CHAPTER 2

Well-Travelled Female Avengers
The Transcultural Potential of Japanese Ghosts

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Introduction

When Samara, the new incarnation of Ringu’s Sadako (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998), crept out of the television set in Gore Verbinski’s The Ring (2002), both the appearance and actions of the female ghost were novelties to viewers in North America and Europe. Today, the global audience is familiar with the now iconic spectral woman in white with ruffled black hair as the “poster girl for Asian horror” (Feeley, 2012: 46). The vengeance-seeking female ghost is not just native to contemporary Japanese horror cinema (J-Horror), but is also a trope found in many films throughout East and Southeast Asia including Inner Sens-es/Yee do hung gaan (dir. Chi-Leung Law, 2002), A Tale of Two Sisters (dir. Kim Jee-woon, 2003), Shutter (dir. Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongs-pond, 2004) and transnational co-productions like The Eye/Gin gwai (dir. The Pang Brothers, 2002).

Although these ghost films share stylistic and thematic conventions, they also incorporate diverse local aesthetics and customs, as

[… it could be said that the New Asian ghost films were born of the con fluence of the Ring-style horror films’ experimental aspects and the female ghost tradition in various Asian countries.]

LEE HUNJU, 2011: 75

As Wai-Ming Ng (2008: 143) states, local film industries ‘domesticated’ Japanese elements to develop innovative works and, in some cases, to also cater to a new taste for ‘Asian’ horror which had spread among global horror fans.

What is it that made this type of ghost such a worldwide success? Why was it so easily adapted, integrated and transformed? A comparative study of ghost films from several Asian countries is an ambitious task: aside from the difficulty of mastering a diverse range of Asian languages, one has to deal with the complex entanglement of local, Asian and global influences. Lee Hunju (2011) meets this challenge in her dissertation on what she terms “New Asian female ghost films”, however her research largely remains on the surface in terms of the historical dimensions of the films she examines.
In this chapter, I have chosen to take a different approach. I will focus on Japanese ‘ghost culture’ and J-Horror to show how the development of stories and films about female ghosts within Japanese culture has always been influenced by the incorporation and appropriation of foreign cultural elements. By underlining the transcultural influences upon the sphere of the supernatural—such as the adaptation of Chinese literature, the popularity of Western spiritualism and the global genre of horror films—I will characterize Japanese female ghosts as nomadic entities open to transformation and transnational cooperation.

I will begin with a brief overview of the development of the female ghost figure in the Edo period, a period characterized by Buddhist and Confucian conceptions of women as sinful and irrational beings. I then explicate the way in which this stereotype was formed by Chinese literature, the stories of Lafcadio Hearn and by Western spiritualism. Finally, I will argue that J-Horror became a popular and adaptable genre by adopting conventions of Western horror cinema, before examining the notion of the uncanny within a highly urbanized environment.

The Female Avenger in Japan

The stereotype of the avenging ghost woman (yūrei) dressed in white with ruffled hair developed during Japan’s Edo period (1603–1868), a period distinguished by a lively popular culture. These revenants made their appearances in picture books, on theatre stages, in card games, and in the oral traditions of the period. Although female ghosts had existed previously in Japan—particularly in literature and Nō theatre—it was during the Edo period that their classic appearance developed, and the character became an eerie pre-modern pop icon. The most famous of these Edo ghosts is ‘O-Iwa’ in Tsuruya Nanboku’s kabuki play “Tōkaidō Yotsuya Kaidan”/“Ghost Story of Yotsuya” (1825). In this story, the masterless samurai Iemon plans the death of his wife O-Iwa so that he can marry a rich woman. After her horrific death, O-Iwa—who had been

1 Yūrei is a term that can designate male as well as female ghosts. The term is most often used when discussing the stereotypical image of a white-clothed ghost, an image that became mainstream in the Edo period. For vengeful ghosts without a concrete form, particularly in the Heian period (794–1185), the term onryō was used. More neutral terms for ghosts of the dead are shinrei and shiryō. For more on the terminology of ghosts, see Scherer, 2011: 35 ff.