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## Repetition and Difference in East Asian Gothic Cinema: the *Bunshinsaba* film series

In 2004, the first *Bunshinsaba* film was released. Directed by Ahn Byeong-ki, it was a modest hit at the Korean box-office although it did well enough globally to warrant a dubbed as well as subtitled DVD release. It is the first of twelve films, four of which are directed by Ahn Byeong-ki with the most recent film in the series being the web film *Bunshinsaba vs. Sadako 2*. Like the *Whispering Corridors* films, the series is linked by premise rather than by character with the second film, a Chinese ‘remake’ by Ahn, being a reimagining of his early Korean film, *Nightmare*. In this paper, I explore the *Bunshinsaba* film series as an example of Inter-Asian cinematic dialogues and exchanges. The ease with which *Bunshinsaba* is translated from one culture to another, despite political and economic differences, points to the increasing importance of regionality in East Asian cinematic production in which cultural proximity allows cultural translations as demonstrated by the growing prevalence of co-productions across the region. However, I argue that this repetition is always marked by difference, drawing on Iwabuchi’s concept of ‘iteration’ and the creation of the new as a result of this process (2016). This is demonstrated by the fact that the “Pen Fairy” in the *Bunshinsaba* films undergoes a significant representational shift across her Korean and mainland Chinese incarnations which is mapped out not just textually but metatextually as evidenced by the reviews of the first three films posted on Douban. As such I argue that East Asian Gothic cinema is multiplicitous rather than singular and this needs to be understood in terms of differential experiences of modernity and colonialism which is expressed in continuing tensions in the region.

## Introduction

In 2016 a YouTube channel, *media adaptation*, posted a series of reviews of the *Bunshinsaba* films to celebrate Halloween. The reviewer not only discusses films that they haven't seen subbed versions of, therefore unintentionally misreading some of the key plot elements, but they also talk about the films as "J-horror" and the ghosts in them as onryō. In doing so they follow critics and cultural commentators who argue that J-horror is a meta-genre rather than a distinctive culturally located genre which needs to be understood as emerging from a specific context. In fact *Whispering Corridors* (Park Ki-hyung, 1998) which marks the beginning of the Korean High-School horror sub-genre, which the first *Bunshinsaba* belongs to, emerges simultaneously with Nakata's *Ring* in 1998, and should not be considered a mere 'copy' of the later - which is commonly taken as the J-horror prototype - as the codes and convention of the genre had not yet been established. In addition, the Chinese films simultaneously evoke and deny the existence of ghosts as a direct result of China's strict censorship regulations which see ghosts as communicating the very antithesis of communism and thereby audiences need protecting against. Even the mashups between Japanese ghosts with their own franchise - Sadako (*Ring*, Nakata: 1998) and Kayako (*Ju-on*, Shimizu, 2002) – and *Bunshinsaba*, seek to explain the existence of the ghosts away either within the diegesis itself through recourse to pop psychoanalysis, or during the end credit sequence in order to stress the 'fictionality' of the narrative. The recourse to J-horror as a meta-genre ends up subsuming cultural differences under the umbrella of similitude and as such can be considered as participating in the perpetuation and solidification of orientalist stereotypes as found within the Westernized discourse of Asia and Asianness. As Laforteza writes: "A homogenized view of "Asianness" is produced wherein one "Asian" can stand in for another "Asian" and therefore speak about all "Asians"" (Laforteza,

2009, p. 5). This reductive reasoning can also be found in the discourse of “Asian Values” promoted by politicians in “Asia” to explain the economic growth in East and South East Asia as being a result of innate traditional values. This reverse or self-orientalism stresses Confucian commonalities across the region. In *The Asian Cinema Experience, Style, Spaces, Theory*, Yeo argues for style as a connective feature rather than genre, in relation to Asian horror cinema. He writes: “the ghost story style may be said to impart a sense of National style in Asian horror cinema while acting at the same time as its most generic style” (2013, p. 95). Despite foregrounding stylistic connections, Yeo is relying on the discourse of Asian Values when he contends that the “sociality of spirits” unifies Asian ghost stories underpinned by gender relations. Yet as we will see, such a framework has limited applicability when applied to the *Bunshinsaba* series as the Chinese films have very little in common with their Korean counterpart, even the ones shot by the same director. This is partly because censorship regulations come into play in determining the narrative of the Chinese films to order to neutralise the threat signified by the [female] ghost. Pang points out that “an anti-superstition film policy is idiosyncratically Chinese, in terms of its breadth, variation and relevance” (2011, p. 461). As a nation state whose very construction is based upon a denial/disavowal of ghosts and associated superstitions, the possibility of allegorical readings of such ghosts could provide a possible mechanism of undermining the tenants of state socialism” (Pang 2011, p. 461).

