

# **ASIAN HORROR: THE FACTORS DRIVING THAI AND JAPANESE HORROR FILM INDUSTRY: AN ANALYSIS TOWARDS *RINGU* (1998) AND *SHUTTER* (2004)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses theoretically on the factors driving the Thai & Japanese horror film industry. The appeal of horror films from these countries is due to the uniqueness of their culture, religious beliefs, as well as socio-political circumstances that helped shaping the film industry. Horror films resonate with cinemagoers in the sense that they connect with an individual's subconscious yet fundamental need to deal with the things or issues that frighten him or her. Derry (2009) stated, in the way they work upon the audience, films act as dreams while horror films are the nightmares. Kellner (1995) also stated that horror films unearth the "*hopes and fears that contest dominant hegemonic and hierarchical relations of power*" through the portrayal of both significant dreams and nightmares of a culture and that the culture is attempting to channel them to sustain its current copulations of power and domination.

However, Asian countries possess their own unique set of traditions and superstition, urban legends, as well as religious beliefs that are fundamental elements of their national identities such as Buddhism in Thailand & Shintoism in Japan. Teo (2013) credits the global interest in Thai films to the filmmakers' ability to present horror as a combination of natural and supernatural force. Besides that, the popularity of the genre in the country is also partly rooted in the Buddhist belief of reincarnation. According to Lee (2011), horror films in Asia also act as representations of the local citizens' anxieties about the undesirable shifts their countries were struggling in the late 1990s due to a near-crippling financial crisis. As a result, millions of people in the region were destitute, unemployment rates tripled in some countries, salaries declined as low as 40%, deteriorating health throughout the region, reported cases of child labour, prostitution, as well as domestic violence dramatically heightened (Aslanbeigui & Summerfield, 2000). Lee (2011) also stated that, socio-political events in Thailand such as large-scale unemployment rates and the domestic people's dissatisfaction with their government sprouted as a result of the Democrats' failure to revive the economy (Lewis, 2003) paved the way for the horror film industry.

The Thai nationalism was concretized as anti-foreign feelings and resentment of potential foreign takeovers (expedited by the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s policies) of Thai businesses. Meanwhile in Japan, although the three major distributors (Toho, Toei, and Shochiku) were hit by a string of box office disappointments, the

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number of domestic releases grew during the late 1990s due to the increasing number of mini-theatres, which began screening independent Japanese films. Thus, unlike the decline of mainstream film industry, independent filmmaking was prospering at that time (Lee, 2011). The growing world of independent filmmaking was filled with provocative talents from young directors whose previous careers were in the fields of advertising, television and music videos.

The young directors were tired of the constraints inherent within traditional genre films, usually produced by the major productions, and wanted to explore various other genres, mainly the horror genre. As for the result, the second part of the paper explores the comparison between Thailand and Japan's most celebrated horror directors and their most critically acclaimed feature films. One of the directors discussed in the essay is Japan's Hideo Nakata who led the international J-horror boom with **Ringu (1998)**. As for Thailand, the film that will be analysed is **Shutter (2004)**, directed by Bangjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom. Lastly, this paper will conclude with the effectiveness of the factors analysed in the first part of the essay in today's horror film industry. While the horror films of the 1990s and early 2000s were manifestations of the socio-political events in both countries at that time, the question is whether Thai and Japanese horror film industry is declining, improving, or stagnant.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the factors driving the Thai & Japanese horror film industry. The appeal of horror films from these countries is due to the uniqueness of their culture, religious beliefs, as well as socio-political circumstances that helped shape the film industry.

Horror films resonate with cinemagoers in the sense that they connect with an individual's subconscious yet fundamental need to deal with the things or issues that frighten him or her. According to Derry (2009), in the way they work upon the audience, films act as dreams while horror films are the nightmares. Kellner (1995) states that horror films unearth the "hopes and fears that contest dominant hegemonic and hierarchical relations of power" through the portrayal of both significant dreams and nightmares of a culture and that the culture is attempting to channel them to sustain its current copulations of power and domination. However, Asian countries possess their own unique set of traditions and superstition, urban legends, as well as religious beliefs that are fundamental elements of their national identities such as Buddhism in Thailand & Shintoism in Japan. Teo (2013) credits the global interest in Thai films to the filmmakers' ability to present horror as a combination of natural and supernatural force. Besides that, the popularity of the genre in the country is also partly rooted in the Buddhist belief of reincarnation (Teo, 2013).

