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Where got ghost movie?: The boundaries of Singapore horror

ABSTRACT

While acknowledging that the horror film is generally not considered a major part of the 'Singapore new wave', this article makes the case that Singapore horror films nevertheless merit closer critical evaluation not only because of their sustained output in a very small industry, but also because of their articulation of a range of issues germane to Singapore nationhood and identity – issues which obtain in other Singapore films as well. The discussion surveys the entirety of the Singapore horror output from the 1990s onwards and draws out a number of key distinctive themes and trends, such as the referencing of Chinese supernatural beliefs and regional Southeast Asian spirits, and also the distinctive preponderance of horror narratives involving military or police. The films are then read in relation to broad tropes of gender, geography and regulation.

KEYWORDS

Singapore new wave
Singapore horror film
Southeast Asian film
military themes
national identity
pontianak
ghost film

INTRODUCTION

While the horror genre has arguably not been as central to the rise of the contemporary Singaporean cinema from the 1990s onwards as it has been central to the revival or development of a number of other Asian film industries

(Southeast Asian industries in particular), it has nevertheless comprised a significant component of Singapore's generic landscape, the consistent annual handful of horror features (typically on the order of two to four films) being notable in relation to the city-state's relatively small feature output (around twenty films in most recent years).[1] Additionally, while some of the horror productions have been fairly low-budget and low-profile affairs, several of them have been directed and/or produced by the country's top filmmakers – to wit, Eric Khoo, Jack Neo and Kelvin Tong; indeed, while Khoo is easily the director whose name is most strongly associated with the rise of a 'Singapore new wave' in the 1990s, he also happens to be a horror aficionado and (as producer) has been the driving force behind a number of horror productions and most recently served as the creative director of the 2018 Scream Asia Film Festival (a week-long series of Singapore premieres of international horror films).

But despite the notable (if modest) level of horror production within Singapore's contemporary cinematic output, and the involvement of multiple key filmmakers in the genre, Singapore horror is not at all what is referenced in most of the discourse on the 'Singapore new wave' (nor does Singapore horror have any of the global 'brand recognition' of the horror films from Japan or South Korea or, closer by, Thailand). This irony is perhaps not very surprising when one considers that new waves tend in general to be assumed to have formal and/or political 'art cinema' aspirations, that they tend to be perceived as self-consciously making aesthetic and ideological interventions, which are in turn (in the more successful cases) consumed and appreciated by global film festival and art-house audiences. Horror, on the other hand, is generally apprehended as a 'low' form that gleefully eschews any sense of seriousness of purpose – a popular entertainment more often than not aimed primarily for a local audience.[2] One notable exception is arguably Kelvin Tong's *The Maid* (2005),[3] which, aside from experiencing success beyond the borders of Singapore, also plainly engaged with social issues – but discussions of a 'Singapore new wave' have been more likely to focus on drama or comedy (or even documentary) – be that in the films of Khoo, Neo, Royston Tan or documentarian Tan Pin Pin at the time of the release of *The Maid*, or, more recently, in such younger-generation successes as Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* (2013), Boo Junfeng's *Apprentice* (2016) or Kirsten Tan's *Pop Aye* (2017) (even as horror films have continued to be produced as regularly as ever, if not more so).[4]

While acknowledging that the Singapore horror film is not generally discussed as part of a 'Singapore new wave' and indeed that it is to a large extent of a different cinematic mode than those films that are so discussed, this article takes the position that Singapore horror nevertheless deserves examination in relation to a broader consideration of such a 'new wave' – not only because it is an economically significant part of the same larger industry (with many of the same production personnel involved), but also because the films share a common interest with films more typically considered 'new wave' or art house in exploring issues of Singaporean nationhood and identity, as well as regional identity. Indeed, these productions have coalesced around several distinctive sub-generic trends and articulated a particular constellation of culturally resonant themes, which scholars such as Harvey (2008) and Tan (2010) (whose writing has laid some of the groundwork for the present article) have previously begun to unpack, with specific reference to *Return to Pontianak* (2001) and *The Maid*. As such, this article will be concerned, as space allows,

1. A running list of Singapore film productions can be found at the IMDA website, while a listing of Singapore horror films is in Appendix 1 to this article.
2. For a foundational exposition of this dynamic of differing cinematic taste cultures, see Sconce (1995).
3. Referenced Singapore horror films, such as *The Maid*, can be found listed in a separate Appendix at the end of this article; while other cited films are included in the bibliography as per usual documentation format.
4. Such exclusions, one could add, are hardly unique to the Singapore context. In the case of Thailand, for example, the contemporary national cinema was arguably put on the road to global recognition initially owing to the success of a horror film – *Nang Nak* (1999) – and yet discussions of a 'Thai new wave', even if acknowledging that film, have tended to focus on films fitting more into the 'art cinema' mode rather than the profusion of horror which also developed after *Nang Nak*.

with mapping horror's broader trends within contemporary Singapore cinema up to the present moment and delving deeper into the cultural purchase of its distinctive themes.

One initial challenge in approaching such a project, however, is the fact that the term 'Singapore horror cinema' is complicated and difficult to define to begin with. Beyond a considerable scholarly literature on the definitions and parameters of the horror genre in film and other media (e.g. Carroll 1990 or Leeder 2018), there is the fact that horror bleeds into other genres and traditions of the fantastic in the Asian context – more specifically into traditions of the supernatural that may not be as horrific (indeed if horrific at all) for many Asian audiences as they would be for typical western ones. Thus, communication with a deceased loved one in cultures where shrines to the deceased are commonplace (e.g. Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong) is not necessarily a generic cue for horror in the Asian context; animistic traditions such as those of tree spirits in various Asian cultures are likewise not automatically linked with the horrific. So while it is generally wise to cast a broad net in considering certain generic trends (to encompass texts which might not be in the main of a category but are nevertheless significant for developing the distinctive conventions of that genre), in the case of Singapore horror in particular, one can point to quite a few related texts that have only a very weak link with the genre – and quite a few of the first examples of modern horror-related films from Singapore would fall into this category (as noted below). Still another complication is the predominance (as in Hong Kong and Thai horror as well) of comedy-horror hybrids (a case in point being Jack Neo's dubbing his *Where Got Ghost?* [2009] a 'hor-medy').

