similar to Frankenstein’s monster, the jiangshi possesses supernatural traits such as brute strength and a near-zero I.Q. Historically, the first jiangshis to appear in Chinese horror films are quite tamed; they can be controlled via talismans and hand bells by shamans (and later by Taoist priests). However, in later films such as Mr. Vampire, the jiangshis became more powerful and ferocious. They also acquired vampiric qualities, although the stories only vaguely reveal whether the jiangshi attacks for blood or for flesh. By this time, the shaman was already absent from the plot and it was up to the Taoist priest, or tianshi, to exorcise these hungry hopping vampires.

Superstition, likely derived from mythology, is another influential force that ensures people’s adherence to the cultural, more often than the religious, rules and practices. Superstition entails the practice of certain action, rites or rituals of varying numbers. For example, in the Chinese community, superstitious practices range from small acts such as avoiding pointing at the full moon (to prevent the moon deity from cutting off your ears) to large scale events in which the entire community conducts offerings and organizes neighborhood concerts for the dead during the Hungry Ghost
Festival (also known as the 7th Month Ghost Festival). While the word superstition denotes a widely held but unproven belief or practice in a supernatural causation that results in certain consequences, the connotative meanings it carries transcend logical plausibility. For example, the Chinese believe that ghosts are released into the mortal world once a year during the 7th lunar month. This is the time when the hell gates open and the sprits are free to roam the mortal world for a period of an entire month. “Hell” money and other material goods such as Rolex watches, cars, condos and even servants, all made of paper, are burnt to appease these spirits. Of course, such an act is environmentally unfriendly, and there is also a great possibility that the material goods may simply go up in ashes and not reach the ghosts. However, bearing in mind the consequences (eternal bad luck) of not following this tradition, rationality is temporarily suspended during this critical month.

Many superstitious beliefs are built around mythological figures such as deities, demons and ghosts, of which the last apparently has a particularly greater impact on people. This is surmised from the fact that Asian Horror is largely about ghosts. One of the superstitions shared by many Asian cultures involves substitute-seeking ghosts. Rania Huntington writes that:

In late imperial Chinese ghost tales, the victims of certain kinds of untimely death, including some methods of suicide, become ghosts who seek out mortals to take their places. If such a ghost can induce another to die by the same means that she died, then she will be freed from suffering as a ghost and be reborn. (Huntington 2005, p. 1)

Substitute-seeking ghosts are especially terrifying because of their random “killing” sprees. Unlike the vengeful ghost, whose motive to kill is largely driven by her need for revenge, the substitute-seeking ghost, on the other hand, preys on unsuspecting individuals so that she can be reborn. The act of finding a substitute to permit
reincarnation is illogical, but the emotional manifestations this act produces are precisely the root of terror:

The idea of ghosts seeking substitutes both creates and controls horror. Unjust or unclean deaths not only leave traces, but also reproduce themselves indefinitely. The terror of all ghosts is often based on the fear that they will pull us over the same border parting the living from the dead. (Huntington 2005, p. 2)

Asian horror narratives capitalize on superstitious beliefs, such as the existence of substitute-seeking ghosts, to create several notable archetypes. The types of substitute-seeking ghosts are: Hanged, Drowned, Burned, Childbirth and Building Jumping. These archetypes have one thing in common: death by an unnatural cause. It is believed that ghosts of these categories are more deviant because of the unjust factors (such as murders or fatal accidents) that precipitated their untimely deaths. These deaths may even be the result of suicide, in which case death is by choice. Death by choice, among other causations, is extensively intertwined with the personal grievances of the deceased. These suicides are committed because of the individual’s inability to cope with the consequences of external causations. Hence, residual grievances are brought along with the deceased into the netherworld. These grievances can only be resolved when a substitute is found and the spirit can reincarnate.

The hanged ghost is likely a victim of suicide death. The emotional ramifications behind its death can be due to rage, sorrow, shame and despair. The method of their suicide is graphically unsettling, with trademarks such as popping out eyes, tongue sticking out of the mouth and a wrung neck. The hanged ghost adopts a systematic approach in finding a substitute.
They travel to find their victims at a moment of crisis, which usually happens indoors. Their persuasion of their victims is not spatial, in that it is not key to lure the other to a perilous place...more often they directly induce the wish to die, taking advantage of emotional distress. (Huntington 2005, p. 6)

The power hanged ghosts possess is a telekinetic one; it is most effective on people with weak willpower or those who are mentally distressed. In narratives, the hanged ghost is often invisible since she operates on a psychological level. Even the victim may be blind to her presence as the desire to commit suicide has been transposed into the latter. The imperceptibility of the hanged ghost makes it a difficult character to deal with in horror texts.

Drowned ghosts are usually associated with seas, lakes, ponds and wells; these are probable localities of their fatal misfortune. They belong to a different category of the substitute-seeking archetype because their existence is constrained within the space of their demise. Unlike the hanged ghosts, they do not travel to find their victims; rather, they prey on individuals (swimmers) who trespass on their domains. Drowned ghosts can be victims of suicide or accident. They are identified with a mysterious, malevolent force of nature; thus they are often incompletely anthropomorphized, seen as dark vapors or hands grasping from the waters...The loss of the corpse in the element which is the cause of death and the failure at proper burial contribute to fearful image of the ghost. (Huntington 2005, p. 5)

The physical attributes of the drowned ghost, if anthropomorphized, are grotesque as death by drowning often results in the bloating of the corpse. Their power is often fused with the territory that is encapsulating its soul. Victims are often lured into drowning through deception, or simply being pulled into the depths of the water. One can only be rescued from the entrapment if his/her senses are awakened in the nick of time.
Burned ghosts, among the other substitute-seeking archetypes, are the most ferocious. Their hatred and yearning to be reincarnated are constantly provoked by their terrible and painful deaths. Therefore, burned ghosts will not settle for anything less than seeing their replacements engulfed by an ocean of flames. Like drowned ghosts, the existence of the burned ghosts is also confined within specific localities, which are usually schools, hospitals, hotels and theaters. As burned ghosts are usually victims of the same inferno, they exist as a community and work together in identifying and locating their substitutes. The processes of seeking their substitutes are often re-enactments of the original inferno, in which case, victims are lured into a set-up that recaptures the conflagration that took the lives of the burned ghosts.

Childbirth ghosts are female specters that died in childbirth. The causes of their deaths are usually unnatural (e.g. accidents, miscarriages, abortions), which explain why their grievances are intense. The childbirth ghosts are similar to hanged ghosts in that they travel to find their victims, who are indoors, in the birthing chamber. They are not suicides at all, but are associated with a very impure and disturbing form of death...they cause agony without the need to persuade their victims to choose death. (Huntington 2005, p. 5).

The childbirth ghosts are feared mostly because of their interest in targeting pregnant women. In fact, their seeking of substitutes is a curse to families where heirdom is of great concern. Closely associated with the childbirth ghost is the child specter, which is the offspring of an expectant woman’s premature death. Also, known as the unborn ghost, these specters feel deep grief because they either feel they have been abandoned by their mothers or they have missed a chance to enjoy motherly love and
life. Hence, the unborn ghosts are believed to be desperately seeking a mother figure and substituting her child once the time is right.

The last kind of substitute-seeking ghost, the building-jumping type, is a fairly recent addition to the family because of the modernizing urban landscape.

Although the various types of substitute-seeking ghosts employ different methods to coerce the living into taking their places, they are also capable of possessing humans, taking control of their bodily functions. Such ghosts gave rise to the possessed archetype, which is extensively depicted in Asian horror narratives.

**Literature**

Literature is the final common cultural element I want to discuss in relation to Asian Horror. The horror sources seen in Asian horror narratives today are most often inspired by literary works, besides religion and mythology. This is linked to religion and mythology. Many of the horror concepts inspired by literature are in fact adapted from religion and mythology. Despite their close association, literature is conceptually different from religion and mythology because its primary objective is not social control and it is most often discussed in esthetic terms. To examine the origins of the horror sources, the literature is dealt with separately from religion and mythology so that we can determine the esthetic roots of Asian Horror.

Unlike religion and mythology, horror literature does not impose fear and punishment on its readers. In a dramatic way, horror literature tames religious and mythological threats. The influence of horror literature on the construction of horror archetypes in modern day horror films is definitely significant. Two early horror
literary works that have impacted Asian Horror today are Pu Song Ling’s *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (1766) and Lafcadio Hearn’s *Kwaidan* (1890-1904).

Based on folklore and legends, *Liaozhai Zhiyi* is a collection of supernatural tales, which included 431 stories when first published in 1766. Known for the richness of its supernatural characters such as ghosts, spirits and especially fox spirits, *Liaozhai Zhiyi* stood out amongst other horror literature due to its infusion of romance and humanistic qualities in the supernatural beings. Released at a time when the Qing government had just overthrown the Ming dynasty, certain *Liaozhai* stories may be derisive commentaries on the reigning government. For example, the almighty gods and deities of the heavenly court depicted in *Liaozhai* stories are plagued by human flaws such as greed, jealousy and lust. Pu Song Ling's fantastical tales embed moralistic undertones in surreal imageries:

> The *Liaozhai* stories deal with age-old human phobias about death, the afterlife, strange occurrences and other-worldly demons and spirits. In Pu's world, death is a supernatural realm populated by spirits and ghosts who seek rebirth. Once rebirth is achieved through reincarnation, peace and harmony are restored. (Teo 1997, 220)

In the interplay between the realms of good and evil, the dead and the alive, harmony and chaos, three notable Asian horror archetypes have emerged from *Liaozhai* stories – the demon, the spirit and the scholar.

According to literary references, such as *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, the universe comprises three realms – yao (demon), xian (deity) and ren (human). The existence of each realm ensures that the universe stays balanced. Horror stories of *Liaozhai* conventions are built on the overlapping of these realms, thus establishing a necessary antagonist-protagonist relationship amongst the characters. The yao, who is often the mastermind behind human catastrophe, is a principal character in *Liaozhai* stories.
Being an epitome of evil, it shows no compassion to those who oppose it. Gender-wise, the yao may be exclusively male or female, although in some cases, it can be androgynous or even hermaphroditic, which escalates its grotesqueness. The yao is in essence a karmic manifestation of either a plant, animal or insect. It draws its energy by depleting the life force of captured humans, and even deities. The yao often does not work alone; the powerful ones command an army of spirits to do their bidding. Although matriarchal, the yao is ironically antithetical to the mother figure, as it can be cruel to its underlings. In Liaozhai stories, the evildoings of the yao are often beyond redemption; only by completely annihilating the being can peace and goodness be restored.

The “pure” deities are not exactly the staple of Liaozhai stories. In fact, deities and gods are not exactly likeable characters due to their corrupt and human personalities. It is actually the jing (spirit) that has enhanced the appeal of period supernatural stories. Very often the jing gets mistaken for a xian because of its apparent beauty. Men are unable to differentiate between jing and xian because of their desire for all things material and beautiful. The jing, especially huli jing (fox spirit) is so endearingly desirable that men, at the sight of its beauty, may find themselves in a state of stupor. The jing has the ability to bewitch even the most learned men, and cloud his mind with lust and desire merely with her looks: “Blankly, Wang picked up the flowers and turned sadly back as if he had lost his wits” (Pu 1987, p. 32). The jing is actually a lower form of yao, and it shares many similar characteristics with the latter, such as the karmic association with nature (plants, animals and insects) - Liaozhai Zhiyi often uses the imagery of flowers, such as “a spray of plum blossom” as a metaphor to describe the jing’s beauty (Pu 1987, p. 32). Just like the yaos, the jings are often disguised as humans so that they can
remain long enough in the human realm to carry out their ploys. Their power to deceive is perhaps more terrifying than their paranormal abilities.

One significant noteworthy difference is that the jing is usually a female, which, by the prevailing Chinese standards of that time, explains her lower position in the hierarchy of demons and spirits. Her sexual attractiveness also acts as a lethal bait for unsuspecting men. Although controlled by demons, Pu Song Ling’s jing characters are rudimentarily good-natured and often show pity and compassion towards humans. The story of Hongyu, a Fox-fairy is one of the many examples that portray the jing as a kind and magnanimous being:

I was lying when I told you I was your neighbor’s daughter. I’m in fact a fox. When I was out one night, I saw the boy crying in a valley. I took him to Shaanxi and brought him up there. I heard your troubles were over, so I brought him here so that you can be reunited. (Pu 1987, p. 74).

Despite being the former lover of the protagonist, Hongyu disregards the injustice attributed to her and takes pity on his family. A benevolent act like this highlights the disparity between humans and spirits. Perhaps, it is this out-of-this-world compassion the spirits exude that draws the lesser beings to them.

Although almost every attribute of the jing is beautiful, its capability of the sublime should not be ignored. After all, the jing is of the same class as the devils and demons, and their position in the karmic realm is to terrorize humans. Like yao, the jing is a karmic manifestation of nature. To deceive humans and make themselves physically acceptable, they transform their grotesque bodies into the likeness of human beings. Their impersonation is flawless, which becomes a threat to the human realm as the boundary between the demon and human realms is violated. As mentioned earlier, the most terrifying aspect about the jing is its power to deceive –
the power to metamorphose between human and spirit forms. The following story depicts a man’s discovery of his brother-in-law’s “metamorphosis” secret when the latter is in a state of drunken stupor:

Then Zeng, who was thoroughly tipsy, slept at the table while Tao started back to his room. As he staggered out, however, he tripped over a chrysanthemum bed and fell, shedding his clothes, and taking root in the ground, turned into a huge chrysanthemum the height of a man, with a dozen flowers each as large as a man’s fist! (Pu 1987, p. 126)

The cause of man’s terrifying experience is definitely not due to the impending threat of the spirit because he is highly aware that his brother-in-law does not harbor any ill intentions. However, the chance discovery of a well-concealed deception can be sublimely terrifying. In human form, the jing conceals her real intentions by charming men with greed and lust. The attack is psychological, and resistance against her is usually futile. In spirit from, the jing harnesses special abilities that draw powers from the nature. As the jing transforms from human to spirit form, the ferocity of her attack increases; it is particularly during this metamorphosis that one finds the jing terrifying.

The final horror archetype (the scholar) produced by Liaozhai stories is not a terrifying figure. However, its place in horror stories is crucial because he represents both the frailty and ambivalence of the human psyche. Despite being a learned man, the scholar is incapable of comprehending the mechanics of the supernatural world. He is also susceptible to attacks by demons and spirits as he is psychologically and physically a vulnerable character. The scholar’s gentleness and indecisiveness are perhaps the main reason for his downfall. When facing adversity, the scholar often hesitates in taking a stand and arriving at a decision. His inability to differentiate between right and wrong, especially when in a trance, makes him an easy target for
demons and spirits. Helpless and defenseless, the scholar archetype is a projection of the audiences’ anxieties and their inability to tame the supernatural world.

The demon, spirit and scholar characters form a definite archetypal template, which is, most of the time, only incorporated in period horror narratives. While it is implausible for modern day horror narratives to depict these archetypes, traces of such conventions can be identified in the midst of modernity. For example, entrapped or even slain demons and spirits can be resurrected after centuries of slumber, and the scholar archetype can be presented as a white-collar worker. One significant legacy the Liaozhai stories have left for later horror narratives is the depiction of necrophilia. This theme originally stems from the inevitable romance between the spirit and the scholar – another overlapping of realms. However, over a period of time, the innocent romance digresses into lust and explicit sexual rendezvous, as depicted in films such as Erotic Ghost Story III.

While Pu Song Ling’s Liaozhai stories are embedded with political messages and moral overtones, Lafcadio Hearn’s Kwaidan takes on a different approach to study stories of strange occurrences. Born of an Irish-Greek ancestry, Hearn arrived in Japan in 1890, when he became keenly interested in the Oriental culture. His collection of tales in Kwaidan has been adapted from archaic Japanese books, such as Kokon-Chomonshu and Yaso-Kidan, and even Chinese folklore. Hearn tells these stories with poetic imagination, often transporting his readers back in time and space. His stories are seldom laden with objective views, nor do they attempt at being didactic. Kwaidan is simply a documentary presentation of the things and events that amuse Hearn. His candid and lucid style of writing has preserved the spiritual reality of the folklores. The spiritual reality Kwaidan captured in its tales has produced a pivotal archetype for current horror narratives (particularly Japanese works) – the
unsettled ghost. Very similar to the vengeful specter, the motive of the unsettled
ghost is to seek a resolution to an unfinished business prior its demise, so that its soul
can be appeased and become eligible for reincarnation. The determined resolution of
unsettled ghosts is the result of On, a value espoused by the Japanese, and to some
degree, by members of other pan-Asian communities. Michiko Iwasaka and Barre
Toelken explain the concept of On as

> the kind of obligation that one assumes … when one has been the
recipient of love, nurturance, kindness, favor, help, or advice –
especially from a superior in the social system. On entails not only an
awareness of having received a favor, but carries with it the absolute
necessity to respond and repay. (Iwasaka and Barre 1994, p. 19)

Importantly, “these obligations do not end with death”. They “continue afterwards,
both in terms of people who have died without fulfilling their obligations or paying
their debt, and those left behind who have an obligation to the departed” (Balmain

> On his death as a person, his “obligations” are brought along to the nether
realm. It is only when these obligations are fulfilled that the spirit is freed from his
spectral existence. Hochberg comments that it is the fulfillment of these familial and
societal obligations that leads to the emergence of the vengeful specter as “when these
responsibilities are unfulfilled or violated, the resulting imbalance opens the door to
malevolent entities” (Hochberg, n.d.). However, the claim ignores the essence of On,
which is definitely not about seeking vengeance. Although there are instances in
some horror narratives where the ghost adopts a hybrid form of the vengeful and
unsettled archetypes (e.g. Sadako in Ringu, who looks for familial ties while seeking
revenge), the two archetypes should be differentiated to help us understand the
sensibilities of these archetypal constructs. One difference between the vengeful and
unsettled ghost is that the former thrives on wreaking havoc on others (not necessarily only the perpetrators of its plight). The unsettled ghost, by contrast, is most of the time, not malicious; its continuance in the mortal word is sustained by the need to settle an unfinished matter, which is not exclusive to vengeance.

