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Transformations of the Monstrous Feminine in the New Asian Female Ghost Films

Hunju Lee

Abstract

Since the financial success of the American remake of a Japanese horror film called *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata 1998), remaking a well-accepted Asian scary film in its domestic or pan-Asian market has been a recurring phenomenon in the American film industry for the past decade. The particular style of horror films which this article identifies as the "New Asian Female Ghost Films" has been the most welcomed Asian genre for the Hollywood project for reworking Asian cinematic originals. Beyond the commonality in narrative and thematic sharing, the New Asian Female Ghost Films are characterized as the specific iconography of the monstrous feminine with other gendered/gendering imageries and imaginations to reflect as well as the countries' long traditions of female ghost filmmaking and the changed socio-cultural matrixes.

This essay addresses the question of how the marked gender in the New Asian Female Ghost Films is transformed in the American remakes of the films. It examines the various intertextual and contextual influences on the American reproduction of the monstrous feminine and the divided representational modes by sex/gender lines in the Asian originals, including the cinematic and cultural texts the individual remake producers and filmmakers refer to; the conventions of classical and contemporary American horror films; and the American/Western assumptions on Asian country, Asian culture, and Asian women, namely, the Asian otherness.

The author analyzes four examples of American remakes: *Shutter* (Massyuki Ochiai 2008), *The Eye* (David Moreau and Xavier Plaud 2008), *One Missed Call* (Eric Valette 2008) and *The Uninvited* (Charles Guard and Thomas Guard 2009).

Since the financial success of the American remake of the Japanese horror film *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata 1998), remakings of Asian horror films that were well-received in their domestic or pan-Asian market have become recurring phenomena in the American film industry. The most welcomed Asian genre for the Hollywood project of reworking Asian cinematic originals is horror, particularly a subgenre of films I identify as the "New Asian Female Ghost Films." The term New Asian Female Ghost Films refers to films from Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, and

Corresponding author:
Hunju Lee, MA, USA.
Email: lee.hunju@gmail.com

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Singapore since the late 1990s (with peak production between 2000 and 2005), with a main narrative focus on the prematurely dead women's grudge and vengeful power. Beyond shared themes, the New Asian Female Ghost Films are characterized by specific iconography of the monstrous feminine, reflecting not only the countries' long traditions of making films with female ghosts as main characters but also changing socio-cultural matrixes.

This essay addresses the question of how gender in the New Asian Female Ghost Films – which I believe reflects and responds to Asian societies' "surplus repression" (Wood 1986: 47) – is transformed in the American remakes of the films. I examine various intertextual and contextual influences on the American reproduction of the monstrous feminine and the divided representational modes by sex/gender lines in the Asian originals. These include the cinematic and cultural referent texts for remakes; the conventions of contemporary American horror films; and American/Western assumptions about Asian nations, culture, women, and otherness more generally.

Theoretically, my study centers on the critical application of what Freeland defines as Creed-Kristevan approach to the cinematic horror genre (Freeland 2009). Broadly describing the generic characteristics of the New Asian Female Ghost Films and their American reworkings, my essay analyzes four examples of American remakes: *The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu 2004), *Shutter* (Masayuki Ochiai 2008), *The Eye* (David Moreau and Xavier Palud 2008), and *The Uninvited* (Charles and Thomas Guard 2009).

The New Asian Female Ghost Films: Monstrous feminine images and modernity in crisis

As mentioned previously, I categorize the four Asian originals of the American remakes analyzed in this essay – *Ju-On* (Takashi Shimizu 2002), *Shutter* (Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom 2004), *The Eye* (Oxide Pang Chun and Danny Pang, 2002), and *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim Ji-Woon 2002) – as "New Asian Female Ghost Films." The main narratives of these films unfold with the female ghost figures returning to punish the wrongdoers. The images and iconographies of the modern female ghosts rely heavily on counterparts in the classical Asian female ghost films, mostly produced in the 1950s to the 1970s. For instance, the typical images of the avenging female ghosts in the New Asian Female Ghost Films can be understood as reconstituting portraits of ghost women in the Japanese Kaidan films influenced by the country's traditional forms of art and cultural production, such as the historic literature called "Kaidan-Shu," the theatrical traditions of Kabuki and Noh, and Ukiyo-e paintings.

Beyond the influence of tradition on female ghost figures, the characters are closely related to what Barbara Creed defines as the "monstrous feminine." According to Creed, modern Western horror films often depict the monstrous maternal figure as a mythological, archaic mother whose generative power is negatively visualized as the "all-devouring womb," the "blackness of extinction (namely death)," and the "all incorporating black hole that threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed" (Creed 1993: 27–30). The Asian originals construct the bodily monstrosities of ghosts based on cultural fears of female fecundity and the abject maternal body. As Oliver argues in relation to Kristeva, a woman's reproductive body is imagined as abject in the symbolic order due to the very nature of the maternal body that uncovers the process of subject formation and the lack/gap in the subject unity (Oliver 1991: 48). In the Japanese film, *Ju-On*, the threatening and omnipresent mother ghost, which Creed might define as the "castrating archaic mother," haunts a house, a visual simile of her extended body. Once anyone enters the house, she/he is dragged by the vengeful mother ghost into the dark holes in the house, the "intra-uterine setting of the haunted house" (Creed 1993: 53) as the archaic mother tries to engulf a fetus into the place where it is originally born.