An equally problematic modifier in the context of the Singapore horror cinema is 'Singapore'. Most immediately, identifying the national becomes complex in the case of the modern city-state given its multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-linguistic composition (including significant Chinese, Malay and Tamil communities and with English as the predominant language of business and education) – and not surprisingly the dynamic of ethnic vs. national identity certainly surfaces at times in these films. But the issue of a given *film*'s national identity also becomes complex, as many of the films produced with Singapore moneys have key production personnel who are not Singaporean and/or are not visibly set in Singapore. So just as with generic designation, with national designation, it is a matter of degree; and the approach here will be to cast a wide net in order to capture all relevant examples (though the main focus in this particular article will be the most 'fully' Singaporean – in terms of money, personnel and setting – for practical reasons of space). To give one clear example, *Where Got Ghost?* appears quite strongly Singaporean in terms of moneys, personnel, setting – while *Bait* (2012) can hardly be recognized as 'Singaporean' without some background knowledge, but it was produced with Singaporean funding, had Singaporean post-production work, included a Singapore related plot point, and featured a well-known Singapore actor in a non-lead role.[5]

But despite contemporary 'Singapore horror cinema' being, from multiple directions, a contingent and qualified term, employed here in a notional and heuristic fashion, it is still quite possible as a starting point for one to come up with a list of films falling within the category as broadly understood – nor is such a listing a purely academic exercise, as not only do people discuss 'Asian horror' and 'Singapore horror' (i.e. those have currency as popular and critical categories), but also, as shall be argued in this article, a range of salient and

5. The 'cinema' in Singapore horror cinema could undergo a similar interrogation here, space allowing, given new modes of circulation of audio-visual texts and the phenomenon of media convergence. There do exist examples of Singapore horror in other media, including television – most notably the long-running supernaturally themed series Incredible Tales. For the sake of practicality, the present discussion will be limited to feature-length films.

significant tendencies can be gleaned from a closer examination of such a listing. Appendix 1 offered below, then, comprises feature films that people have discussed as belonging to Singapore horror; or that embody certain tropes or conventions that are sometimes associated with horror (e.g. ghosts, other supernatural phenomena, serial murders, gory violence, events that induce feelings of horror); and at the same time that all have a significant connection with Singapore (in terms of money and/or personnel and/or setting). It should be reiterated, however, that since this Appendix 1 casts a broad net for the sake of completeness and as a starting point for interrogating the horror category, it includes several films with only tangential connections to horror – for example, films that appear to include ghosts and/or other supernatural phenomena, but which make no effort to represent such in a manner that induces horror (as would more typically be expected in the horror genre). *12 Storeys* (1997) and *Their Remaining Journey* (2018) constitute two instances of such a phenomenon – and the films in fact make for interesting comparison in both featuring ghosts as silent observers of the melancholic nature of life in Singapore's public housing projects, though two decades apart.

KEY GENERIC TENDENCIES AND NARRATIVE FOCI

Across this grouping of titles which have varyingly strong or weak links to what is commonly understood as the horror genre, a number of broader tendencies are readily apparent. Firstly, one can notice a preponderance of stories involving ghosts of one kind or another (or in relation to this, but less commonly, possession by the returned spirit of a deceased person). There is the occasional *pontianak* (a local spirit) who, unlike a typical ghost, tends to have a physical embodiment – but even this embodiment tends to be related to the spirit of a deceased person. Zombies have only a minor (though recently increasing) presence, vampires really none at all (save that the *pontianak* is sometimes described as a kind of vampire, see Ng 2009).

Aside from ghost themes, the films often reference ethnic Chinese spiritual and supernatural beliefs and practices, in particular as they pertain to the afterlife and in particular as they are manifested in Southeast Asia. Allusions to beliefs in the seventh lunar calendar month as the Ghost Month, when the spirits of deceased relatives are apt to be visiting, as well as to beliefs about ghostly returns after a certain number of days or after an annual cycle, are also common. Among the films where such beliefs are highlighted are *The Eye* (2002), *The Maid*, *Men in White* (2007), *The Spirit Compendium* (2008) and *Where Got Ghost?* As might be expected, a number of films also reference supernatural-related beliefs and figures specific to the region – for example certain shamanic 'black magic' or witchcraft practices and spirit mediums (e.g. in *Medium Rare* [1992], *Return to Pontianak*, *The Tattooist* [2007], *Pulau Hantu* [2008], *Greedy Ghost* [2012], *Red Numbers* [2013], *A Fantastic Ghost Wedding* [2014], *Bring Back the Dead* [2015] and *When Ghost Meets Zombie* [2019]), and local supernatural entities such as the *pontianak* (in *Return to Pontianak*, *1942* [2005] and the opening segment of *7 Letters* [2015]) or the *toyol* (a Southeast Asian foetal or child spirit, as in *Ghost Child* [2013]).

Perhaps less expected, however, is a striking preponderance of narratives with army themes (or, to a lesser extent, a focus on police). Soldiers figure significantly in *1942*, *Painted Skin* (2008), *Pulau Hantu*, *Where Got Ghost?*, *Haunted Changi* (2010), *The Ghosts Must Be Crazy!* (2011), *23:59* (2011), *23:59: The Haunting Hour* (2018) and *Zombiepura* (2018); while there are

police-focused narrative threads in *God or Dog* (1997), *The Tree* (2001), *Rule Number One* (2008), *Blood Ties* (2009), *Twisted* (2011), *Afterimages* (2014) and *The Offering* (2016). While it is hardly unusual to come across a horror narrative involving a police investigation, such a predominance of military-related horror within any given national horror corpus may well be unique, and the combined emphasis on figures of law, order and regulation suggest a clear cultural specificity, to be parsed further below. It should also be noted here, apropos of the article's basic position that Singapore horror can fruitfully be read in relation the larger movement of the Singapore new wave more broadly, that the interest in military themes (or for that matter in themes of law and order) can be found in Singapore's non-horror cinema as well: The army comedy *Ah Boys to Men* (2012) is one of the most successful Singapore films of all time (and yielded a number of sequels), while a satire on the preponderance of regulations in Singapore, *Just Follow Law* (2007), was also a popular hit.

One further distinctive broader tendency to be highlighted here is that of the omnibus horror film: *Where Got Ghost?*, *The Ghosts Must Be Crazy!*, *Twisted*, *Afterimages*, *23:59: The Haunting Hour* and *Hell Hole* (2019) are all organized as groupings of shorter tales (in some cases with narrative interconnections). This trend can perhaps be read on one level as a function of the polyglot (multi-faceted, multi-cultural, multi-lingual) nature of Singaporean society, since the structure enables the films to focus variously upon many different, discrete parts of Singapore life. It could also perhaps in part be understood as an influence of one of the few local horror models – that of the supernatural television series, which itself follows the structure of varied short tales (albeit separated in viewing times). In this regard, it is interesting that promotional copy for Singapore's long-running (though intermittent) supernatural series *Incredible Tales* (2004–present) links together the episodic nature of its format and the multi-cultural nature of Southeast Asian society: '*Incredible Tales* is all about ghost stories told through generations which cross boundaries of culture and language. Stories that generate intrigue, fascination, and even intense fear' (MediaCorp 2018: n.pag.).