The “unsettledness” of such a ghost, as explained via the concept of *On*, is a spiritual residue of the moment of death. If a person is believed to have an unresolved issue at the point of death, his/her pondering thoughts and intense emotions may manifest into a spiritual form:

Only the very last intention of that fellow could have been dangerous; and when I challenged him to give me the sign (bite a stone as his head is decapitated), I diverted his mind from the desire of revenge. He died with the set purpose of biting the stepping stone; and that purpose he was able to accomplish, but nothing else. (Hearn 1971, p. 48)

The tradition of *Kwaidan* stories has dawn a clear line between the vengeful and unsettled ghosts. For the unsettled ghosts, their motive in the mortal world is to resolve emotional issues such as romance and kinship. *The Story of O-Tei* tells an endearing love story of a wife who fulfills the promise to marry her husband again when she reincarnates:

Seventeen years ago, I died in Niigata: then you made in writing a promise to marry me if ever I could come back to this world in the body of a woman; - and you sealed that written promise with your seal, and put it in the butsudan, beside the tablet inscribed with my name. And, therefore, I came back. (Hearn 1971, p. 34)

Although unsettled ghost stories, such as the one above, are heart wrenching rather than horrifying, they have produced a celebrated archetype for Asian horror narratives, which can be found in several Asian horror films such as *The Eye* (2002) and *Dark Water* (2003). The appeal of the unsettled ghost stories lies in the
formulation of a solution to release the unsettled ghost. *Bancho Sarayashiki*, a famous Japanese traditional ghost story, narrates the story of a ghost in a well who refuses to leave because she is falsely accused of breaking a valuable plate. She haunts the well by counting up to nine and then letting out a frightening cry. This is because the broken plate is one of a set of ten. Her tormented spirit is only freed when a priest shouts “ten” after she does her usual count of nine (Bush 2001, p. 20).

Another archetype introduced by *Kwaidan* is the spirit of nature (e.g. insects, animals, rocks and river). This archetype is derived from the Shinto belief that all things of nature have a *kami* (god/deity/spirit) within. They are not necessarily good or evil; rather their nature is dependent on the circumstances that gave rise to them:

The Shinto tradition does not believe that there is an absolute dichotomy of good and evil. Rather, all phenomena, both animate and inanimate, are thought to possess both…negative and positive, characteristics and it is possible for a given entity to manifest either of these characteristics depending on the circumstances. (Littleton 2002, p. 26)

Typically, spirits of nature are adorned with both beauty and the sublime. They possess elitism and show compassion, yet there is definitely something terrifying about their omnipresence. An example of the dual persona of the spirit of nature is best portrayed in Yuki-Onna:

The white woman bent down over him, lower and lower, until her face almost touched him; and he saw that she was very beautiful, though her eyes made him afraid. For a little time she continued to look at him, then she smiled, and she whispered. (Hearn 1971, p. 112)

The dubious personalities of these spirits make them unfathomable, and hence, terrifying. There is a striking resemblance between Pu and Hearn’s archetypes even though their works are a century apart. This is the key element of this chapter – there
are clearly shared cultural resources across several Asian countries, and these inspire a number of national horror cinemas. China and Japan, for example, are culturally linked, and their belief systems, where the supernatural is concerned, have been significantly shaped by Buddhism and Taoism.

Conclusion

Horror films can be related to the national contexts in which they are produced. In this chapter, I have explored a number of common cultural elements across Asian countries that have provided the sources for horror films. Buddhism and Taoism, mythology and 18-19th century horror literature have produced the key horror archetypes used in Asian horror films. However, although these elements are shared among various Asian cultures, the horror archetypes derived are not necessarily identical across all Asian horror films. There are also distinct national differences between Asian horror cinemas. The specificity of three Asian national horror cinemas will be examined in case studies of Japanese, Hong Kong and Thai Horror in the following chapters.
Chapter 4
Case Study: Japanese Horror

In the previous chapter, the shared basis of horror in Asian horror films was examined through tracing the genealogy of horror in religion, mythology and literature. While tracing the genealogy of horror, ten archetypes specific to Asian Horror were identified: vengeful female ghost, tianshi, diviner, substitute-seeking ghost, jiangshi (hopping vampire), the possessed, demon, spirit, scholar, unsettled ghost and spirit of nature (kami). The recurrence and development of these archetypes will be further examined against the historical contexts of Japan, Hong Kong and Thailand in three separate case studies. This chapter will provide an overview of the development of the horror genre in Japan from 1959 – 2002. It will also highlight the major shifts closely associated with the changing social, cultural, political and economic scenario during the 40-year period. Specifically, the case study will track the thematic trends as well as establish recurring motifs. The case study will end with an examination of the Japanese horror texts as allegorical nostalgia for the Japanese-audience.

The use of the vengeful female ghost archetype in Japanese horror cinema is related to the country’s national culture. Mizoguchi Kenji’s internationally acclaimed Tales of Ugetsu (1953) was one of the earliest Japanese ghost stories released. However, to conclude that Ugetsu is just the forefather of the Japanese horror genre is to fail to see Mizoguchi’s craftsmanship in weaving a powerful story about love, betrayal and the human psyche. Ugetsu is not a horror film, yet it certainly serves as a pioneer in paving the way for the contemporary Asian horror genre. The use of the vengeful female ghost in this film is related to wider changes in Japanese culture that were taking place at the time of its production. As Balmain points out:
The vengeful female ghost in Japanese horror films emerges from older Japanese cultural traditions. The first Japanese horror film that captured this theme was Shozo Makino’s *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (The Yotsuya Ghost Story) (1912), which was based on Nanboku Ysuruya’s kabuki tale. It was later remade by Nobuo Nagakawa for Shin Toho in 1959, and became the definitive Japanese horror film since then. *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (1959) depicts the story of a masterless samurai named Leumon who murders his pregnant wife, Iwa, so that he can marry the daughter of a powerful feudal lord. After Iwa is horribly killed (poisoned), she returns as a vengeful ghost to haunt her husband. The crimes of the sinner are only redeemed upon his death, which also sets a tradition for the “vengeful ghost” stories.

The archetype of the “vengeful ghost” becomes particularly resonant for Japanese culture after the events of World War II. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by nuclear weapons in 1945 fundamentally changed Japanese culture. The revival of the horror genre in the 1950s has been observed as a response to the aftermath of World War II, which left behind, particularly for the Japanese, memories of physical devastation and psychological trauma (Balmain 2008, p. 31). The theme of vengeance and retribution recurred in most Japanese horror films after *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*. Nakagawa’s next work, *Jigoku* (The Sinners of Hell, 1960), was released at a time when the horror genre outside Japan, especially in the West, was undergoing a significant reformation. At that time, psychological thrillers such as *Stranglers of Bombay* (1959) and *Psycho* (1960) rather than classic horror movies that involved vampires, werewolves and zombies, were more popular. In tandem with this change, *Jigoku* offers a phantasmagorical glimpse of the Eight Hells as described in
Japanese Buddhist literature. It is a story about a young college student, Shiro, who unintentionally causes the death of three people, one of them, his fiancée. The actual perpetrator of these heinous crimes is Tamura, a demonic friend who turns out to be his alter-ego. When Shiro dies and goes to hell, he is thrown into a terrifying abyss where he has to witness the graphic punishment of sinners. As Tamura, his alter-ego, refuses to admit to the crimes he has committed, Shiro is punished instead. Some of the gruesome punishments he goes through include being hung upside down with a spear pierced through his throat, walking over a field of sharp bladed swords, and watching helplessly as his baby girl drifts down the river of the netherworld. These vivid images of punishment portray the Buddhists’ belief that all men must face the Judgment Day in Hell after they die. The degree of retribution matches the quantity of sins an individual commits during his lifetime. It does not require a great stretch of imagination to see a connection between the events of 1945 and the obsessive interest in vengeance in post-war Japanese Horror.

Other Japanese horror films are not so clearly linked to events in Japanese history. Some sit comfortably within a more international horror tradition that explores the fear of what lies within ourselves. Ishiro Honda’s Matango (Attack of the Mushroom People1963) deviates from Japanese conventional horror by exploring the gullibility of the human psyche upon consuming a foul tasting mushroom. Apparently, the mushroom contains an infectious virus that has destructive effects on the brain. After the seven characters (five men and two women), who are stranded on an island consume the mushrooms, they become irrational, obsessive, violent, deceitful and unrestrained. During their uncontrollable struggle, all these happenings are observed by strange-looking creatures, possibly aliens. While Matango may sound a little camp (perhaps a B or C movie by Hollywood standards), its unique
horror questions the true nature of humanity – perhaps, irrationality, obsession, violence, deceit and spontaneity – are all part of the human psyche, even when not influenced by viruses. The film deals with the theme of apocalypse, with a pessimistic view towards the goodness of human beings.

Other films specifically demonstrate their characteristic Japanese national identity by drawing on the tradition of Japanese literature. Kwaidan (Ghost Stories), directed by Masaki Kobayashi for Ninjin Club, won the Special Jury Prize during the Cannes International Film Festival in 1965. The film is a compilation of four stories based on the writings of Lafcadio Hearn, a folklorist of Greek-Irish ancestry, who took Japanese citizenship in 1895. Kobayashi’s recreation of Hearn’s tale combines horror with theatrical art. The end result is a visually stunning film filled with surrealist images and sublime horror. The first story, The Black Hair, depicts the story of a poor samurai who leaves his wife to marry the daughter of a high-ranking official. The samurai soon realizes his newly-wedded wife is a selfish and vain woman, and that he cannot forget the love, gentleness and patience of his former wife. When he finally forsakes his official post and returns home, he is shocked to find that his house is already in ruins. His wife, however, remains as beautiful as the day he left her many years ago. When he wakes up the next day, a revelation befalls upon him that his wife has already been dead long ago; what remains is only a decomposed corpse with a thick and lustrous mane of black hair. The samurai’s body then begins to degenerate as if he is under a vengeful curse. The narrative plot of The Black Hair is reminiscent of that in Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan; the most notable element being the use of the vengeful female theme.

In The Woman of the Snow, Kobayashi explores the conflict between love and betrayal. The story begins with a poor woodcutter who narrowly escapes death when
he confronts a phantom-like woman who kills people with her icy breath. The mysterious woman pities the woodcutter and spares his life on condition that he does not disclose what he saw that night. The woodcutter promises, and the lady disappears into the woods as if she is just part of a fantastic dream. Years later, the woodcutter falls in love with a lady who happens to pass by his home one day. They are happily married, with children for years, which is the envy of everyone. One night, the woodcutter remembers the phantom-like woman and tells his wife about her. The promise is thus broken. It finally turns out that that his wife is the incarnation of the woman who sealed a promise with him many years ago. Angry and betrayed, the woman leaves the woodcutter and their children, once again disappearing into the midst of the icy forest.

The third story, Hoichi, the Earless, tells an amazing tale of a monk who plays the biwa (a four-string lute) and sings songs about the great sea battle between the Genji and Heike clans. Hoichi’s songs are so moving and engaging that the ghosts of the Genji and Heike clans demand that he perform for them every night. Hoichi’s nightly confrontation with the specters weakens his body as time passes. When the head monk learns that Hoichi is in grave danger, he intervenes by writing a Buddhist sutra on his body as it is believed that a sutra can ward off the spirits. When the ghost samurai comes for Hoichi that night, he is unable to see him as the latter is protected by the sutra. The method works except that the head monk has forgotten to also write the sutra on Hoichi’s ears. Seeing that only the ears remain, the ghost decides to bring them home to show his masters. He rips Hoichi’s ears off. Although Hoichi survives the ordeal and becomes a very rich man, he is discovered by the spirits towards the end of the film. The ultimate conclusion is that there is no way out once your destiny is intertwined with that of the specters.
The last story, *In a Cup of Tea*, engages the audience in a mood that is different from the first three films, being more playful than horrifying. The story is told within a story, which is recounted by a narrator. *In a Cup of Tea* there is a writer who never gets to complete his ghost story. His story is about a samurai who drank a cup of tea that contained the soul of another warrior. Shortly after that incident, the samurai is visited by the mysterious warrior, demanding revenge because his soul has been wounded when the former consumed the tea. The warrior disappears after the samurai tries to cut him down. Sometime later, three other warriors, apparently the henchmen of the “tea” warrior, came to deliver a warning message to the samurai. Enraged, the samurai goes on a killing rampage. Although the three warriors are illusive initially, he manages to annihilate them one by one, towards the end. In the process of slashing and thrusting these mysterious figures, the samurai becomes insane.

As the writer is completing this story, his wife suddenly screams while drawing water from the well. Out of curiosity, the writer proceeds to take a peek into the well. He is horrified. In the well is the image of the samurai; his right hand is gesticulating for the writer to join him. The writer flees. Although the ending of the film is abrupt and appears inconclusive, Kobayashi has chosen the perfect story with an appropriate ending to close the compilation of strange encounters. Patrick Macias writes “according to animistic Shinto belief, everything (even old films, presumably) has a spirit. The ghosts and creatures who inhabit Japan’s rich folklore continuously take on new forms” (Macias, 2001: 70). The ending is intentionally left open to reinforce this Shinto belief – if that cup of tea has a spirit, the story the writer is writing can also have one. And by the same token, what about the film we are watching?
The aliens attack in *Goke, Body Snatcher from Hell*, directed by Hajime Sato for Shochiku in 1968. This film reveals how international tendencies in horror films can be particularly strong in specific national contexts. This film is an example of the “apocalypse genre”, films which:

literalize the darker side of a process of nation-wide industrialization largely orchestrated as a result of, and in direct response to, Western military and cultural imperialism. As horror films, they contribute to a discourse of boundary violation and body invasion, graphically enacting, in the process. (McRoy 2005, p. 6)

The apocalypse genre can be found in many national horror cinemas although it is particularly prevalent in Japan. *In Goke*, in the midst of a turbulent time, where mad terrorists, evil politicians and natural catastrophes are destroying the world, an alien in the form of a slug penetrates an assassin through his head (again, a corruption of the mind) and begins to suck the life-force (vampire-style) from unsuspecting passengers onboard a plane. It soon becomes a plague and everyone on board, except the pilot and flight attendant, is infected by the alien spores. Towards the end, the duo manages to escape the carnage, despite several close encounters with the aliens. However, as soon as they return to their homes, they realize that humanity has already been corrupted by the alien spores. Although the bloodsucking characteristic is heavily borrowed from Western Horror, the “no way out” ending is a trademark of most Japanese horror films.

*Goke* is atypical for Japanese Horror in its use of a male antagonist. As seen in the earlier Japanese horror films, the predominant use of the grotesque female body to scare the audience is so instinctive that one wonders if anything else can achieve the same effect. Prior to *Goke*, men are portrayed as victims rather than aggressors, as in the case of *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*. Perhaps it is in the Asian context that the
male body cannot be impure and corrupted on its own; the female body, on the other hand, has often been associated with perceived grotesque acts such as birth, menstruation and seduction. Hence, the use of a male antagonist is almost inconceivable. However, *Goke* has successfully marked a deviation from the vengeful female ghost theme, proving that male antagonists can also send shivers down the spine. This serves as a reminder that although horror cinemas have their national specificity, they also share common cultural elements. This is true for both pan-Asian horror and Asian and Western horror films.

Japanese film genres have a tradition – not just in horror – to use teenage female characters as protagonists. This was true even before the release of American slasher classics such as John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978), Sean S. Cunningham’s *Friday the 13th* (1980), and Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). One of the earliest Japanese horror films to fixate on teenage girls was Nobuhiko Obayashi’s *Hausu* (House), released in 1977 by Toho. The story is about the supernatural misadventures of seven teenage school girls when they visit Ohare’s (one of the seven girls) aunt, who lives in the countryside. The horror begins when they stay overnight at the aunt’s eerie old house. They are disturbed by paranormal forces during the night and gradually, one by one, all of them become hysterical, consumed by the evil yet inexplicable forces inside the house.

Despite being categorized as a horror film, *Hausu* is more comedy than terror. The film’s “Freddy Kruger” sense of humor supersedes the horror elements to the extent that the scenes of the girls being teased/scared by the paranormal forces are actually entertaining. Apart from inculcating a wicked sense of humor, the visual stylistics in *Hausu* are imaginative and stunning, bearing resemblance to Tim Burton’s earlier works. This also takes away the audience’s attention from the
horrifying elements. Despite these pitfalls, Obayashi’s contribution to the horror genre is significant. His film, though it deviated from mainstream Japanese Horror, offered a new avenue for both filmmakers and the audience.

The Japanese film industry has a significant track record in the production of sex-themed films, beginning in the early 1960s with Pink film (Pinku eiga), a type of Japanese soft porn films, to the proliferation of hardcore porn, also known as AV (Adult video) in the 1980s. It has been observed that the popularity of these pornographic texts is attributed to the rapid modernization of the Japanese society. Fran Lloyd argues that the urbanization and gendered space of Japan juxtaposed in Japanese visual culture, which uses sexual innuendos as forms of dissent. This transgression of disobedience that rejects the effects of Japanese modernization and frequently returns to pre-modern indigenous traditions which, focusing on the raw body, became metaphors for the violation of the national psyche or body of Japan. (Lloyd 2002, p. 16)

This aspect of Japanese culture has infiltrated the national horror cinema as well, in films such as Evil Dead Trap (1988): “A daring and grim thriller… [that] reveals Japan's twisted sexual soul in one terrifying scene after another” (as Oliver Stone expresses it on the video cover). Evil Dead Trap, directed by Toshiharu Ikeda, clearly strays from its predecessors. In the absence of vengeful ghosts, alien predators and teenage schoolgirls, serial killer, blood and gore, rape and sadomasochistic sex hog the limelight in this slasher movie (possibly the first of its kind in Japan). The film is obviously heavily influenced by the popularity of the American slasher movies during the 1980s, a phenomenon which was promulgating throughout most parts of world at that time (Halloween (1978), (Friday the 13th (1980), A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)). However, Dejan Ognjanovic emphasizes that the Japanese psychos differ from their American counterparts in that they are “products of the contemporary
Japanese society where alienation, distance and detachment, lack of affect, indifference towards others and selfishness seem to be the rules of the day” (Ognjanovic 2006), rather than products of dysfunctional families. Balmain further notes that these sex-violence films “expose the contradictions within the Japanese society, in which the commodification of sex exists uneasily side by side with traditional discourses of appropriate femininity” (Balmain 2008, p. 111). The story begins with Nami, a TV show host, receiving a mysterious videotape at the studio. When she plays the video, she is horrified to see a series of strange scenes. In one particular segment, a woman is brutally tortured and killed. This is cut to a close-up picture of Nami, which suggests she will be the next victim. Nami decides to gather her crew to investigate the matter. With clues gathered from the video, they manage to trace their way to an old military base.