In 2015, Zhou Yongkang, former security chief, was jailed for life. Among other things, Zhou was accused of trading state secrets to Cao Yongzheng, a mystic specializing in fortune telling, qigong and healing, who was subsequently convicted of corruption in 2016 and sentenced to 7 years imprisonment. This enforced “the disciplinary authority of the Xiamen Communist Party”

which regulates against superstitious and supernatural beliefs (Moriarty, 2019) especially amongst its members. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1975, there was a marked revival in “feudal superstition” demonstrated through “a rush to rebuild temples and ancestral halls, the resurgence of spirit mediumship and exorcism, renewed interest in divination and geomancy, the reemergence of heterodox religious cults notably Falungong, and the appearance of “jade emperors descended from heaven.”” (Smith, 2006, 405). This resurrection of feudal superstition attests to the fact that beliefs in non-scientific ways of understanding the world had not been eradicated despite the Maoist state’s “intensive propaganda campaigns and bouts of repression” (Smith, 2006, 405). President Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2012, has also campaigned against such superstitions, warning party members in 2019 to stick to the scientific principles of Marxism and not believe in “ghosts and spirits”. This is laid out in the party statement which reads “Resolutely prevent not believing in Marx and Lenin and believing in ghosts and spirits, not believing in the truth and believing in money .... Resolutely oppose all forms of mistaken thought that distorts, misrepresents or negates Marxism” (Reuters, 2019). In his analysis of “superstitious rumours” in China, between 1961 and 1965, Smith argues that they articulated a radical cosmology at odds with state doctrine and can be understood as popular resistance, albeit limited, to the party-state (Smith, 2006, 406). As such it is little surprise that the feudal beliefs that underlie such rumours are being actively legislated against under the current regime led by President Xi Jinping who in 2018 instigated a constitutional change in order to be able to remain in power beyond the two term limit that had been in place since the 1990s. This means in effect that President Xi Jinping can remain in power as long as he wishes to and evaluated his status to the equivalent of Chairman Mao (BBC News, 2018). In Peng’s words: “cultural control is often

in direct conflict with the emancipation that cultural expression might engender, and people's fondness for ghosts indirectly jeopardizes political stability" (Peng, 2011, 475).

It is difficult to say exactly how many films the *Bunshinsaba* series consists of, as in addition to the "official films", there are a number of "unofficial films". The first consists of four films - the 2004 "original" and the subsequent three Chinese films directed by Ahn. The second consists of almost a dozen films and includes *Bloody House* (笔仙诡影, Gao Yuxin and Liu Feng, 2016), *Bunshinsaba vs Kayako* (笔仙咒怨, Deng Andong, 2017) and the *Bunshinsaba vs Sadako* films (River Huang, 2016 - ). While none of these aforementioned unofficial films has been accused of plagiarism, the same cannot be said of the two *The Death is Here* films: *The Death is Here* (笔仙惊魂, 2013) and *The Death is Here III* (笔仙惊魂 3, 2014), both directed by Guan Er. The later film was released on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2014 just three months before *Bunshinsaba 3*, prompting a law suit which the producers of *The Death is Here* films lost, forcing them to apologise as well as pay 500,000 yuan (approximately £80,000) for misrepresentation, Huai Bao writes that:

While both the plaintiff and the defendants have produced horror films featuring the pen spirit, the former sued the latter for engaging in an unfair competition, in which the latter used the Chinese word, 笔仙 (bixian, pen spirit), in its Chinese language title for the series titled Death Is Here (《笔仙惊魂》), following the success of the plaintiff's South Korean film (2004), which also used the same words in the Chinese language title of its pen spirit horror franchise, *Bunshinsaba* (분신사마). (Huai Bao, 2016, p. 114)

Then there is *Mid July Days 2* (七月半 2 : 前世今生, Li Hong Jian, 2016) which has the alternative title of *Bunshinsaba: Past and Present*. It comes as no surprise that the director for this was also the producer for *The Death is Here* films. Despite having been sued for misrepresentation, *Death is Here III* still made a substantial profit, indicating a market for films that take as their subject *Bunshinsaba* or in some way target the film's core audience. There is one notable Chinese/Korean co-production, *When Pen Ghost Meets Plate Ghost* (笔仙撞碟仙, Mo Sa-Li, 2016) which has a Korean director, Sal Li-Mo and riffs on a number of Japanese, Korean and Chinese ghost stories and urban legends. However despite having ghost in the title, the film denies the ontological reality of ghosts through situating their appearance as the sign of a deep rooted childhood trauma. What is important to note is that the type of series that we see with successful films in the West, especially in relation to horror cinema, are typically not found in Korean cinema. It is thus very unusual to find a sequel to a film, irrespective of how well they did at the box-office. This is also true of Korean dramas which generally are limited to 16 episodes and one season. Although we are seeing this change perhaps due to the global success of Korean cinema and drama, this was not the case in 2004 when Ahn's original *Bunshinsaba* was released. For example *The Whispering Corridors* High School horror series (1998-2009), consists of five films which are related only in terms of sharing a similar setting and dealing with the appearance of a ghost who unsettles relationships between a group of teenage girls. Even the Chinese films are not sequels but rather are films with a common theme or share "ghosts".

This article explores the *Bunshinsaba* film series as an example of Inter-Asian cinematic dialogues and exchanges utilising Iwabuchi's definition of "iteration" as "repetition with a difference" (2016, p. 28). The ease with which *Bunshinsaba* is translated from one culture to

another, despite political and economic differences, points to the increasing importance of regionality in East Asian cinematic production and the importance of “cultural resonance”. Cultural proximity allows translation of media texts across national borders as demonstrated by the growing prevalence of co-productions in the region. However this repetition is always marked by difference and is evidenced both textually and metatextually in responses to the films. Local reviews of the Korean film and the first two Chinese films posted on China’s popular film and book review site, Douban, which has over 600,000 forums and 160 million users, highlight the translocal features of the films while stressing their domesticity. In these terms the East Asian Ghost film which is popularly understood as modelled on J-Horror is an inadequate and orientalist framework through which to understand both the complexity of the region and of its popular culture. As such East Asian Gothic cinema is multiplicitous rather than singular and needs to be understood in terms of differential experiences of modernity and colonialism which is expressed in continuing tensions in the region.

