INTRODUCTION

Why Do We Need Asian Gothic?

With over 4.75 billion inhabitants, accounting for nearly 60% of the world's population, Asia is the largest and most diverse continent on Earth. This alone should make one hesitate before attempting to reduce its rich cultural production to a potentially detrimental homogenizing label that aims to present an image of a larger "imagined community" at the cost of eradicating difference. It is clear that the term "Asia" is more than a neutral geographic identifier, as it is always embedded in discursive practice that enacts and perpetuates cultural assumptions and imposes ideological judgments about the people who live there, their socio-political conditions, and the creative works they produce and consume. Labels like "Asian Literature" or "Asian Cinema" exist simultaneously to mark the geo-cultural origin of certain works but also to distinguish them from the more "mainstream" productions that reflect the West-centric bias of the global publishing and film distribution industries. Given that "Gothic" is not a category native to Asia but rather a classificatory term coined by Western writers and literary critics, should not the calls for the examination of "Asian Gothic" be discouraged? Or is there any redeeming quality to this kind of positioning of Asian texts?

Without a doubt, Asian Gothic is not a popular label—a quick search for the term will likely take you to a cluster of online shops selling dark fashion accessories and a few academic sites. Within the scholarly community, the appearance of Asian Gothic as a classificatory term is consistent with the global turn in Gothic studies that became noticeable towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, but the category only began to gain critical legitimacy in the late 2010s. In the 1980s and 1990s, Gothic scholarship was mostly focused on western Gothic forms and Asian literature was mostly discussed in imperial and post-colonial Gothic contexts firmly entrenched in the comparative discourse of East versus West. With Gothic seen primarily as a literary genre, the term was rarely applied to cinema (or other visual media), where it was found indistinguishable from Horror. If anything, however, it was the cinema that ultimately contributed to the emergence of the Asian

Gothic label, conceptualized as a critical extension of the popular category of Asian Horror.

When "Asian Horror" made its first appearance in the early 2000s, the phrase was not intended to delineate a coherent genre, but rather to serve as a global branding and marketing strategy for the promotion of disparate horror films made in Asia. Introduced to Western audiences through the festival circuit and "artsy" independent cinemas, Asian Horror films offered a chance to revitalize the genre that in the late 1990s seemed clearly in decline. In 2001, London-based Metro Tartan launched its "Asia Extreme" division based on a concept that "elided the differences between different Asian national cinemas in order to create a single, strong, indelible brand image" (Martin 1). The brand focused mostly on horror and violent action/crime productions from Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong, with occasional titles from Thailand, Singapore and Taiwan. By the time Tartan ended its operation in 2008, the collection included over one hundred films whose themes aligned with western Orientalist fantasies that portrayed the East as mysterious, inscrutable and fascinating, but also barbaric, perverse and depraved. Although the brand undoubtedly succeeded in popularizing Asian "cult" cinema, it also established Asian Horror as a category known mostly for its "moral and visceral extremes" (Choi and Wada-Marciano 1) and "sensibility, typified by . . . over-the-top grotesque[ness] to the point of being surreal" (qtd. in Choi and Wada-Marciano 5).[1] It thrived on simplification, stereotyping and general cultural insensitivity; needless to say, it was problematic.

Not everyone saw the term as a liability, though. For many Asian filmmakers, the Asian Horror brand was not a limitation but an opportunity. The term began to be interpreted not as a signifier of difference (where "Asian" equalled "non-Western") but rather of commonality (stressing regional inter-Asian connections). This debate was also reflected in the works of regional film critics, with some, like Bliss Cua Lim, decrying a "globalist deracination of Asian genre films" (112), and others, like Vivian Lee, pointing out that the label encourages a regionalist approach to filmmaking, funding and distribution while offering an opportunity for smaller and often financially struggling industries to promote local films on a much larger global scale (214). Two decades later, we can now conclude that while the collective Asian Horror category may have started as a gross oversimplification or an attempt to set

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[1] The quote is from Tartan's founder, Hamish McAlpine.

Asian films apart from the "proper" (Western) horror genre, it has ultimately contributed to the recognition of an industry that is no longer positioned as derivative of Hollywood, devoid of originality and style, but has instead become a standard in its own right. Additionally, the widespread popularity of the label has initiated extensive scholarly inquiry into local genre histories and has led to a broader acknowledgement of Asian cinema's impact on the genre.

