

Introduction



The Politics of Folklore in Asian Gothic

Asian Gothic is not an established category meant to be imposed on literary or cinematic texts for classification. Instead, it is an exploratory process of reading such texts through the lens of Gothic scholarship. To study Asian Gothic, one must go beyond the narrow boundaries of Gothic as a literary genre, as little can be learned about Asia and its cultural heritage from even the most scrupulous study of eighteenth-century English novels. But then, Gothic has outgrown its literary origins. It has spread to every corner of the globe and impacted every medium. Over the past forty years, scholars have meticulously mapped the abundance of local and global variations of Gothic, studying its presence in literature, film, television, theatre, music, comics, games, and other forms of popular culture. Gothic itself has been rebranded as a style, an aesthetic, a form, a mode, or a process. While some critics see the label as a clear Western construct, the “discovery” of Gothic in regions culturally distant from Europe has led others to question that origin. After all, as Andrew Hock Soon Ng rightly argues – Gothic does not belong to any particular country since “transgressing taboos, complicity with evil, the dread of life, violence, and the return of the repressed [...] are not specific to any culture or people, but are experienced by all throughout history” (Ng 2008, 1).

While not exactly historical fiction, Gothic has always had a keen interest in history. Gothic narratives are often set in times long past, and while these settings may occasionally recall real historical events, they do not strive for authenticity. Gothic history is invariably a construction – blending myth and folklore with subjective retellings of authorized versions of the communal past. More than a style, a mood, or a set of conventions, as Maria Beville argues, the Gothic is also a way of living, a way of seeing, and a way of remembering: “the Gothic serves both as a part of our way of looking back and also a part of the way in which we carry the past forward into the future” (Beville 2014, 54–55). The Gothic past appears as a source of trauma – it is broken, fragmented,

and full of secrets that have a bearing on the present. The historical setting of Gothic plots is meant to serve a dual function: it activates a sense of nostalgia for the imaginary past that never existed, while also serving as a warning that humanity is always capable of regression to its primitive and barbaric form. The Gothic past, after all, is full of monsters and history – whether a series of events affecting entire nations or individuals – that haunts the present like a ghost.

Gothic loves its monsters for they do useful cultural work. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains, monsters are born as “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place” (Cohen 1996, 4). Their bodies are constructs that incorporate our fears, anxieties, fantasies, and desires. As projections, they are always a displacement signifying something other than themselves – “the monster exists only to be read” (p. 4). Resisting categorisation, monsters embody difference and represent cultural, political, racial, economic, or sexual others (p. 7). Gothic narratives exploit the figure of the monster to produce horror and terror but also, more significantly, to challenge taboos and explore transgressions of the cultural boundaries between the natural and the man-made, the living and the dead, the human and the non-human/the divine. Gothic monsters come in many shapes and sizes, continuously updated to fit contemporary contexts. Though it is not unheard of for such texts to produce a completely new species of monsters, most often it is not the monsters that change but rather our readings of monsters, framed through specific social movements or events.

Many Gothic monsters are derived from folklore, seen as a repository of stories about encounters between humans and mythical creatures. Folklore is often said to be the origin point of the Gothic but the relationship between the two is more complicated. As Carina Hart has observed, while Gothic “shares many formal and conceptual features with folklore” (Hart 2020, 1), it does not only appropriate folkloric figures to place them within a Gothic narrative that may diverge from their origin (3). While folklore is an oral tradition, it is also intimately attached to cultural practices, literary texts and landscapes that enable its cultural transmission. As a result, just as folk narratives influence the development of Gothic, the Gothic mode helps “shape the way folk narratives have been collected, written and presented to the public” (p. 2). According to Manuel Aguirre, Gothic “operates half-way between literature and folklore” (2019: 171) and its folk sources need to be acknowledged on par with literary ones. Gothic owes a great debt to myth, legend, and folktale – three prose narrative forms that constitute a large part of folklore – and part of its function is to keep folklore alive (Aguirre 2013, 14).

Aguirre argues that Gothic should be studied as “a modern mythological system” and calls for “a reassessment of Gothic as an able *compromise* (as

much on formal as on thematic grounds) between oral tradition and literary demands" (Aguirre 2013, 14, *italics original*). What needs to be acknowledged, however, is that Gothic texts construct their own folklore in exactly the same way they construct their history. In this sense, the examination of folklore within a Gothic narrative complies with the idea of the *folkloresque* – a concept introduced by Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey Tolbert to acknowledge popular culture's perception and performance of folklore. Foster writes: "a folkloresque product is rarely based on any single vernacular item or tradition; usually it has been consciously cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements, to appear as if it emerged organically from a specific source" (Foster 2016, 5). Folkloresque texts are produced in the "style" of folklore and are connected to folkloric sources and processes of folklore creation and transmission.