### **The birth of Bunshinsaba**

*Bunshinsaba* is Ahn’s third film. By this time, Ahn had established a reputation as a proficient and inventive director of the horror film with *Nightmare* (가위, 2000) and *Phone* (폰, 2002). The first is a tale of ghostly revenge from beyond the grave while the second is a techno-nightmare where connectivity is cursed. Both films did well at the local box-office. Indeed Imprint Entertainment bought the rights to *Phone* for a US remake although it didn’t get beyond the planning stages. In ‘Gothic Bodies and the Return of the Repressed: The Korean Horror Films of Ahn Byeong-ki’, Conrich argues that Ahn’s Korean films bear the influence of both Hollywood Horror and J-Horror. He contends that the ghost of the wronged woman in Ahn’s Korean films

bears similarities to that of Sadako in Nakata's *Ring* and Kayako in Shimuzu's *Ju-on: The Grudge*. In fact, Conrich goes as far to say that: "Arguably, more than any other director associated with Korean horror cinema, Ahn has shown the influence of J-Horror within his work, and as one viewer has stated 'Ahn may be wearing borrowed clothes, but he wears them well'." (Conrich, 2010, p. 108)

While there are without doubt similarities, it is a stretch to suggest that Ahn is merely a metteur-en-scene whose work bears little originality or is derivative of J-horror, especially given the fact that the first film in the *Whispering Corridors* series is released in the same year as *Ring*. In addition, the female ghost can be found across Asia and it is difficult if not impossible to determine her point of origin. It is not surprising therefore that there are obvious similarities between the figure of the vengeful ghost across Asian cinema. However there are marked differences in some South Asian cinematic imaginings, for example in Indian and Indonesian films the female ghost's monstrosity makes her less of a tragic figure and more a horrific one in line Creed's delimitation of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1992). In his analysis of Ahn as auteur across his Korean films, Martin points out that a key feature of Korean cinema is the constant foregrounding of the present's imbrication to the past: "It has emerged as a consistent trope of the Korean horror film that the violent actions of the killer, either real or supernatural, are indelibly tied to past events, and Ahn's films are emphatic examples of this" (2013, p.149). However this imbrication between past and present is, of course, a general definition of the gothic as a genre, as well as the structuring factor of the slasher film. Instead it is the "female ghost" and her proximity to madness that constitutes the main thematic trajectory of Ahn's *Bunshinsaba* series of films. However while the Korean "original" can be located within the

melodramatic mode which is linked to historical and colonial trauma (Iwabuchi, 2016, p. 29) giving birth to the figure of the vengeful ghost, the Chinese films emphasize identity as interiority separate to history by defining appropriate femininity in relation to both the girl and the mother in terms of performing their roles in the service of the nation-state.

In *Bunshinsaba*, the female ghost is Kim In-sook, who was burnt alive with her mother, Chun-hee, having been bullied as a result of her [visible] difference (blindness) from her classmates 30 years before the events in the film. She returns to the present when another bullied schoolgirl, Yoo-jin, and two friends, use an Ouija board to ask for help from the dead. As they clasp their hands around the pen, Yoo-jin says the name of “Bunshinsaba” calling on evil spirits to curse the class bullies. Here “Bunshinsaba” is not the name of a spirit that is being called on but rather it is chant or curse used to evoke the spirits whilst using the spirit writing board. Derek Elly explains ““Bunshinsaba” is an invented word, like the English “abracadabra” (2016 [2012]. Yoo-jin fails to keep her eyes closed during the ritual which results in her becoming possessed by In-sook, the spirit entering her body through her eyes as conduit to the soul. As in any ghostly revenge drama, the newly revived spirit kills not only those in the present but also turns her vengeance onto those who were responsible for her death in the past. And it is not only In-sook who returns, but her mother, Chun-hee, also returns by possessing the newly arrived art teacher, Lee Eun-jun, at the school. While Eun-jun attended school with In-sook, she has forgotten about the trauma of the past. In-sook concentrates on punishing bullying school girls in the present, while Chun-hee kills those that were responsible for her and her daughter’s death in the past, including the school principal. Martin points out that:

Unusually for a high-school horror, *Bunshinsaba*'s focus is on family rather than peer bonding. Yujin's two friends, introduced in the opening scene, are barely glimpsed again. Rather, the film emphasises Yujin's utter isolation, and through the revelations about the nature of the ghosts, ultimately focuses on familial bonds and the mother / daughter dynamic (2013, p. 151).

Despite the English titles of the film, *Witch Board / Ouija Board*, the actual game plays a very small part in the film and functions merely as a plot device to invoke the ghost of the past to wreck vengeance in the present. However in the Chinese remakes, both official and unofficial, "Bunshinsaba" gradually becomes the embodiment of a vengeful ghost from the past gaining ontological reality in the process. In addition, the visual imagery, in particular costume and props, of Bunshinsaba marks her out as different from the archetypal East Asian vengeful ghost. As we shall see instead of being dressed in funereal white like the homegrown ghost, Bunshinsaba takes on the signifiers of the Western femme fatale, with her form fitting scarlet dress, blood red lips and nails, and matching stilettos. It must also be pointed out that red is symbolic of communism and thus the reconfiguration of the pen fairy can be said to draw on local culture while "absorbing American cultural influences" (Iwabuchi, 2016, p. 28).