Introduced as a branding strategy, Asian Horror never fully transcended its commercial origins. It can be argued then that Asian Gothic developed out of the need to create a term more suitable for academic inquiry. If Asian Horror is often meant to imply certain types of East and Southeast Asian film productions, Asian Gothic appears as an attempt to make sense of the vast and diverse body of Asian literature, film, television, games, comics and other forms of cultural production by reading these texts from a Gothic perspective. It has to be stressed here that the Gothic in this context is no longer thought to be a fixed genre and bears only a remote connection to eighteenth-century English literature where it is said to have originated. Critical explorations in Asian Gothic often begin by identifying texts that engage with typical themes and concerns, or employ conventions, devices, or stylistic elements generally associated with the Gothic, but their primary purpose is to examine what can be gained from opening up these texts to a Gothic interpretation. In this sense, while it initially may appear to be a mode, aesthetic, or tone, Asian Gothic may be best understood as a practice or a process. The following journal issue demonstrates this process in action.

This *Wenshan Review* special issue on Asian Gothic contains four essays, collectively addressing how the notion of the Gothic broadens our understanding of the contemporary literary and cultural production in Asia, and vice versa. The issue demonstrates the function of the Gothic as a conceptual bridge over regional and cultural differences. Indeed, the characteristics and traits exemplified in the works examined in the four essays manifest the challenges and impracticalities of attempts to attribute the prototypical features of Gothicism (violence, fear, mystery, the supernatural, to name just a few) exclusively to a specific country or region. The Chinese translation of the term into either "*gede*" (哥德) or "*zhiyi*" (志異) in Taiwan in the past few decades illustrates the tug-of-war between regarding the Gothic as a foreign concept and subsuming it. The former version translates the term directly from the sound to indicate its Western origin. The latter version domesticates the term,

alternatively, by replacing it with a pre-existent Asian genre and absorbing it into the ancient classical tradition of Chinese tales about strange or extraordinary, and often supernatural, events. The former translation, in particular, is more closely aligned with the architectural style in a Chinese context and hence complicates its reception (and perception) in the Chinese-speaking world.

The polarized treatment of the word "the Gothic" in Chinese translation magnifies diverging approaches towards its conceptual and theoretical complexity. Nevertheless, such variance also accentuates the importance of reviewing the heterogeneity and elasticity of the term as a transnational phenomenon. A recent special issue on Global Gothic in the *Chung-Wai Literary Quarterly* in Taiwan, edited by Min-tser Lin, as well as the growing popularity of *yōkai* studies in Taiwan Literature, testify to the diversity and vitality of the term as a transcultural concept. Our special issue continues the scholarly effort to address the dilemma/opportunity by reframing the Gothic in Asia as a meta-language, a poetic lens, and a methodological framework, through which various cultural practices and belief systems (such as folk gastronomy in the Brahmaputra Valley of Northeastern India, and the *nō* and *kabuki* theatrical traditions in Japan), governmental policies (like the section 377 of the Penal Code which criminalized homosexual sex in India), and national traumas (like the 6 October Massacre in 1976 in Bangkok), can be reflected upon, interrogated, and reassessed in their political and historical context, allowing new interpretive possibilities and representational modes to be imagined.

The special issue does not seek to trace the reception history of the term or provide a comparative reading in an East–West context. Rather, the four essays offer rare opportunities to rethink relationality through the notion of the Gothic among societies, cultures and genres, across temporal, spatial, and linguistic confinement. Through the transtemporal, transcultural and transmedial interfusion of aesthetic, and narrative elements shown in the four essays, the category of Asian Gothic proves to be effective in its capacity to enable a broader sense of epistemology. It allows the intimate entanglement between regional, indigenous political and cultural practices and Gothic tropes and imagery of monstrosity, spectrality, and haunting to be resituated and rearticulated in a specific Asian context. Such a categorization encourages more

cross-cultural dialogue and stimulates deeper engagement with indigenous Gothic texts in Asia.

The four essays highlight the subversiveness of Gothicism and its heterogeneous hybridity, as well as its capacity to reveal the profound relevance between the present moment and the historical past, culturally, politically, aesthetically, or otherwise. By revisiting past trauma, individually or collectively, the folklore, comic short story series, novels, plays, and films examined in the four essays disclose multi-layered, subterraneous interconnectedness between the local and the global, the mainstream and the peripheral, the indigenous and the foreign, the generic and the experimental. The locations discussed in the collection of essays range from pre-colonial Assam in Northeast India to Kolkata during the reign of the Mughal Empire in the seventeenth century; from the infected Chinatown in Bangkok during the Cold War era to the mountains in Mutsu province in the eighth century and an isolated cabin in the woods in contemporary Japan. A wide variety of themes and topics is presented here: from the retelling of female sexuality and subjectivity in the Assam region to homosexual rights activism in India; from the political paranoia and social unrest in the 1960s in Thailand to the disjuncture between the younger generation of media consumers and the traditional performing culture in Japan. The special issue also covers various generic hybridity, such as gastronomic horror and folk Gothic in Northeastern India, Bharati fantasy and werewolves in Indian horror, speculative Gothic and contagion narrative in Thai Cold War literature, and *nō* drama and *kabuki* theater in J-Horror.