Lee (2011) states that horror films in Asia also act as representations of the local citizens' anxieties about the undesirable shifts their countries were struggling in the late 1990s due to a near-crippling financial crisis. As a result, millions of people in the region were destitute, unemployment rates tripled in some countries, salaries declined as low as 40 per cent, deteriorating health throughout the region, reported cases of child

labour, prostitution, as well as domestic violence dramatically heightened (Aslanbeigui & Summerfield, 2000). Lee (2011) also stated that, socio-political events in Thailand such as large-scale unemployment rates and the domestic people's dissatisfaction with their government sprouted as a result of the Democrats' failure to revive the economy (Lewis, 2003) paved the way for the horror film industry. The Thai nationalism was concretized as anti-foreign feelings and resentment of potential foreign takeovers (expedited by the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s policies) of Thai businesses. Meanwhile in Japan, although the three major distributors (Toho, Toei, and Shochiku) were hit by a string of box office disappointments, the number of domestic releases grew during the late 1990s due to the increasing number of mini-theatres, which began screening independent Japanese films. Thus, unlike the decline of mainstream film industry, independent filmmaking was prospering at that time (Lee, 2011).

The growing world of independent filmmaking was filled with provocative talents from young directors whose previous careers were in the fields of advertising, television and music videos. The young directors were tired of the constraints inherent within traditional genre films, such as samurai Swashbucklers and yakuza action films usually produced by the major productions, and wanted to explore various other genres, mainly the horror genre. As for the result, the second part of the paper explores the comparison between Thailand and Japan's most celebrated horror directors and their most critically acclaimed feature films. One of the directors discussed in the essay is Japan's Hideo Nakata who led the international J-horror boom with *Ringu* (1998). As for Thailand, the film that will be analysed is *Shutter* (2004), directed by Bangjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom.

Lastly, the paper will conclude with the effectiveness the factors analysed in the first part of the essay in today's horror film industry. While the horror films of the 1990s and early 2000s were manifestations of the socio-political events in both countries at that time, the question is whether Thai and Japanese horror film industry is declining, improving, or stagnant.

## **ASIAN HORROR**

The term 'Asian Horror' was generally used to categorize horror films that are produced in East Asia and Southeast Asia without recognizing that there are common elements across horror films from these regions. Rather than merely functioning as a supra-category that covers the many national cinemas, Asian Horror should recognize as "*the changing landscape mediascape and the increasing interdependence of local [Asian horror] cinemas with the Asian region*" (Choi & Wada-Marciano, 2009), 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, according to McRoy (2008), "*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*".

Since the late 1990s, horror films have been actively produced in Asia and most importantly, some of these films have managed to achieve huge box office success both in their domestic markets and international reception. Therefore, it appears that the genre of cinematic horror is one of the main representative genres of Asian cinema. The contemporary popularity of horror genre in Asia, especially the subgenre of female ghost films, was considerably affected by the extraordinary success of the Japanese film *Ringu* with its iconic 'longhaired girl ghost' character Sadako (1994). For example, Baek (2008) describes female apparitions who returned to the Korean cinemas during the late 1990s as 'Sadako's daughters'. From one point of view, the South Korean critic's comment might be on-key for many contemporary Asian female ghost films that have simulated the alleged 'Sadako effects,' adopting the imagery of Sadako's character in the *Ring* (2002), evident in successful South Korean films like *Phone* (2002), *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), and *Bunshinsaba* (2004). From another, *Ringu* (1998) is not the only reason for the resuscitated popularity of Asian female ghost films during the late 1990s.

In terms of the horror phenomenon, the significant triggers are in fact, specific contexts related to the Asian crisis. Therefore, the Asian female ghost films produced during the times of Asian economic depression can be symptomatically interpreted in the relationships or articulations with specific social discourse and people's anxieties in the region at that point of time. According to Ciecko (2006), Asian religions such as *Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Islam*, as well as the "diverse range of governing socio-political structures and systems including constitutional monarchy, parliamentary and multiparty democracy, socialism and communism", all brought a significant impact "to the contextual fabric of Asian cinema as cultural production and social experience."