The ending of the 2004 film leaves the way open for a sequel, however this doesn't happen. In this scene, we see Eun-ju, walking along the beach with her young daughter, celebrating their mother daughter bond. In the final shot, the daughter's gaze at the camera signifies that In-sook's spirit is still present and has merely shifted bodies. As already suggested the generic features and conventions of Korean cinema are anathematic to the concept of the sequel, especially in the

early 2000s when the film was made. In fact, not only does Ahn not make a sequel to the film but despite its success and the interest from the US in remaking *Phone*, he doesn't direct another Korean film. Instead, he eventually moves to China to direct a remake and two sequels, in the process setting up his own studio there.

### **From Korea to China – Bunshinsaba becomes BiXian**

In his discussion of Chinese transnational cinema and the 'collaborative tilt' towards South Korea, Yecies points to the formation of *guanxi*, or personal and industrial networks, as marking the beginning of collaboration between the two countries. This can be traced back to the early 1990s which saw an influx of Korean students coming to China to learn the craft of film directing at the Beijing Film Academy (BFA) (Yecies, 2016, p.226-227). He writes: "The depth of *guanxi* that Korean filmmakers had nurtured in China in the early-to-mid-1990s led to the flowering of relationships with both the state-controlled and budding commercial sectors of the Chinese film industry" (Yecies, 2016, p. 228).

In addition to this is the well documented penetration of China by Korean popular culture, particularly kdrama, in the late 1990s during the first wave of Hallyu. Indeed Iwabuchi reads the Korean Wave as an iteration of East Asian Popular Culture which stresses its historicity and multiplicity as an articulation of repetition with a difference (2016, p. 28). In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization which brought about a shift in perception of Chinese media output from merely being a mechanism for state propaganda to "a platform for showcasing popular commercial entertainment." Further Korean directors and other media industry players were actively sought after to produce indigenous TV and film in order to get around the restrictions

put in place by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) (国家新闻出版广电总局) (Soh and Yecies, 2017, p. 75-76). Ahn Byeong-ki's career as a director seem to have ground to a halt in South Korea after *APT* in 2006 even though he was the co-producer for two films directed by Kang Hyung-Chul: *Scandal Makers* (과속스캔들, 2008) and *Sunny* (써니, 2011) which were well received by critics and audiences. As a result, a move to mainland China allowed him to reboot not only *Bunshinsaba* but also his career. Indeed the success of the reboot, led to Ahn becoming the "first South Korean director to set up his own workshop (ByungKi An China Studio 安兵基導演工作室) on the Mainland" (Elly, 2016).

Before analysing the films, it is important to discuss linguistic shifts as the relationship between the official and unofficial *Bunshinsaba* films is constructed not just through content but also through the films' titles. Although they all keep "Bunshinsaba" in their English title, the Chinese title actually translates as BiXian (笔仙) and not Bunshinsaba. Indeed in the films when the spirit writing takes place, "Bunshinsaba" is used for the English subtitles while BiXian is the name that is actually called and is written in the Chinese subtitles. BiXian means Pen Ghost, Pen Fairy or Spirit of Pen. BiXian is a variant of Die Xian (碟仙), or Spirit of Plate, a divination game which has its roots in Daoism and was a way of formally inviting a God to send or answer messages (MoonQueen, 2018). In their discussion of the relationship between nationalism and religion in contemporary China, Hsieh points out that divination games were popularised in the first half of the twentieth century during which time Daoism was transformed through its contact with global culture and modernity. He writes: "Daoist organizations and activities, centered on the 'spirit-

writing' (fuji 扶乩 or fuluan 扶鸞) ceremonies, took place mostly in Daoist altars and halls” (2017, p. 260). The use of spirit-writing in *Bunshinsaba* in a form which would have been recognisable to Chinese audiences demonstrates that the original was viewed as a regional rather than a local text as this blogger’s comments demonstrate:

[T]his Pen Fairy Movie is very Chinese to me. There too many similarities that it shares with the Chinese with regards of what Pen Fairy is all about, how to play it, the summoning, and the consequences of this game. To me, I really do not see any difference at all with the Chinese version. They are both about the same. (Chan ShiJie, 2011)

At the same time, the Chinese version of *Bunshinsaba* is not what we would understand by a remake or even a reboot in that it doesn’t merely localise the story but rather tells a totally different story. We are no longer dealing with the horror that is High School but instead are faced with the horror that comes from the fractured family and domestic abuse. A famous horror novelist, Xiao Ai (Mei Ting), is struggling with the rejection of her latest book and finds herself with writer’s block. She moves into a large house in the countryside with her young son, Xiaoxin, who suffers from asthma. The move is not just to allow Xiao Ai to write in peace but is also necessitated by the fact that her ex-husband has recently been released from jail after having been imprisoned for domestic violence. However the house holds dark gothic secrets which turn out to be more of a threat to the family than her abusive ex. These secrets gradually reveal themselves when Xiao Ai discovers photographs of a mother and daughter with their faces cut out and her new novel which relates their story seemingly writes itself. Meanwhile Xiaoxin finds an old doll which belonged to the daughter which seems to be a conduit from the world of the

dead to that of the living. Xiao Ai becomes afraid that the past is going to repeat itself and that her son's life is under threat. Of course as is typical in mainland Chinese productions, the ghost turns out to be the result of psychological trauma suffered by the protagonist which can only be healed through resolution and acceptance of past transgressions.