THEMATIC PREOCCUPATIONS

i) Gender

Given the centrality of gender-related themes in the modern (post-1997) wave of Asian horror films – and particularly motif of the oppressed young woman in the cycle-inspiring film *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998) onwards – it is hardly a surprise to find a significant presence of issues linked to gender in the Singaporean horror film (as indeed for Southeast Asian horror more broadly); indeed, Tan (2010) has effectively argued (looking at three films released in the period 1998–2005) for the centrality of a motif of female monstrosity linked in turn to repressed anxieties about nationhood. However, despite the Singapore horror film partly fitting into the Asian trend of gendered themes, I would make the case that its gender thematics are distinctive – and arguably not as focused on the emergence of ghostly and/or horrific female forces or entities *as a function of past female oppression* as is the case fairly overwhelmingly in, for example, Japanese horror films or Thai horror films (see, e.g., Wee 2011 or Knee 2005, respectively). Many of the examples that do highlight the social contexts of female oppression (e.g. the ones Tan discusses), moreover, come relatively early in the wave of contemporary Singapore horror and thus closer in time to the initial splash being made by the pan-Asian horror trend headed

off by *Ringu*. (That is to say, these films arose not long after the earlier film with its profoundly wronged [if also perhaps inherently malevolent] supernatural female antagonist Sadako – and they are therefore quite logically more strongly under the global generic sway of it and those immediately following.) Some of the other abovementioned tendencies of Singapore horror also correspond to or work in concert with this relative lack of emphasis upon the suffering or oppression of women – first of all that the military-themed narratives are primarily focused on male conscripts (with few if any female characters appearing), and second of all that the local female apparition, the *pontianak*, is not simply or even primarily a figure associated with past suffering, but rather one that in a complex way is linked with multiple different sentiments and thus encourages a complex emotional response involving at once elements of fear, repulsion and sympathy (to be discussed further below).

Indeed, in the first mainstream supernatural-themed Singaporean film of the present millennium – 2001's *The Tree*, a relatively large-budgeted (for the time) feature from state-owned Mediacorp Raintree Pictures – the classic backstory of the oppression of a helpless victim that leads to later repercussions does not take up the usual gendered framework (of horror arising from the suffering of women). Rather, the secret suffering that the narrative reveals is that of its young *male* protagonist, who has been sexually molested in the past; and the film's main female characters rather than depicted as present or past victims are strong and wilful, to the extent that one is even plausibly positioned as a suspect in the aforementioned molestation and in a murder (although the conclusion to the film vindicates her). But despite a structure that echoes that of contemporary Asian horror (the redress of past sins against the helpless) and the presence of apparently supernatural elements (the boy is protected by a tree and an affiliated fungus, which seem to be inhabited by the spirit of his late father), the film's focus and tone are far more those of melodrama and romance than horror, and so it has not generally been discussed as a horror film. Indeed, the film's generic strangeness, its unevenness of tone and outlook all around, resulted in its having done poorly both critically and financially – and thus it was in no way an important historical influence on Singapore film in the horror genre or otherwise.

What is arguably the first bona fide modern Singapore horror film,[6] *Return to Pontianak*, was released just two months after *The Tree* (in June 2001) and centres around the aforementioned classic horror figure of the *pontianak* – although in fact the reference in the film's title is in the first instance to the Indonesian town of Pontianak rather than to the supernatural entity. This low-budget independent production is more strongly marked by the global horror trends of its time not only in featuring a horrific female figure linked to historical gender-based oppression (like much of Asian horror), but also, and even more so, in hewing closely to the generic model of the low-budget blockbuster *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), being about a group of (mostly) young people who get lost while on a mission to do a search in the woods – and who end up in confrontation with a mysterious and seemingly supernatural and malevolent female figure. (The film's style, too, takes its cue from *Blair Witch* in being filmed from a subjective-seeming shaky perspective, though in this case the film does not attempt to appear to have been made from found footage.) The manifestly gender-oriented concerns of *Return to Pontianak* are evident from the film's opening minutes, where in a voice over we learn about an Asian-American adoptee's plan to search for her birth mother's grave in

6. There are a number of 1990s films listed in the Appendix along with 2001's *The Tree*, but these bear only the loosest of connections to horror (only because of the presence of sensational and/or supernatural themes) and have not generally been promoted or discussed as horror.

Pontianak (read her occluded ethnic origins and maternal lineage) after feeling that her forebear has mysteriously communicated to her in dreams.

The young woman's mission soon runs into snags of the *Blair Witch* kind as the group find themselves getting lost in the jungle and strangely going around in circles (while cell phone and GPS no longer seem to function). They also then encounter a mysterious mute young woman who seems to be following the group and tracking them at times – and who is herself confronted and beaten by a man (evidently a *bomoh* or 'witchdoctor') who seems concerned to curtail the woman's behaviour. More details arise (in an increasingly elliptical narrative style) that, for the regional Southeast Asian audience, strongly suggest the mysterious woman is some form of *pontianak*, and a title that comes up at the close of the film retroactively anchors this reading for all audiences: 'Pontianak: A Malay woman who dies after childbirth or abuse by man and returns as an undead controlled by a Bomoh (witchdoctor)'. Those telling details towards the conclusion include the team coming across some corpses – or ghosts? – of babies, and a vision of the past experienced by the protagonist, evidently of a local mother with child being harangued by men in her village.

Again, much of this is narratively opaque, and one must guess at the connections (if any) among the Asian-American protagonist, the apparent *pontianak*, the mother figure in the vision (possibly her own mother?), and the baby corpses, but what is clear is a backdrop of abuse and violence against women – in the flashback of the mother, in the presence of the *pontianak* (who a priori stands in for such abuse by the film's proffered definition of the figure), in the scene of the *bomoh* beating the *pontianak*, and indeed in the murder of a female member of the group of explorers at the hands of a male friend, who acts under the influence of one of the *bomoh*'s spells.[7] At the same time, the film's narrative opaqueness considerably mutes any broader critique of patriarchal violence that might be intended, since the situational details of any violence alluded to are left obscure. It is especially difficult to know just how to read the figure of the *pontianak*; the film does inform us through the projected intertitle that she is an undead woman who has suffered either in childbirth or through abuse – but we are given few narrative cues to let us unequivocally know whether to interpret her more as a figure deserving sympathy, or one who is genuinely evil or malevolent – or some of both. Such a split is indeed typical of conceptualizations of the *pontianak* – the pathology and cosmology of the creature appears to vary widely across differing textual and cultural contexts, but the intermingling of horrific and pitiable characteristics is quite common, as is a capacity to alter physical form between monstrous and beautiful (Ng 2009; Izharuddin 2015).

Moreover, from another perspective, the ambivalence over this *pontianak*'s moral and ontological status, the lack of a definitive backstory, may be precisely the point: What may distinguish her most clearly is in a way her lack of definability, her challenge to the narrative structures of the plot and its characters' perception of reality. Spectators and characters alike cannot grasp the precise nature of her existence, the logic behind her mysterious appearances and disappearances, although it is hinted she poses some form of supernatural danger. And the interaction with the *bomoh* in particular frames her as not only an affront to narrative order, but also patriarchal order, a figure of female volition outside of usual strictures which the male authority figures feels compelled to (unsuccessfully) try to contain.