Folklore itself is a rather complex category lacking a concise definition, as it has often been approached from the vantage point of different disciplines. As Barre Toelken observes:

The historian may see in folklore the common person's version of a sequence of grand events already charted; the anthropologist sees the oral expression of social systems, cultural meaning, and sacred relationships; the literary scholar looks for genres of oral literature, the psychologist for universal imprints, the art historian for primitive art, the linguist for folk speech and worldview, and so on.

TOELKEN 1996, 1

Folklore is a repository of oral and written texts, but also diverse beliefs and practices – it is not only a collection of antiquated lore but also a lived experience. This experiential aspect of folklore is echoed in what Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Maria Beville call "living Gothic" – a formulation of Gothic arising from "our engagements with the living past, within the experiential contexts of lived practice, and the legacies that it leaves to the living narratives of folklore and tradition" (Piatti-Farnell and Beville 2014, 2).

While European Gothic is often placed within a larger Romantic tradition that turned to folk and folklore as a gesture of resistance to the Enlightenment, seeking out the irrational, the fantastic, and the supernatural to protest against the regime of the rational mind, the same cannot be said about Asia, where cultural development took a different route. Representing tradition and locality, folk beliefs and practices may occasionally be constructed in nation-making discourses as opposed to progress and modernization, but in most Asian cultures, modernity and tradition go hand in hand. Rooted in local

philosophical systems, Asian modernization is not necessarily compatible with Western rationalism. Where Christianity was distrustful of nature, relegating much folklore to superstition and witchcraft, many Asian religions see humans as one with the universe. In this world, humans and non-humans coexist side by side, and the “supernatural” is very much the natural, although it is still perceived as an anomaly. Animistic beliefs, supernaturalism, mediums, and shamanic practices – all still very much part of the Asian present – underpin the way in which folklore and Gothic texts are produced and consumed. Folklore is also intimately attached to the landscape, as it elucidates the relationship between humans and their environment. Asian folklore abounds with horrifying ecologies in haunted landscapes populated by people and spirits, ready to inspire locally produced Gothic texts.

This special issue explores how Gothic folklore shapes literary and cinematic texts that address the aftermath of personal and collective traumas, revealing intricate connections between the present moment and the historical past, whether on a cultural, political, or aesthetic level. The term “Asian Gothic” is used cautiously in the volume to signal a critical perspective from which the discussed texts are approached, rather than to propose a new genre or impose a constricting label. The Gothic readings of the selected texts, where Gothic themes and sensitivities are rearticulated in an Asian context, aim to open them to new interpretations rather than view them as derivatives of European Gothic. The five essays, which take us on a journey across East and Southeast Asia – from Malaysia to Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and finally to Thailand – discuss novels, short stories, popular journalism, feature films, and documentaries. These works frame local folklore through the Gothic tropes and imagery of spectrality, monstrosity, and haunting to comment on indigenous political and cultural practices that frequently depend on othering women, foreigners, immigrants, political dissidents, or members of the lower classes. Removed from their original folkloric context, ghosts, spirits, and mythical creatures are deployed to expose the divisions and imbalance of power that give rise to Gothic narratives.

The first essay of the collection, written by Soumyarup Bhattacharjee, discusses Beth Yahp’s novel *The Crocodile Fury* (1992), which fuses Malayan folklore with the thematic and affective framework of Gothic, within which its story unfolds. Set against the historical backdrop of the British colonisation of Malaya, the troubled years of the Malayan Emergency and struggle for independence, and the late twentieth-century Malaysian modernization, the novel weaves together the memories of three generations of women from the same family, whose personal experiences were shaped by the time they spent at a convent school perched on a jungle-covered hill at the edge of the city.

The convent, once a wealthy man's mansion, represents a violation against nature, upsetting the balance between the human and the non-human. It is also a deeply oppressive space affecting the protagonists, who become victims or witnesses of the atrocities committed within its walls. Bhattacharjee views the novel's depiction of grotesque, monstrous transformations of its characters into mythical creatures as central to their sense of oppression and need to escape. The experience of violence, rebellion, and haunting within the confines of the convent "serves as a powerful reminder of how the structures of dominance – colonial, patriarchal, racial – leave a lasting legacy that is notoriously difficult to eliminate" (Bhattacharjee 2024, 16).