The Asian community's anxieties towards modernity in crisis played a significant role in establishing specific themes of the Asian female ghost films made from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. In addition, the cinematic reflections on Asian modernity have been vocalized through certain representations and ideas about women's roles, sexualities, identities, and bodies in the films. For example, *Whispering Corridors* (1998), the first film that began the second flourishing of the horror genre in South Korea, describes a group of high school girls as the 'others' who have been most repressed by the oppressive Korean school system. According to Baek (2008), since the film's release and subsequent success, Korean female ghost films started to speak more directly about social issues and moved beyond the motifs of personal grudge and revenge seen with frequency in the films' earlier counterparts. *Whispering Corridors* (1998) has been produced with a relatively low budget and an obscure director and actors/actresses, but it gained massive box office success when it drew hordes of high school students to the theatres. The power of this film, which assured its popularity, lies in its realistic depiction of the Korean educational system, which formed the basis for the fantasy about a mistreated girl who returned as a ghost to seek revenge on the teachers and classmates.

The film shows that the Korean high school is haunted not only by the girl's spirit, but also by the harsh competition among friends and by the teachers who exercise omnipotent power over their students. It also depicts some of the demeaning situations Korean female students experience within their schools (including sexual

harassment and physical violence), which are controlled by military style rules and masculine discipline. The fear aroused by the film *Whispering Corridors* was, in reality, caused by the underdeveloped educational system that the nation's modernity project evidently overlooked due to its main focus on economic growth (Lee, 2011).

## **JAPAN**

In East Asia, particularly Japan and Hong Kong, although they suffered relatively less during the Asian crisis, the film industry suffered massive declines in the late 1990s. In the case of Japan, the most popular films in 1997 were about 50 per cent Hollywood, 30 per cent Japanese and 15 per cent European. According to a 1998 poll, 60 per cent of Japanese who were surveyed said they did not go to the movies at all in the previous year and 22 per cent said they only went once or twice. According to Hays (2009), the decline of the Japanese film industry in the late 1990s was caused by the cartel nature of the Japanese film industry, which included only three companies, namely Toho, Shochiku, and Toei, which dominated the market. Although the three major distributors were struck by a string of box office disappointments, the number of domestic releases grew during the late 1990s because of the increasing number of mini-theatres, which began screening independent Japanese films. Thus, unlike the decline of mainstream film industry, independent filmmaking was thriving at that time. Several mini-theatre operators, including Theatre Shinjuku and Eurospace, started investing in film production.

Besides that, the rise of new media venues, such as cable and satellite channels, created more demand for independent films. One prominent investor was the Wowow satellite station (its current president as of October 2011 is Nobuya Wazaki) which financed *the J-Movie Wars* (J mean Japan) series of low-budget shorts and feature films beginning in 1992, and underwrote the 1998 launch of Suncent CinemaWorks.

The growing world of independent filmmaking was made up of intriguing talents from young directors whose previous careers were in the fields of advertising, television and music videos. The young directors were tired of the constraints inherent within traditional genre films, such as samurai and yakuza action films usually produced by the major productions, and wanted to explore various other genres.

## **THAILAND**

In some of the Asian countries who were experiencing economic crisis, local film industries did not suffer a decline, but rather enjoyed an unexpected flourish and expansion. In Thailand, while the press and advertising were badly struck by the 1997 financial crisis, filmmaking increased (Lewis, 2003), which resulted in the rise of New Thai Cinema. Until the mid-1990s, the condition of the transnational exhibition in the country, by which the largest exhibitor was half owned by Hong Kong and Australian companies and the second largest owned by United Arts, made Hollywood movies responsible for holding about 85 per cent of the market (Lewis, 2003).

According to Boey (2012), only horror films from 1970s onwards were properly documented due to language barrier and inadequate archiving, though many Thai horror films have already been produced and enjoyed by audiences since the silent era. Although its history of horror films is relatively short, Thailand is a prominent case study relating to the pan Asian degree of influence on the development of national horror cinemas.

In the context of Asian horror, Thailand is the representation of pre-modern culture. The country's association with the occult, like witch doctors, ghost children, black magic, and curses, have spread across Southeast Asia, establishing themselves as urban legends in the society.