Return to Pontianak did not lead to any immediate cycle of Singaporean horror film – which is readily understandable in industrial terms since the

7. Tan's reading (2010), I would note, takes the narrative details and backstory as largely clear and concrete (based, presumably, on the cues given), while I am emphasizing that the text appears to go out of its way to obfuscate such detail.

film did poorly at the box office, the then-current popularity of Asian horror notwithstanding, and, equally important, since the overall state of Singapore production was still fairly moribund at that point, with only a half dozen features appearing each year. Director Djinn had his next theatrical release in 2005, a year that marked the start of an uptick in the level of locally produced film releases (with ten features in 2005, fifteen in 2006) – but Djinn's follow-up (and, to date, last) feature was not another horror film, but rather an off-beat drama (*Perth*, actually completed in 2004), which was critically well received and arguably a closer 'fit' to the evolving pattern of a dark and quirky 'Singapore new wave', though not financially successful.

When a Singaporean director did next make a horror film, in 2005, a possible *pontianak* again had a featured role, and she was again represented as a mysterious and threatening force, given scant narrative context but clearly stood as disruptive to the (in this case all-male) apprehensions of stability and order. Kelvin Tong's direct-to-DVD feature *1942* focuses on a group of the Second World War Japanese soldiers wandering somewhat lost in the jungles of Malaysia and encountering a number of mysterious and unsettling phenomena, such as their unintendedly travelling in circles back to where they had come from (like their trekking counterparts in *Blair Witch* and *Return to Pontianak* it might be added) and, most terrifying for them, repeated encounters with a woman singing a ghostly tune. But again, the woman's signification is as a figure of anxiety and disruption, not as a sign of culpability for past oppression of women.

Perhaps more than any other individual, Tong could be credited with helping Singapore horror emerge as a distinctive contemporary cinematic phenomenon and also, to some extent, a component part of a 'Singapore new wave'. He achieved this, however, not only by taking an (at times) distinctively local and/or offbeat approach to his filmmaking, but also by at other times going out of his way to embrace a more mainstream, commercial aesthetic – a distinction the director has made clear in interviews that he is quite self-conscious about (e.g. Soh 2014). Thus, Tong followed the narratively mysterious and slowly paced direct-to-video *1942* with a highly successful and globally visible theatrical horror release (*The Maid*) and then in turn with a local horror comedy (*Men in White*) and a Hong Kong horror co-production (*Rule Number One*).

Given that *The Maid* had its sights on a global audience by design, it is hardly a surprise that it more than most Singapore horror films hews to a focus on horrific redress for past oppression of women, in keeping with the trend of much regional horror. Yet even in *The Maid*, there are a number of factors which mitigate the focus on such oppression, and an emphasis on an intermingling of horrific elements.

The plot of the film, briefly, concerns a Filipina who comes to work as a maid for a Chinese ethnic family in Singapore and soon finds signs that she is being haunted by her deceased predecessor in that same post. The dark secret that emerges is that this predecessor had been raped by the family's mentally disabled son and then brutally murdered by his father to keep this a secret, so this is in the first instance a classic example of a socially powerless woman being taken advantage of – and now coming back in ghostly form to seek redress against her oppressors. What slightly complicates the gendered structure of this scenario is firstly that the rapist is himself evidently not fully comprehending about the rape (because of his mental disability and sexual naiveté) and indeed is so bereft over the victim's death that he commits suicide

(he too, it turns out, is a ghost); and secondly that men and women are clearly involved in the acts and structures of female oppression represented here, the family's matriarch and the female employment agent, contributing operators in a system that, it becomes clear, allows for continued and repeated abuses of young women from the Philippines. So while *The Maid* is undeniably an instance of the Asian paradigm of ghostly oppressed young woman return for revenge, it also highlights and critiques a broader system of social control and abuse along axes of gender, age, economic class and nation/ethnicity.[8]

One further example that merits discussion in relation to gender concerns in this initial group of modern Singapore horror films is the 2008 made-for-TV feature *Pulau Hantu*. *Pulau Hantu* would in some ways appear to have drawn direct inspiration from *Return to Pontianak* and *1942*, with its plot about a squad of reservist soldiers on a mission on an undeveloped island off Singapore's main island, during which they start to experience supernatural occurrences and violent injury which seem to be the work of a *pontianak*-like figure resident there. The film quickly puts gender issues at the fore not only by detailing the *pontianak*'s historical legend in its prologue – that of a village woman who was raped by a *bomoh* and bore him a child as a result, only to later be buried alive by him – but also in casting a woman as one of the squad's leaders (and the only career soldier in the bunch). However, at its dénouement, *Pulau Hantu* for a time significantly strays from the conventional gender polarities of the genre (as did *The Tree* before it) in that it is revealed that the *bomoh* was not the perpetrator but rather the victim of a rape at the hands of the village woman (who had already been drawing power from black magic), and this revelation springboards in turn to yet another scene (though possibly an hallucination) of a male (the main squad leader) being raped by a strong, aggressive and malevolent female (the career soldier under the influence of the *pontianak*).

Among subsequent Singapore horror films, it is Chai Yee Wei's and Sam Loh's work that most centrally focuses on the oppression of women, in the form of rape and other usually sexualized instances of violence. The main protagonist and antagonists of Chai's *Blood Ties* are all policemen, but a key motivating incident is the violent and brutal rape of the main protagonist's wife, and the film also references the sexual trafficking of teenage girls. Chai's follow-up film *Twisted*'s various component narratives as well are all driven by instances of sexualized violence against women – which generally leads to violent repercussions for the perpetrators. And Sam Loh's *Lang Tong* (2014) follows the activities of a Singaporean lothario and conman who takes sexual advantage of numerous young women – but who (in another instance of the gendered tables being turned) receives a bloody (and explicitly detailed) castrative comeuppance at the hands of some of his would-be victims.

ii) Geography/identity

While gender issues are highlighted in a significant portion of Singapore horror films and positioned to *some* extent as a source of the horrific, the movies discussed above and quite a few other Singapore horror films also derive horrific elements from the narrative and thematic intermingling of disparate spaces and of the diverse people associated with those spaces – or, to put it another way, from complex and sometimes troubled negotiations regarding territory, nationhood, ethnicity and identity. Harvey lays out this kind of geographic-ethnic dynamic in *The Maid* and *Return to Pontianak* through the

8. See Gomes (2011) for an analysis of the film as indexing this real-world social issue, but local audiences as failing to engage with its commentary; and Campos (2016: 527–41) for a reading that situates the film in relation to a transnational OFW genre that focuses on such issues.