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Another fear imprinted in the films' imagery of the female ghosts concerns the pre-Oedipal maternity, the dyadic relationship between mother and child that Kristeva defines as "semiotic chora" (Keltner 2011: 49). The semiotic chora governs the child's pre-socialization before the symbolic power intervenes into the mother-child dyad. The child's pre-Oedipal desire for an inseparable unity with the mother is supposed to be repressed in order to guarantee his or her successful entrance into the symbolic world dominated by the father's law and language. The successful transition to the post-Oedipal stage is necessary for the child to have his or her own autonomous identity, individual body, and subjectivity separated from the maternal subject and body. Grant (2013) claims that the genre of cinematic horror often thematizes such conflicts between the pre-Oedipal desire and post-Oedipal order, representing the repressed but reemerged pre-Oedipal desire as a threat to the normality of the male symbolic power/order (Grant 1996; Erens 1996). For example, the 2004 Thai film, *Shutter*, expresses male anxiety as inseparable from its place of origin, the maternal body, failing to achieve individuality and subjectivity when the ghost of Natre asserts her right to possess the hero's body.

In *Shutter* and in the 2002 Hong Kong/Singapore co-production, *The Eye*, the strong pre-Oedipal bond between mothers and daughters in families where paternal power is absent becomes the very reason why the dead girls cannot leave this world. In *Shutter*, the mother keeps her daughter's decaying body in her house and doesn't provide the culturally proper funeral service for the girl's wandering spirit. In *The Eye*, the mother waits for her dead daughter's daily visit to her house. The mothers insist on their rights to take care of their daughters even after the daughters' deaths, which provides the very cause of the films' haunting, transgressing the border between the living and the dead. The mother's denial of the burial and funeral service according to the country's Buddhist tradition in *Shutter* can be read as a resistance against the intervention of the male symbolic order into the undividable union between her and her daughter, what Kristeva calls the "nonexpressive totality" of the semiotic chora (Oliver 1991: 46).

The monstrous feminine images in the Asian originals are closely intertwined with the particular socio-cultural contexts. First, both the expansion of feminist discourse in Asian countries and the backlash against the feminist social mood affected the specific representations of the female ghost characters. The changes in Asian societies' political and economic structures, including enhanced opportunities for women's employment and increased dual-income households, have contributed to the development of social consciousness of gender equality. For instance, housewives who were traditionally expected to sacrifice their lives for other family members began to speak out about their own desires for happiness, resulting in the increasing rate of elderly couples' divorce.[1] Through somewhat hyperbolic discourse from the countries' popular media (especially at the time when a large percentage of Asian women were still exposed to domestic violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination in both the private and public spheres), the 1990s was defined as the "Era of Women" in the Asian nations (여성의 시대, *yeoseong eu sidae*, in Korea, and 女の時代, *onna no jidai,* in Japan).[2]

The New Asian Female Ghost Films reveal rising feminist sensibilities in contemporary Asian countries in terms of their distinctions from classical Asian female ghost films. The archetypal female ghost characters in classical Asian female ghost films are identified through their trait of drastic transformation. During their lifetimes (before they die and return as vengeful ghosts), the female characters are honored as "good women" according to Confucian norms. They are obedient and sacrificial daughters and wives to/for powerful male patriarchs – e.g., Oiwa in the Japanese film, *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (Nakagawa Nobuo 1959), and Wolhwa in the South Korean film, *The Public Burial Ground Under Moon* (Cheol-hwi Kwon 1967). Therefore, the changing images from women as living human beings to threatening ghosts seem to be radical transformations from culturally admired beauties to disgusting abject bodies. In contrast to the classical films, in the

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New Asian female ghost Films, the division between the living women and the returned ghosts is blurred since the women are always already "othered" in the films, even before they are transformed to the abject female ghosts.

The Japanese film *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata 1998) represents Sadako as the maligned girl with supernatural power. Ling in *The Eye* has had the ability to see impending death since childhood, and has been isolated in her small village, stigmatized as a witch. Natre in *Shutter* also keeps a distance from the socially admired femininity of the living persona of the ghost women in the old Asian films. She is portrayed as a silent and lonely girl with a grave and rather saturnine facial expression. While Natre is alive, she is displayed as a hysterical and dangerous psychopath due to her extreme attachment to the hero, her boyfriend. As a result, in the New Asian Female Ghost Films, there is no nostalgia for the docile female subject required by the patriarchal society and embodied by the beautiful, good, and subservient female persona of the classical Asian horror films. Rather, in the modern ghost films, the dichotomy of good and bad women does not exist, and the otherness of female subjectivity is continued from the living women to their dead and returned ghosts.

In addition, the monstrous women in the New Asian Female Ghost Films do not merely attack individual men or wrongdoers, but they are also visualized as threatening to the very symbolic and ideological systems sustaining the patriarchal societies. Even though the female ghost in *The Eye* does not directly take revenge on the village people who branded her as a witch, she challenges the male cognitive system which is based on rationality and scientific knowledge; she demonstrates the uselessness of legitimized knowledge in controlling the power of the unseen supernatural world which is equated with femininity in the film. No male authority or agency is able to regulate the border-transgressing female figures in the films, including the religious power that achieves such victory in classical Asian female ghost films.