The new generation of directors who emerged during or after 1997, such as Nonzee Nimibutr *Nang Nak* (1999), Pen-ek Ratanaruang *Fun Bar Karaoke* (1997), and the Pang Brothers *The Eye* (2002), altered the local film scene, which had heretofore been governed by Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries. Since the success of the film *Dang Bireley and the Young Gangsters* (1997) directed by Nimibutr, Hollywood films have lost some of their grip on Thailand's market. In 1999, *Nang Nak*, the horror film made by the same director out grossed *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1999).

The Thai film industry was already somewhat transnational before the late 1990s, as more than 80 per cent of film exhibition was being dominated by Hong Kong and Hollywood companies. The major change in terms of the transnational conditions for filmmaking in the late 1990s was Hong Kong film industry's more active involvement with producing and distributing local Thai films. This transition was made possible through the methodology in which Hong Kong's film industry tried to secure more talent, finances, and markets from beyond their own country in order to overcome the deterioration of Hong Kong cinema. For example, a number of films directed by the Thai film makers Pen-ek Ratanaruang and Nonzee Nimibutr were produced by Hong Kong producer/director Peter Chan's Applause Pictures. Besides that, Amsterdam and Hong Kong-based Fortissimo Films also played an important part in the international successes of the Thai films *Iron Ladies* (2000) and *Nang Nak* (1999).

Although Thailand is still a developing country, it does not escape from the challenges faced by Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Thailand is forced to break away from its historical and political past in the process of emerging and competing in the global market, where cultural imperialism is ubiquitous. The rise of Thai horror films from 2002 to 2007 (Totaro et. al., 2010) suggests a high demand because these films illustrate an ambivalent relationship with the traditional way of life in Thailand, religion, and the occult, that were once prominent and characteristic of the country (Boey. 2012).

## FACTORS DRIVING ASIAN HORROR

### RELIGION

One of the main elements of imagery and narratives for horror films is undoubtedly the element of religion. Although religion has provided spiritual comfort to its followers, the restraints it dictates have imposed on them creates anxieties; believers are encouraged to fear *the wrath of Gods and demons, retribution, Armageddon, and Judgment Day*. According to Hicks (1999), 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”*.

Such association is a common characteristic also visible in Asian religions, particularly in Buddhism and Taoism, whose rites and scriptures have moralistic tones. This provides one method to understand the common element across various Asian cultures. Another common attribute of religion is its rigid classification of all things into two contrasting groups, such as good or evil, *ying* or *yang*, form or formless (Boey, 2012).

The attempt by religion to distinguish between the extremities establishes the existence of the blasphemous and sacred as well as to create a sense of awe for the sacred. Religion, in leading its believers to the path of enlightenment, incorporates 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, and Enlightenment), religion also makes the effort to warn its followers about violating its teachings.

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, light punishment. The degree of punishment one faces is determined, on Judgment Day, by the quality and quantity of wrongdoings the deceased has committed during his lifetime. For example, depending on the seriousness of the crimes, one may be imprisoned in one of the eighteen levels of Hell instead of being reincarnated.

The extreme methodologies are traced back to the dharma of Buddha, where the purpose 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).

According to Buddhism, the torments and sufferings increase proportionately with each descending level. For specific crimes, 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 meditation over decomposing corpses, with the ultimate aim of

transcending the cycle of life and Samsara (the repeating cycle of birth, life, death and reincarnation) suffering. Through the practice of 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. Pandey (2005) states that the medieval Buddhist monks observed in detail the various decomposing stages of a corpse as part of their religious training.

The practice, according to a fifth-century Indian Theravadin Buddhist commentator and scholar called Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, is “beneficial to 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 or her own body, thinking. “It is mine”*”. The concept of meditating on a decomposing corpse being beneficial may seem bizarre to modern readers but it is an example of Buddhist beliefs shaping the way Asian cultures perceive the concept of the body. In the quest for enlightenment, profanity can be misconstrued as the opposite pole sacredness and all that represents goodness.

### **WOMEN’S ROLE IN SOCIETY**

Another 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. Replacing the excessively male-oriented monsters and phallic creatures are the 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), though the connection may not be simple.