In "Retelling Folk as Gothic in *Kothanodi* and *Aamis*," Anshuman Bora examines the transmedial adaptation of a number of Assamese folklore stories into two recent films in the 2010s. Bora provides a postcolonial reading of the revitalizing potentiality of folktales set in the precolonial era, and explores new opportunities emerging from the popular media and digital-visual cultures in the twenty-first century. According to Bora, Bhaska Hazarika gothicizes Lakshminath Bezbarua's folk tales in his contemporary cinematic rendering by utilizing narratives of haunting and indigenous folk instruments, in order for more diverse female subjectivities and representations of female desire to be voiced. Bora's reading teases out the intricate connection between the exoticization of Assamese folk culture during the colonial period, and Hazarika's Gothic retelling of these tales as a political strategy against gender

injustice. Bora further draws on George Bataille's philosophical association between eroticism and violence to look at gastronomical horror in the second movie *Aamis*, accentuating its subversive power to challenge the gastro-normativity of the postcolonial metropolis. As Bora points out succinctly, both movies of Hazarika "contest the familiar forms of representation banking on Eurocentric determinism and lay open the alternative possibilities of projecting the folk as a vigorous narrative force" (85). Assamese folk and culinary aesthetics perform the role of postcolonial resistance against cultural hegemony derived from Enlightenment and colonial thinking.

The literary representation of sexuality in the Indian subcontinent is also investigated in "Queer Werewolves in India: Hybridity, Sexuality and Monstrosity in Indra Das's *The Devourers*," in which Deimantas Valančiūnas examines the man-to-animal transformation narrative in fantasy novels and its parallel with the political developments in India about homosexuality. While acknowledging the roots of Indian fantasy literature in Indian mythology, Hindu scriptures and epic literature, Valančiūnas shifts the focus from indigenous folklore to the hybrid Gothic image of a werewolf monster as combining a western import and a homegrown mythological creature, a transcultural figure that also adopts a type of vernacular supernatural shapeshifter in Indian mythology. Valančiūnas notes how the debut novel by Indra Das "employs the imagery of a werewolf monster in order to comment on the current socio-political climate of India and its cultural anxieties concerning sexual and national identities, and to present an alternative version of Indian identity" (49). The werewolf characters in the novel identify themselves with monsters rather than humans, and thus challenge the conventional Western definition of nonhumanity and monstrosity. Valančiūnas argues eloquently for the novel's revision of the popular association between shapeshifters and homosexuals for their animalistic sex drive, and demonstrates Das's reworking of their connection with the colonial past to suggest how "colonialism is not presented in the novel as a persistent traumatic experience, but a process to be transcended" (58). For Valančiūnas, those werewolf characters provide alternative possibilities with their promotion of "fluid and non-binary postcolonial cultural, sexual and national identity" (63).

While the Gothic can serve as a powerful aesthetic and political tool for post-colonial resistance and decolonial, liberating possibilities, it can also mirror international political anxiety and magnify the constructiveness of the

national Other, through which national identity crisis can be addressed. In "Liberal Vaccine for Communist Viral Disease: National Paranoia, Body Politic, and Contagion as Political Allegory in Por Intharapalit's 'Songkram Chuerok' [Germ Warfare] (1963)," Suntisuk Prabunya explores the employment of the affective language of the Gothic showcased in a short story by Por Intharapalit, a prolific Thai writer mostly known for his humorist writing style. Prabunya invites the reader to examine a text not conventionally recognized as Gothic through a Gothic lens. He points out the entangled relationship between body politics and the metaphor of disease in Thai popular literature during the Cold War period. According to Prabunya, the contagion narrative of the time drew an analogy between the infiltration of communism and an infectious virus, and combined it with the deep-seated Sinophobic sentiment in Thai society. The short story thus comments on the justification of the use of violence to eliminate the disease in order to expel national paranoia. As Prabunya remarks poignantly, "Whereas Por Intharapalit wields violence to hilarious effects, it was historically enacted, rigorously and indiscriminately, by the Thai state in a series of political pogroms and suppression, with an eye to preempting any embryonic threats from within and without" (16). For Prabunya, the gothicization of the Communist Other in the short story anticipates the 6 October Massacre in Bangkok more than a decade later in a hauntingly realistic way.