While the contemporary Asian ghost films reflect changing gendered attitudes through the inclusion of powerful female subjects who threaten the masculine order, they also respond to the social discourse of patriarchy in crisis that resonates with the countries' economic problems, anxieties, and backlashes from the growing popularity of feminism. The representations of male subjectivity in the films reproduce the notion of patriarchy and paternity in crisis, accelerated since the Asian economic downturn in the late 1990s that pushed many fathers into un- or under-employment. In the Asian patriarchal system, many of whose tenets are supported by the division of labor based on sexual difference, a man's unemployment often means losing his position as a patriarch, and a subsequent destabilization of the masculine identity. In the wake of Japan's economic recession in the 1990s, fathers who lost their jobs were desperate to find their ways back home, yet "the homecoming of workaholic and estranged fathers was often met with indifference and mild contempt by wives and children" (Yoda 2006: 240). During the IMF period in South Korea in the late 1990s, the theme of patriarchy in crisis had been frequently dealt with in Korean films that portrayed men as weak and unstable. For instance, Korean male melodramas popular in the late 1990s share the conversion narratives in which a male subject's position shifts from attacker to victim and/or feminized other (Hand 2005: 45) through, for example, narratives addressing male protagonists' unhealthy and dying bodies.

In this regard, neo-conservative discourse about restoring paternalism to its former position had been most rampant during the time of the Asian economic crisis, although these discussions continue today. In Japan, paternalists have denounced the excess of motherhood and the maternal principle, both inside and outside the domestic sphere, as encouraging uncontrolled egoism, narcissistic and hedonistic consumer culture, and the hysteria of entitlement and victimhood (Yoda 2006: 239). Japanese paternalism blames "the interconnected phenomenon of paternal deficit and maternal excess not only for problems riddling Japanese families, such as violent crimes committed

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by youth, prostitution by middle-class teenage girls, and the refusal of children to attend school, but also for a broad range of economic, social, and political upheavals that the nation has seen in the past decade" (Yoda 2006: 239–240). One of the Japanese paternalistic criticisms of maternal excess has targeted the so-called "kyoiku Mama" (教育ママ, education mother), a mother who is perhaps overly committed to furthering the education of her child. In other Asian countries, whose educational systems have forced children to survive murderous competitions, the stereotypically supervising and controlling mother who manages her child's body and soul has come to represent the country's typical pattern of maternity. For instance, in contemporary South Korea, a large number of mothers willingly choose to leave their husbands and follow their children to some English-speaking countries in order to take care of them so that the children might have better educational environments and opportunities for learning English. While the mothers display great power in raising their children alone in foreign countries, Korean fathers are left by themselves, their role reduced to mere financers of their children's education abroad.

In the four original New Asian Female Ghost Films, social concerns are reproduced through the films' fears of intimidating maternal figures, pre-Oedipal maternities, and the problematic nature of femininity. Most especially, the films project the local population's apprehensions of the vulnerability of contemporary paternity and maternal excess onto the threatening maternal subjects who desire to control every aspect of their children's lives – individuality, identity, and subjectivity – while blocking out any male intrusion into the mother-child dyadic relationships. These powerful maternities and the close bonds between mothers and children (daughters in the films), are similar to those experienced in the pre-Oedipal stage or the semiotic chora, and cause the most threatening moments in the films, the return of the female ghosts.

Beyond the films' disapproving stance on pre-Oedipal motherhood, the castrating mother in *Ju-On* connotes the cultural internalization of absolute control exerted by the mother inside the house, creating a cultural fantasy of constant surveillance and discipline by the mother subject (Foster 2008: 193). In *Ju-On*, the mother ghost's panoptic gaze permeates almost every aspect of the narrative, even outside the haunted house. In one scene, the teenage girl who is destined to be killed by the mother ghost covers every window in her room with newspapers, in an attempt to shut out the monstrous mother's supervising eyes. Sadly, newspapers are no match for the power of the maternal ghost's gaze, and the girl is brutally murdered. Here, when the monstrous mother's dominance is exercised throughout the teenage girl's life, her body and soul, the ghostly mother reminds us of the "education mama," the contemporary representative of the typical Asian mother.

The social, economic, and cultural innuendo in the New Asian Female Ghost Films is related not only to the discourse surrounding gender politics but also to anxieties about the return of pre-modernity, or the past repressed by the Asian countries' rapid modernization. The Asian financial crisis made local people realize the vulnerability of the economic structures in their countries. The subsequent disasters in the private/public sectors caused by the economic crisis invited critique of the "compressed modernity." The term refers to the swift transformation of certain Asian countries – including South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia – from the pre-modern to the modern, made possible through the development projects initiated by the authoritarian governments. Asian compressed modernity turned out to be full of unexpected costs and risks that threatened the sustainability and further development of the social and economic conditions in the affected nations (Chang 1999).

Some prevalent storylines and images in the New Asian Female Ghost Films conveyed local anxieties about degenerating into the pre-modern state/status if the countries failed to maintain the hard-earned trappings of modernity. In *The Eye*, the film's heroine, Mun, and her male helper, Dr Wah, travel from the developed postmodern city of Hong Kong to a less-modernized Thai village in order to trace the story of Ling, the girl who donated her corneas to Mun. Their journey is similar

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to that found in another modern female ghost film from Singapore, *Return to Pontianak* (Djinn 2001), in which the female protagonist and her friends take a trip to the Malay jungle from the city/nation of Singapore in order to find the heroine's biological mother. This narrative structure is also repeated in several other films within the subgenre, including *The Ring, One Missed Call* (Takashi Miike 2004), and *Phone* (Byeong-ki Ahn 2002).