It is clear that the link between the first Chinese *Bunshinsaba* and the Korean one is tenuous. There is no spirit writing board or calling for the spirits of the dead, just as there are no ghosts. Instead the young girl from the past and in the fictionalized book is called Bunshinsaba. In the embedded story, the girl turns other children into dolls to assuage her loneliness before doing the same to her mother so that they can be together forever. The trailer which shows the spirit game where Bunshinsaba is being invoked can be interpreted as metaphorical, alluding to the concept of a "ghost writer" which is literalised here. While the girl ghost is an example of an shared East Asian imaginary, despite the necessary denial of her ghostly status in Ahn's first Chinese take on her story, there is also a direct link to other East Asian, and particularly, Japanese horror films in particular, Miike's J-horror, *One Missed Call* (着信アリ, 2003) which is "also" about child abuse and neglect and ended up being part of a trilogy of films in which the story of the curse is told across Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. At the start of *Bunshinsaba* we see a woman hanging from a red cord, her lifeless body swinging in the wind, as her daughter who is dressed in white watches helplessly. In the denouement, we see the girl spitting out an orange gobstopper. This borrows from *One Missed Call* where the victims of the "cursed" cellphone are found with red gobstoppers in their mouths, which the original 'victim', Mimiko Mizunuma, was fed by her older sister to render her silent about the abuse she inflicted on her. Further Mimiko also suffers from asthma, and indeed dies after an asthma attack. Xiaoxin's frequent asthma

attacks which are brought on through abuse seems to directly link Ahn's reboot of *Bunshinsaba* to *One Missed Call*. There are other intertextual references to Japanese horror: the photographs of, what we discover are, Xiao Ai and her mother, with cut out faces are visual references to Shimuzu's *Ju-on* (呪怨, 2000-2006) films while the reflection of the girl in one of the mirrored panel doors in the final scene of *Bunshinsaba* is reminiscent of Nakata's *Ring* (リング). Having said this, in the only English interview with the director, Ahn contends that the positive reaction to the original film in Chinese markets was its appeal to local sentiments through the foregrounding of the mother/daughter bond rather than its similarity of J-horror:

“It was a mother-daughter story and that was what touched the Chinese audiences despite its uniqueness in the genre. Unlike the Korean society, China still has a strong, tight bond among family members. Think about the Chinese New Year. They travel to their hometown as a large family unit. The audiences were favorable toward the film because it is about a family.” (Ahn, 2012)

He goes on to talk about wanting to make more realistic horror films which touch on social issues. This might explain why in this version of *Bunshinsaba* the focus is on the mother's trauma which leads to the repetition of abuse in the present rather than the vengeful ghost with folkloric origins. The pop psychology explanation for all the ghostly events we see in the film is necessary in order to conform to Chinese cinema censorship laws. It is clear that *Bunshinsaba* (2012) is not a remake, sequel or prequel. Even as an adaptation, it falls short in that it bears so little resemblance to the first that it would be a stretch to consider it in terms of fidelity to the source text or capturing the original's spirit (Kline, 1996).

In the 2013 sequel, Ahn doesn't carry the story forward from the first, but rather digs deep into his filmography and remakes his 2000 Korean film, *Nightmare* (가위) instead. This can be seen as a return to the popular Korean School Horror genre. As such, it bears more similarities to the unofficial films than the official one as they are also set in High School / University and focus in on relationships between a small group of students. Arguably *Bunshinsaba 2* is the most 'Korean' of Ahn's Chinese trilogy in that it locates the point of horror within fractured relationships of a group of students while situating the trigger event in the present which relates to past trauma as a result of competition between teenage girls for patriarchal validation through normative heterosexuality. Here Hongrui, falls in love with Xiao Ai, who is close friends with Nana, who is herself in love with Hongrui. This sets in effect a series of events that will directly lead to Xiao Ai's death and what seems to be her ghostly revenge in the present. This "ghost" from the past actually turns out to be one of the other members of the group desperate to find a USB which has footage of Xiao Ai's 'suicide' on it as it shows that she was in fact murdered. With its fast paced chase sequences and multiple suspects, *Bunshinsaba 2* is much closer to the Western slasher genre than the East Asian Ghost film. However unlike Ahn's first film in the trilogy, this does contain a Bunshinsaba invoking scene. The pen spirit ceremony is instigated by Nana under the pretence of discovering why the group seems to be cursed with bad luck. Dressed in red, a colour which will become inseparable from more recent iterations of Bunshinsaba, Nana tells the group about Xiao Ai's traumatic childhood and unmask her as Yuki, an orphan who was ostracized as a child by the small community in which she lived. The flashback scenes that accompany this revelation, start with a shamanistic ritual during which the villagers are calling Yuki a monster and say that it was her fault that her mother died in childbirth. Not only is the girl