While the previous three essays illustrate the transnational potency of the Gothic imagination in representing regional anxieties imbricated in the global currents of history, the final essay works the other way around and traces the origin of Japanese Gothic horror cinema, critically perceived as part of the global Gothic, back to its classical source in traditional performing arts. In "A Theatre of Ghosts, A Haunted Cinema: The Japanese Gothic as Theatrical Tradition in *Gurozuka*," Kevin Wetmore uses a J-Horror movie *Gurozuka* as an example to argue for the influence of *nō* dramas, *kabuki/bunraku* plays, and the *ukiyo-e* art on the subsequent media. For Wetmore, classical theatrical practice in Japan is inherently Gothic and would have preceded literary works in its ability to reach out to a wider audience. Wetmore considers the film to be a meta-movie, a movie that is named after a *nō* play and moves from "a play to film based on play to film about film based on play," while "recreating the filming of the original film" (38). The film thus goes beyond J-Horror conventions and serves as a cinematic commentary on how contemporary Japan

is haunted by its cultural past, a past that is forgotten by the millennial generation who are avid consumers of Western horror films and yet remain ignorant of Japanese theatrical tradition. Wetmore concludes the essay with an insightful observation: in the movie "the Gothic grotesque is used to deliver a critique of Japanese art and popular culture, alluding to ancient symbolic forms and practices behind them that lurk no matter how much we remain unaware of them" (45). Asian Gothic, in this way, is not necessarily linked with contemporaneous social and political critique of the oppressed, the victimized, or the scapegoated, but it can also point towards lost cultural traditions that demand to be remembered.

As these four articles eloquently demonstrate, a Gothic reading of Asian texts is by no means meant to be intrusive. It in no way intends to impose an unwelcome foreign label on these works, or to imply that some specific authors or their books should be simply rebranded as Gothic. It poses no threat to "official" reception of Asian classics, nor does such a reading aim to undermine local interpretations; instead, it simply provides an alternative way of discussing the text. Asian Gothic refuses to treat Asian cultural production as a copy of Western Gothic classics, even when their authors openly acknowledge such inspirations. It avoids direct comparisons that strengthen the dichotomy of West versus East (or more recently Global North versus South) and prioritises inter-Asian connections. It does not privilege diasporic authors who write in English and often live and work abroad, but rather seeks home-grown approaches to these Gothic themes which are seen as universally human. It recognizes that, as Andrew Hock Soon Ng explains, "[a]fter all, transgressing taboos, complicity with evil, the dread of life, violence, and the return of repressed (just to name some familiar Gothic themes) are not specific to any culture or people, but are experienced by all throughout history" (1).

Invested in the examination of local varieties of the Gothic in Asia, Asian Gothic draws on postcolonial, transcultural and global approaches but refuses to be reduced to any of them. Rejecting the notion that the Gothic needs to be bound within the limits of its original genre, it shows preference for more contemporary investigative strategies of Eco-Gothic, Anthropocene Gothic, Urban Gothic, or Gothic Folklore, and its preoccupation with ghosts opens it up to discussions on spectrality and haunting. In its study of Asian texts, Asian Gothic is wary of methodological approaches that privilege West-centric perspectives and keen to engage with local socio-cultural and philosophical

contexts, contributing to the decolonization of the field. In doing so, it resists acculturation and forces us to re-examine major foundational assumptions of Gothic Studies, its practice, and its terminology that are often taken for granted.

Nearly two decades since its first appearance, Asian Gothic has gained a degree of legitimacy as a method of inquiry and continues to attract a steadily growing number of local and international scholars willing to unpack the label and claim it as their own. In their works, Indian literature no longer appears only in Postcolonial or Imperial Gothic contexts; Tropical Gothic refers to more than the title of a Nick Joaquin novel; and *goshikku* fashion seems oddly at home in Cool Japan. Critical reframings of works of Asian literature, film and popular culture, like the ones offered in this volume, reassure us that Asian Gothic is a process. You can look at this process as a challenge—condensing a vast area with innumerable texts into a single article or even a book seems an impossible task because there are so many things bound to be left unsaid. But it is also an opportunity to highlight previously unseen connections, introduce new texts to a larger audience and perhaps encourage further scholarly inquiry on the subject. Sometimes the best we can do is to take things one book (or film) at a time, and with this in mind, we hope you enjoy this brief Gothic journey through Asia.

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