Other images in the films that symbolize the possible return to the pre-modern include the juxtapositions of contrasted settings that remind the audience of modernity and its opposite. For instance, *The Eye* juxtaposes the images of a poor Thai village where people live in old huts with a forest of high rises in one district of Hong Kong, apparently with the intent of arousing the fear of returning to the pre-modern past. Such memories of the pre-modern are always recalled by scenes depicting a traditional and largely rural life in neighboring countries. Relatedly, the film's pre-modern spaces reverberate with particular images and storylines to constitute the female ghost character. Ling, the dead girl who returned, was raised in a rustic Thai community, in which being excluded has a greater impact on a person's life than it would in an urban setting where residents are usually strangers to one another. Furthermore, Ling lives her final moments in the deteriorated and eerie hospital in her village, whose aged wooden architecture is distinctive from the modern Hong Kong hospital where Mun receives her corneal transplant surgery.

Additionally, the temporarily amalgamated settings in *Ju-On* are as haunting as the interstitial mother ghost. The ancient wooden house in *Ju-On*, built according to traditional Japanese architecture and plagued by the mother ghost's grudge, is physically juxtaposed with the newly-constructed apartment complexes that house white-collar tenants. *Ju-On*'s mother ghost leaves the haunted house to stalk Hitomi, who visited her brother's family after they moved to the house. The vengeful female ghost encroaches upon Hitomi's apartment and murders her in that "clean" and "modern" space. In the scenes displaying Hitomi terrorized by the unknown intruder, what makes these scenes even more haunting is the apartment's cleanliness, its careful arrangement, armed with modern devices such as CCTV (closed-circuit television) and an alarm system that are ultimately useless in protecting the "modern" space from the supernatural interloper. They are pathetically impotent in confronting the abject mother ghost's invasion.

The American remakes: Transformations of the female ghost, recovered male subjectivity, and the haunted Asian city

In the Asian originals, the women who returned as revenging ghosts are represented as "others" during their lifetimes – a characteristic connected with their after-death constructions as monstrous women. In the American remakes, the women's otherness is enhanced by their relationships with American male protagonists who do not appear in the original films. For instance, the American remake, *The Grudge*, presents several newly added scenes showing the ghost woman Kayako's living days. The added scenes are inserted to clarify the ambiguity in the original film, *Ju-On*, about why Kayako's husband murdered her. According to the supplemental scenes in *The Grudge*, Kayako secretly admired an American professor named Peter before she was killed by her suspicious and jealous husband. Kayako's admiration for Peter is described as excessive and abnormal through behaviors such as stalking, sending him numerous love letters, and collecting his bodily remnants like hair and fingernails. Later, the American professor takes his own life, not by his own will, but because he is haunted by Kayako's malicious spirit. In the remake, the threats from the female stalker are symbolized by images of eyes that she drew on her diary, connoting her obsession with the incessant surveillance of the American professor's life.

Another remake, *Spirits*, represents the ghost woman Megumi through similar modes of displaying Natre, the girl whose insanity is caused by her extreme attachment to her boyfriend. One

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difference between the original and the remake is the way in which the two films describe the reasons behind the girls' deviant personalities. In the original, *Shutter*, Natre's insane craving for the hero's love seems to result from her isolation and loneliness. The remake girl Megumi's abnormal attachment to the American boyfriend, Ben, is rather caused by her Japanese traditional patriarchal family. Megumi's conservative ideas about the ideals of a good woman and the commitment to a man whom she considers her lifetime partner are imparted by her old-fashioned father, here depicted via cinematic clichés for a Japanese samurai. Megumi's traditional femininity renders her different from other Japanese women who live in the modern and global city of Tokyo – women like Ben's assistant, Seiko, who demands her sexual freedom and easily maintains a friendship with her ex-boyfriend. In Ben's flashbacks, Megumi is portrayed as a pure and sexually inexperienced girl who has never been in a serious relationship with a man before she met him, and who felt freedom from her controlling father when she dated an American man. After Megumi's father dies, she becomes increasingly attached to Ben, and he eventually becomes tired of the girl who asks for more love and responsibility than he can offer. He then decides to resort to immoral means to remove her permanently from his life: he has his American friends rape Megumi while he takes pictures of the scene to later blackmail her.

As the American remakes position the Asian women within love relationships with the Western male characters, relationships that do not exist in the original films, the images of the ghost women's lifetime in the remakes reflect Western discourse of "oriental" women, stereotypes and images produced by Western conceptualizations of Asian women's identities, personalities, bodies, womanhood, and femininity (Uchida 1998: 162). As other scholars have pointed out, emblematic representational modes in classical and modern Western films orientalize Asian women as the "docile doll/lotus blossom" or as the "diabolic dragon lady/Suzy Wong" (Chow 1987; Kumagai 1978, Tajima 1989). Asian women are exoticized by Western popular discourse as "submissive," "subservient," "obedient," "passive," and "domestic"; or as "sinister," "treacherous," and "lecherous." (Uchida 1998: 162). In the remake, *The Grudge*, Kayako's living persona is influenced by the binary discourse of Asian women, as the film represents her as silent and passive in the face of her husband's violence, while at the same time depicting her as an importunate stalker who desires the American man's love. These images are similar to those of Megumi in the remake version of *Shutter*. The Asian girl's submissiveness and obedience to men, values she learned from her patriarchal family, first pique the Western man's interest in traditionally subservient Asian women. However, the remake concurrently describes the woman's "authentically Asian femininity" as uncomfortable, annoying, and threatening.