Unfortunately for Nami and her crew, their escapade turns out to be more than a reality show. In the tradition of slasher films, the crew members are gradually killed off by a mysterious murderer. Unlike their American counterparts, Japanese protagonists in horror stories rarely get a way out, and so finally, Nami’s death is inevitable. *Evil Dead Trap* is considered an important film in the history of Japanese Horror, not because of its artistic qualities or the new contributions it offers to the genre, but because it reflects the degree to which slasher flicks have influenced the world. Following its runaway success, two sequels were made subsequently in 1991 and 1993, respectively.

Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (The Ring) (1998) is often acclaimed as one of the best horror films to emerge by the end of the 20th century. It shows that venerable cultural traditions can remain potent in a techno-rational modernity. Here, the vengeful female spirit of Japanese mythology infects modern communications technology – showing
that modernity is not immune to the ghosts of national culture. *Ringu* helped coin the term J-Horror (Japanese Horror) and set the stage for more vengeful female specter-themed films. A videocassette, a television set, an ancient well and a woman with long black hair covering her face are what it takes to scare audiences around the world. The film is about a TV reporter who stumbles upon a cursed videocassette, which has been linked to the deaths of several people who died after watching it. The cause of their deaths is unknown. After an extensive investigation, she discovers that a deceased female psychic named Sadako had cast a curse on the videocassette. Whoever sees the video must accomplish a certain task within seven days. While trying to save herself from the curse (she had seen the video earlier on), she unravels the encrypted message in the video tape. Apparently, Sadako was murdered by her father many years back and nobody was aware of it. The curse demands that whoever has seen the video must get another person to watch it within seven days. Any failure to do so will result in a terrible death.

After the advent of widespread computer viruses via high-tech systems like mobile phones and the Internet, *Ringu* was released at the right time to address humanity’s inability to control technological advancements. Just as our highly relied-upon equipment (mobile phones and computers) are susceptible to attacks by hackers, television sets and telephones, home electronics once considered beneficial and safe, have become a gateway to hell. Balmain argues that the videotape embodies contemporary anxieties in that it is the technology through which the repressed past reasserts itself. As such, technology both metaphorically and literally signifies death – the loss of tradition in the face of encroaching modernity is projected onto the female body, making a series of implicit connections between technology, femininity and death and death. (Balmain 2008, p. 170).
Ringu definitely paved the way for the return of the vengeful female theme. Following its success are sequels and spin-offs that dwell on “the revenge of the female specter” theme. One such venture is Takashi Shimizu’s Ju-on (The Grudge) (2000).

Ju-On shows that Ringu was not a one-off and that the vengeful female spirit retains its place at the heart of Japanese cultural history. Superficially, Ju-on appears to be a film put together by a string of poorly orchestrated segments; its narrative plot is weak and the transpositions from one segment to another are barely fluid. The background story of Ju-on is about the murder of a woman and her son by the husband, who was jealous of his wife’s love for a teacher from her high-school. The new occupants of the house where the murder took place soon discover the evil supernatural forces that lurk behind the plastered walls. The first victim of the grudge is Nishina Rika, a social worker who visits the occupants in the house. There, she discovers a strange looking boy by the name of Toshio who was duct taped inside a closet. As she probes into the mystery of the creepy house, she finds that she has unleashed the wrath of the ghost of the dead mother. This triggers a chain of events in which unsuspecting people entering the house end up becoming victims of the grudge.

The events that follow are loosely connected by the vengeful specter and the motive behind her killings are continuously being questioned – why does she have to kill those innocent people? Perhaps, her motive is similar to Sadako’s – she kills to enlighten people about her grievance. If we deconstruct the film, putting aside the narrative plot, it becomes clear that Shimizu is actually adept in handling the vengeful female ghost theme. The vengeance theme reverberates in the film, and the continuous chain of events, without any resolution, is a reinforcement of the film’s
title. Just like Sadako’s curse is never-ending, the grudge will never be resolved, infinitely.

Like mythology, Japanese literature continues to be a source of inspiration for horror cinema. The release of Miike Takashi’s *Audition* in 1999 has drawn international attention to Ryu Murakami’s original novels of the same title, showcasing to the world a shocking twisted tale of a middle-aged man (Shigeharu Aoyoma) in search for his perfect companion. Through a mock audition, Aoyoma takes a fancy for Asami Yamazaki, one of the four thousand hopefuls who have applied for the lead role in a film that is never meant to be produced. Lies and deceit eventually land Aoyoma in a life-threatening situation beyond his imagination. The monstrous characteristics of Asami differ from those of the female vengeful female ghosts that were revived by *Ringu*. Lies, deceit and betrayal, intertwined with perversity, lead to the final sequence where Aoyoma has to survive a series of gruesome tortures orchestrated by Asami. At a time when vengeful female ghost films are proliferating, *Audition* has succeeded in presenting horror of a different kind under Takashi’s auteurship.

The last forty years of Japanese horror film history have seen the emergence of different types of horror films. While it is interesting to note the similarities (e.g. revenge and retribution) amongst these films, it is more crucial to examine the appeal of these archetypes. Commenting on the recurring appearances of the vengeful female specter in Japanese Horror, McRoy argues that careful analyses of the specters’ wrath and their intentions provide insights into the tensions between Japanese nostalgic imaginings and her traditional past (McRoy 2008, p. 76). By examining the allegories depicted in these films, we will be able to determine if horror sources have national specific basis.
Japanese Culture and Horror Films

In explaining why horror has become the flagship genre for contemporary Japanese film, Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh links the popularity of the horror film to stressful societal situations in Japan. They cited examples such as the sarin gas attack on Tokyo’s mass transit system by a violent cult, the Aum shinrikyo, and the Hase Jun case as national atrocities most Japanese can immediately relate to.

In the Hase Jun case, an eleven-year-old Jun was beheaded in an affluent suburb. After placing the head on the school gate, the killer challenged the police for days with riddles published in the local paper. The killer was eventually identified as the fourteen-year-old playmate and neighborhood bully. “Such senseless cruelty prompted much anxiety over public morals, but events like these made Japanese society not just threatening, but more dramatic” (Davis and Yeh 2008, p. 121). They explained these social occurrences as *kireru* (“to snap”), which can affect anyone who is pushed beyond his or her threshold of endurance by the pressures of life (Davis and Yeh, 2008: 121). Yet, *kireru* is not a core representation of the Japanese identity and consciousness; at best it is only a series of reflections on the dark side of life.

In the preface of *Japanese Horror Cinema*, Christopher Sharrett paints a grim picture of Japanese horror films within the context of the socio-political environment:

> Images of out-of-control madness, bloodshed and mass destruction are often connected quite blatantly by Japanese Horror with corporate capitalism’s assault on the very institutions and values its superstructure says it holds dear: the home, the family, the community, the sanctity of the individual life. (Sharrett 2005, p. xii)

Sharrett has accurately identified the cultural dissonance Japan is experiencing due to the conflict between its rapid modernization and the traditions it once held dear. Evidently, there is a relationship between the archetypes and themes seen in horror
films and the socio-political context they are based on. In the case of Japanese horror texts, there are obvious discrepancies between the depiction of the film world and the real world. These differences are reconciled through the allegories of nostalgia.

As mentioned above, the significant event that possibly has had the greatest impact on the Japanese psyche is Japan’s defeat in World War II. As discussed earlier, the aftermath of the war has seen an increase in the production of horror films with the vengeance theme. In explaining the relationship between Japan’s defeat and the revival of the horror genre, Balmain argues that the aftermath of the Second World War, and the Allied Occupation (1945-52) would give rise to vengeful ghosts and monsters from the pre-modern past. She comments that,

The facts and figures are stark: 1.8 million dead and 680,000 missing or wounded; cities demolished; and Japan’s position as a Pacific power totally destroyed. Victims not immediately killed by the bombs would die slowly and painfully, and generations to come would be affected by the fallout as the full horror of radiation poisoning became evident. (Balmain 2008, p. 31)

Whether these horror films are consumed as a remembrance of Japan’s defeat, shame and aftermath horror, or are merely manifestations of its desperation to forget the past and displace a prominent chunk of its history is debatable. An obvious trademark of these horror films is the return to the supernatural themes over technological ones. Even in popular tech-anime, such as Robotech and Gundam, which features humans in robot-armor suits, the supernatural theme is still indispensable. These supernatural themes reflect a return to nostalgia, a concept that appeals to the Japanese particularly at a time when the country is going through rapid social, cultural and economic changes. Japanese horror films are national specific due to their incorporation of the return-to-nostalgia theme in their narratives. The nostalgia themes (supernatural,
ghosts, traditions and superstitions) have created allegorical dissonance in the advent of rapid modernization and technological advancement. H.D. Harootinian writes:

In contemporary Japan there has been a relentlessly obsessive “return” to ‘origins’: an orchestrated attempt by the state to compensate for the dissolution of the society by resurrecting 'lost' traditions against modernism itself, and by imposing a master code declaring 'homogeneity' in a 'heterogeneous' present. (Harootinian 1989, p. 66)

With an estimated population of 127.4 million, Japan has set a prominent landmark in the global economy by becoming the second largest economy in the world, after the United States of America, at about US$4.91 trillion (Google Public Data, GDP Japan) in terms of nominal GDP. However, its journey to success has been long and arduous, after its defeat in World War II. Surrounded by emerging powerhouses like Russia and China, Japan thrives on the sheer efficiency of its relatively small workforce, emphasis on high technology and close government-industry collaboration. Within a few decades, beginning in the 1960s, Japan has achieved economic success through its intensive modernization program. Today, Japan is one of the forerunners in the fields of scientific research, machinery, technology and medical research. While pushing for these remarkable economic, scientific and technological achievements, Japan has been trying hard to maintain its traditions and cultural identity, which have been hampered by Western influences.

The end of World War II also curtailed the role of the Emperor of Japan to a symbolic one. Balmain notes that

this was a major upheaval in the very foundation of Japanese societal values and obligation, as the emperor was seen as a descendent of Amaterasu (the Sun Goddess, Shinto’s chief deity) and had become synonymous with Japanese nationhood since 1868. (Balmain 2008, p. 30)
Thus, having a political system based on constitutional monarchy implies that a balance has to be struck to honor the throne while embracing capitalism, democracy and social reforms. The contradictions of beliefs upheld by the Japanese create a national identity problem, one that can be resolved through allegoric imaginings. Ivy argues that the hybrid realities and national identity crisis of Japan are,

contained within dominant discourses on cultural purity and nondifference, and in nostalgic appeals to premodernity: what makes the Japanese so different from everybody else makes them identical to each other; what threatens the self-sameness is often marked temporally as the intrusively modern, spatially as foreign. (Ivy 1995, p. 9)

Modern Japanese culture has evolved rapidly over the years. The new product is often an amalgamation of traditional Japanese and popular foreign culture. One such example is *manga* (Japanese comic), which is a combination of traditional woodblock printing and Western pop art. This perhaps explains why the facial features of the manga characters more resemble those of the Caucasians than that of the Japanese. *Anime* (Japanese animation), a technologically based offspring of *manga*, also reflects the impact science and technology exert on Japanese culture. Two of the popular recurring themes captured in *anime* are fantasy (the likes of R.R. Tolkien’s middle earth stories) and robot wars (ala *Transformers*). Interestingly, both themes represent impossible realities for the Japanese. As mentioned above, the influx of technological advancements and modernity have posed cultural dissonances in a society habituated to embracing traditions and nostalgia. However, the implausibility of mystic creatures such as elves, warlocks, ogres and demons has been integrated into its subculture. Through the consumption of these implausible contents, the modern Japanese national identity is reconciled with its traditional culture. While robot wars *anime* reinforces the contemporary Japanese identity, one
that is associated with its technological contributions to the world, the theme of war itself certainly contradicts Japan’s paralyzed military capabilities. In reality, since the end of World War II, under Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan, the country has already lost its right to declare war and/or use military force as a means of settling international disputes. Yet, the popular theme of war has been recurring in anime for the past three decades. This perhaps suggests Japan’s nostalgia for its glorious past and military aggression.

Another social phenomenon that developed after the war was the rapid dissipation of class and gender differences, which had created great social tension in Japan. Regarding the complex stresses that plagued Japanese society in the 1980s Napier claims that the changing status of women, as they joined the Japanese workforce, was one of the most significant stresses.

Feminist thought, although never reaching the degree of influence that it exercised in Western society, penetrated Japanese society to an unprecedented extent. Not only were women going to work in greater numbers, but they were also putting off marriage and childbearing… (Napier 1996, p. 146)

The shifting balance between the male and female identity and the displacement of their place in the conservative Japanese society upset the social norms that were held prior to the modernization and industrialization of Japan. Hence, horror films and other “implausible” genres such as anime became an avenue to address those stresses. Balmain argues that at a time of societal disruption,

shifting relationships between men and women, the demise of rigid distinctions between classes and the rapid modernization of Japan, the horror film provided one of the most suitable mechanisms through which to articulate anxieties and concerns over the changing nature of Japanese society at a time of unprecedented upheaval. (Balmain 2008, p. 31)
The diminishing class and gender differences are reflected in Japanese horror films, in which discrimination towards the “lesser” beings is displaced. As discussed earlier, Japanese horror narratives posit their female characters on a level above their male counterparts. The vengeful female specters particularly are far more superior than their ex-oppressors. They are uncontrollable, incomprehensible and indestructible. Class also does not play a significant role in horror narratives, as the supernatural does not discriminate between the privileged and the deprived. The enhanced homogeneity between men and women, and different classes in these films thus signify Japan’s determination in rebuilding the nation and her economy – a return to its glorious past.

An analysis of Japanese horror cinema then shows several degrees of cultural influence. There are some international elements of horror – such as the fear of what might lie inside each of us. There are pan-Asian elements of horror – including the vengeful female spirit. But it is also clear that there are nationally-specific elements of the horror cinema. The focus on vengeance in post-WWII Japanese Horror is notable, as is its fascination with the relationship with modernity (technology) and the past (the supernatural). This provides us with a model for thinking about the national identity of horror films. I apply this model to Hong Kong in the next chapter.
Chapter 5
Case Study: Hong Kong Horror

Analyzing Japanese horror films reveals three levels of influences – international, pan-Asian and nation-specific. Hong Kong horror cinema reveals a similar interplay of cultural heritages.

Most people associate the Hong Kong film industry with its notable genres – comedy, gangsters and kung fu. The Hong Kong horror genre was only revived recently by Oxide Pang’s *The Eye* (2003) and Peter Chan’s *Going Home* in *Three* (2002), a compilation of three horror films by directors from Korea, Thailand and Hong Kong. However, there was a time during the 1980s when horror films from Hong Kong were the most easily accessible (incidentally, the first horror film I watched was from Hong Kong); inevitably it became a canonized genre. Made in Mandarin and Cantonese, these films have a ready market (Malaysia, Taiwan, and Singapore) in Asia. A unique characteristic of the 1980s horror films is the genre's blending with kung fu and comedy genres. These mixed-genre horror films greatly influenced the later films, as well as television serials such as *I have a Date with the Vampire* (1998) and its 1999 and 2004 sequel-series.

As with other national cinemas, Hong Kong Horror draws on the mythological heritage of the city-state. One of the first ghost story films made in Cantonese was Chiu Shu Ken’s *Ghost of the Old Mansion* (Gu Yuan Yao Ji) (1949). The film is about a property agent who encounters a female ghost in an old mansion. As the ghost resembles his dead wife, the property agent soon falls in love with her. The narrative is melodramatic, which reveals possible influences from the Western style of filmmaking. This is because in Hong Kong the situation is slightly different from
the one in Japan; its cultural positioning means that Western filmic traditions are as available as Chinese ones. Similar to other genres, the early horror films from Hong Kong were imitative of their Western counterparts. Classical Hollywood horror conventions, infused with melodramatic twists, were heavily borrowed in *Ghost of the Old Mansion*. Stephen Teo describes the film as “a richly evocative thriller that shows Cantonese Cinema absorbing the influences of classic Hollywood horror movies and Chinese cinema’s own traditions of grand guignol” (Teo, 1997: 221).

Chiu’s influence on Hong Kong horror productions was significant and permanent. He started a horror film trend in depicting necrophilia. This was unlike the draculas in Hollywood horror, where the “undead” desire the living (their blood actually). Between the 1950s and 1960s, there was an abundance of horror films portraying necrophilia. Men not only loved specters, they also made love to them. Although the thought of making love to the dead is perverse, the genre manages to blanket such perversity through eroticism. Thirty years later, the soft porn film industry capitalized upon the appeal of erotic horror and produced many films portraying necrophilia.