Hand (2005) attributes the origins of the female antagonist to the monstrous women, *akuba* (evil women) and *dokufo* (poisonous ladies), in the Noh and Kabuki Theatre in Japan; who are “motivated through revenge or grief, or are, especially in the case of the supernatural female, inherently evil”. In addition, Leiter (2002) states that one of the primary ways in which victimized women become empowered are to turn into vengeful spirits after they have died. The horde 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.

Religion also played a role in the portrayal of women as antagonists in Asian horror texts. The marginalization of women, resulting in the portrayal of women as the epitome of evil, can be seen in *fujokan*. In the eyes of the 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 victims of such vices and therefore, distract themselves from enlightenment.



In terms of Asian societies, the social discourse to confine women's roles to domestic sphere had more practical power under the situation where the Asian crisis affected women's and men's employment disproportionately. In Indonesia, for example, 46 per cent of the unemployed were women (from 1997 to 1998). Thai women composed 50 to 60 per cent of the nation's unemployed. In South Korea, women comprised 75 per cent of the discouraged workers and 86 per cent of the retrenched workers in the banking and financial service sectors (Aslanbeigui and Summerfield, 2000). During the period of economic depression in the Asian nations, women (especially married women) were the first group to be laid off, under the circumstance where Asian women needed permission from male members of their families to work outside home, were crowded into low-wage occupations in informal sectors, and discriminated against in employment.

Several South Korean horror films like *White Room* (Im Chang-jae, 2002), *Phone* (Ahn Byeong-ki, 2002), and *Acacia* (Park Kihyeong 2003), shows how the films were harmonized with the contemporary patriarchal discourse about maternity and motherhood that re-gained discursive power during the late 1990s. For example, in the film *White Room*, of which the title connotes woman's reproductive organ - the womb - a female ghost, who was bitten to death by her boyfriend after delivering a dead baby, chooses a group of women who want to abort (and already aborted) their fetuses as the target of her revenge. In so doing, the film punishes the women who are involved in abortion, while simultaneously defining them as being sexually promiscuous (the female ghost never punishes the men who are also responsible for eliminating the unborn life). Other films, *Phone* (2002) and *Acacia* (2003) prioritize biological motherhood over other alternatives such as adoption and pregnancy by egg donation since the films represent the non-biological methods of motherhood as being unstable and monstrous.

### **ANXIETIES TOWARDS MODERNITY**

In the 1980s and the early 1990s, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) promoted stabilization and structural adjustment programs that contributed to the globalization of trade through privatization and liberalization policies. More recently, the two international financial institutions (IFIs) helped globalize capital markets by pressuring some Asian countries to liberalize their external capital accounts and financial markets. In the context of weak regulatory structures, financial liberalization helped create the Asian crisis (1997-1998), which damaged the economies of Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines (Aslanbeigui and Summerfield, 2000). In the aftermath of the Asian crisis, millions of people were impoverished, unemployment rates tripled in some countries, real wages dropped at times by 40 per cent, health deteriorated throughout the region, and reported cases of child labour, prostitution, and domestic violence dramatically increased (Aslanbeigui and Summerfield, 2000).

The Asian financial crises cause the local people to realize about the vulnerability of their countries' economic structures. In addition, with the subsequent disasters in the countries private and public sectors, what had been repressed under the myths of rapidly achieved modernity, often called 'compressed modernity', started to return in the Asian countries' social discourse. What the term of 'compressed modernity' suggests is the swift transformation from the pre-modern to the modern in the Asian

countries including South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia, which were possible through the development projects led by the authoritarian governments. The despotic governments established, in many cases, by military *coup d'états*, mainly emphasized economic growth and industrialization for the development of modern nations, all the while sacrificing various other dimensions related to modernity.

The Asian compressed modernity turned out to be full of unexpected costs and risks that threatened the sheer sustainability, not to mention the further development of the contemporary social and economic conditions in the affected nations. Therefore, confronting the financial crisis, dominant social discourse in the Asian countries started to diagnose the very mechanisms and strategies for achieving rapid economic development and modernization as fundamental obstacles against the nations' current and future development.