The monstrous feminine images in the original films are based on the male dominant culture's universal phobias about the archaic mother and the pre-Oedipal relationship articulated within particular socio-cultural contexts and feminist/anti-feminist discourse inscribed in the films' modes of representation. The four American films recreate their own versions of the monstrous feminine bodies based on the original ones. First, one of the transformations of the original female ghost characters that commonly take place in the four remake films is apparent in the increased physicality or materiality of the "abject" existences of the monstrous women. For instance, in the Japanese film, *Ju-On*, the avenging mother ghost usually appears in the form of a shadow, except for the two scenes where viewers can see the mother ghost's face with abnormally popped eyes. In the original film, viewers' fears are generated from the uncanny feelings caused by scenes in which victims are observed and chased by the unseen/unknown stalker. The remake, on the other hand, creates horror by emphasizing and expanding the physicality of the monstrous woman's abject body. In the scene where Karen first sees Kayako's ghost in the house, enormously long dark hair hangs down from the ceiling and transforms into a dark face with beastlike white eyes and outstretched hands

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Figure 1. *Shutter* (Masayuki Ochiai, USA 2008).
The ghost of Megumi tries with an extremely long tongue to suffocate the hero.
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reaching for the heroine's body. The monstrous body is remade from the original scene where one can see only the dark silhouette of a female body.

The remake is more interested in frequent visualizations of the mother ghost's abject body, to appeal to the viewers' more physical responses to the haunting imagery (e.g., feelings of disgust and jumping from their seats). This strategy is contrasted with the technique in the original film of saving the clear exposure of the mysterious other for the final climax scenes – a technique often used in the New Asian Female Ghost Films. The remake of *Shutter* also recreates the figure of the female ghost by attaching more physical and material abjection to the original ghost girl's existential abjection (her interstitial status between the living and the dead is already abject). In the original film, the ghost girl's interstitial position is not evident in her bodily images. In fact, the ghost girl's appearance is not entirely distinguishable from when she was still alive. Although the ghost girl is represented through the typical iconography for the Asian female ghosts with long dark hair and a pale face, it is consistent with her lifetime appearance. In contrast, the American remake represents its ghost girl, Megumi, through tactics that increase the remade figure's inhumanity and monstrosity. In one scene, Ben sees Megumi's ghost sitting on a chair in the photo lab. She slowly turns to confront Ben while the camera focuses on her face, showing filthy lumps that move from one side of her cheek to the other. The lumps flock into her eyes, only to spurt out as bloody pus. In another scene in the remake film, whose purpose seems to be to produce repulsive feelings toward the female ghost's abject body, Megumi's ghost climbs up onto the bed, taking off her clothes to expose her burned back with bare bones. The ghost girl approaches Ben and reaches out one of her arms to touch his face. Suddenly, an extremely long tongue thrusts from the monstrous woman's mouth and into Ben's (see Figure 1).

The ways in which the remake films reconstitute the original female ghosts as physically non-human monsters are direct attacks on human bodies, and are influenced by one of the significant features of contemporary American horror films. Brophy defines this feature, which has existed since the late 1970s, as "the strong connection of the mode of showing, as opposed to telling, the destruction of the body" (Brophy 1986: 7). The American horror films that have been popular since the late 1970s and the 1980s, including *The Amityville Horror*, *The Exorcist*, *An American*

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Werewolf in London, *The Thing*, and *Alien*, do not play so much on the broad fear of death, but more precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it (see Brophy 1986: 8). These American films represent human bodies as being taken, destroyed, or interrupted by outside invaders whose disgusting bodies are abnormal and beyond what is possible for human beings.

Although the American remake, *The Grudge*, somewhat faithfully reworks the mother ghost's grotesque body with the crooked and disconnected parts, it more frequently visualizes the monstrous, abject otherness of the body. The American remake recreates the original female ghost as an alien-like existence in several scenes, which is entirely different from the appearance of shadows taking on the form of a female body in the original film. The reworking of the mother ghost as an inhuman being emphasizes the female ghost's existence as an outside attacker and alludes to other monstrous figures in American films, including the engulfing bodies of the mother aliens in the *Alien* series. The *Shutter* remake also portrays the female ghost's monstrosity through inhuman representations. In this regard, the remake versions reflect what Brophy identifies as a particular tendency to show the monstrous characters' bodily transformations in contemporary American horror films. Unlike classical horror films, in which characters' transformations into monstrous figures are presented in time-lapse, the contemporary films center more on the transition period of the physique: a metamorphosis of the body. The remake of *Shutter* exploits this method of emphasizing the transition period of the physical metamorphosis from a woman to a bestial other.

Another American remake, *The Uninvited* (2009), drastically transforms the mother ghost's images from the original Korean film, *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003). In the original, the ghost woman's dreadful images are rooted in anxiety about the female generative power as visualized in several scenes that remind the viewers of women's menstruation and childbirth. On the other hand, the mother ghost in the remake film is "asexualized" as a kind of cinematic zombie.