Besides mythology, Chinese literature has been a significant influence on Hong Kong horror cinema. Just as folklore literature, such as *Kwaidan*, made such a great impact on Japanese horror films, *Liao Zhai*, written by Pu Song Ling during the Qing Dynasty, is the basis of many Hong Kong horror films. The earliest known *Liao Zhai* film to be produced in Hong Kong is Li Han Xiang’s *Qian Nu You Hun* (The Enchanting Shadow1960), an adaptation of Pu Song Ling’s story. The story is about the ordeal a young lad and a female ghost (Xiao Qian) have to go through when they fall in love. Since Xiao Qian is under the control of an evil Thousand-Year-Old Tree Demon, she is unable to reincarnate. Later, the duo meets a highly skilled Taoist priest, who agrees to help them to suppress the tree demon. Decades later, Chan Siu-
tung's version, under the title *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), achieved great success, partly due to the film’s use of elaborate mise-en-scene and state-of-the-art special effects. A central theme of these ghost stories is the notion of reincarnation, in which the only way for the protagonist (the ghost) to end her sufferings as a specter is to be reborn. Teo says that

> the reincarnation theme is the backbone in all ghost stories, and it is the ghost story which defines Hong Kong's horror genre...It is also the oldest strand in the horror cinema, stretching back to the inception of Chinese film-making and drawing inspiration from a long oral and literary tradition. (Teo 1997, p. 221)

The strength of the reincarnation theme in Hong Kong horror cinema is closely linked to the Chinese Buddhist karmic beliefs and Taoist philosophies, discussed earlier in Chapter 3. Only a few films, such as Tang Huang’s *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* (Fairy, Ghost, Vixen) (1965), Ding Shanxi’s *Yin Yang Jie* (Blood Reincarnation) (1974) and King Hu’s *Shan Zhong Chuan Qi* (Legend of the Mountain) (1979), were made in this tradition period, during the 1960s and '70s.

Towards 1980s, the appeal of *Liao Zhai* themed horror dwindled. Replacing this tradition was a brand new style of horror – *kungfu* horror. This shows that it is not only literature that provides a nationally-specific cultural influence: other forms of culture can also play their role. Zhang Che's *wuxia* epics in the 1960s and Bruce Lee’s martial arts flicks in the 1970s were so popular that many genres were blended with *kungfu*, horror being one of them. The shift towards the action genre has been construed as a reaction to the changing times and audience demands. Teo argues that

> if the effete romantic hero of the previous decades had been connected with the subordinate status of a colonized and dominated culture, the action hero may well be a cultural registration of an increasing sense of self-confidence expressed in the same mythical and
historic narrative forms that had provided generic framework for films (wuxia). (Teo 1997, p. 97)

The industry's shift towards combining horror with kungfu was both commercially and creatively driven. The blend of horror kungfu was possibly a response to the dwindling appeal of horror narratives depicting ghosts, spirits, demons and inept humans. This mixed genre was initiated by veteran British filmmaker Roy Ward Baker, who was commissioned by Hong Kong’s Shaw Brothers and Britain’s Hammer Films to make The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires in 1974. These type of productions demonstrate the highest level of cultural heritage in Hong Kong horror films – the influence of international elements of horror cinema. Being a joint production with the West, the film featured European folkloric characters such as Van Helsing and Dracula. The narrative plot also closely resembles those of the Classic Hollywood Cinema Western epic. Daniel O’Brien notes that

received at the time as an uneasy, largely unsuccessful mix of exploitation genres, 7 Golden Vampires...is closer in spirit to an American Western or Japanese samurai epic than a horror film, featuring a remote village under siege, saved by skilled fighters at a heavy cost. (O’Brien 2003, p. 9)

Despite the flaws, The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires opened up a new avenue for horror filmmakers as it demonstrated that a mix of kungfu and horror had concocted a very interesting appeal for the audience. A few years later, this mixed genre became even more popular with the introduction of a grotesque yet appealing character – the jiangshi (hopping corpse).

I have earlier discussed the role of ghosts in Chinese horror cinema. But despite this tradition, there is surprisingly little use of the supernatural creatures of Chinese mythology in Hong Kong horror cinema. It is only in the later films – like
*Spiritual Boxer II* (1979) - that Hong Kong horror films begin to draw on the rich Chinese heritage of such supernatural creatures as the *jiangshi*. According to Stephen Teo, Lau Kar Leung’s *Spiritual Boxer II* is the first Hong Kong film that depicts the *jiangshi* archetype. The *jiangshi* is an equivalent of the Western zombie in the earlier films. It acquires vampire attributes much later, possibly because of the influence of successful vampire films in the West. The *jiangshi* became more ferocious and powerful in later films such as Sammo Hung’s *Gui Da Gui* (Encounters of the Spooky Kind 1980). Elaborate methodologies to counter the wrath of the *jiangshi*, such as glutinous rice, Chinese coins and wooden swords, were also showcased in this film. These methodologies were expertly executed by the *tianshi* (vampire slayer), who usually dons the garb of a Taoist priest. The antagonistic partnership between the *jiangshi* and the *tianshi* became a prime feature in many Chinese horror films and television till the late 1990s.

Prior to *Spiritual Boxer II* and *Gui Da Gui*, Hong Kong horror films did not have the habit of using identifiable supernatural creatures from Chinese folklore. Compared to Western Horror, which was already famous for its celebrity-status monsters such as Dracula, Frankenstein’s monster, werewolf and zombie, Hong Kong Horror lacked a sense of “Asianess”. O’Brien observes that “while Chinese folklore contains as many ghosts, demons, vampires and assorted fiends as Western cultures, there was no great tradition of supernatural creatures in Hong Kong Cinema” (O’Brien 2003, p. 22). This vast resource of film material was virtually untapped because very few people believed in its appeal. However, Sammo Hung believed that his *Gui Da Gui* project would work as many people in the region (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia) were fascinated with the occult and the supernatural.
The story of *Gui Da Gui* begins with Cheung, an infamous village braggart, who takes on a bet to prove his courage by staying overnight in a haunted house. Meanwhile, Cheung’s boss, who is having an affair with Cheung's wife, plots to kill him. He hires an evil sorcerer, Chin Hoi, to kill Cheung. Fortunately for the latter, the sorcerer’s brother, Tsui, who is also highly skilled in occult magic, helps Cheung to ward off the attacks. The final showdown is fascinating to watch as the two sorcerers fight with *kungfu* and magic. Spirits are summoned and Cheung and Chin Hoi’s apprentices are possessed to enhance their fighting capabilities. In the “good triumphs over evil” tradition, Chin Hoi is defeated (at the expense of Tsui’s sacrifice) and Cheung kills his boss and beats up his unfaithful wife. Although the *jiangshi* only appears for a brief moment in *Gui Da Gui*, its unique movement (hopping with both hands outstretched) and antiquated clothing (Qing Dynasty official robe) has left a lasting impression upon horror fans. Its zombie-like facial features, though terrifying, are often balanced by its “inadequate” idiosyncrasies (its awkward movement and the inability to see). Often, slapstick moments are created when the *jiangshi* fails to move forward due to low ceilings (it could not hop to the optimal height), or when it cannot detect its victims when the latter hold their breath (*jiangshis* are blind; they track victims by picking up the scent of their breath). The *kungfu* action, the comedy and the Asianness are possibly the key driving forces that pushed *Gui Da Gui* and the *jiangshi* archetype into fame.

After the phenomenal success of *Gui Da Gui*, more directors began similar projects to tap into this emerging market. It is important to remember the industrial nature of horror films. Not all nationally-specific elements can be explained through the heritage of the place they are produced in. In the case of Hong Kong horror cinema, the generic nature of production is important. When one film succeeds by
drawing on the supernatural creatures of Chinese mythology, a slew of similar films follows.

Interestingly, as with Japanese Horror, international horror traditions play their role. Just as some Japanese horror films deal with the horror within human beings, so also in Hong Kong horror cinema, once in a while, the evil side of humanity is explored. Dennis Yu’s *The Beasts* (1980) portrays how fellow humans can also terrorize humans. The antagonists in this film are hooligans known as the Disco Boys, who orchestrate a killing rampage on some teenagers when they take a wrong turn and end up in their territory. Although *The Beasts* did not receive an encouraging response from the market, it paved the way for urban terror films such as Patrick Tam’s *Love Massacre* (1981), Philip Chan’s *Night Caller* (1985), Billy Tang and Danny Lee’s *Dr. Lamb* (1992) and Herman Yau’s *Bunman* (1993). The last two films were based on true stories of two infamous serial killers in Hong Kong. Other than *Dr. Lamb* and *Bunman*, some of the urban horror films are imitative; they borrow plots, from Western box-office successes such as *Halloween* and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). This category of films deviates from the Hong Kong film industry's usual mass production of mafia, *kungfu* and comedy genres. These films deal with serious issues that are rooted in the socio-economic scenario of Hong Kong. Tony Williams argues that although often termed “escapist”, these films have “some disturbing links to the material aspects of their culture, often ignored by viewers and promoters” and “are grim embodiments of a dark social reality affecting Hong Kong society in the last decade of the twentieth century” (Williams 2005, p. 203).

Although presented with farcical elements these films depict the culturally and socially embedded fears and anxieties. The antagonists particularly of *Bunman* and *Dr. Lamb* are filmic resurrections of actual serial killers that plagued the city of Hong
Kong in the 1980s. *Bunman* recounts the story of a psychopath who kills his acquaintances and uses their meat to make steamed buns. *Dr. Lamb* is a loose adaptation of the true story of a taxi-driver cum serial killer who rapes and slaughters his female victims. The ramifications of the aftermath left by these killers are deeply embedded in the memories of Hong Kong city dwellers. The once terrifying term 人肉叉烧包 (barbeque human bun) has now been transformed into a pun, perhaps as a way to tone down their anxieties and/or fears of the infamous legend, and the idea of involuntary cannibalism that lurks within roast pork buns, which is a celebrated Dim Sum delicacy amongst the Chinese community. Besides this, taking a late night taxi ride has also become a taboo for women in Hong Kong.

The cultural traditions of Hong Kong Horror harked back towards the local heritage with the release of Ricky Lau’s *Mr. Vampire* in 1985. It grossed HK$20.08 million at the box office in Hong Kong alone, once again demonstrating that the hopping corpse was popular with Hong Kong horror filmgoers. The supernatural trouble begins when a landowner hires a geomancer (who also happens to be a vampire slayer) to relocate his father’s corpse to improve his fengshui. Unfortunately, there is a miscalculation and the corpse ends up being buried in an area full of yin energy. As the corpse absorbs the negative energy, it transforms into a jiangshi with an unquenchable thirst for human blood. Having realized the impending disaster he has triggered, the tianshi sets off to hunt down the vicious jiangshi together with his apprentices. More trouble comes their way when an amorous female ghost bewitches one of his apprentices, and the other is slowly transforming into a jiangshi after being bitten by one.
Mr. Vampire set a landmark in the horror genre for the Hong Kong film industry. Its unique blend of comedy, kungfu and horror became a pattern for many horror films to follow. As noted by O’Brien, “bearing only a passing resemblance to the traditional Western vampire tale, Mr. Vampire is an extraordinary viewing experience, balancing the humor and scares with consummate skill” (O’Brien 2003, p. 55). Apart from reinforcing the importance of a horror icon from Chinese mythology (jiangshi), it also made Lam Ching Ying, who played the tianshi in the film, famous. Also known as Yi Mei Dao Zhang (The Single Eyebrow Priest), Lam acted his role as the jiangshi’s nemesis convincingly with his amazing acrobatic skills and impressive onscreen persona. His successful performance in Mr. Vampire landed him with similar roles as the vampire slayer in later films (Mr. Vampire II – IV (1986, 1987, 1988), Ultimate Vampire (1991), Shyly Spirit (1991), Close Encounters of the Spooky Kind II (1990), The Gods Must Be Crazy III (1991) and more). Lam died of liver cancer in 1997, leaving behind a legacy of numerous “vampire-slaying” films.

Hong Kong horror cinema in the mid 1980s to the early 1990s featured many jiangshi movies; the Ching Siu-Tung and Tsui Hark collaboration revived Liao Zhai-themed horror stories with the release of Qian Nu You Hun (A Chinese Ghost Story) (1987). Unlike Li Han Xiang’s version, Ching’s film uses rapid editing, outlandish camera angles, elaborate sets, high-energy action scenes and, most significant of all, state-of-the-art special effects. The end result is a phantasmagorical and highly entertaining interpretation of Pu Song Ling’s literary work. When released in 1987, Qian Nu You Hun grossed HK$18.831 million at the box office, which revealed that hopping corpses were not exclusively popular in the horror scene. The success formula of Qian Nu You Hun involves an entrapped beautiful female ghost, a wishy-washy tax collector, a powerful demon and a compassionate tianshi. This
combination, with slight narrative variations, was seen again in later films such as
Chinese Ghost Story II - III, O Sing Pui’s Golden Swallow (1987), Wu Ma’s Picture
of a Nymph (1988) and Ivan Lai’s Erotic Ghost Story III (1992). The last film was a
soft-porn spoof of Qian Nu You Hun.

On considering the ways in which national specificity influences horror
cinemas, it was found that it is not only textual features that bear consideration. I
mentioned above that the generic nature of horror films leads to cycles of films based
on popular hits. Systems of censorship and classification also help to shape national
cinemas. I noted above that one distinctive element of Hong Kong horror cinema has
been the use of necrophilia as a plot device. This interest reached its peak in the early
1990s when horror filmmakers and audiences turned to Category III pictures – films
which are rated by the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority as being
unsuitable for viewers under the age of 18 (mainly soft-porn movies). Such a move
was inevitable since the box office success of the predecessors had demonstrated that
these films were profitable, despite being of a low-budget. Moreover, since horror
could be easily integrated with pornography, it became a promising venture for many
production houses. One of the first soft-porn horror directors was Nam Nai Choi,
who made Erotic Ghost Story for Diagonal Pictures in 1990. The story is about three
fox spirits who are abstaining from sex so that they can ultimately become deities.
However, their aspirations are ruined by Wu Tong, a lust demon who, in the form of a
suave scholar, seduces them into breaking their celibacy. With the help of a righteous
tianshi, they manage to subdue Wu Tong at the end. In such a film, the mythological
heritage interacts with a classification system that allows pornographic material for
viewers above the age of eighteen to produce a horror film that is specific to Hong
Kong.
Unlike *Erotic Ghost Story*, *Erotic Ghost Story III* was more of a pornographic adaptation of *Qian Nu You Hun*. The ingredients used in the latter are similar: a swordsman, Chu Ching, arrives at a haunted house and soon falls in love with I-Meng, a female spirit who is enslaved by a wolf-demoness. Replacing the usual tianshi is a Buddhist monk named Reverend Wick, whose only magical power is self-shrinking. Fortunately for Chu Ching, the inadequate monk has a disciple who is more proactive in taking on the demons. Other than absurd sex sequences, the narrative plot of the film is predictable. Although highly entertaining (as in comedies), Category III horror films are weak in horrifying the audiences. The reason is obvious: despite borrowing narrative and camera techniques from pure horror films, the appeal of sex and farce in these Category III films distracts audiences from the horror sources. Towards the end of *Erotic Ghost Story III*, Reverend Wick shrinks himself so that he can enter the demon’s vagina to destroy her. This is perhaps comedy in a grotesque sense.

As with Japanese horror cinema we can see the connection between important national events in Hong Kong’s history, and the types of horror films that were produced. As Hong Kong approached the 1997 Handover, the demand for “costume” films (e.g. sword-fighting, *jiangshi*, fox spirits) dropped considerably. This could be seen as a resistance to their previous association with Mainland China and the impending arrival of their “foreign” Chinese cousins. Horror films made during this period depicted contemporary settings; once again, urban horror predominated. Cheng Wai-Man and Tam Long-Cheung’s *Ying Yang Lu* (Troublesome Nights) emerged as one of the more successful ghost films of the last decade. In fact, *Ying Yang Lu* was so successful that 17 sequels were made within five years after the first film was released. Each film was a compilation of a few separate stories, which were
usually intertwined at the end with a twist. Actors such as Simon Lui and Louis Koo appeared in most of the sequels. The similar “twilight zone” endings and the appearances of regular actors in most of the sequels became the trademarks of Ying Yang Lu. Due to their popularity, a prolific franchise was set for Colour Business Entertainment Ltd., the company that commissioned the sequels.

For a long time, Hong Kong Horror was not taken seriously by critics due to its generic mingling with comedy, kungfu and pornography. However, 2002 was a significant year for Hong Kong’s horror film industry with the release of Oxide and Danny Pang’s The Eye and Peter Chan’s Going Home. The filmic styles adopted by both films are true to the horror genre and feature little generic hybridity. The central character in The Eye is a blind girl, Mun, who regains her eyesight through a corneal transplant. However, the gift of sight comes with a price; Mun begins to see strange things happening around her (in “I see dead people” style). Yet, Asian horror archetypes such as the unsettled ghost are present in the film. Mun discovers that the cornea she received came from a Thai girl who committed suicide because her fellow villagers did not believe her premonition of their impending doom. This resulted in the loss of many lives when a fire burned down the village. The ghost haunts Mun because she has a message to share. The film ends with an ironic twist as Mun tries to warn the people of an impending inferno but fails.

Going Home differs from Mr. Vampire, A Chinese Ghost Story and Troublesome Nights. Unlike mainstream horror, the film does not deal with ghosts or supernatural beings. Instead, it explores a man’s futile attempt to cheat death and depicts true love as unfathomable. The story begins with a policeman, Chan, and his son moving into a rundown hostel. Everything about the hostel, from the echoic corridor that runs infinitely to old photographs left behind in vacant apartments, does
not feel right. However, no one, except his son, notices these irregularities. The story intensifies with the appearance of another, and only, tenant, a strange man who keeps talking to his paralyzed and mute wife. When Chan’s son disappears one night, he immediately suspects that his neighbor may be the perpetrator, although the latter rudely denies having seen his son. Chan enters the neighbor’s apartment while he is away and is shocked to see the man’s wife totally submerged in a tub of Chinese medicated concoction. Chan’s investigation is quickly terminated when the man returns and knocks him out. When Chan regains consciousness, he discovers that the woman has already been dead for three years. She was strangled to death by her husband, as part of the treatment for her liver cancer. The husband faithfully believes she will revive in three days. Chan, however, finds the idea of necromancy to appear preposterous. His attempt to demystify his belief is responded with immense agitation. On the final day of the three-year wait, Chan is rescued and the man is arrested before his wife’s resurrection. The story concludes with a surprising revelation. Apparently, the man, who had been ill with cancer, had died six years ago (perhaps, also strangled to death by his wife). His wife, who is also a trained Chinese physician, then executed the same necromantic technique. When he was successfully resurrected, his wife contracted liver cancer. This entailed another three-year wait.