given a Japanese name but her white costume and hood seem to be direct visual reference to the figure in the cursed video who is pointing to the left in Nakata's *Ring*. While this overt intertextual reference to J-horror would seem to accord with claims that Japanese horror cinema is the origin point for the East Asian ghost film, the renaming of Xiao Ai as Yuki within the diegesis can be interpreted as signifying the continuance of Sino-Japanese tensions on two levels: firstly as a metonymic reference to the Japanese occupation of Korea during which the Korean language was banned and citizen forced to take Japanese names; secondly as a reminder of Japan's aggression towards China as exemplified by the atrocities of the Nanking Massacre and the Japanese government's subsequent detail of responsibility for this. Bearing the weight of history, Yuki turns out to be neither cursed nor possessed by a ghost but rather becomes the embodiment of bad luck both in the past and the present. This flashback scene is also reminiscent of Ahn's *APT* (2006) which is an extended meditation on the nature of the shut-out or *wangdda*. Martin defines the *wangdda* as "the member of the group who (for whatever perceived offence) does not belong, and is typically subject to intense physiological and / or physical bullying (2013, p. 168), the character being the defining feature of the Korean High School Horror film but is also a character that we find in Japanese cinema drawn from a real world social crisis. The term "hikikomori" (shut in / loner) was introduced into the Japanese vocabulary in 1998 by psychiatrist Tamaki Saito and although it was first seen as an exclusively Japanese problem, it is now a medical term used throughout the world as a diagnosis of a particular type of isolated and alienated individual. However when it was first identified as a psychiatric condition, it was thought to be mainly associated with high tech East Asian societies and recent statistics show equal prevalence across Japan and South Korea: "the epidemiological estimates of hikikomori in South Korea are approximately the same population percentage as in Japan (2% or about

100,000 people)” (Krieg, 2016). As an example of Inter-Asian referencing, the figure of the loner (wanggda / hikikomori) in East Asian popular culture is “translocally relevant” emphasising the regional cross-border mobility of cultural representations while foregrounding the fact that social isolation is a differential experience across cultures.

*Bunshinsaba 2* resolves in typical fashion with the revelation that the murders were human and dictated by greed rather than otherworldly and dictated to by vengeance. However as in Ahn’s previous films, the end scene operates in an uncanny manner and inserts hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations for the film’s events. The confrontation between Song Qian and Nana, the only two survivors from the group seems to suggest that the ghost of Xiao Ai has returned to be with Song Qian. We see in a full length mirror Xiao Ai behind Nana holding her wrist as she slashes her throat. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Song Qian’s face as a slow smile appears. The credit sequence then shows all the students talking to camera before the events that lead to Xiao Qi’s murder returning us to a superstition and supernatural free world.

The final film in Ahn’s trilogy returns to the bond between the mother-child that provided the narrative motivation in the first film. However instead of the mother-son dyad, the film focusses in on the relationship between mother and daughter. The mother is Xu Lian who is a long term patient in a mental hospital and the daughter, Xiao Ai, who is being looked after by her grandparents in her mother’s absence. Xu Lian escapes from the hospital, desperate to be reunited with her daughter, but her parents tell her that she doesn’t have a daughter and her insistence that she does, is a symptom of her mental illness. However Xu Lian sees them putting a child in the back seat of their car seemingly confirming that they are lying to her. Before Xu

Lian can be found and returned to the hospital, her parents die in a car crash. As they had arranged for her involuntary sectioning, Xu Lian is now free and her daughter is returned to her. The mother and daughter go to live in the family house which is located in the countryside to the northwest of Shanghai. This house is very similar to the one from the first *Bunshinsaba* in the trilogy. It is a gothic ancestral home full of dark secrets and hidden trauma. There are only a few people living near to the house including a brain damaged young man and his devoted mother, a young teenage girl, Jiao Yuanyuan, and Xu Kuizhe, a painter and art teacher at the local college. Xu Lian begins to see and hear things and becomes convinced the house is haunted. There is a portrait of a young girl who is badly scarred hanging at the top of the stairs and Xu Lian becomes convinced that it is her spirit that is haunting the house. As she starts to spiral out of control, her relationship with her daughter begins to unravel and past and present coalesce. Unlike Ahn's earlier films, there is no clear distinction between past and present events until the final act, which is reminiscent of the fourth film in the *Whispering Corridor* series, *Voice* (여고괴담 4: 목소리, 2005) except in that the shift between temporalities is more clearly signalled. There are also numerous references to Japanese and Western horror films. For example, when Xu Lian accidentally sees Xu Kuizhe brutally murder his wife, she is hiding behind a white curtain which frames her face in a visually similar way to how Tilde's face is framed through her T-shirt by the slash of a razor blade in Argento's *Tenebrae* (Italy, 1982). Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) is explicitly referenced in the scene in which Xiao Ai rides a scooter in the house. In addition, a scene where she is shown spinning in the air in her bedroom could be a visual reference to *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and/or numerous other Western possession films. At the same time, the emphasis on an inability to remember as a result of trauma is a key trope in Korean cinema and indeed arguably, one of the defining features of the Korean horror film. In her

discussion of liminal space and incognizant ghosts in Korean drama, Lee argues that amnesia is “metonymic of suppressed trauma at a national as well as a personal level (Lee, 2015, p. 218).