"Zombie films," as one of the subgenres of cinematic horror, represent the recently dead and reanimated human beings. They no longer have human minds, so they are technically the corporeal remains of humanity after the loss of any unique soul (Boon 2007: 33). The subgenre became popular through George A. Romero's classic trilogy and was recently revived in Hollywood's adaptation of *Resident Evil*, the famous zombie survival-horror role-playing games, which include the blockbuster films *Resident Evil* (2002), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004), and *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2006). Other films, including the UK productions *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle 2002) and *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright 2004), also contributed to the boom in the zombie film genre during the early 2000s. Cinematic zombies are scary because of the ontological anxiety they arouse. They transgress the boundary of the living and the dead, human and animal, becoming the most fully realized articulation of the dynamic interdependency between the human self and the monstrous other. Therefore, zombies remind viewers of the antithesis of human identity, embodying the monstrous, inhuman other, and of human being's own mortality, exhibiting physical corruption (Boon 2007: 35). Cinematic zombies are differentiated from the monstrous feminine, explained by Barbara Creed as the erasure of gender. As Harper points out, in zombie films, female zombies are not only undead but virtually "ungendered," except in the outward form of their clothing (Harper 2003: 5).

In *The Uninvited*, the dead mother returns to the house as a body without a soul, namely, as a zombie. For example, in one scene where Anna stumbles upon her dead mother's ghost for the first time, the mother ghost lies flat on the ground, hiding her face, which imitates the typical action of a female ghost in current Asian female ghost films before the subsequent shocking revelation of the face. Then, the mother ghost rapidly lifts up her face and turns her head toward her daughter in movements reminiscent of the zombie's cadaveric rigidity. In the following scene, the mother

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ghost's huge body rises in front of her daughter, staring at her and making inhuman noises. The remade mother ghost's monstrosity originates from the animated dead body.

The remake films transform female ghosts into others that are more "seeable, understandable and controllable by human gaze and power"; something that can be clearly seen by human eyes is recognizable through human reason and knowledge. In *The Grudge*, the ghost woman's face and body are frequently seen by other victims. In contrast, in the original film, *Ju-On*, victims are haunted by the uncanny feeling that something or someone is observing them, but the owner of the panoptic gaze rarely appears before the film's climax. In his article comparing the American remake of *Ring* (Gore Verbinski 2002) with its Japanese original, *Ringu,* Ozawa argues that while the remake ghost girl Samara's face is frequently shown in the American film, the original character Sadako's face never appears in the original film except for the one scene in the climax. The faceless female ghost in the original film can be regarded as something beyond reason, an inexplicable existence beyond human recognition and knowledge. The ghost with a face in the remake is firmly situated within the bounds of human rationality, so that both filmmakers and audience can control and gain recognition throughout the cinematic experiences of gaze (Ozawa 2006: 3–6).

The imagery of the female ghosts in the American remakes invokes the monstrous others that are more familiar to Western moviegoers: inhuman beasts, aliens, and zombies, whose bodily images are entirely separated from human subjects. This type of reworking in the remakes emphasizes and increases the otherness of the female ghosts, while the images in the original films overlap with those of living women. What is protected or preserved in the American remakes through drawing clear lines between the ghost women and the living ones, the others and us, abnormality and normality, is human subjectivity, identity, and power, which has control over outside attackers.

In relation to this point, in the remake films, the male characters' subjectivities and both their literal and symbolic power are preserved despite attacks from the threatening female ghosts, which is distinctive from the Asian originals. In the remake of *The Eye*, the masculine voices and symbolic world have the power to reject the female supernatural world. The male psychiatrist, Paul, doesn't believe in the world of the spirits which the heroine Sydney comes to see after she receives the corneal transplant donated by the dead girl, who later returns as a ghost, until the climax of the film. This is different from Dr Wah in the original film who easily accepts Mun's unexplainable power to see the unearthly world. Thus, in the narrative of the reworked film, rationality and scientific knowledge are more legitimatized than in the original Asian film where intuitive knowledge and supernatural beliefs hold dominant positions.

In *Shutter,* the male protagonist, Ben, becomes the major target of the ghost girl's revenge as in the original film, but is more physically attacked by the monstrous woman in the remake. On the other hand, unlike the ending of the original film where the hero's body is finally and eternally possessed by the ghost girl, the final moment in the remake film displays the masculine subject's heroism. In the closing scene of the American remake, Ben decides to kill himself after he realizes that he will never be free from the monstrous woman's dominance over his life, body, individuality, and subjectivity. This happens after he discovers that the ghost girl has been riding on his shoulders and will forever burden him in this manner. As Samara's father does in the remade *Ring*, Ben tries to commit suicide by electrocution. This scene, which does not exist in the original film, expresses the man's strong will to regain the individuality of his own body and to save his subjectivity and independence from the invincible ghost woman's possession, even at the cost of his own life. This scene epitomizes the transition of a male subject from the pre-Oedipal stage to the Oedipal stage, the separation from the omnipresent archaic mother. In the original film, the display of the hero Tun's body in the ending scene where his ex-girlfriend, the ghost girl, is riding on his shoulders implies the man's failure to accomplish his own subjectivity, forever deadlocked in the pre-Oedipal

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Figure 2. *Shutter* (Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, Thailand 2004).
In this climactic scene, the hero finally recognizes that his pain is due to the ghost of Natre riding on his shoulder.
© Yodphet Sudsawad.

stage. Contrasted with this, the remade American hero does not allow his living body and subjectivity to be possessed by the malicious female spirit.