*Going Home* offers escalating suspense as the audience anticipates the resurrection of the female corpse. The loving care the man gives to his dead wife, an act of necrophilia, is disturbing. Lee argues that “by framing its own nostalgia within a “necrophilic” text, the film distances itself from the nostalgic at the same time the dead (images) from the past is invoked” (Lee 2009, p.193). Nevertheless, it is this impossibility that captures one’s fascination and curiosity. Is he insane or is he just a
dutiful husband? The film also provides a philosophical consideration of life and death; the tragic ending instills a message that mortality is inevitable.

**Hong Kong Culture and Horror Films**

The examination of the interrelationship between Hong Kong horror texts and Hong Kong’s reunification with China “offers an opportunity to rethink the questions on nationhood, specifically those relating to China (original culture, Mainland China (geopolitical power), and Chineseness (ethnic-cultural affiliation)” (Lee 2009, p. 13). Hong Kong became a colony of the British Empire in 1842 as a result of China’s defeat in the First Opium War. During World War II, the Japanese briefly occupied Hong Kong. After the latter's defeat in 1945, under the governance of the United Kingdom, Hong Kong’s economy grew rapidly. By the 1970s, the economy grew by an average annual rate of 9.2% (*The Economist*, 1997, 23). The remarkable growth continued into the 1990s due to Hong Kong’s rapid industrialization. After Hong Kong was returned to the People’s Republic of China in 1997, as a Special Administrative Region, it maintained a highly capitalist economy based on a policy of low taxation, free market and non-intervention from government. In 2008, Hong Kong’s per capita GDP was US$215 billion (*Google Public Data, GDP Hong Kong*).

Hong Kong is culturally and religiously diverse. Due to the region’s exposure to Eastern and Western influences in the early days, contemporary Hong Kong is marked by its seamlessly amalgamated culture. Along a typical crowded street lined with neon lights in Hong Kong, one is likely to find Chinese-themed shops punctuated by Western commercialization such as McDonald’s restaurants and Coca-Cola advertisements. The Chinese living in Hong Kong are quite culturally displaced when compared with the mainlanders. Although, most contemporary Hong Kong
residents are descendents of immigrants from Mainland China, and by origin and tradition should embrace the values and cultural identities of their countrymen across the border, one century of British colonial rule has transformed the region’s sense of identity. Prior to the handover in 1997, most residents in Hong Kong had mixed feelings towards the re-unification. On the one hand, they were happy about the reunion and the departure of a foreign government, while on the other, they were apprehensive of the effects that the re-unification would have on their social and cultural selves.

The national identity crisis Hong Kong faces is similar to that of Japan, and this can be related to the popularity of the horror genre, and its ability to integrate nostalgia with modernity. After the advent of social, cultural and economic transformations brought about by the 1997 handover, the people of Hong Kong needed to manage their new identities as Chinese citizens of a special administrative region. In the process of negotiating with their new reality, their old reality had to be represented allegorically to ease their cognitive dissonance. Among other art forms such as theater, dance and painting, film serves as an effective popular channel for such nostalgic allegories. Impossible realities, depicted in several genres such as epic, fantasy and particularly kungfu and horror, return values, identities and memories of long abandoned eras to the Hong Kongers. Siu Leung Li claims that kung fu imaginary, a representation of Chinese cultural essence is “imbued with an underlying self-dismantling operation that denies its own effectiveness in modern life”. She argues that this ambivalent filmic representation of kung fu as an always already self-negating imaginary problematizes the (re)claiming of a Chinese self and the problem of Hong Kong’s self-invention in a “home in
perpetual transit”. It betrays an ‘ordinary’ moment of heterogeneity, an origin of itself as already impurely Chinese. (Li 2006, p. 100)

The same can be said about Hong Kong horror cinema, in which the creation and narrating of stories about supernatural beings and occurrences present a cultural distinction between the Chinese in Hong Kong and Mainland China. The horror genre, to the Chinese in Mainland China, has remained implausible and a marginalized genre; there have been very few, if any, horror films made in Mainland China since the Cultural Revolution. Hence, the production of horror films is both a physical and psychological act of resistance and counter-action to the influx of Chinese and Chinese ideology into the Hong Kong society. Rooted in the horror imageries on screen is a protest against China's cultural and ideological claiming of the island.

The horror genre in Hong Kong is unique in many ways, one of which, as noted above, is its blending with genres such as comedy and *kungfu*. The amalgamation of horror, comedy and *kungfu* has diluted the horror genre, hence displacing the uncontrollable and creating the impression that the supernatural is less intimidating. The objective of doing this is to transcend traditional beliefs while ironically compensating their national identity. Teo identifies the reincarnation theme, which is a common feature of Hong Kong ghost films, as a textual bridge between Hong Kong's modernity and traditional beliefs. He argues that the reincarnation theme in Hong Kong’s cinema is construed as

a way of dealing with the fundamental hybridity of Hong Kong’s situation, caught between the modern worlds of both Western capitalism and Chinese 'communism' on the one hand, and the abstract nationalism invoking an older, vaguer notion of Chinese-ness on the other. (Teo 1997, p. 225)
As noted above, the horror genre is not as popular in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This phenomenon is worth examining because PRC is the source of Chinese values, rituals and superstitions that influence much of Hong Kong Horror. One significant reason for the lack of a mainland Chinese horror cinema is the country's residual intolerance of all things religious, spiritual and magical. In 1966, Mao Zedong launched an epic movement (the Cultural Revolution) that transformed the socio-cultural aspects of China and led the country to the brink of civil war. The justification offered by the Chinese Communist Party for this drastic reformation was that although the bourgeoisie had been overthrown it was still “trying to use the old ideas, culture, customs, and habits of the exploiting classes to corrupt the masses, capture their minds, and endeavor to stage a comeback”. In this context,

the proletariat…must meet head-on every challenge of the bourgeoisie in the ideological field and use the new ideas, culture, customs, and habits of the proletariat to change the mental outlook of the whole of society. (Chinese Community Party, 1966)

The primary objective of this movement was to reject feudalistic and bourgeoisie ideologies. The repercussions the Cultural Revolution brought to modern China were the rejection, and therefore, the extinction of many traditional arts, and the renunciation of the occult and religions. In such a context it is not surprising that the horror genre has not found a supportive cultural context. By contrast, in a Hong Kong which is deeply ambivalent about its relationship with mainland China, an exploration of occult themes which are banned by the PRC provides a popular and entertaining way to insist on the city-state’s difference from the mainland.

These explorations of Japanese and Hong Kong horror films have demonstrated the variety of cultural influences that shape a national horror cinema. Including international, pan-Asian and nationally-specific cultural heritages the role
of nationally-specific institutions such as the censorship and classification apparatus can help to explain how specific genres evolve in particular contexts. This is once again true in my third case study, the horror cinema of Thailand.
Chapter 6
Case Study: Thai Horror

Compared with Japan and Hong Kong, early Thai films were less accessible to international audiences due to the language barrier. Therefore, they could not be exported immediately without translation; like Japanese, Thai is a homogeneous language used mainly by its own people. However, the former enjoys more accessibility due to Japan’s prominence in the global economy. Thai films only enjoyed more foreign viewership after they were dubbed in Mandarin and distributed to regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore in the 1980s (Crocodile, 1980). Thai horror films were some of these exports (Ghost Money, 1981). Although many horror films have already been made and enjoyed by audiences since the silent era, these films have not been accessible to foreign audiences and researchers due to the language barrier and inadequate archiving efforts. Only horror films from the 1970s onwards were more properly documented. Due to this scarcity of resources, this chapter will only cover Thai horror film history from the 1980s until the present.

Although the history of Thai horror films is relatively short, its influence on the genre since its emergence has been quite prominent. In fact, Thailand is an important case study relating to the pan-Asian degree of influence on the development of national horror cinemas. The language barrier of would have been expected to hamper the elements of Thai horror from influencing a broader pan-Asian horror culture – but this has in fact not proven to be the case. One of the reasons why Thai horror films have been successful abroad is the country’s association with the occult. Folklore and superstitions about Thai witch doctors, ghost children and black magic
have spread across South East Asia, establishing themselves as urban legends long before Thai horror films were exported. Other forms of cultural distribution have taken these elements of Thai Horror to a broader regional audience. Also, the mobility of film production crews has allowed Asian horror films from other countries to be produced in Thailand, allowing elements of this national culture to contribute to other Asian horror cinemas. Hong Kong, for example, has used Thailand as a locale (The Eye and Forever Young to name two). Adam Knee explains that the appeal of Thailand as an alternative locale for foreign narratives stems from the reputation of the country’s lush nature and beaches, and association with the occult. He says that

    Thailand itself in effect becomes an inexpensive natural resource, ready to be used for the benefit of traveling Hong Kong urbanites. It is not only Thailand’s natural attractions that help position it in contrast to Hong Kong’s modernity in these films; a strong association with the supernatural reinforces this contrast as well. (Knee quoted in Marchetti and Tan, 86)

In the context of Asian Horror, Thailand represents the pre-modern culture. Thai culture, and the horror films produced in that context, position Thailand as strongly related to the natural – and the supernatural. It is interesting to note that international audiences have gotten to know Thailand first through non-Thai films instead of Thai films. Hence, when Thai Horror finally becomes accessible, foreign audiences are already familiar with its geographic attributes and unique manner of the occult.

    Two recurring themes have dominated the Thai horror scene during the last two decades: the vengeful ghost and Thai black magic. The first of these is familiar from other Asian horror cinemas – but is presented with a particular national inflection in Thai horror films. Between 1979 and 1981, the majority of horror films released related spirits who returned to the mortal world to seek revenge on the
perpetrators of their tragic fates. *Thakieng Karong* (Wrath of the Tree Sprit) (1979) tells the story of a woman who is about to marry a Bangkok teacher when she is raped and brutally murdered by a village hooligan. Her spirit returns later to seek justice and eternal reunion with her fiancé. The same story, with more impressive special effects, was remade in 1980 under the title of *Putit Pisawas* (Ghost Romance). *Phi Tabo* (Eyeless Ghost) (1981) takes a darker approach in which a doctor kills a man for his eyes; he uses them to cure his blind wife. The ghost returns to punish the unscrupulous doctor and takes back his eyes. In the same year, *Nung Pak Phi* (Ghost Money) tells the story of three young boys who have stolen money from the graves of dead people. Not realizing they have taken valuable coins from a cursed corpse, they are soon tormented by the emergence of the ghost, who wants his possessions back.

These films draw on Thailand’s mythological heritage. Other films draw on the historical sources – and raise questions about where the dividing lines lie between these elements of culture. When does a historical event become a national myth? One of the most significant icons Thai Horror has created is *Mae Nak Prakanong*, a vengeful-unsettled ghost archetype. According to Sukwong and Suwannapak, *Mae Nak Prakanong*, Thailand’s most popular ghost story is,

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derived from the nineteenth century tale of a woman from Prakanong, a rural suburb of Bangkok, who died while in labor together with her unborn-child. Films of her story have been made repeatedly since the silent era. The most famous, starring Preeya Rungruang was *Mae Nak Prakanong*, which appeared in 1958. (Sukwong and Suwannapak, 2001, p. 52)
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Many films carrying the theme of the vengeful dead mother and her unborn child were made later following *Mae Nak Prakanong*’s, but they were not as internationally acclaimed as Nonzee Nimibutr’s *Nang Nak* (1999). Often seen as a love story, the film nevertheless has some horrifying moments. Upon his return from the war, a man
finds himself reunited with his wife and child. Their bliss is soon disrupted by concerned neighbors, who try to convince the man that his wife and child have died years ago. Fearing that he will discover the truth, the “ghost wife” begins a killing rampage, killing innocents one by one. *Nang Nak* is not visually horrifying; it is the examination of the human psyche and of how pure love can manifest as a demonic thirst for taking innocent lives that is frightening.

The vengeance of the begrudging spirit continues in Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom’s *Shutter* (2004). While driving home from a gathering of friends one night, Tun and his girlfriend Jane run over a mysterious woman. However, the woman’s body is not to be seen after the accident. Stranger things happen later as the couple notices that there are unexplainable silhouettes in the photographs they have taken. Amidst this mystery, Tun’s friends are haunted by a female ghost and driven into a state of frenzy. Upon investigation, Jane finds out that the begrudging spirit is Tun’s ex-girlfriend, who is back for revenge. *Shutter* became the number one box office the year it was released, with a gross of THB110 million (approx. $US3.35 million) (IMDB, 2010). Its success is not a surprise as the film has capitalized on the popularity of Asian Horror, particularly the vengeful ghost archetype. The film draws on pan-Asian elements, informed by the specifically Thai tradition of spirits that draws on the tale of *Mae Nak Prakanong*. In some ways, *Shutter* is reminiscent of Nakata’s *Ringu*; both films portray a vengeful spirit that presents itself through the mechanical reproduction of film. It is through the articulation of horror via mundane artificial creations (e.g. television, telephone, and camera) that make these vengeful specters threatening. Once again the importance of pan-Asian elements to national horror cinemas is apparent.
Black magic, the other staple formula of Thai Horror, adds an interesting Thai flavor to the horror genre. This set-up usually includes an evil witch doctor (often opposed by a good counterpart), a possessed female character and victimized men. The witch doctor usually does not attack his victims directly; spells are cast instead and it is up to the good witch doctor to save the day. A noteworthy example of the black magic theme is *Itirit Numanphrai* (Love Potion) (1984). The film tells the story of a young girl who is transformed into a demonic spirit, known as *Phi Kraseu*, by a witch doctor. Devoid of her humanity, she terrorizes her fellow villagers in her altered form. A good witch doctor is later sought to subdue her. However, it seems almost impossible to expel the evil without harming the girl. Once again we can see elements of Thai culture interacting with pan-Asian and international horror elements. Highly formulaic, the narrative plot also resembles those of Hong Kong and Hollywood productions, in which the protagonists, in challenging the source of evil grandeur (demons, vampires), are forced to battle their own kind.

In the second story in *Bangkok Haunted* (2001), the black magic theme is crossed with the vengeful female specter archetype. The story concerns a lonely Bangkok woman seeking a series of sexual escapades and ultimately true romance. With aid of a love potion (made from fluid drained from a female corpse, of which she is obviously unaware), she manages to seduce men. Unfortunately, this effective love potion is not without consequences as these men mysteriously die after a sexual rendezvous with her. More horrifying is the undetected presence of the ghost of the corpse, from which the fluid to make the potion is drained. The ghost lingers around the men who have been contaminated by the love position, and kills them. As with Japanese and Hong Kong Horror, this film can be seen as part of horror genre’s ability to reconcile the past and the present – mythology and modernity. Knee argues
that the narrative seems to articulate a certain retribution on men, for the past suffering of women. He says that

the sense of sexual panic suggested here can be seen as part of the film’s confrontation between modernity and the past: the protagonist’s sexual aggression … is something entirely out of keeping with traditionally “proper” Thai female behavior, something immediately associated with Bangkok and the modern age. (Knee 2005, p. 148)

Set in a time and locale that reflects contemporary Bangkok, the film’s story of the dangers of sexual promiscuity resonate with the image of a city infamous for its sex industry, plagued by deadly sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS. The underlying message against sexual promiscuity is clear.

Thanit Jitnukul’s Art of the Devil (2004) draws on another nationally-specific aspect of Thai black magic – the theme of deception. The film examines the exploitative use of black magic for materialistic gains, which is a popular function of the occult. In it, a millionaire’s entire family is brutally and mysteriously murdered. The methods are inexplicable. As a crime reporter probes into the mystery of the massacre, he discovers that the murders are conducted via black magic by Boom, the millionaire’s lover who wants to reclaim her inheritance. As Boom appears to be a young, fragile and beautiful woman, no one (except the reporter) believes that she is the culprit. The story is a reminder to the audience that black magic users can be very deceptive and may be amongst us without our realizing it. This deception is a prominent feature of Thai black magic.

More recently, Necromancer (2005) tells a cat and mouse story of a policeman, Santi, and an escaped convict, Itti, who practices black magic. This film draws on a number of specifically Thai elements of black magic - the devil buffalo, the devil three-legged dog and a child ghost. These fantastic creatures from Thai
folkloric mythologies have given the film a distinctive Thai horror flavor. In this film, Santi soon realizes that he is not the sorcerer’s match; the only way for him to get rid of evil is to enter the dark side himself. Ironically, in pursuing his goal, Santi brutally kills “apprentice” level sorcerers to absorb their powers, thus becoming more evil than Itti. The final sequence of the film depicts a fierce battle between Santi and Itti, which is reminiscent of the antagonistic relationship between the good and evil tianshi in Hong Kong Horror.

Thus far I have mentioned the specifically Thai cultural heritage that influences the country’s horror films. But apart from the vengeful ghost and Thai black magic themes, more general international horror elements such as religion and superstition are also the basis of some Thai horror films. Sutape Tunnirut’s Angulimala (2003), an adaptation of an Indian folktale, tells the story of a religious fanatic and mass murderer in 500 B.C. India. Born into a prominent Brahmin family, Ahimsaka is cast out by society because of a prophecy that he will become a mass murderer one day. As the story unfolds, the prophecy is fulfilled as Ahimsaka works towards killing 1,000 people in order to achieve Nirvana. To keep count, he cuts off a finger of each of his victims and strings them into a rosary; hence the name Angulimala (Finger Rosary). In pursuit of his selfish aspiration and destiny, Ahimsaka claims that his slaying of people is an act of deliverance for life is itself a form of suffering. The film points to the ways in which nationally-specific cultural elements can in fact travel from nation to nation, gathering local resonances for each one on the journey. Although the story is based in ancient India, where Buddhism originates, the references to Buddhist fundamentals, and the mythical landscape in the film resonate with Thailand’s national identity. More recently, the selfish nature of humanity is examined in Ekachai Uekrongtham’s The Coffin (2008). The belief that
lying in a coffin, a common Thai-Buddhist ritual, may get rid of bad luck leads two protagonists, one who wishes to cure her ill-stricken girlfriend and another who has been diagnosed with a brain turner, to attempt the ritual out of despair. Although the ritual is effective, they soon realize that it is at the expense of their loved ones as the bad luck (illness in this case) has been passed on to them. In both films, religious doctrines are abused by the protagonists for their personal gains. Implicitly, these acts are allegories of the ambivalences of Buddhism and nationhood in Thailand’s history – as discussed below.