concept of 'spectral tropicality', which she describes as 'a form of haunting in which what has been repressed within the air-conditioned nation of Singapore returns in the forms of both horrific beings and uncanny spaces' (2008: 31), and Tan too, though employing more of a psychoanalytic lens, highlights the thematically resonant tension between 'technologically advanced Singapore and the haunted jungles of Southeast Asia' (2010: 158). That such a dynamic emerges as a significant and pervasive component of Singapore horror is not surprising if one considers the corresponding real-world complexity of Singapore's spatial–national–ethnic conditions; and in point of fact different dimensions of this Singapore-specific complexity are explicitly referred to in quite a few Singapore horror films. Some of the complexities I allude to (to name a few of the most pertinent ones) include: Singapore's existence as a geographical and political entity of multiple forms (an island, a city, a British colony, a part of Malaysia) before its separation from Malaysia as a sovereign city-state in 1965 (an event itself fraught with political tension and complexity); its centuries-long status as a key Asian port through which numerous global influences have always flowed; its physical situatedness as a tiny tropical island nation sandwiched between two much larger nations, compelled for practical reasons to carefully regulate, maximize the efficient usage of and where at all possible expand the capacity of its minimal land space; its pragmatic practice of maintaining stable diplomatic and trade relations with most all other nations (and its concomitant practice of remaining largely neutral on any divisive external political issues); and the present-day multi-ethnic, multi-religious make-up of its population (including key communities of ethnic Chinese, Malays, Tamil Indians and Eurasians) and the corresponding recognition of multiple official languages (see Hack et al. 2010 for a broad overview of Singapore's history as a nodal point in the region). All of these are component elements of what make Singapore what it is, things that contribute to defining national and individual identity – but they also involve fissures and points of irresolution or tension, and the Singapore horror film provides one arena for explicitly or implicitly working through such tensions (just as it also registers tension in the gender realm). As alluded to at this article's opening, such nationally specific resonance is part of what makes a non-art-house genre like the Singapore horror film such a fertile object for analysis.

Again, the importance of the dynamics of place (in all its many dimensions) is evident from the earliest of the contemporary horror films. *Return to Pontianak*'s title points directly to a geographical underpinning of the narrative; and that return involves an increasingly uncomfortable if not dangerous immersion in a mysterious, uncontained jungle landscape implicitly antithetical to the measured, ordered, urban space of the Singapore home base of some of the film's characters and makers (see Harvey 2008; Tan 2010: 157–59). *1942* likewise involves an anxiety-ridden trek through unfamiliar jungle landscapes – at the film's conclusion put in explicit contrast to modern day urban Kuala Lumpur (as the soldiers discover that they are themselves the ghosts of the past). Much of the horror in the subsequent military-themed horror and comedy-horror films takes place in remote jungle areas of Singapore itself (or on adjoining islands, as in *Pulau Hantu* and *23:59*), spaces removed from the country's present-day development and thus somehow redolent of and accommodating of the mysterious and the supernatural, older systems of belief, implicitly all that is counter to modern, rational frameworks of perception (and indeed, the comedy in the supernatural scenes often turns upon a character being forced to accept a supernatural progress of events in spite

of their own non-supernatural view of the world). Another supernatural film drawing in some sense more directly on such a trope of mysterious nature is *The Tree*, given that its title object turns out to be a title antagonist of sorts.

To put this another way, then, the Singapore horror film often evinces a tension or even direct struggle between the ordinary and the supernatural, the rational and the mysterious, modern frames of reference and older local cosmologies; and this tension is typically articulated through a parallel and associated geographical tension and in many cases provides a basis for moments of horror. This dynamic extends in another form, moreover, even into Singapore horror films set in more developed locales. Such films not at all surprisingly often go out of their way to make use of the less developed spaces within their urban environments, the overlooked neighbourhoods, the old shophouses that the country's policies of continuous upgrading and updating have not yet caught up with. The boy protagonist of *The Tree* for example lives in a low-rise housing development of evidently older vintage with much greenery present all around – that is, he lives in close proximity to the natural world with which he has a mysterious bond. *The Maid* concordantly characterizes the Chinese family's home (and for that matter the neighbourhood in which it sits) as untouched by time, brimming over with artefacts from an earlier era (see Harvey 2008: 27–29; Tan 2010: 165; Feeley 2012: 53–60). And just as the jungle settings are accommodating to the existence of supernatural beings in the films described above, so does this older neighbourhood allow the flourishing of a range of beliefs and practices relating to the return of deceased relatives during the Ghost Month. Even *The Maid*'s relatively more developed locales, the landscapes of public housing (specifically, Housing Development Board [HDB] flats), give the appearance of having come from an earlier moment of modernization and seem now still accented with their past era – so it is apropos that ghosts appear in this setting as well.

Other examples of disused places yoked to the past (the classic haunted house paradigm) in contrast to the broader setting of modern Singapore include the haunted Geylang shophouse of *Ghost on Air*, the old row house setting for the framing story of the omnibus film *Afterimages* (and the old barbeque shop from the film-within-the-film), the out-of-the-way historic family homestead in *The Offering*. Perhaps the most loudly broadcast example of this type of setting is the titular locale of *Haunted Changi*: an abandoned hospital (one that actually exists in fact) still haunted by its earlier history of serving as a Japanese wartime base where enemy soldiers were kept prisoner and sometimes tortured or executed. Sequences of transit to the site by members of the protagonist team of ghost hunters make clear to filmgoers that the hospital is at a distant remove from the main of Singapore (in the narrative world as in actuality), on a hill, in a far corner of the metropolis, beyond easy reach by bus or train. Its distinctive situatedness at the cusp of the developed modern world, as a bridge between the here and the beyond, is neatly encapsulated in images of a back door that supposedly 'leads to the jungle' (and which the team members therefore choose not to use). In the case of the film noir-inflected *Blood Ties*, Chai's evocation of Singapore (which is not explicitly named) as a dark, haunted-looking city overall requires that he films almost entirely in old spaces, largely absenting the city's modern architecture.

Germane to this discussion of the signifying resonances of the Singapore horror films' spatial properties is that fact that (as should already be becoming evident) more often than not, these films' varied locales and disparate

geographies are ethnically and/or nationally marked, the spatial imbricated with the racial (as Harvey puts it, '*The Maid* and *Return to Pontianak* suffuse their incarnation of tropical spectrality with ethnic specificity' [2008: 31]). Again, the set-up of *Return to Pontianak* makes consummately clear that its geographic return is equally to be understood as an ethnic or racial return, as the western-assimilated Asian protagonist makes her journey in order to connect with a long-separated forebear (a birth mother she did not know), does so as a result of telepathic/supernatural signals sent directly by her.[9] (And as Tan [2010: 160] points out, the ethnic return here is simultaneously a generic and cinematic one – as Djinn's film implicitly alludes to an earlier history of Singapore Malay-language film production, a cycle of *pontianak* and other Malay-language horror films in the 1950s and 1960s.)