In *The Uninvited*, the father's symbolic power still exists within the family, unlike the original film, *A Tale of Two Sisters*. The remade father is not victimized in the narrative, at least in terms of loss of masculine and patriarchal power. In this regard, the representations of the father in the remake are very distinct from those in the original film, in which the father character is passive, weak, impotent, indifferent, and preoccupied with unfathomable things. The father in the remade version, displaying none of the morose behavior exhibited by the original father, is described as an average friendly American dad. The communication between the father and his daughter Anna seems to be clear and open, unlike in the original film. In addition, Anna, unlike Su-mi in *A Tale of Two Sisters*, believes in her father's power to normalize her problematic family, to define and judge truth, and punish wrongdoings. Whereas the father in the original film is represented as symbolically castrated and asexual, in the remake, the father's masculine voice and desire are still powerful.

The recovery of masculine voice, power, subjectivity, and symbolic order in the remakes is related to the excision of themes and imagery related to the monstrosity caused by the mother-daughter relationship. The original Asian films represent the pre-Oedipal relationships between the dead women and their mothers as the very moment in which the monstrous women's returns can be allowed.

The final transformation of the original films is manifested in the reconstitutions of the settings in the original films, the Asian cities. The American remakes, *The Grudge* and *Shutter*, take the Asian city of Tokyo as their central location. While *The Grudge* was shot in Tokyo to faithfully adapt the original film, the remake *Shutter* changes the film's setting from Bangkok, Thailand, in the original film to Tokyo, Japan. In both films, the Asian city plays a significant role in producing the particular horrific atmosphere. Since the remakes contain Western characters who first encounter the Asian city, the horror aroused by the malicious female ghosts is merged with and amplified by the Westerners' feelings of isolation, unfamiliarity, and anxiety about the "strange" city. Quite

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a few scenes in the remakes are allocated to describing the strangers' angst about the unknown city and people, the alien culture, and their incommunicability. The scenes showing the American characters' anxieties contribute to the films' overall terrifying mood, with the overtly scary scenes showing the female ghosts.

In *The Grudge*, the female protagonist Karen's first visit to the haunted house is accompanied by the troubles people typically experience in a foreign land. The American girl gets lost while walking through the crowded Japanese streets. In the subway station, she is confused by the complicated map, and a busy Japanese man cuts in front of her in the ticket line. Karen feels awkward and alienated in the train where every passenger is Japanese, and a Japanese child demonstrates her fear of the white girl by hiding behind her mother's back. The anonymous Japanese people are unfriendly to Karen, and they seem unwilling to be nice to the American girl who has a hard time finding her way around. In the scenes that follow, Karen faces the horrific Japanese ghost woman in an old Japanese house which she finally reaches after experiencing extreme anxiety in this exotic Asian city. The remake seems to emphasize the Western girl's panicked feelings about something unfamiliar or something "Asian."

In the same film, another American woman, Jennifer, even more obviously highlights the Western characters' anxieties about the exoticness of their location. The character of Jennifer is recreated from her original counterpart, Kazumi, the wife in the Tokunaga family whose members become the victims of the avenging mother ghost. In the remake, Jennifer's family moves to Tokyo and accidently comes to live in the haunted house. However, before she is terrified by the mother ghost, she is already cowed by strange circumstances in the foreign city. She shares with her husband her horror in not finding anyone who could speak English when she got lost, and begs him to return to the US. The American woman's unease reaches its height when she sees a Japanese boy (actually the ghost of Toshio) in her house; and finally, the mother ghost's abject face sends her into cardiac arrest. In another scene in the film, Jennifer's sister-in-law, Sarah, takes a taxi home after barely escaping the monstrous stalker in her office. The camera does a close up of the "Welcome to Tokyo" sign in the taxi, and through the car window Sarah sees the after-dark landscape of downtown Tokyo, which looks like it is bathed in sunlight, due to the brilliance of the numerous neon signs. The Western woman has a petrified expression, but what seems to shock her even more is the darkness, the mysterious monstrous other embedded in the glittering night view of the modern city of Tokyo.

Similar to *The Grudge*, *Shutter* displays Westerners' fears of a strange Asian city. Unlike the original film, which is narrated from the male protagonist's point of view, the remake depends upon the heroine Jane's point of view, focusing on the American woman's sense of unfamiliarity and isolation caused by her relocation from New York City to Tokyo. Jane gets lost and confused in the crowded streets and in the subway, like Karen in *The Grudge*. In the street packed with Japanese pedestrians among whom she seems to be the only foreigner, she asks several Japanese people for directions, but nobody can understand her English. The heroine, frustrated and tired, gets into a subway train and suddenly sees through the window an image of a woman with long, dark hair (actually Megumi's ghost). She screams and cries and tries to stop the train, but no passenger will help her. As a result, the Asian city itself becomes as much a monstrosity as the ghost girl.