**Thai Culture and Horror Films**

Compared with Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore, Thailand now enjoys a less stable political and economic environment in the recent years. The Asian financial crisis devalued the Thai baht to the lowest rate of 56 baht to the US dollar in Jan 1998 (GoCurrency.com, 2006). In the late 2006, a military junta staged a coup against the elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra. Members of the existing government were detained and later dismissed. Martial law was declared in Thailand and later revoked in January 2007. The transient political and economic climate certainly poses a huge challenge to Thailand as its people struggle to build the economy while maintaining their cultural identity.

Culturally, Thailand is heavily influenced by China, Cambodia, India and the rest of Southeast Asia. Its proximity to Malaysia especially creates a linkage to Muslim culture. Despite its diverse tradition and culture, Thailand is homogeneous as 94.6% of its people, according to the census in 2000, practice Theravada Buddhism (*The Buddhist Channel*, 2008). This particular school of Buddhism is integrated with folk beliefs and other Chinese religions such as Taoism due to the large Chinese
population in Thailand. Although the relationship between Sangha (a religious association of Buddhist monks) and the state is one that was complementary in the past, in reality the two domains intersect as the king “was authorized to intervene in extreme circumstances both to protect and purify the religion” (Santasombat 1998, p. 308). After the 1932 revolution, the attempts to destroy the system of political beliefs led to the arena of politics being “abruptly transformed from the realm of the “sacred” to that of the “profane” (Santasombat 1998, p. 315). As Buddhism was closely related to the king, the idea of a nation without the Buddhist tradition became desirable; the term “culture” was thus used to replace Buddhism (Santasombat 1998, p. 316). The national ideology based on the triumvirate of nation, religion and kind was only revived when Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat came to power in 1957. Since then, Buddhism and monarchy became the core pillars for national development and national integration. Santasombat argues that Buddhism offers

    a framework of beliefs, expressive symbols and values with which the Thai people define their world, identify their lives, express their feelings and make their judgments. It provides special legitimacy … to Thai experiences and offers a model which has persisted through time and contributed to the stability of Thai society. (Santasombat 1998, p. 325)

However, with the processes of industrialization and the institutionalization of Western thought in modern Thailand, the significance of Buddhism in their everyday life becomes controversial.

    Although still a developing country, Thailand faces challenges similar to those encountered by Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore. In the midst of emerging and competing in the global market, where cultural imperialism is omnipresent, Thailand has to break away from its historical and political past. As in Japan and Hong Kong, the tension between modernity and tradition is very strong in Thailand. Again, as in
Japan and Hong Kong, reminiscences of their past national identity are reflected in nostalgic allegories. These include cultural products such as horror films and pop music. The rise of Thai horror movies between 2002 and 2007 (Totaro et al. p. 2010) suggested a high demand for films of this genre. These films illustrate an ambivalent relationship with the old way of life in Thailand, the religion and the occult that were once prominent and characteristic of the country.

The prominence of the feminine representation in Thai horror films has also been described as an allegory of “feminine” anxiety. Knee argues that the preoccupations with Thai traditions and history in Thai horror films are

intimately linked: the hidden pasts by which these texts are haunted are primarily those pertaining to women’s oppression. The past and the feminine are figured as sources of anxiety through their linkage to the supernatural, an anxiety that these texts choose variously to exorcise or come to terms with. (Knee 2005, p. 142)

It is not coincidental that the female representation, whether in the form of a phi or a vengeful specter, in Thai and Japanese Horror tends to be of an aggressive nature.

As noted in the earlier chapter, the national identity of genre cinemas can be as much about specific industrial factors as it is about cultural heritage. This is also true in the case of Thai Horror. In response to the popularity and commercial success of J-Horror, the traditional Thai horror cinema is undergoing paradigm shifts, in which more current and pressing social, cultural and economic issues replace the subtext nostalgia. “Contemporary Thai horror films consistently appear as a cultural means of grappling with the past, with secrets and traumas still haunting the country” (Knee 2005, p. 157). Bangkok is repeatedly used as a point of reference in Thai (and even Hong Kong) Horror because it connotes historical contradictions and often appears to
“engender an anxiety over foreign influence and the loss of traditional mores, especially in relation to sexuality.”

These films consistently return to anxieties over gender-related issues, often coincident with irresolution regarding past trauma – concerns over the violence of the male sexual aggression … and the disruptive potential of female agency and desire. (Knee 2005, p. 157)

Compared with Japanese and Hong Kong horror films, the narrative plots of Thai horror films are mimetic and highly formulaic. Yet, Thai horror films have made their mark in the industry through the articulation of distinctive Thai folkloric and mythological elements. While Thai horror films are very popular in South East Asia, they hold less appeal for the Western market.

These three case studies of Japanese, Hong Kong and Thai horror films have explored the national identity of horror cinema in terms of nationally-specific industrial factors, and national, pan-Asian and more widely international cultural heritage. I have attempted, in each chapter, to show the relationship between individual horror films and the national context in which they are produced. The next chapter takes a slightly different tack. The growth of the international distribution markets for Asian horror films in the last two decades has allowed an increasing number of Asian horror films to become popular with Western audiences, and many have been remade for those markets. By looking firstly at which films have succeeded internationally, and secondly at the specific elements the remakes have had to change in order to succeed with Western audiences, we can gather more information on the national identity of particular elements of Asian horror films.
Chapter 7  
Remaking Horror, Rethinking National Identities

The main bulk of this dissertation has examined the relationship between Asian horror films and the cultures in which they were produced by looking at the films themselves. However, there is another approach to understanding the relationship between texts and national contexts. With the increase in Western adaptations of Asian horror texts since the success of *Ringu* and its American remake, a review of these adapted films offers a useful approach to the question of national specificity. By looking at these case studies we can see which elements of the original films have been retained. Also what elements need to be changed to make the films work for other national audiences.

Several Asian horror films have recently been remade by Hollywood for international audiences – for example, *Ringu/The Ring* and *Ju-On/The Grudge* – although these might better be described as “transformations” than “adaptations”. Linda Hutcheon, in explaining what aspects of films get adapted in remakes states that “themes are perhaps the easiest story elements to see as adaptable across media and even genres or framing contexts” (Hutcheon 2006, p. 10). This is to some degree true in the case of Asian horror remakes, which usually capitalize on the revenge theme, a theme that is recognizable in many national contexts. Having said that, while the revenge theme is common, the connotative meaning it conveys to the audience is not. Even if themes are adaptable, other story elements such as archetypes, beliefs, traditions, and cultural artifacts that support them are not. Hutcheon argues that
because Hollywood films are increasingly being made for international audiences, the adaptation might end up not only altering characters’ nationalities, but on the contrary, actually deemphasizing any national, regional, or historical specificities. (Hutcheon 2006, p. 147)

Because of this, in Robert Stam’s terms, “transformation” is perhaps a better term to describe the current trend in remaking/adapting Asian horror than “adaptation”. Stam describes adaptation as “a principled effort of inter-semiotic transformation, with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation” (Stam 2000, p. 62). By contrast, the transformation process includes “selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization and reculturalization” (Stam 2000, p. 68). Adopting this approach to understanding remakes allows one to focus on the transformation process of the original text, thereby establishing an intricate relationship between the original text, its remake and their audiences. Examining the changes as a result of the transformation draws attention to those elements that are problematic in Western filmmaking and allows us to see which elements are passed unchanged.

**Textual/Cross-textual Analysis of Ringu**

Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* is selected for textual analysis because it represents J-horror and bears definitive traits of traditional Japanese Horror. Instead of examining the film in its entirety and performing a scene analysis from the opening to the end, I will study the key cultural elements. These elements are categorized into horror and non-horror elements. The horror elements’ primary objective is to scare and/or create suspense, while the non-horror elements refer to those that are associated with the narrative, but are not horrifying.
I have identified the following objects as horror elements in Nakata’s *Ringu*:

the ghost, the video and the well. As in most Asian horror films, the antagonist of the story is often a female specter. Although the ghost has a relatively short plot duration her presence is most prominent. In *Ringu*, Sadako is initially portrayed as a mysterious, terrifying and malicious specter. She will kill anyone who has seen the video. Yet, when more about Sadako, her psychic mother and how her father had pushed her into the well are unveiled, the motive behind her revenge becomes clear.

There are two occurrences during this transition that are related to the national context of the film’s production.

The first is the revenge theme. As I have argued in the prior chapters, revenge bears a particularly strong link with the cultural heritage of several Asian countries because of the traditional religious formulations. Sadako’s urge to seek vengeance is a residue of the grudge she bears when her father killed her. In the Asian version, the revenge theme is emphasized in several ways. First, Sadako’s revenge is the central force leading the narrative. Her curse and message are encoded into a video-cassette and her motive is to communicate her grudge and story to an unsuspecting audience. Simulating the “chain mail” method, which was a socio-cultural practice in Asia as well as North America in the 1980s anyone having viewed the video content would need to copy it and show it to another person within seven days. The consequence of not doing that was unholy death. Revenge in this case is manifested from Sadako’s personal vendetta into community frenzy, as Reiko frantically targets her son’s substitute. The never-ending curse set by Sadako reflects the extent of the grudge one would bear when injustice befalls upon one; it also reveals how unforgiving one can be when being violated. Second, it is not only Sadako who is seeking revenge; even her victims become vengeful. When Reiko catches her son Yoichi watching the
video, she is even more shocked to find out that it is the ghost of Tomoko (one of Sadako’s victims) who prompted him to watch the video. While it might sound implausible for Tomoko to harm Yoichi, a cultural understanding of grudge and even the substitute-seeking ghost archetype reveal Asian imaginings of the supernatural.

Although Verbinski’s *The Ring* shares a similar plot, the revenge theme is less obvious and is overshadowed by the film’s interest in building suspense using symbols. Samara appears to hate her mother more than she wants revenge. Her victims (unlike those in *Ju-on*) do not express a grudge, much less the need to seek substitutes. These elements are either modified and/or omitted in the Western transformation.

The second nationally-specific element of *Ringu* is the female ghost archetype. As discussed in the earlier chapters, the female ghost archetype is also affiliated with Asian religions and mythologies. As discussed in Chapter 3, the use of the female body to personify evil, filth and disgust stems from early Buddhist scriptural teachings. Certainly, the lowly status of women in old and modern Japan also reinforces such beliefs. This imagery of women is in turn upheld by traditions and teachings. On the contrary, the use of the female ghost archetype is less prevalent in Western Horror prior to the remake version of *Ringu*. Even in Verbinski’s *The Ring*, the female identity of Samara is clearly downplayed and questioned as we witness her more masculine qualities such as monstrous appearance and brute strength. The sympathy for her as a marginalized woman is also absent as the audience only sees her as a psychotic killer – in the tradition of Michael Myers in *Halloween*.

While vengeance is the central theme in Nakata’s *Ringu*, the Hollywood version does not focus too much on the revenge theme. In fact, the revenge theme is
quite insignificant and Samara, instead of being seen as a pitiful specter seeking redress, is portrayed as a demonic spirit craving kills. In the scene where Samara is all set to kill Noah, she is portrayed as demonic and decomposed, which is a far cry from her childlike appearance in the earlier portion of the film. This transformation reflects the loss of her humanity and innocence. Compared with Sadako, the morphed Samara has less emotional attachment to the human world. She has had an unhappy childhood and is wanted dead by both her parents. The narrative obviously suggests that she is suffering from psychosis. Her compulsive desire to kill is not driven by vengeance but by her madness and her inability to control her psychic powers.

It is worth noting that not all critics agree with this interpretation of the two films. Drawing on the Japanese onryou (female vengeance ghost) narrative, Linnie Blake argues that

both Ringu and The Ring are ideally positioned to explore the ideological function of models of national identity promulgated by the media in Japanese and US society and internalized by members of each, often in direct contradiction of the realities of national history or contemporary social and cultural practices. (Blake 2007, p. 212)

In this article, Blake argues for the similarities between the two films, rather than their differences, linking the onryou archetype with Japan and America’s political-sociological histories. I would argue that this approach does not consider the very different place that the onryou archetype occupies in the two countries. Western films do not have a history of such characters. Although Western films such as Kill Bill (2003) and Point of No Return (1993) have been exploring femme revenge themes, it is obvious they are different from the vengeful ghost archetype. In these femme revenge genres, the heroines do not return from the dead to seek vengeance. They are also protagonists rather than antagonists. In the Japanese context, the vengeful ghosts
carry a weight of representational history. Despite being the antagonists, these vengeful ghosts are often tragic characters as they symbolize the imbalance of the social hierarchy of women in the context of religion and culture. This is not true for Western films that feature vengeful female characters.

The next horror element I will examine is the video clip. This idea links superstition with modern technology. Hill proposes that a trope like this should not be seen as linked to “negative Western stereotypes of Japaneseness”; rather,

it could be countered that there is a cultural homology operating here between Japanese and Western fears of technologized society, such that the cultural differences may become less significant than shared transnational anxieties over media distortions and corruptions of the real. (Hill 2005, p. 167)

This thesis focuses on the differences in national cultures, and the ways they relate to the films produced within them. I have also discussed the trans-Asian cultural elements that appear in horror films from several countries. However, the use of technology in these films points us towards a set of international cultural understandings which cross Asian and Western countries. Suspicion of new technologies is common in many nations, despite being separated by geographical borders. However, while the concept addresses our transnational anxieties, a closer examination of the video clip reveals the national specificity of each film.

The video clip in *Ringu* begins with a long shot of the sea. This is cut to a shot of an odd-looking mirror reflecting the image of a woman combing her hair. This is followed by a shot-reverse shot, depicting a split second of Sadako’s image in the mirror. The next shot shows a series of moving Japanese characters, which is then cut to another shot of people crawling aimlessly on the ground. The subsequent shot depicts a man with his head covered by a piece of cloth. He is pointing at a
direction/object that is obscure to the viewers. An eye appears next with the word “Sada” superimposed on the pupil. The last shot depicts an aged well in the middle of the forest.

The video clip in Verbinski’s *The Ring* opens with the image of a ring, which we later realized is actually a “below the well” shot of the latch closing. This cuts to a medium shot of the blood-polluted sea. The next shot depicts a chair in the middle of a white emptiness followed by a close-up shot of hair being combed. This is cut to a shot of a woman combing her hair, which is depicted through the reflection in the mirror. A shot-inverse shot then shows Samara’s image in the mirror, which suggests the close relationship between Samara and the woman. The next shot is rather quick and obscure, depicting the image of blood dripping down a strange-looking slit. This is cut to a high angle shot of a man peering through the window. The next shot is a scenic view of a cliff with the sea as the backdrop. At the top right corner of this shot is a fly, which appears to be behind the TV screen. This is cut to a shot depicting a rope being pulled out of a ghastly looking mouth. A shot of the well latch closing appears next. This is followed by a series of fast cuts: a burning tree, a rusty nail piercing a finger, maggots, a high shot of people frolicking in a river. The next shot depicts a glass of water on a table; a giant centipede crawls out beneath the table. Another series of fast cuts depict the lower torso of an animal in a barn, a close-up shot of a horse’s eye, well latch closing, wriggling detached fingers and a tree burning. The woman in the mirror appears in this shot, except that she appears to be looking at the audience, wanting to convey a message. This is cut to a shot of a similar shot of the window we saw earlier; the man is no longer there though. The pace of the cutting between shots quickens. The chair we saw earlier is seen spinning. A ladder appears in the next shot. The next shot shows a dead horse by the beach,
followed by a woman jumping off the cliff. This is cut to a high shot of the ladder. The latch is completely closed, forming the circumference of the ring. The ladder collapses. The last shot depicts an ancient well in the middle of the forest. The surrounding trees appear to be withered.

The two video clips can be compared and contrasted on two levels. First, the duration of the Japanese version is shorter than the Hollywood version. The main difference in length is due to the inclusion of more images in Verbinski’s film. While the original version is mainly encoded with clues, the remake version contains images that reveal more about Samara’s state of mind than her story. The montage of symbolic images such as the burning tree, spinning chair, gigantic centipedes and dead horse reflects Samara’s insanity. She is portrayed more as a psychotic killer than a specter seeking revenge. The images used in the Japanese version are more nation-specific. For example, being a non-Japanese, I have found the images of the crawling people and pointing man obscure; these images may be associated to bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during WWII. However, the images in Verbinski’s version are more attuned to Western sensitivities. In fact, the shots depicting detached fingers, lower torso of an animal, maggots and the rope being pulled out of the mouth are reminiscent of the Bakhtinian grotesque. These Rabelaisian images mimic the grotesque acts of life and death. In terms of narrative, the clip in Verbinski’s version contributes to the story by repeatedly reinforcing the symbol of the “ring”. This is depicted several times during the clip as we see the well latch closing. The shift in the meaning of the ring is obvious across the two films; the “ring” refers to the telephone ringing in the Japanese version, while in Verbinski’s version, it refers to Samara’s point of view from the bottom of the well. Once again, it reflects the chaos of her inner state of mind.
The last horror element I wish to examine is the well. Although the well is part of the video clip, it should be examined separately because of its significance to the narrative. It is the gateway (other than the television set) between Sadako/Samara and her victims. Both clips end with the shot of a precarious-looking well situated in the middle of a forest; it represents imminent danger. In the subsequent video clip scenes, the audience is able to catch a glimpse of Sadako/Samara climbing up the well. On the symbolic representation of the well, Bush explains that in Chinese and Japanese literature and films, the well is a symbolic link to the underworld and by extension, the unconscious. In folklore and in films and books such as Ringu, the well is a place of death and return. Many commit suicide by jumping in a well and consequently the well is haunted. This parallels Western literature. (Bush 2001, p. 198)

The well is clearly positioned as a portal between the living and hell. However, more significantly, it also represents death and unholy birth. The ghost of Sadako/Samara resembles the “drowned ghost” (a substitute-seeking ghost archetype) in that she died unnaturally in water. The notion of “death in the well” is a very Asian concept, which is popularly documented in the many Chinese and Japanese literature (Bush 2001, p. 198). These deaths are considered unjust and untimely; hence their ghosts are perceived as more violent, powerful and malicious. While Samara falls under the category of the “death in the well” ghost, she does not carry these connotative interpretations, at least not from the perspectives of a non-Asian audience. Samara’s association with the well – the act of crawling out of the well and bringing chaos reflects an imagery of the grotesque. The grotesque act of birth and death is recognized internationally, which explains certain common aspects of horror. An interesting point raised is that on the one hand, certain horror images have an international appeal because of their grotesque elements. On the other hand, these
images also carry connotative meanings, meanings that are nationally-specific. In such case, the horror effect is achieved, but the experiences of the horror elements may be different for different national audiences.