Much of the anxiety and fear projected in both *1942* and *The Maid* has to do with the protagonists being in nationally foreign realms and interacting with culturally foreign individuals, and *The Maid* makes considerable effort to characterize the trappings of Chinese ethnic culture as ghostly and fearful (see Feely on the film's calculated focus on Chinese elements, to the exclusion of that which is non-Chinese). The haunting of the protagonist of *The Eye* has everything to do with her quite literally being of two distinct national and ethnic realms (as the recipient of an eye transplant from another country, see Knee 2009; Siddique 2016). The supernatural manifestations in *Ghost Child* arise in tandem with the arrival of a new Indonesian Chinese wife in a Singapore Chinese household (bringing along with her a *toyol* child spirit plainly emblematic of her Indonesian ethnic baggage). And similarly (though more humorously), the ghostly incursions across the Singapore border in *When Ghost Meets Zombie* have their origins in Thailand (as the spirit of a Singapore beauty queen killed by Thai piranhas inhabits the body of a Thai zombie in order to return to her home country and pursue her dreams of a pageant victory).

In the case of *Haunted Changi*, just as Changi Hospital is positioned as a nexus point between spatial realms and between ontological realms, so is it a point of contact between different (mostly ghostly) ethnic and national identities, one diegetic interviewee even referring to the place as a 'United Nations of ghosts'. Among supernatural beings which characters believe to be present (some of which the film actually lets us see) are a *pontianak*, the ghost of a Chinese mainlander, and the murderous spirit of a Japanese Second World War soldier (who turns out to be the main villain of the piece – thus suggesting the continued transnational psychic repercussions of the historical trauma of the occupation). A similarly murderous Japanese World War Two soldier-ghost is the focus of one of the multiple stories of *23:59: The Haunting Hour*, which in another segment also features a snake spirit who has accompanied soldiers back to Singapore after a training in the jungles of Brunei.

The broader point to be made here, then, is that the hauntings and/or supernatural manifestations in these Singapore horror films, beyond having a distinctive gendered valence, tend to be not only temporal hauntings (marking the persistence of the past in the present), but also spatial hauntings (embodying the reassertion of occluded or unresolved geographical and/or transnational interrelations) and ethnic hauntings (indexing the complex status of Singapore's multi-ethnic lineage). Moreover, this particular grouping of areas of tension or irresolution can arguably be seen as specific to the national context of Singapore, including the complexity of its own racial/ethnic lineage and identity. This arises from, for example (and as mentioned above),

9. The fact that the film's above quoted definition of a *pontianak* designates the entity as a Malay woman may well be a result of imprecise wording (i.e. the *pontianak* is a figure from Malay folklore, but the phenomenon does not require her to be Malay) – and yet that slip-up is a telling one, highlighting the filmmakers' identification of the film's local supernatural manifestation with Malayness.

a severance from Malaysia at the moment of the nation's modern founding, a highly managed and directly supported modern-day multi-culturalism, and, at the same time, contemporary anxieties among some of the populace about the heavy presence of migrant workers of multiple classes – low-wage domestic helpers and construction workers, as well as white collar professionals (see Chua 2017: 123–56 on the dynamics of 'state multiracialism' and Poon 2009 on the alterity between attitudes towards multiracialism and those regarding foreign workers).

iii) Regulation/boundaries

Just as the Singapore horror film tends to involve some kind of tension between disparate realms, it is also notable that the clashes between realms are in many cases able to arise because of some absence or loss of regulation or control. At a most literal and basic level, traversing into an unfamiliar (and in particular a prohibited) realm is predicated upon a deficiency in or lack of border control – a theme with immediate purchase in the geographically, geo-politically complicated context described in the previous section. At the same time, a significant number of these films take place in part at the *edges* of settled (and, thus, controlled or supervised) areas, near that door to the jungle, or the out-of-the-way shophouse that the passing postman (as in *The Maid*) will not take much notice of, or the isolated forest cottage that few pass (as in the Indonesia-set Indonesia co-production *Macabre* [2009]), or on little-populated islands in a number of films – settings conducive to the operations of the supernatural and/or the nefarious, even in a modern, rationalized, regulated world (and which Singapore horror filmmakers go to clear pains to seek out). Such less-regulated spaces, however, exist in a dialectic with the strong presence in many of these films (alluded to above) of figures of state authority and of the oversight of daily life – soldiers, police and other state employees – and issues of regulation and of adherence to national and/or moral laws are explicitly raised in quite a few narrative situations (e.g. sometimes humorously depicted images of reservists trying to shirk tiresome work details in *Pulau Hantu*, *Where Got Ghost?* and *The Ghosts Must Be Crazy!*).

Such a dialectic is consonant with a broader sense of an ambivalent perspective on official regulation and policing of daily life across the body of these films: there is anxiety over the chaos that may ensue if regulatory control is lost, but also an anxiety over the potential oppressiveness of regulation – or potential corruption of the regulatory system if it is not operated properly. In some of the films, ghosts arise or at least become a problem because of a lack of regulation in one manner or another (e.g. *Return to Pontianak*, *Ghost Child*, *Bring Back the Dead*, *The Second Coming*), but in some instances the ghosts are themselves the agents of regulation, the enforcers of the law (e.g. *The Maid*, *Blood Ties*, *Where Got Ghost?*). *The Tree* notably embodies both of these tendencies at once: The ghost (of the father, in tandem with the tree) is the boy's protector, but is also at times jealous and cruel – while in a parallel fashion, the film's police are represented as at times caring, but also at times callous and a source of anxiety. And while ghosts (and/or law-breakers in several of these films) who have avoided the normal forces that regulate them provoke anxiety as agents of malevolence and chaos, in some films they also potentially hold positive connotations of freedom from the usual restrictions of (living) existence (e.g. *Men in White*). What is evoked then is not only an ambivalent stance on regulation, but also a correspondingly ambivalent attitude towards legal or

social or moral transgressions of various kinds, in some cases playing out as a sympathetic or humorous depiction of the transgressor, but in concert with an understanding that comeuppance is necessary and inevitable. This is perhaps articulated most explicitly in a non-supernatural example at the edge of the horror genre, the dystopic fantasy *Faeryville* (2014), in which outsider students at a university desire both the freedom to do as they wish and protection from attack, and figures of law and order (police and administrators) are both protective and abusive.

It almost goes without saying that there is a very direct cultural referentiality in such dynamics given that Singapore is so widely known for its regulatory zeal (alluded to in the tourist t-shirt slogan 'Singapore is a FINE city', or the endless tourist jokes about the prohibition of chewing gum), its ethos of staying within the realm of the politically and socially acceptable embodied until recent years in the concept of the 'OB marker', that is, the commonly understood 'out of bounds' limit of certain forms of public discourse (see, e.g., George 2000: 39–48; Chua 2017: 157–75). The case that is being made here is that it is precisely such a culturally specific framework of boundaries that the Singaporean horror film indexes, negotiates and responds to in a range of ways.