Along with this, *The Grudge* transforms the Asian original's representations of the local people's anxieties about the return of the pre-modern/traditional into the Western characters' feelings about the Asian city, Tokyo (broadly the country of Japan), as a contradictory combination of tradition and modernity. After the opening sequences briefly display the city's saturation of modernity (through aerial scenes depicting numerous pedestrians, traffic jams, and skyscrapers), the next scene presents the American couple Karen and Doug watching a Buddhist funeral rite. Karen seems to be impressed by the quiet and sincere mood of the Buddhist service, and she lets her

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boyfriend (and Western viewers) know about its meaning, saying, “the incense smoke carries the prayers to the spirits of their ancestors. It’s to help them find peace. They must have lost someone they love.” In this scene, what is presented as exotic to the American characters (and viewers) is the ritual belonging to the pre-modern Japanese culture for connecting the realms of the dead and the living.

Whereas the American girl initially romanticizes Asian pre-modern beliefs, other scenes (after her contact with the grudge of the mother ghost) represent the girl’s fear of the power of the dead, which can disturb the world of the living. For instance, in a rooftop scene, Karen listens to a Japanese detective’s lecture about beliefs surrounding serial homicides; the detective says: “It is said in Japan that when a person dies in extreme sorrow or rage, the emotion remains, becoming a stain upon that place. The memory of what happened repeats itself there. Death becomes part of that place, killing everything it touches. Once you become part of it, it will never let you go.” While the Japanese man is explicating the curse of the haunted house, and also emphasizing that the belief in a grudge haunting a place is authentically Japanese, the camera focuses on Karen’s perplexed and petrified face. In this moment, the Western character (along with the Western audience) is frightened by the monstrosity of the Asian spiritual culture that remains within the modernized Asian nation.

The images used to define the Asian city of Tokyo (or, more broadly, the Asian country of Japan) as the contradictory combination of the modern with the pre-modern in the remakes echo one of the representative Western stereotypes and imagination about the Asian country. According to Raz and Raz, Western images of Japan are divided into three aspects related to different periods, that is, (a) as admired and studied as being the most aesthetic of the modern people; (b) as a “yellow peril,” after Japan’s defeat of Russia and through WWII; and (c) as a paradox encompassing both tradition and modernization (Raz and Raz 1996: 162). In all these images, Littlewood (1996: 7) sees a current tendency to package Japan in terms of paradox and contradiction, and, as Swenson argues, the tendency to focus on the country’s paradoxes and contradictions has long been exhibited by Western scholars, as in Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), Arthur Koestler’s *The Lotus and the Robot* (1960), and Lewis Austin’s *Saints and Samurai* (1975). Swenson suggests that Japan has been imagined as an exotic country based on the Westerners’ ideas about the contradictory coexistence between the modern and the traditional in the same country, although, through a careful reading of the country’s history, the Western imagery of Japan turns out to be superficial (2007: 105–107).

Conclusion

In the American remakes of the monstrous feminine images and the gendered representations in the New Asian Female Ghost Films, the conventions of Hollywood horror films have strong influences on the thematic, visual, and narrative logic, saving the subject (i.e., human reason and male subjectivity) from the existential hybridity of the monstrous other, whereas the lines between the subject and the object, the human beings and the ghost/monsters, were blurred in the original films. The remakes employ various audiovisual techniques and special effects to reconstitute the original female ghosts as much more bestial and inhuman figures who clarify their affiliation with the world of the dead. That is, the monstrous others in the American films should not be confused with the living women, a distinction from female ghosts in the original films whose appearances and bodies display abject femininity but are still continuous with their living personas. In the remakes, the women have died and returned as asexualized monsters, and the cinematic apparatus clearly visualizes metamorphoses from human beings to monsters. Thus, viewers can find little remaining humanity in the monstrous bodies.

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The extreme “othering” of the female ghost characters in the remakes is related to the narrative othering of the Asian city/nation, and Asian culture more generally. With the narrative inclusion of newly created relationships between American/Western heroes and their Asian girlfriends who are later transformed into malicious spirits with intentions to murder their ex-lovers, the heroes’ points of view depend upon a Western gaze that orientalizes Asian women. This perspective is both admiring and fearful of the differences of Asian femininity, defining imagined purity, virginity, loyalty, and commitment as extreme attachment and obsession. At the same time, Western stereotypes about the amalgamated Asian city and Asian culture, the risky coexistence between the modern and the pre-modern, the rational and the supernatural, are also major sources of horror in the remakes. The Westerners in the American remakes got lost and are both horrified and amazed, frustrated by Asian strangeness, uncanny atmospheres, unrecognizability, and incommunicability. The unfathomable must be controlled to recover the normal order, the conventional ending of the Hollywood horror film.

The original New Asian Female Ghost Films enunciate the vulnerability of human reason, especially masculine rationality and knowledge in confronting the monstrous feminine, the all-castrating power of female spirits. These films reflect the countries’ social/cultural anxieties during the times of the Asian crisis, which are connected to the countries’ risky modernity, the return of the repressed pre-modernity, the growing feminist discourse, and the patriarchal backlashes. In the remake films, what replaces the Asian original films’ contextual allegories is the Western faith in human reason, especially masculine knowledge in exercising controlling power over the abject monstrous feminine.

Notes

1. See Kim Haw-young (2006), and the article “Divorce rate climbs among middle-aged Chinese couples,” published in *The Epoch Times* on February 1, 2004 (asianresearch.org/articles/1846.html).
2. According to Tipton (2002: 228), during the early 1990s, “onna no jidai” became a catchphrase connoting freedom, affluence, and independence achieved by women in Japan.

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