It is interesting to see how non-horror elements play a part, through setting up the narrative, in articulating horror. One difference between Nakata and Verbinski’s films is the portrayal of character archetypes. Although both versions depict the same key characters – mother, son and father – the characteristics and personalities of these characters differ. Mise-en-scene wise, both Japanese and American settings are relatively modern. However, the social norms that operate along the narratives are different. The difference in gender relations, for example, is obvious in the Japanese setup when compared to Verbinski’s version. Although Reiko is the main protagonist, she lacks the strong personality that is found in Rachel. The portrayal of women as the helpless counterpart of men becomes obvious when we see Reiko’s extreme dependence on Ryuji. In the scene where they are emptying the well, Ryuji slaps Reiko on the face when she turns hysterical. The act of domestic violence provides a glimpse of the typical Japanese patriarchal family. It also suggests the marginalization of women in Asian societies. Although the above observations have little to do with the horror narrative, they provide an insight into the change of the family structure in the contemporary Japanese society. McRoy argues that reimaginings of the Japanese family have consistently accompanied the frequently extreme economics transitions occurring in Japan over the last half-century...though single mother continue to struggle against patriarchal authority in the form of destructive prejudices and restrictive legislation. (McRoy 2008, p. 80)
Here, I have identified the horror and non-horror elements that are related to the national production context of Nakata’s *Ringu* and have suggested why these elements may have been transformed for the foreign audience.

**Textual/Cross-textual Analysis of The Eye**

As argued in Chapter 5, the fact that Hong Kong Horror has included comedy and *kungfu* elements makes the supernatural less terrifying, and more controllable. In Chiu Shu Ken’s *Ghost of the Old Mansion* (Gu Yuan Yao Ji) (1949), the protagonist falls in love with a female ghost in a bid to immortalize the memory of his dead wife. In Wu Ma’s *The Dead and the Deadly* (1983), the Taoist Master helps Sammo Hung’s character avert death by deceiving hell’s guards. More recently, in Peter Chan’s *Going Home* (2002), the protagonist attempts to revive his wife from death by using Traditional Chinese Medicine. Whether it is the ghostly romance or the *jiangshi*-slaying horror sub-genre, these films reveal a desire to control death. Unlike the Western concept of death-cheating, where going against the law of nature often comes with a hefty penalty (as in Stephen King’s *Pet Sematary* (1989), or an episode from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in which Buffy tries to revive her dead mom), the moralistic undertone regarding death-cheating is less conspicuous in earlier Asian-based stories.

The supernatural realm, according to Asian religion, mythology and literature, is unfathomable and sublime. In the pursuit of immortality and deliverance from *samsara*, people naively attempt to control the frightening effect. Methodologies to subdue the supernatural are invented, spells and talismans to provide eternal life are developed, and fears and anxieties are transposed and managed on controllable media.
such as film. The rules that guide what can and cannot be controlled, like all forms of cultural rules for communication, are nationally-specific. These rules will be examined in the analysis of Pang Brothers’ *The Eye* (2002).

Similar to the analytic method I employed in studying *Ringu*, I will examine *The Eye* in parts rather than as an entirety. A comparison with the Western transformation will also be performed to examine the national specific differences. A difference between Western and Asian Horror is in their treatment of death. The Western horror genre operates on the belief that good triumphs over evil, and methodologies such as wooden stakes, silver bullets and holy water have been created to tame monsters and ghouls. This resolution of taming the beast has been significant in the Western horror genre. The successful CBS television series *Supernatural*, which frequently showcases Asian archetypes during its first season, operates on the concept that evil can be contained and destroyed. On the other hand – and despite the use of comedy and kung-fu in Hong Kong horror films - Asian Horror often regards the supernatural as unfathomable and uncontrollable; hence the narrative often depicts the protagonist’s futile struggle against evil. The Chinese saying, 道高一尺，魔高一丈 (translated as Evil prevails over goodness threefold), suggests Asian sentiments towards the occult. It reveals a sense of frailty in relation to the supernatural realm, towards all beings (especially those that are evil) greater than them.

*The Eye* does not include kung-fu or comedy elements. Like other Asian horror texts such as *Ringu* and *Ju-on*, it reflects pessimism and helplessness in confrontation with the supernatural as the protagonists fail to appease the wrath of the specter. In *The Eye*, Mun realizes that her newly-acquired ability to see ghosts is attributed to the unresolved wish of her cornea donor, Ling. Upon investigation, Mun discovers that Ling's unresolved wish is to seek her mother’s understanding and
forgiveness. In an attempt to renounce her cursed ability, Mun reconciles the relationship of the mother and daughter. However, despite her efforts to free herself from the torments of seeing impending death, the special power does not go away. The supernatural cannot be contained. The narrative reflects a pessimistic view in several Asian cultures about the possibilities of taming the supernatural; it further reinforces the Taoist belief that nature (and, indeed, the supernatural) takes its own course and has its own resolution. Although Mun did not manage to either relinquish the curse without a price (loss of her sight), or succeed in warning the people of their impending deaths, she managed to avert at least personal death. The story clearly differentiates what can and cannot be controlled.

A significant thematic difference between The Eye and other Asian horror films, and a significant thematic similarity with Western Horror, is the absence of the female antagonist – the vengeful female specter. The horror elements in the The Eye are not built on the concept of the vengeance theme, but on the misunderstood world of lonely and estranged specters. The “I see dead people” theme is strikingly similar to that of M. Night Shayamala’s Sixth Sense. Although both films dwell primarily on the unfinished resolution of the dead, there lie national specific undertones beneath the narrative. At first, it appears that The Eye is reaching out more to the global audience rather than drawing on Hong Kong’s cultural history. The film, on the surface level, downplays Asian horror traits such as the vengeful female specter and substitute-seeking ghost archetypes. However, embedded within the cross-national elements of horror are nationally-specific ones. Particular forms of national experience and knowledge are required to decode these elements.
The nationally-specific elements in *The Eye* can be categorized under non-horror and horror. A qualitative analysis of the non-horror elements reveals three subgroups of such components: Superstition/Religion, Society and Geography.

*Superstition/Religion*

One of the nationally-specific elements in the *The Eye* that sets it apart from Western culture is its constant reference to Buddhist and Taoist philosophies. In one particular scene, suicide is mentioned as a cyclical process in which the soul, as a result of a suicidal death, goes through that final moment of the suicide over and over again. The torment is cyclical, hence eternal. As Mun possesses the transplanted cornea of a girl who has committed suicide, she begins to see horrific visions of the latter and shares her suffering. The only solution to break this vicious cycle is to resolve the soul’s unsettled problem. Thus, Mun helps the ghost break the suicide cycle by reconciling the differences between the latter and her mother. This is another nationally-specific element, as Asian superstitions believe that if one has an unresolved matter prior the moment of death, the yearning will sustain the soul and prevent it from reincarnation until that matter has been resolved. The cyclical karma and the unsettled ghost archetype have been discussed in Chapter 3.

Other nationally-specific elements depicted in the film are cultural-superstitious practices prominent in the Southeast Asian region. There are a few scenes in the film that depict people burning joss sticks and paper-made objects. These are superstitious practices common to Asian communities in which paper artifacts, crafted to represent materials items such as money, houses, and even airplanes, are burned as offerings to the dead. While these practices do not appear
horrible, and in fact are inconspicuously integrated into the Asian society, they present a backdrop of Asian Horror.

Although funerals are practices in most cultures, their rites and rituals are culturally-specific and hence carry with them connotative meanings. The Chinese funeral depicted in the *The Eye* consists of cultural icons such as the white lanterns, which are widely used in Hong Kong. The lanterns do not only symbolize funerals, but are also superstitious taboos that stipulate the rules of contact with these lanterns. While the lanterns are not physically horrifying, they are prominent markers of Chinese Horror. The images of these lanterns remind the audience of their own mortality and the paranormal realm.

*Society*

The main character featured in *The Eye* is relatively atypical; the majority of the audience will not be able to relate to Mun. Other than the fact that Mun is a girl who has been blind since the age of two, her newly-found ability also sets her apart as extraordinary, and hence detaches her from society. It is actually the peripheral characters that an audience is more likely to relate to. One such character is the boy who loses his report card and commits suicide by jumping off the apartment. This is a hybrid archetype that comprises both the unsettled ghost and the substitute-seeking ghost attributes. But besides functioning as an archetype, this character also links to important social changes in Hong Kong. In many Asian countries, where education is a top priority, parents' demand for children to do well in their studies has become a social issue of some concern. The image of the child pressured into suicide has become a feature of well-known urban stories. As depicted in the film, the Asian boy commits suicide because his parents do not believe he has lost his report card; they
think he is just making up an excuse for obtaining poor grades in school and not
daring to show the grades to them. The torment is repeated cyclically as he goes
through the moment of suicide over and over again in a shabby-looking apartment,
reminiscent of an urban dwelling.

*Geography*

It is not coincidental that the story takes place in Hong Kong and Thailand. As
discussed in Chapter 5, Hong Kong is well known for its customary and superstitious
practices. Despite being a progressive and metropolitan society, Hong Kong
residents pay attention to the supernatural realm. The ghost sightings that take place,
whether in apartments, hospitals or out on the streets, are believable because they
have been integrated to the people’s beliefs and way of life.

The film pays homage to Thailand, a country that is well-known for its
superstitious practices and beliefs in the occult. Mun’s tracing of the origins of her
cornea transplant donor is in fact metaphorically paralleling the tracing of the origins
of the occult to Thailand. Under normal circumstances, it is difficult to imagine an
ordinary rural girl with an extraordinary power that everyone fears. The story is
situated in Thailand because of its appropriate cultural and societal context.
Culturally, the nation’s association with the occult realm makes it a representative
paranormal geographical icon. Societal wise, the significant disparity between the
rich and the poor living conditions in Thailand makes the notion of an isolated and
mysterious rural community plausible.

A qualitative analysis of the horror elements in *The Eye* reveals two
subgroups: Asian Ghost Archetypes and Locale.
As mentioned earlier, *The Eye* is in some ways different from its Asian counterparts and similar to the likes of Shyamalan’s *Sixth Sense*. Yet, the basic horror elements in the film are nationally-specific despite its appeal to the international audience. The specters featured in *The Eye* fall under the Asian ghost archetypes discussed in Chapter 3. Most of the ghosts sighted in the film are female specters: the old woman in the hospital, the angry specter in the calligraphy school, and the mother and son outside the Chinese restaurant. The first and second ghosts are presumably territorial; they have died within a confined space and are unable to travel beyond that confined space. Another territorial ghost is the old man in the elevator, who presumably causes mischief to passengers taking the lift. Clearly, his existence is only sustained within the confined space of the elevator. These are substitute-seeking ghosts; they are not able to leave their domain/proceed to reincarnation if they cannot find someone else to take their place.

The childbirth ghost, a common archetype in Asian Horror, capitalizes on the eternal bond between a mother and her child. This ghost archetype tends to invoke sympathy rather than fear. A subtype of the childbirth ghost archetype is the mother and son ghost. In the film, the mother and son ghost are not able to “move on” because of the yearning of their family. This is reciprocated by the living (the owner of the restaurant), who refuses to sell his restaurant because he somehow knows that his wife and son would visit the restaurant on a daily basis.
Locale

Many Asian people, especially in China, are superstitious about visiting hospitals. They believe that since many people die daily in the hospital, the locale is unclean and infested with tormented souls. Hence, visiting hospitals may bring misfortunes and disasters. These negative beliefs about hospitals make them the ideal locale for horror narratives. In *The Eye*, it is not surprising that the hospitals, both in Hong Kong and Thailand, are depicted as haunted by spirits. The ghosts seen in hospitals are often estranged and tormented because of their loneliness and the amount of the pain they had to suffer prior to death. Two particular scenes at the hospitals (one in Hong Kong and the other in Thailand) depict the spirits confronting Mun and crying out their sufferings to her.

Hollywood Remake

David Moreau's *The Eye* (2008) illustrates several national specificity issues with regard to the remaking of Asian Horror for a non-Asian audience. First, the commissioning of such projects has to assume that horror in general shares cross-national features; that there is a common language of horror (e.g. suspense) that many cultures can share. It also assumes that emotions such as fear can be evoked from the same or similar causes; that fears in audiences of different countries can be triggered by the same elements. However, since horror sources are nationally-specific, they may not be part of the international audiences’ experience.

In the case of Moreau's film, a transformation has occurred resulting in the loss of the original theme and national specific significances. Although the film closely follows the narrative structure of the original text, presenting the story
systematically in an almost identical order of scenes and sequences, there is a deviation in terms of the archetypes and themes due to national differences. The difference of the protagonist-antagonist relationships (Sydney Wells - Ana Cristina Martinez versus Wong Kar Mun – Ling) depicted in both films, in which Ana is obviously a more authoritative specter than Ling, reflects a shift from a passive to an active voice (on the specter's part) after the transformation. This can be seen as related to Asian horror archetypes. Unlike Ling, Ana’s objective is to warn Sydney about the impending disaster on the freeway so that she can prevent it from happening, an act that Ana was not able to accomplish when she was alive, and which resulted in the deaths of many. At first look, this action may appear to be a trait of the unsettled ghost archetype. However, it is actually different because the unsettled ghost resolves its own issues on its own rather than through another person and another unresolved matter. Ling, on the other hand, is a good representation of the unsettled ghost archetype; her spirit lingers in the living world because of an unresolved matter. As such, she repeats the torment of suicide every night at the same time until her wish is resolved. Tragically, she is unable to resolve her matter on her own; her helplessness as a specter is inherited from her community's abhorrence of her ability to see impending death. Unlike Ana, who directs Sydney throughout the narrative, Ling takes on a passive approach in influencing Mun.

Another element changed in the remake is its conscious awareness of the traits of Asian Horror. This is possibly attributed to Peter Chan’s (a prominent Hong Kong director/producer) involvement as the producer of the remake. Unlike other Hollywood Asian horror remakes, such as The Ring (2002) and Dark Water (2005), Moreau's film demonstrates sensitivity to national specificity, in which certain culturally significant parts of the original film are retained. One example is the boy
ghost that haunts the apartment building Sydney lives in. While all the characters of 
the original film have been replaced by Caucasian personalities, the boy ghost and his 
mother are not; they retain their Hong Kong Chinese identity. This is necessary 
because a Caucasian boy who commits suicide because he loses his report card is less 
likely to make sense to a Western audience. As discussed earlier, adolescent suicide 
connected to academic competition is prominent (in terms of the awareness of the 
phenomenon rather than the statistical occurrence) in East Asia, but not in the West 
such as the United States.

The decision to retain the Asian identity of the boy ghost does not completely 
resolve the problem of audience interpretation. To recognize the academic-related 
adolescent suicide as part of the Asian reality, the audience must have some 
familiarity with the idea of intense academic pressure in East Asia.

The remake also introduces elements that are clearly linked to American 
cultural history. For example, in one of the final sequences, Sydney warns the 
passengers on a bus about an impending disaster. Her attempt is initially futile until 
she tells them that terrorists have planted a bomb on the bus. Although terrorism has 
become a world issue since 9/11, the tragedy caused by terrorist attacks has had a 
particularly powerful cultural resonance in America.

**Textual/Cross-textual Analysis of Shutter**

Thailand has been a prominent producer of horror films since the 1970s, but it is only 
since the 1980s that Thai horror films have been dubbed in Mandarin and exported to 
other Chinese speaking Asian countries. The popularity of J-Horror in recent years 
has spurred an increased production of Thai horror films. Some of the films that have
achieved international accolades including Nonzee Nimibutr’s *Nang Nak* (1999) and Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom’s *Shutter* (2004). The latter was remade for the Hollywood market in 2008. Knee argues that Thai horror films mark a retrieval of the past, a return to a genre quite popular in the heyday of Thai Cinema. They do, to some extent, engage modern global (read Hollywood) conventions of the horror genre, but also very specifically refer back to the local genre tradition, itself deeply rooted in local folklore… (Knee 2005, p. 141)

According to Knee, at least four Thai horror films were produced between late 2001 and early 2002, which is a significant phenomenon, considering that the output of Thai films has been only about 12 films in recent years (Knee 2005, p.141). The national identity of these films is not straightforward. Some of these films were, unlike what Knee has observed, modeled after internationally successful Japanese horror films with only minimal local horror traditions being retained. An earlier film that shows obvious influences from Japanese Horror is *Shutter* (2004). I have chosen this film as a case study because of its close proximity to the release of *Ringu*, which sparked off subsequent production of “revenge theme” horror films, and its retention of some Thai horror conventions. Hence, the objectives of analyzing *Shutter* are to examine the relationship between specifically Thai horror conventions, pan-Asian elements, and wider international elements.

*Shutter* tells the story of a man (Tun) who realizes that the ghost of a young woman (Natre) has been “riding” on him. The film capitalizes on the success of the vengeful ghost archetype, a narrative that was popularized by J-Horror a few years earlier. This is not a familiar element of traditional Thai stories. *Shutter* is not representative of a Thai horror film. This makes it an interesting case for analysis as it challenges any simplistic dualism between local and international elements in horror films. A qualitative analysis of the non-horror elements in *Shutter* reveals
three subgroups of such components: superstition/religion, society and region-specificity.