One area of transgression highlighted in several of the films is that of financial greed, which not surprisingly often ends up with some form of retribution. This comes up throughout the humorous, Jack Neo-produced trilogy comprising the Singapore Ghost franchise: in *Where Got Ghost?* a gang perpetrates various scams for financial gain (and a ghost eventually delivers their punishment), while in *The Ghosts Must Be Crazy!*, a man is willing to enter into a somewhat questionable marriage because he understands it will improve his fortunes, and in *Greedy Ghost*, a man seeking riches strikes an ill-advised deal with a spirit. Or, in a much darker framework, a desire for financial betterment leads to betrayal and also rape and murder in *Blood Ties*. While on one level, one could readily identify a Singapore resonance of such themes in the widely purported Singaporean penchant for considering the bottom line – the financial worth of a thing – before all else. But more critically, one can also see registered here a relatively occluded fact of Singapore's economic miracle, the existence of various kinds of economic underclasses, not only unskilled migrant workers, but also families of wage earners in non-white collar jobs, and single retirees who must continue to work menial jobs to cover their daily living expenses (Teo 2018). Financial difficulties bedevil and encourage the troubled behaviours of numerous characters from Singapore horror, thus raising the spectre of the uncomfortable underside of Singapore's Asian Tiger status – one of a number of sensitive areas the genre broaches. At the same time, it could also be noted here that a preoccupation with financial gain is shared by other kinds of Singapore film as well (it is a cultural trope that extends beyond the horror genre) – for example, in *Money No Enough* (1998), *The Wedding Game* (2009) and *The Fortune Handbook* (2017).

Another relevant area of transgressive behaviour that often arises in Singapore horror, as indeed in much of horror cinema around the world, is that of physical violence and murder – though some might make the case that some of the films that focus on these themes in a non-supernatural context are better understood as thrillers (though perhaps gory and violent ones) rather than horror films proper (since not delving into the fear or mystery of the supernatural). Films in this group include two only minimally screened lurid works based upon the real life 1980s case of Singapore ritual murderer

(and claimed spirit medium) Adrian Lim – 1991's *Medium Rare* (which does in fact include some supernatural overtones) and 1997's *God or Dog*. *The Maid* (as discussed above) turns on violent predations against maids, rape, attempted murder and murder, while *Macabre* (on which Eric Khoo was executive producer, though it was not set in Singapore) offers an extremely gory and violent tale of an isolated household of cannibalistic murderers preying on passing travellers, and the backstory of the new wife in *Ghost Child* is one of abuse at the hands of her first husband.

Four further films that belong in this group are two each by two directors of growing reputation in Singapore (and who could perhaps even be discussed as part of a still developing 'Singapore new wave', though their names are not as well known as those of more established directors, nor do they have a large feature film track record): Chai Yee Wei, who has also directed a number of award-winning shorts and who has contributed substantially to Singapore's film production scene by founding the production facility Mocha Chai Laboratories, and Sam Loh, a successful veteran television director aside from his film interests. Chai's two films mentioned here are the highly violent, supernaturally tinged crime thrillers *Blood Ties* and *Twisted*, the latter also darkly comic. Loh's relevant films are the intensely gory and sexually explicit thrillers *Lang Tong* and *Siew Lup* (2016) (and presumably the forthcoming *Hell Hole*) – though one could also mention the never-released *The Outsiders* (2004), pulled before its debut because of scenes of necrophilia (by a serial killer). Still more than the greed-themed films, these works (perhaps with the exception of *Macabre*) very directly suggest the existence of a dark underside to the bright and highly regulated image of Singapore usually shown outwardly; at the same time, however (as will be discussed further below), they do not all suggest greater policing or regulation is what is needed to prevent such violence from erupting or to keep those who are so inclined from going out of bounds.

As should be evident from the foregoing, the violence in many of these horror films is clearly sexually inflected in some way. We find outright sexual assaults in, for example, *The Tree*, *The Maid*, *Ghost on Air* (wherein a schoolgirl is raped), *The Second Coming* and all of Chai Yee Wei's and Sam Loh's horror films; and spousal or girlfriend abuse in *Ghost Child* and *Afterimages*; while the violent assaults of *Macabre* are preceded by seduction and/or take on a sexual tinge. In quite a few of these examples, the supernatural is precipitated by sexual violence (hence the classic trope of the female spirit seeking revenge), but still more broadly, the realm of horror and the fantastic emerges as the realm of sexual transgression and/or the sexually non-normative across many of these films – that is, it is a space in which usual sexual regulations or prohibitions are for whatever reasons not fully in place. To cite other kinds of instances of this, seductive demons or ghosts who put mortal lovers in peril are central to *Painted Skin* and *The Ghosts Must Be Crazy!* – in the latter case with the added detail that the putative female ghost has the appearance of a man and is played by a man (and indeed the ghost's mortal husband needs to inspect the ghost's genitalia in order to be convinced s/he is a she). The queer nature of such a scenario potentially runs counter to Singapore's own sexual mores and its cinematic regulatory framework (which has tended to restrict images of homosexuality through age ratings and limits on screening venues though more the case at the film's release date several years ago), but at the same time the comic and fantastic nature of the framework mitigate the transgressive nature of what is in effect an image of male-on-male coupling which

would not ordinarily have been permitted (see Tan 2007: 71–93 on Singapore censorship principles and practices). The only nominally released *The Spirit Compendium* even more clearly makes use of a spiritual-supernatural framework as a means of allowing 'queer' images which again would ordinarily not have made their way to Singapore screens, especially back in its production year of 2008 (with the protagonist's exploration of mysterious inherited spiritual powers providing a narrative pretext for male-on-male massage and bed-sharing).

One might object that this last is a highly obscure, non-mainstream example, seen by hardly any viewers (never having had a regular theatrical run or a wide DVD distribution), but the point being made is that the example is able to illustrate (in fact by virtue of its obscurity) a certain generic logic at work across much of Singaporean horror (albeit usually in more covert form) – more specifically, a subterranean concern with the political and societal regulation of daily personal life, a dramatization of tensions and negotiations between the permitted and the proscribed which is occasioned by the fantastic narrative situations that the genre allows. Chai Yee Wei's work in particular has often highlighted such dynamics, in sometimes disturbing or plainly controversial ways. *Blood Ties* features shocking images of murder and rape perpetrated against the protagonist's family, but it also raises the question of the morality and the appropriateness of the protagonist taking revenge (in supernatural form) through also brutal murders of the original perpetrators – specifically, the question is raised as to whether it is 'right' for him to go against the law in order to exact vengeance, whether there are instances where one ought to circumvent official regulation. This question is made even more pointed in that the narrative reveals that those who ought to be the agents of such regulation, the officers of the law, are in this case (as it turns out) the villains of the piece, corrupt police willing to commit murder owing to their own desire for wealth. And the question is also made far more disturbing and difficult in that the vengeful protagonist makes his return in spirit by possessing the body of his 13-year-old sister; we are thus confronted with the shocking (and also queer) spectre of a young girl channelling (unbeknownst to her) the spirit of an adult male, as she performs highly sexualized murders upon other adult men (e.g. involving castrating a man and stuffing his genitals into his mouth).