While Ahn’s Chinese *Bunshinsaba* trilogy can be considered to be made for the regional and global as well as the local market, the unofficial films are directed with the Chinese box-office in mind and in order to take advantage of the success of the official films as discussed earlier, or in the case of the *Bunshinsaba vs Sadako* series to be streamed. *The Death is Here* and *The Death is Here III* are closer to *Bunshinsaba 2* in that they centre on University students and play out more like the Western slasher film than the East Asian Ghost film. What is interesting is how *Bunshinsaba* gains ontological materiality in these films which begins her codification into the Western femme fatale through appearance - red dress and stiletto heels with scarlet lips and nails – and dangerous demeanor. In both films, a spirit writing game takes place after which *Bunshinsaba* appears and people begin to die. However she is revealed not to be metaphysical but rather a physical manifestation and performance put on to allow a killer to get away with murder. In *Mid July Days 2* (七月半 2 : 前世今生 Hong Jian, 2016), *Bunshinsaba* is an urban legend that a group of University students seek to debunk for their video channel. Indeed they enact out the spirit summoning ceremony at the beginning of the film which functions to stress its performative status. The web series, *Bunshinsaba vs Sadako* (2016 - ) reconfigures the former in nationalistic terms pitting her against the monstrosity of *Sadako*, who of course comes from Japan. With long red talons matching her dress, stilettos and lipstick, *Bunshinsaba* is a rescuer coming to help those who are haunted/hunted by *Sadako*. The colour contrast between the two female spirits also reinforces national boundaries, red for China and white for Japan. Here *Bunshinsaba* is transformed into an agent of propaganda fighting those that seek to harm Chinese

citizens. However as in the other films discussed, neither spirits are real. Instead they are revealed to be ghosts from the unconscious and symptoms of mental illness that needs to be medicalized away. To reinforce their functionality, the end sequences show the actors and actresses behind the scenes. Kayako is also brought into the battle of nations in *Bunshinsaba* (笔仙咒怨, 2017). This reimagining of the Bunshinsaba mythology is described on posters as 笔仙 VS 伽椰子 or *BiXian/Bunshinsaba vs Kayako* or in other words “Chinese ghost vs Japanese ghost” (Elley, 2018). Like the *Death is Here* films, the main action of the film is set in a rural village. In this case, the village is under threat by developers. Bunshinsaba is called on in order to frighten the developers away. Here as in the *Bunshinsaba vs Sadako* series, Bunshinsaba embodies the spirit of Chinese communism and its nationalist ideology. Accordingly she frightens the dastardly capitalist developers away as a dutiful daughter of the regime. Kayako doesn’t appear until the final act and only after Bunshinsaba has done her duty. In opposition to Bunshinsaba, Kayako is depicted as monstrous, spider woman who needs to be defeated as she is a threat to the national order. Elley points out: [T]he spider-like Kayako 伽椰子, [is] gleefully appropriated from the Japanese movie series Ju-on 咒怨 (aka The Grudge, 2000- ). In fact, the film’s Chinese title can be read as either “Bixian’s Grudge” or just “Bixian The Grudge”, neatly hooking a ride on both franchises. (2018).

*When Pen Ghost meets Plate Ghost* (笔仙撞碟仙, Mo SaLi, 2016) brings together four ghost tales from Korea and China and foregrounds the shared mythology brought about by cultural proximity. With a Korean director at the helm, this coproduction foregrounds similarity over difference. However it retains its Chineseness through the revelation that everything is a result of a mental disorder. In addition this mental illness is brought on after an agreement is made to sell

the village school to developers and will only go away when the agreement is rescinded. This confirmation of state communist ideology which as we have seen, is closely linked to censorship policies, stresses the local nature of the film despite the fact that it presents a shared mythology between China and Korea.

### **Translocality, cultural resonance and difference**

What is important here is not just how the films textually utilise Inter-Asian referencing in order to communicate translocally but also how the reception of the films evidences the fact that iteration, or repetition with difference, functions to deessentialize the notion of region as a unified and singular concept and with it the concept of “Asianness”. Reviews of three of the *Bunshinsaba* films (the “original” and the first two Chinese films), on Douban, stress the operation of cultural resonance while situating the Chinese films domestically. In relation to the Korean original, the mother-child relationship seems to be particularly resonant. 花白胡子 writes: “The mother’s protection of the child throughout the film, and at the end of the film, the beautiful mother and the happy child tell us that even if the mother takes care of the child, more time for the child to grow up is in school, and the environment there is particularly important” (5<sup>th</sup> October 2006). A user who goes by “Hello” states that: “that pure-wisdom mother has the strength to calm the men in the village” (10<sup>th</sup> January 2009) in what is a largely negative review of the film. 唐玉小业 argues that “The so-called horror movie ghost film also has a meaning. Not so much a pen fairy, but rather a mother revenge”. While most reviewers recognise that the film is a High School Horror film, most are less concerned with the structure of the film and its Koreanness than with how the mother selflessly sacrifices herself for the daughter. Reviews of the 2012 remake also foreground the representation of the mother figure and the relationship