While Singaporean female ghost films produced between the late 1990s and early 2000s, including *Return to Pontianak* (2001) and *The Maid* (2005) exhibit one way of popular culture's methods of coping with the national anxieties about the country's vulnerability as a developed, modern country. As Tan argues, due to the country's particular geopolitical position that located it within the heart of a still traditional and largely rural Southeast Asia, Singaporeans, who live in the more advanced stages of global capitalism, keep witnessing other neighbouring countries' pre-modern statuses. The developing Southeast Asian countries remind Singaporeans of the pre-modern past they worked so hard to overcome but might return to if they fail to maintain the country's hard-earned modernity. Tan argues that the current Singaporean horror films help Singaporeans cope with this kind of anxieties, chiefly through narratives that lead to mastery over threats embodied in monstrous female characters.

*Return to Pontianak* (2001) is a good example of the cinematic responses to this kind of social anxieties. In this film, the heroine, Charity, is a teenage Asian American who was adopted at birth by an American family living in Singapore. Her mother was known to have mysteriously disappeared in the Malaysian Jungles when Charity was four years old. In her dreams, her mother beckons to her from the jungle. Charity returns to Malaysia, particularly the jungle town of Pontianak, from the highly urbanized modern city-nation of Singapore, in search of her birth mother. A group of her friends who are making a documentary about her journey act as her companions. During the journey, the ghost of Charity's dead mother shows up in front of Charity and her friends and every member of the group is mysteriously killed except Charity herself. In this film, the Southeast Asian jungle - the primal, fertile, and dangerous space - symbolizes the abject material that highly-developed Singapore must but cannot fully exclude from its urbanized, industrialized society. The fearful pre-modern status of life is displayed through the imagery of the unruly body of the jungle and embodied by the images of the mother, represented by the figure of monstrous mother ghost.

In fact, in most scenes in the film, which take place in the Southeast Asian jungle, the undeveloped and uncontrolled nature itself seems to be equally horrific to the figure of the mother ghost. From the very beginning of the film, the members of the filmmaking crew are frustrated by the power of nature, which no modern technology can face against. They get lost in the jungle and are attacked by numerous insects. When

their GPS (Global Positioning System) failed to work, they only reluctantly rely on a distrustful Malay guide whose intention seems to make the group more confused. It appears the major conflicts in this film exist between the modern and the pre-modern, including the mysteriously haunting nature and the supernatural. A Singaporean man in the group who is described as an expert of modern technology becomes the first one to be killed by some unknown cause. Another American man that ridiculed the Malay shamanistic beliefs (by accidentally urinating on a voodoo sculpture but ignores his friend's advice about apologizing to the God to evade retribution) is transformed into a soulless zombie who kills another woman in the group.

### **GRUDGE CULTURE**

The prominence of grudge culture in Asian societies is closely associated with tolerance, which is one of the more highly regarded Asian values. Such culture can be explained by the analysis of the Buddhism religious system. Buddhists believe in the cyclical nature of life and death, which differentiates it from other religions like Islam and Christianity, and that *ying guo* (cause and effect) lies at the heart of reincarnation in Buddhism. A person who has committed many good deeds will receive duly rewards before his or her passing, and in the same virtue, receive retribution if he or she commits crimes or causes harm. Therefore, this moral equation forms the core of Asian religious teachings where the law of nature governs one's capability to differentiate between what is right and wrong.

However, the problem with *ying guo* surfaces when the *guo* (effects) aspect is absent due to external and random forces (Boey, 2012). The divine powers of nature are not absolute, which causes many evil people to go unpunished for the sins they have committed. Hence, the grudge theme functions readily in situations with the absence of effects and causes of grievances are so obvious, that something beyond nature's forces has to be done to balance that moral equation. In countless Asian horror films, the grudge of the deceased acts as the main reason for her existence in the mortal world. This is evidenced by her refusal or inability to reincarnate due to her strong desire to seek revenge on those who have caused her suffering or death, and only through the achievement of her goal will the cycle of *ying guo* be completed and her grudge be appeased.

In Japan though, the grudge theme was not derived from religious beliefs, but rather from older Japanese cultural themes. The first horror film that tackled the theme of the vengeful female ghost was Shozo Makino's *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (The Yotsuya Ghost Story) in 1912, which was based on a kabuki play by Nabuko Ysuruya. In 1959, Nobuo Nagakawa remade it for Shin Toho, turning it into the definitive Japanese horror film. *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (1959) tells the story of Leumon, a master-less samurai who murders his pregnant wife, Iwa, so that he is able to marry the daughter of an influential feudal lord. Iwa then returns as a horribly disfigured and vengeful spirit to haunt her husband. The moral of the film is that the crimes committed by the sinner can only be redeemed with his death, and the film has set a tradition for most '*vengeful spirit*' horror films to come.