The second essay takes us to Japan. Samantha Landau delves into the fascinating world of Japanese female apparitions, tracing their transition from folklore to fiction. While cautious about applying the term Gothic to Japanese literature, Landau asserts that certain portrayals of Japanese female ghosts, especially those found in twentieth-century texts, can be seen as a form of Globalgothic. These depictions often feature ghostly women who simultaneously represent patriarchal ideals of femininity and subvert them with their monstrous personas. Landau argues that the Gothicization of Japanese literature, attributed to increased interactions between Japan and the outside world from the Meiji period onwards, introduced changes to the way the Japanese viewed and portrayed ghosts. The essay traces the evolution of Japanese female phantasms in the works of Ueda Akinari, Lafcadio Hearn, Kawabata Yasunari, Abe Kōbō, and Enchi Fumiko. Noting the shift towards more complex, realistic portrayals of ghostly women in twentieth-century Japanese fiction, Landau concludes that within the Gothic framing of these narratives, "the figure of the female ghost symbolizes criticism of patriarchal and industrial systems that oppress women through sex, marriage, and work" (Landau 2024, 20).

Although a female ghost is at the centre of the Taiwanese film *Detention* (2019), the next paper shifts its interest from gender issues to political history. Min-tser Lin explores the role the Gothic framework of the film plays in preventing it from becoming a part of the nation's grand narrative of collective commemoration of the White Terror past. Lin suggests that for the Gothic mode to succeed, historical events must be de-politicized and dis-remembered. As a result, while the film evokes the viewers' impressions of the White Terror through a number of familiar scenarios and references, its actual representation of this historical period is blurred into a generic portrayal of a totalitarian regime's oppression and violation of basic human rights. The film's adoption of a Gothic representation mode, with a particular nod towards the Japanese horror aesthetics, contributes to displacing and obscuring specific political

meanings. At the same time, Lin concludes, these inaccuracies “are symptoms of the historical trauma that the movie fails to cover up with its ceremonial and ludic practice of Gothic collective commemoration” (Lin 2024, 5).

Political commentary also frames Jan Marvin Goh’s discussion of the Philippine documentary *Aswang* (2019), which exposes the mechanics of Rodrigo Duterte’s administration’s “war on drugs” within the dark urban spaces of Manila. The film juxtaposes realistic documentation of extrajudicial killings and state-sanctioned violence with references to the folkloric figure of the *aswang*, used allegorically to represent Duterte and his police force as monsters that have shapeshifted into human form. Goh suggests that the film should be read as an example of a “gothumentary,” a term borrowed from Kristopher Woofert to describe a production where Gothic-realist strategies are used in documentary representation, blurring the boundaries between documentary, avant-garde, and horror cinema. While the film’s approach to politicize the figure of the *aswang* is not entirely new, its gothumentary mode “urges a rumination and reassessment of the ‘war on drugs’ by immersing the audience in a space of disconcerting proximity to both the deceased and the living by looking back directly at the eyes of these evil creatures, both folkloric and real” (Goh 2024, 14).

Last but not least, folklore and true crime converge in Arthit Jiamrattanyoo’s discussion of the rise of sensationalist mass media in 1920s-1940s Siam, culminating in the appearance of the hybrid genre of folksong news reportage. Published in paperbacks and periodicals, these folksong newsprints typically focused on the figure of the ghost, the criminal, or a combination of both. Written in rhyming verse, they combined an enjoyable horror experience with moral didacticism. While these texts bear certain aesthetic similarities to European sensationalist Gothic forms, Jiamrattanyoo argues that their development should be viewed as a distinct consequence of the modernization of Siam, when the Siamese state’s restrictions on public horrors resulted in the remaking of horror objects as profitable mass media products for general consumption. It is, however, possible to read these texts, written “with a new aesthetic of physical violence and horror that prioritized affective impact over factual accuracy” (Jiamrattanyoo 2024, 11), as Gothic through the affective response they generate.

Gothic folklore, with its depictions of ghosts and monsters, threatening spaces, haunted landscapes and ecologies, and accompanying cultural beliefs and practices, continues to be reimagined and reconfigured in Asian texts across a variety of media formats. The texts in question borrow from local folklore traditions, often to politicize their figures by placing them within Gothic narratives that explore social, cultural, economic, or gender inequalities.

Gothic tropes and conventions, in turn, fuse with folklore, resulting in a shift in the understanding of ghosts and mythical creatures and imbuing them with new meanings. The five essays in this special issue offer a glimpse into this fascinating process and the wealth of material that lends itself to Gothic explorations.

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