between her and her child. As 胖兔子 succinctly puts it: “This story is about trying to understand and consider mom” (18<sup>th</sup> December 2012). 闲人 看过 makes reference to the restrictions that the Chinese censorship system places on the representation on ghost and their supernatural in their review: “However, due to the shackles of the censorship system on horror films, the mysterious plot of “Bi Xian 3” can only be explained by mental hallucinations. Fortunately, this illusion is to illustrate a mother’s feelings of guilt for her child. It is an alternative interpretation of maternal love”. They conclude their review with the following words: “Finally, a friendly reminder, although the film director is Korean, it is a domestic movie after all” (17<sup>th</sup> December 2012). Finally 秋香石榴姐 (18<sup>th</sup> July 2012) and 桃桃林林 看过 (17<sup>th</sup> July 2012) stress the film’s “Koreanness” in terms of its visual style in order to argue that Korean horror films are superior to Chinese ones. Finally reviews of the 2014 *Bunshinsaba* film also mention the mother-daughter relationship with 写剧本的肥树 writing that: “The mother-daughter relationship that runs through the main line is the premise for the establishment of the story. Fortunately, this illusion is to illustrate a mother’s feelings of guilt for her child. It is an alternative interpretation of maternal love” (4<sup>th</sup> July 2014). JoeyLu’s review remarks on the return to traditional values in the third instalment of the series: “Pen Xian 3 has returned to the murderous house in 1. It also has little girls and mothers, but 3 does not have the kind of cheating friends like Guo Jingfei”. In the same review JoeyLu also makes note of the translocal features of the film: “Cool, the special effects are done by the Korean team, and the ending song is sung by Yao Beina!” (31<sup>st</sup> December 2018). Finally, 细水长流 begins their review with commenting on President Xi’s trade visit for South Korea and contending that this signals the start of even more film cooperation between the

two nations. The review also suggests that *Bunshinsaba* has been thoroughly domesticated, writing that: “The pen fairy elements in the first two “Bi Xian” are not obvious, but in “Bi Xian 3” there is really a pen fairy. I guess this immortal originated from the ancient Chinese Fuyao. After being spread to Japan and South Korea, it became a subculture that young people are enthusiastic about” (6<sup>th</sup> July 2018). This dynamic reworking of the *Bunshinsaba* myth “exposes both commonality and difference in the constitution and representation of East Asian modernity” (Iwabuchi, 2014, p. 28).

### **Conclusion – national ghosts and border crossings**

It is clear that the success of Ahn’s official *Bunshinsaba* trilogy in China is mainly due to the fact they offered the domestic audience tropes that they were familiar in a form that was viewed as superior to that offered by the domestic horror film. As we have seen the reviews of the first three films in the series repeatedly foreground the relationship between the mother and child stressing that the role of the good mother lies in protecting her child. Accordingly, the second film, Ahn’s remake of *Nightmare*, is viewed more negatively than the other two on Douban. While we can talk about East Asian Gothic Cinema as an umbrella term which covers cinemas from Japan, Korea, mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Balmain, 2018), the cinemas are not reducible to each other and “Asianness” and “Asian Values” merely repeat orientalist thinking about East Asia. In China, the *Bunshinsaba* films are made meaningful through direct engagement with nationalistic themes and the denial of the supernatural. As such repetition as we have seen is always marked by difference. While, as discussed, the influence of Western and Japanese horror can clearly be seen through the presence of multiple imagistic references, it is the Korean High School Horror genre which is the most obvious influence, providing the

template for *Bunshinsaba 2* and all the unofficial films discussed in this article. The *Bunshinsaba* film series is a demonstrative example an example of Inter-Asian cinematic dialogues and exchanges which is linked to the increasing importance of regionality in East Asian cinematic production in which cultural proximity allows cultural translations across nations. There has been a significant rise in co-productions in the last few years which suggests that the template of the East Asian gothic film may become codified through such cross cultural productions into a more fixed set of conventions and codes. However as we have seen, *Bunshinsaba* is the name of the ritual in the original film and not the name of a vengeful spirit. This changes in the Chinese films when *Bunshinsaba* is transformed into an entity through the act of linguistic substitution. *BiXian* or “Pen Fairy” gives the made-up word life and transforms it into the archetypal East Asian Ghost who gradually takes on the features of the Western femme fatale. Iwabuchi’s concept of iteration helps to deconstruct and de-imperialize “Asianness” as a unifying concept which creates a homogeneous people and culture. Indeed, he points out that: “Inter-Asian adaptation works as a channel though which the intricate juxtaposition of the specificity and commonality of East Asian modernities is freshly articulated” (2016, p. 29).

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## Filmography

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*Bunshinsaba* (분신사바, Ahn Byeong-gi, Korea, 2004)

*Bunshinsaba 2* (笔仙 II, Ahn Byeong-gi, China, 2015)

*Bunshinsaba 3* (笔仙 3, Ahn Byeong-gi, China, 2014)

*Bunshinsaba vs Kayako* (笔仙咒怨, Deng Andong, 2017)

*Bunshinsaba vs Sadako* (笔仙大战贞子, River Huang, China, 2016)

*Bunshinsaba vs Sadako 2* (笔仙大战贞子 2, River Huang, China, 2017)

*Bunshinsaba/BiXian* (笔仙, Ahn Byeong-gi, China, 2012)

*Ju-on* (呪怨, Shimizu, Japan, 2002)

*Mid July Days 2* (七月半 2：前世今生, Li Hong Jian, China, 2016)

*Nightmare* (가위, Ahn, Korea, 2000)

*One Missed Call* (着信アリ, Miike, Japan, 2003)

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*Ring* ((リング), Nakata, Japan, 1998)

*Tenebrae* (Argento, Italy, 1982)

*The Death is Here* (笔仙惊魂, Guar Er., China, 2013)

*The Death is Here III* (笔仙惊魂 3, Guar Er., China, 2014)

*The Exorcist* (Friedkin, US, 1973)

*The Shining* (Kubrick, US, 1980)

*Voice* (여고괴담 4: 목소리, 2005)

*When Pen Ghost Meets Plate Ghost* (笔仙撞碟仙, Mo Sa-Li, China/Korea, 2016)