## COMPARISON OF ASIAN HORROR FILMS

### HIDEO NAKATA – *RINGU* (1998)

Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998) is often revered as one of the best horror films to emerge from the Asian region by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Boey, 2012). Adapted from the novel *Ring* by Kōji Suzuki, it teaches the audience that venerable cultural traditions can remain strong in a techno-rational modernity by showing how the vengeful female spirit of Japanese mythology infects modern communications technology. *Ringu* (1998) helped coin the term *J-Horror* (Japanese Horror) and set the Asian horror platform for future female spectre-themed horror films.

The film starts off with the spread of an urban legend among the teenage population of Tokyo during the late summer of 1997. The legend tells of a mysterious videotape that dooms whoever watches it to an inevitable death. The unsuspecting viewer will immediately receive a telephone call informing that they have only a week to live. Events soon reveal the deadly videotape to be no mere legend, as a group of teenagers die under mysterious circumstances after watching it while on vacation at a resort located on the Izu peninsula southwest of Tokyo (White, 2005, in McRoy, 2005).



Image 1 & 2: *Ringu* (1998) Telephone and television as Sadako's gateways to the real world

A TV reporter named Asakawa Reiko stumbles upon the videotape during her personal investigation (her niece was one of the victims of the cursed videotape) and learns of its truth: a deceased female psychic Sadako had cast a curse on the videotape and whoever watches it must accomplish an unmentioned task within seven days. As Reiko has watched the videotape, she manages to unravel the cryptic message and how Sadako died. It was revealed that she was murdered by her father many years ago and the curse demands the viewer to get another to watch it within seven days, failure to do so mean eminent death in the hands of Sadako's vengeful spirit (Boey, 2012).

Following the arrival of widespread computer viruses via high-tech systems like mobile phones and the Internet, *Ringu* was released at the most appropriate time to address humanity's inability to maintain control on technological advancements. Just as our highly relied-upon gadgets are susceptible to hackings, televisions and telephones, home electronics once considered beneficial and safe, have become gateways to Hell. According to Balmain (2008), the videotape in *Ringu* is the embodiment of contemporary anxieties of the Japanese citizens, whose traditional values are constantly under threat of extinction thanks to the nation's fast paced technological advancement.

**BANGJONG PISANTHANAKUN & PARKPOOM WONGPOOM –  
SHUTTER (2004)**

*Shutter* (2004) by Bangjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom is one recent horror film that follows the trend set by *Ringu* (1998), which is the theme of the female spirit seeking revenge on those who have wronged her. The film opens with Tun, a photographer, and his girlfriend Jane run over a mysterious woman while on a drive home from a late night gathering of friends.



Image 3 & 4: *Shutter* (2004) The revelation of Natre's spirit at 00.41.11 and 00.41.26

Consequently, the couple soon notices abnormal shapes and silhouettes appearing in the photographs they have taken. At the same time, Tun's friends are haunted by a female ghost and driven to commit suicide. Jane soon discovers that the vengeful spirit is Tun's ex-girlfriend, Natre, who committed suicide after being gang-raped by Tun's friends, with Tun taking photographs of the ordeal to keep her silent.

*Shutter* (2004) is reminiscent of *Ringu* (1998), most particularly its portrayal of the vengeful spirit that presents itself through the mechanical reproduction of film (Boey, 2012). It is through the possession of horror via mundane artificial creations like television, telephone, and camera that make these begrudging entities threatening.



Figure 5 & 6: *Shutter* (2004) Traditional Buddhist chanting at Natre's funeral

The film also shows scenes of Theravada Buddhist influenced practises, which are related to the cultural society in Thailand. In *Shutter*, Tun and Jane decide to visit a temple and burn offerings to the gods and deities to appease their minds following the hit-and-run incident. Other crucial religious practises that are shown on the film are the monks chanting at Natre's funeral as well as the cremation of her body.