**Superstition/Religion**

In *Shutter*, the superstition/religion elements play a crucial role in delivering the narrative. These elements are related to Thai cultural history. Several scenes depict Theravada Buddhist influenced practices. For example, after being troubled by the hit-and-run accident, Tun and Jane decide to visit a temple. They burn what appears to be some sort of offerings to the deities and gods; paper talismans that supposedly bring good luck to their bearers are also posted on the grand altar. The purpose of such practices is to appease the mind in times of trouble. The importance of this action would not be relevant to audiences who are not familiar with the practice. Other religious practices depicted in the film are the monks chanting at Natre’s funeral and the cremation of Natre’s body. The Buddhist chanting at the funeral serves the purpose of deliverance; it eases the tormented soul into the nether world. Hence, when the ghost of Natre appears at the funeral, it is a sign that the grudge is so deep that the spirit cannot be pacified merely by the monk’s chanting. This signifies a powerful ghost that will not relent until revenge is sought. A proper burial or cremation of the body is necessary because in Asian religious traditions the absence of these rituals will cause the spirit to be restless and return to haunt the living. Hence, the cremation of Natre’s body is an attempt to appease her spirit.

The term 被鬼壓 (loosely translated as pressed by ghost) is a superstitious concept well-known in Asian cultures. It is a form of ghost possession that literally means the ghost sitting or pressing on the victim. This form of ghost possession has
been the common theme in ghost stories and is presented in Asian superstition as one of the most common types of possession. Hence, when Tun experiences neck ache, and when the nurse is shocked to find that he weighs exceedingly more than he is supposed to, an Asian audience is able to comprehend the plot as they are familiar with the context. Another Asian superstition is the negative connotative meaning of the number “4”. The number signifies death because the pronunciation of “4” in Chinese is 四 (si), which is phonetically similar to the word 死, which stands for death in Chinese. However, because of the number’s association to the word death, it also carries other connotative meanings such as bad omen and misfortune. When Tun is escaping from the ghost of Natre, the number 4 infinitely imprinted on the wall along the staircase delivers not only the message of impending death, but also other negative meanings for an Asian audience.

Society

Asian Horror is fascinated with suicide. As discussed in Chapter 3, suicide is deemed in several Asian societies to be an unclean death. The person obviously must have gone through a terrible ordeal to come to a decision to commit suicide. Hence, it is believed that suicide ghosts are more vengeful, powerful and malicious. One particular type of suicide death that is closely associated with Asian cultures is “jumping off buildings”. There is no specific term in the English language to describe this mode of suicide death. On the other hand, the Chinese term 坠楼 has been specifically and commonly used to signify this suicide death. 坠楼 is already a part of many Asian cultures. This shows a greater amount of emphasis the Asian community has given to the suicide form of death when compared to the Western counterparts. In Shutter, Natre commits suicide by jumping off the roof of a hospital. Her unclean
death brings along hatred, suffering and vengeance. The horrendous result of her death also creates a ghost that is both hideous looking and poignant. Interestingly, this form of suicide death is not significant in the Hollywood remake. Megumi commits suicide by consuming potassium cyanide. Benjamin Shaw is not coerced into jumping off the building; he chooses electrocution as a form of suicide when possessed.

Region-specific

Surprisingly, there are a few nationally-specific non-horror elements in Shutter. Compared with other Thai horror films, Shutter appears to have disassociated Thailand from its connection to the occult and black magic. This is necessary as the story is capitalizing on the vengeful female specter archetype. The only significant nationally-specific non-horror element is the transvestite, who is depicted in the film for brief comical relief. S/he does not complement the horror narrative in any direct manner.

The horror elements in Shutter can be categorized into three subgroups: Asian ghost archetypes, urban ghost stories and nationally-specific ones.

Asian Ghost Archetypes

As discussed in Chapter 3, the vengeful female specter archetype is distinctively an Asian ghost archetype. The ghost of Natre is an exemplary representation of this archetype. Her face is pale/white and badly disfigured. She has long black hair and is perpetually dressed in white. The national specific image is built based on the archetypal qualities described in many Asian ghost stories. Another good example would be the depiction of the ghost in an inverted position. This is influenced by a
popular ghost story that tells of a female ghost scaring her victims in an inverted position. A possible explanation to why she is in an inverted position is it is the result of her jumping off the building, with her head down.

Natre is not only a vengeful female specter but also a substitute-seeking ghost archetype. Her method of revenge is to coerce her enemies into jumping off buildings. Through this act of substitute-seeking, her anger and torment are appeased. Compared with the Hollywood remake, the motive and method for revenge in the Thai version are definitely national specific as they require the audience understanding of the vengeful female specter and the substitute-seeking ghost archetype. The revenge method used in the Hollywood version is less contextual; the purpose is revenge and nothing else.

The prominence of the vengeful female spirit also leads to scenes which may have different meanings for Thai audiences as compared with international audiences. Tun is in a cubicle in a public toilet. He calls out to the person in the adjacent cubicle for a spare toilet roll. His request is answered by a hand with long fingernails, painted in bloody red, sliding the toilet roll beneath the cubicle partition. At this moment, there is an element of suspense concerning the identity of the person, or ghost, in the adjacent cubicle. In the Western context, the person could be anyone, most probably a woman because of the fingernails. In the Asian context, the person is mostly likely a ghost as fingernails painted in red signify a malicious ghost. It turns out that mysterious figure is actually a transvestite.

*Urban Ghost Stories*

The horror themes used in *Shutter* are largely drawn from urban ghost stories shared amongst city dwellers in Asian countries. There are several oral ghost stories that
depict mysterious women suddenly appearing in the middle of the road at night, after which she is then run over by a car. The body would later disappear, as if the accident had never taken place. When Tun and Jane run over a woman but do not find the body, a Thai audience is likely to understand this as the doing of a ghost because of the familiarity of such urban myths.

Another theme drawn from urban ghost stories is the concept of 鬼遮眼, which is literally translated as “eyes covered by a ghost”. Men who are blinded by the ghost will not be able see. As a result of this impairment, they end up doing things that are physically and psychologically harmful. In the final sequence of the film, Tun realizes that the ghost of Natre has been riding on him all the while. As Natre covers his eyes, Tun becomes momentarily blinded. He walks towards the balcony and plunges to the ground.

Hollywood Remake

Although Masayuki Ochiai’s Shutter (2008) is made for the international market, the film/story is shot and set in Tokyo and the cast comprises mainly Japanese actors - with the exception of lead characters such as Benjamin and Jane Shaw. The horror style of Ochiai's Shutter is apparently more Japanese than American, and even less Thai in terms of the use of horror archetypes. Both versions of Shutter, in essence, incorporate a plot and horror archetypes that are reminiscent of J-horror conventions. The remake, in particular, pays tribute to three signature scenes from the highly successful Asian horror remake The Ring. The first scene opens in a dark studio where Ben is working. A female hand reaches out to caress his face and he assumes that it is Jane's. The phone rings and Ben leaves the studio to pick up the call...it is
Jane! Curious and frightened, Ben opens the door of the studio only to find Megumi seated on a chair with her head facing downwards. As she looks up, Ben sees a small bulge moving beneath the skin of her face. The bulge slowly moves across her face and towards her eye. The bulge turns out to be a housefly. The eye and the fly imageries are similar to those depicted in *The Ring*. Horrified, Ben flees the studio. When Jane returns, she finds Ben seated on a swivel chair in a room at the corner of the corridor. She moves towards Ben in fear that something terrible may have befallen on him. As she turns the chair towards her, Ben suddenly springs up from the chair and hugs her. The suspense of the moment when Jane reaches out for Ben capitalizes on a scene in *The Ring* where Rachel turns around the swivel chair to find a petrified facial expression on the dead Noah. Another similarity *Shutter* bears with *The Ring* is the scene where Megumi brushes her hair in front of a huge mirror. This resembles the scene in the video clip, which depicts the mirror reflection of Samara's mother combing her hair.

The remake utilizes several other Asian horror conventions. For example, the film's explanation of the spirit photography phenomenon (unfinished business with relatives, unrequited love) is based on the unsettled ghost archetype, which proposes that spirits with an unsettled issue before death will linger in the living world until such matter is resolved. In the “museum” of spirit photos, where Ritsuo explains to Jane regarding these paranormal occurrences, a Japanese talisman is pasted on the wall above the doorway. The purpose of the talisman (not exclusive to Japanese one) is to ward off spirits; securing the talisman on the doorway prevents the spirits from leaving the room. Another example of the Asian horror archetype in the film is the shaman, which in the form of a paranormal expert, Murase, is able to invite the spirits to possess his body temporarily. The cremation of Ana's corpse so as to release the
soul and allow it to reincarnate is another ritual specific to Asian culture, although this is vaguely explained in the Hollywood remake compared to the Thai version.

The high concentration of nationally-specific Asian horror sources in the remake raises interesting points about the relationship between national, regional and international elements of filmmaking. In remaking Shutter, Hollywood turns it into a more Japanese film – and simultaneously makes it more accessible to non-Asian audiences. As discussed in the analysis of Shutter, the superstitious concept of 被鬼压 (pressed by a ghost) when Tun registers an abnormally high index on the weighing scale is regionally specific. Hence, the remake adopts a different approach by downplaying the significance of this narrative element.

Another Hollywood convention in the remake is the portrayal of the female character, rather than the male, as a victim. Unlike the original, which depicts Tun as the protagonist, the remake shows empathy for Jane and clearly establishes her as a victim. The theme of “ghost with a message” becomes a key driver for the narrative plot, as Jane realizes that Megumi does not have any intention to harm her. Rather, Megumi wants to warn her about the man she is married to. Another point that substantiates Jane’s position as a victim is she, not Ben, is the first to see the ghost of Megumi. This defies the convention of Asian Horror as the women in horror films are often portrayed as having a high tendency to be initially oblivious to paranormal occurrences. Since women are perceived to be filthy, sinful and deceitful, as discussed in Chapter 3, they are either portrayed as ghosts or being possessed by one. The Thai version follows the Asian horror tradition in that Tun, at least for the first part of the story, is the only witness of Natre's spectral existence. Jane on the other hand is initially oblivious to Natre's existence until her haunting of Tun becomes
obvious. Although Natre has not possessed Jane throughout the film, there is a scene where Natre appears to Tun in the form of Jane, which is metaphorically a form of possession.

As discussed above, suicide death by “jumping off buildings” is part of the Asian reality, but not so in the West. Therefore, despite choosing an Asian-specific suicide method, Megumi’s decision to end her life by consuming potassium cyanide avoids relying on a specifically Asian cultural reference. The choice of suicide however, upsets the Asian horror conventions; it particularly displaces the substitute-seeking ghost archetype. Since Megumi dies of chemical poisoning, it will not make sense if she kills her enemies by coercing them into jumping off buildings. Further, since suicide death produces the substitute-seeking ghost archetype, it explains Natre's method of revenge, which is to force her perpetrators to die the same death as herself.

Recent Remakes

The Asian horror “remake” industry has transformed in the last decade. Verbinski’s *The Ring* (2002) started the trend of close/direct remakes by following the plot structure of the original closely, changing only details such as character names and geographic settings. Ochiai’s *Shutter* (2008) took the transformed/disguised remakes approach by minimally altering both syntactic and semantic elements. Such an

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3 Although Verevis terms close/direct remakes as ‘faithful adaptations’ that seek to reduce difference between themselves and their originals by sharing both syntactic elements and specific settings (Verevis 2006, p. 84), I believe that in the treatment of cross-cultural remakes, change of specific settings is inevitable.

4 Verevis terms transformed/disguised remakes as ‘free adaptations’ that might only make minor alterations to key syntactic elements, but more substantially transfigure the semantic elements, altering character names, gender and/or race, cultural setting, temporal setting and even the genre of the original (Verevis 2006, p. 84).
approach is a response of the filmmaker and audience’s sensitivity towards the national specificity of horror during the remaking process.
Conclusion

Through examining the national specificity of Asian Horror in relation to Asian cultures and national identity, the thesis has given some answers to the following questions:

i) Which are the common elements of Japanese, Hong Kong and Thai horror films?

ii) What are the specific histories of horror in each of these countries?

iii) What can Hollywood remakes tell us about the national specificity of Asian horror films?

Within the horror genres of Japan, Hong Kong and Thailand, ten key archetypes have been identified: vengeful female ghost, tianshi, diviner, substitute-seeking ghost, jiangshi, the possessed, demon, spirit, scholar, unsettled ghost and spirit of nature (kami). Among these archetypes, the vengeful female ghost, substitute-seeking ghost and unsettled ghost are the recurring themes in most Asian horror cinemas. These common themes are primarily linked to Buddhism, a religion that has proliferated in these three countries. Another common element in Japanese, Hong Kong and Thai horror films that are linked to Buddhism is the importance of the deceitful, evil and profane female protagonist. The association of the female antagonist with these negative constructs is rooted in early Buddhism, which decreed that women are sinful and unholy.

The case studies have shown that the relationship between Asian horror cinemas and the specific histories of each of these countries. In the case of Japan, its horror film history is characterized by the recurrence of the vengeful female specter
archetype; the emergence of new subgenres, introducing aliens, monsters and apocalypse themes; influences from Hollywood slasher flicks, featuring psychotic, sex-craved and serial killers; and the revitalization of the Japanese horror genre, bringing the revenge theme to its height. Generally, the horror archetypes and themes in Japanese horror cinema are interrelated with the Japanese national identity and the socio economic position of Japan. As discussed in Chapter 4, the conflict between the country’s rapid modernization and its cultural tradition and history has created cultural dissonance and the presence of revenging ghosts in Japanese horror cinema can be read through this tension. The aftermath of World War II, in particular, has a significant impact on the Japanese national identity because the defeat of Imperial Japan has created an upheaval in the core foundation of Japanese societal values and obligation. It is through the allegories of nostalgia in Asian horror cinema that these differences and contradictions are reconciled.

The case study of the development of the horror genre in Hong Kong revealed that its horror genre is often combined with successful genres such as kung fu, comedy and soft porn. The result is that very few critics have taken the Hong Kong horror genre seriously. The hybrid genre has produced notable horror archetypes such as jiangshi and tianshi, and unique themes such as necrophilia and cannibalism. The commercial success of J-Horror in the late 1990s has motivated Hong Kong filmmakers to make more “serious horror” films such as The Eye and Going Home. Hong Kong faces a national identity crisis that is similar to that Japan. The 1997 handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China has brought forth social, cultural and economic transformations to Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region and threatened Hong Kong’s social, cultural and economic stability. In this context, the focus on supernatural beings and occurrences in Hong Kong horror can
be read as resisting the influx of Chinese ideology into its society; these are beliefs that the Mainland Chinese rejected since the Cultural Revolution. In this sense, horror films serve as a reinforcement of Hong Kong’s national identity.

The horror genre of Thailand is characterized by two distinctive categories. The first is commonly referred to as “traditional Thai Horror”, which involves the vengeful female specter/demon and/or black magic theme. Even before the active dubbing of Thai films into English and Chinese in the 1980s, audiences outside Thailand were already familiar with the country's association with the occult. Hence, when traditional Thai Horror was made available during the 1980s, and reintroduced shortly after the emergence of J-Horror, the international audiences were already familiar with the genre. The second category, a recent addition, refers to the contemporary vengeful female specter archetype as canonized by J-Horror. There are two reasons to explain Thailand's departure from the traditional genre; the first is linked with the popularity and commercial success of J-Horror. The second concerns a social factor, in which the powerful female ghosts of J-Horror are translated allegories of the marginalized female community in Thailand. Further, the processes of industrialization, coupled with the institutionalization of Western thoughts, have clashed with the Buddhist beliefs in modern Thailand. Similar to Japan and Hong Kong, these tensions are mediated in horror films.

The extensive production of Asian horror films and the influx of Hollywood remakes raise questions about the national identity. In the process of transformation, the case studies have shown that the national and historical specificities of the original film are deemphasized to make the films more understandable for international audiences.
In the case of the Japanese horror film *Ringu*, there are several important differences between the original and the remake. The ghost’s motivation in the Japanese version is revenge, tying in with the national tradition of vengeful spirits; in the American remake the motivation is simply that the ghost is a psychotic killer. The Japanese version features a female ghost, while the American presents “monstrous feminine” archetypes. In the video that plays such an important part in the film, the Japanese version relies on obscure images whereas the American is about grotesque imageries and gender relationships. While the plot is almost identical to the original, the remake has incorporated subtle changes in response to national specificity.

While on one level the Hong Kong horror film *The Eye* crosses national boundaries with its familiar “I see dead people” theme, rooted within the film are nationally-specific elements. Prominent among these are non-horror elements such as the concept of cyclical karma, culturally-superstitious beliefs and practices, reflection of social issues, and the use of Asian-specific settings as a locale.

Although *Nang Nak* is one of the more prominent films in recent years to represent the traditional Thai horror genre, *Shutter* has been chosen instead for analysis because this film documents the country's social and cultural shifts after the advent of globalization and technological advancements. More importantly, despite these shifts, nationally-specific elements such as the depiction of Buddhist rituals and folkloric superstitious practices, reflections upon social norms and stigmas, and influences from Asian horror conventions and urban ghost stories, are significant characteristics of *Shutter*. Although the director of the Hollywood remake of this film is a renowned J-Horror director/producer, some of the nationally specific elements have been removed in its translation.
In conclusion of this thesis it is interesting to consider where Asian horror cinema might be headed, and the role that the international distribution of films might play in its evolution. More recent Asian horror films are steering away from the vengeful spirit theme and its genre's cliches. In forecasting the future of Japanese Horror, McRoy claims that the visual and naratological redundancy may compromise the effectiveness of future creations, transforming motifs into cliches and quite possibly, reduce the tradition's potential as an avenue for cultural critique and aesthetic intervention. (McRoy 2008, p. 171)

Replacing these old traditions are visually inventive and sophisticated horror films such as Ochiai Masayuki's *Infection* (2004), Tsuruta Norio's *Premonition* (2004), Shimizu Takashi's *Marebito* (2004) and Tsukamoto Shinya's *Vital* (2004) (McRoy, 2008, 172). These films are not linked to the specific cultural histories of their national production context as strongly as the films I have discussed in this thesis. However, I do not believe that this implies that we are seeing the disappearance of national specificity in horror cinemas. Horror is after all rooted in our culture, traditions, and national identity. Decades ago, the “traditional” Asian horror genre was thought to be dead. My suspicion is that in the future it will return to haunt us again.
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