According to Boey (2012), the Buddhist chanting at the funeral serves as the deliverance of the tormented soul to the nether world. A proper burial or cremation is necessary in Asian religious traditions because the absence of these rituals will cause the spirit to remain restless and return to haunt the living. However, the appearance of Natre's spirit at the funeral is a sign that her grudge cannot be appeased by the chanting, but rather her revenge on the one who has wronged her, namely Tun.

On the other hand, *Shutter* also speaks of the violence and the rampant Thai urban youths. According to Endres and Lauser (2012), violation and violence cause death and give birth to a vengeful ghost bent on haunting and tormenting the living in most Asian horror films. In *Shutter*, Natre was sexually attacked by Tun's friends, dressed in uniforms, in the school laboratory.

The portrayal of these violent youths is one of the social problems faced by contemporary urban Thai society, especially in the decades since 1970. *Shutter*, along with subsequent Thai horror films like *Phobia* (2008) and *Phobia 2* (2009), illustrates how rapid urban modernization in Thailand has produced an increasing number of aggressive, arrogant, undisciplined and rebellious youths and the traditional authority of social institutions like family, Buddhist temples, and schools is losing their grip on this generation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Horror films serve several purposes in Asian society. Firstly, they are representations of the local citizens' anxieties about the undesirable shifts their countries were struggling in the late 1990s due to a near-crippling financial crisis. The cinematic reflections on Asian modernity have also been vocalized through certain representations and ideas about women's roles, sexualities, identities, and bodies in the films. In Japan, the film industry began its revival due to the growing world of independent filmmaking was made up of intriguing talents from young directors whose previous careers were in the fields of advertising, television and music videos. The young directors were tired of the constraints inherent within traditional genre films, such as samurai and yakuza action films usually produced by the major productions, and wanted to explore various other genres, and the most prominent genre was the horror genre. Meanwhile, the Thai film industry was transnational before the late 1990s, as more than 80 per cent of film exhibition was being dominated by Hong Kong and Hollywood companies. The major change in terms of the transnational conditions for filmmaking in the late 1990s was Hong Kong film industry's more active involvement with producing and distributing local Thai films.

Asian horror films draw from several elements that make them uniquely Asian, and that is the reason many Hollywood remakes have failed to match their success in the box office. One prominent aspect is religion, where in leading its believers to the path of enlightenment, utilizes 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, and Enlightenment), religion also makes the effort to warn its

followers about violating the teachings. In Asian horror films, the violation of those rules usually meant eminent suffering and horrific death in the hands of the supernatural.

Another 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. In terms of the societies, Asian horror films with female ghosts are the representation of the social discourse to confine women's roles to domestic sphere had more practical power under the situation where the Asian crisis affected women's and men's employment disproportionately.

The horror films dealing with female ghosts' revenge stories were revived in Asia during the period of Asian crisis. Several Asian female ghost films represent the private and public sectors underdeveloped and isolated by the Asian countries' modernization efforts (usually linked to economic development) as the very spaces where the dead women's grudges are formed and which are disturbed by the returned vengeful female ghosts. In addition, the local people's anxieties about reverting to a pre-modern state or status are articulated via the monstrous feminine images in the New Asian female ghost films like *Sadako* from *Ringu* (1998) and *Natre* from *Shutter* (2004).

Hollywood filmmakers have attempted, with very little success to produce remakes of many Asian horror films, namely *Shutter* (2004) and *Ringu* (1998). Remakes which can be seen as translations do not somehow present this kind of afterlife. In the recent Asian horror remake fever, we see the operation of a global force that attempts to obliterate the local which is tantamount to the original. The original, in the process of translation, disappears, leaving behind a ghostly afterlife of manipulated inter-textual signs. Central to this disappearance is the global-local dialectic which provokes the practices of cultural appropriation and misappropriation through fixing the local. It does not energize the enriching interflow of the global and local and is therefore a force of disruption and destruction in which the essence of transgressing the boundary is obliterated.

In conclusion, Asian horror films represent the anxieties of modernity that Asian societies are facing. Although the countries are rapidly advancing in technological development, folkloric superstitions, religious beliefs, social norms and stigma are still very prominent in societies, which Asian horror films purposes these traditional elements in the films as themes to remind societies of their heritage and to curb social problems amongst the youths caused by swift modernity in Asian countries.

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