What Chai characteristically addresses here is not only moral and statutory law as they apply to his fantastic scenario, with its embedded issues of sexuality, violence and official greed and corruption; but also (and self-reflexively) the laws of representation, the boundaries of permissible imagery under Singapore regulation. These are all potentially hot-button issues for Singapore (not only given its policy of restricting imagery that is perceived to threaten community values, but also its ranking in the global Corruption Perceptions Index as being of very low corruption [Transparency International 2018]), and though in point of fact *Blood Ties* never references its own locale as being Singapore (and Chai claimed at the time of the film's release that it was meant to represent a generic Southeast Asian metropolis), it would be clear to most any regional viewer that there is hardly any other place this English-and-Chinese-speaking, Chinese-ethnic Southeast Asian city could be. One could postulate, however, that what keeps *Blood Ties* from being beyond the limits of the representable, aside from the lack of explicit reference to Singapore, is the fact that it is in the genre of the horror film, a consummately non-realistic genre able (as in this case) to accommodate all manner of outlandish stories and always already positioned as something not to be taken too seriously. As

gory, exploitative horror, *Blood Ties* may be regulation-baiting, but it is also 'just entertainment', and lurid entertainment as that; and it is, therefore, able to fly somewhat under the regulatory radar rather than being engaged as serious political discourse. Chai arguably 'pushes the envelope', in representational terms, still further in his follow up film *Twisted*, a move facilitated by the fact that he takes a more arch, darkly comic tone there than in the far more sober *Blood Ties*. *Twisted* paints a portrait of a Singapore that is home to domestic violence and abuse, date rape and drug dealing and use; and the film's closing gambit takes the opportunity to thumb its nose at the national policing system and its caretakers, as the film's anti-protagonist is about to receive capital punishment because of a technicality and is being looked after by a nose-picking doctor and an all-purpose clergyman who can swiftly change his religious garb depending upon which religion's last rites he needs to perform.

That the horror framework allows political discourse to hide in plain sight, as it were, is in a way made all the more explicit in the far less potentially incendiary horror comedy *Men in White* – even the title of which is also a moniker for Singapore's People's Action Party (or PAP – the country's long-time majority political party, the trademark uniform of which is a white shirt and slacks). This might seem a daring gesture in the Singaporean context, where there are regulations against politically controversial films and, by most accounts, a social framework that hardly fosters open criticism of the ruling party (though this was more so when the film was released a decade ago than now). But part of the reason the film can get away with this is undoubtedly that it *is* a comedy, approaching its subject matter with levity. Nor is any parallel between the 'men in white' of the film's title (some ghosts living in Singapore public housing) and the members of the PAP explicitly highlighted in the film, though it would be hard for a local viewer to miss the fact that these ghosts are invisible beings keeping watch on the conduct of certain Singapore residents. In a comic twist, though, it turns out that these ghosts are themselves being policed by various humans (one a state official) concerned with their activities. And as some old-timers hankering for a prohibited cigarette at a local coffee shop opine at the film's opening, the government is even scarier than ghosts.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Although horror films are none too strongly associated with any 'Singapore new wave', they have been a consistent (if less prominent) part of the contemporary cinematic landscape, and several key Singapore producers and directors have been involved in horror efforts; as of the time of this writing, moreover, that trend continues as solidly as ever, with two Singapore horror films released domestically in the second half of 2018 (*23:59: The Haunting Hour* and *Zombiepura*) and several more slated for release in 2019 (Ho 2019).

Their relatively modest presence in the work of the 'Singapore new wave' notwithstanding, the corpus of Singapore horror films merits closer examination owing to a surprisingly strong, nationally specific generic consistency, as well as a rich and suggestive range of themes and motifs highly resonant with the local context – that national resonance in effect being acknowledged most recently with the choice of Singapore's 2018 National Day as the release date for the new military horror film *23:59: The Haunting Hour*. Perhaps the closest thing to a broad, overarching characteristic of Singapore horror is a preoccupation, on various levels, with issues of order and regulation – and a

distinctively ambivalent attitude towards same. Such regulation (as national narratives often assert) is what has allowed the modern structuring into being of Singapore, a city-state that is thriving, prosperous and safe; but at the same time this regulation can also be perceived as a source of tension if not oppression, putting individual freedoms at risk as the downside of national stability. The irony in many of the military and police-themed films is that the designated keepers of order find themselves chafing under the rules; but then they also find themselves yearning after stability when confronted with the chaotic forces of the unknown in the form of supernatural phenomena. The supernatural is in many cases a source of disorder, fear and danger, but at the same time it allows a narrative return of that which has been socially repressed or politically regulated in the forward march of Singapore's development: subterranean, historical connections of geography, culture, ethnicity, gender and desire (both sexual and pecuniary) which make their persistent relevance felt through supernatural manifestations. And as in much other horror from the region, the past sufferings and oppressions of individuals, in particular women, also make their return, refuse to disappear without appropriate redress. But distinctly and tellingly, in Singapore horror, characters are haunted not only by those who have been the victims of past wrongs, but also by those who police or regulate behaviour.

The case is not being made here that there is full consistency in theme or perspective across Singapore horror, as there is naturally some variety in kinds of narratives and kinds of focus, nor is it claimed that all of the themes and issues discussed here are unique to Singapore horror (although a case could be made that the particular configuration of issues and the modes of addressing them are distinct). As has been highlighted in this discussion, however, analysis of the form provides a window onto a range of issues germane to Singapore culture and identity, especially those pertaining to literal and figurative boundaries, and an unusual glimpse at the operations of the illicit, the transgressive and the repressed in the Singapore imagination.[10]

10. Grateful acknowledgement is made to Stephen Teo and Liew Kai Khiun of Nanyang Technological University for organizing the October 2011 seminar on *Film and Cinema in Singapore* at the Asian Research Institute of the National University of Singapore, where the first version of this article was presented.

APPENDIX 1

Singapore produced and Singapore co-produced feature horror films and films with supernatural themes, 1990–present.

12 Storeys, Eric Khoo (dir.) (1997), Zhao Wei Films.
1942, Kelvin Tong (dir.) (2005), Innoform Media; co-production with Japan.
23:59, Gilbert Chan (dir.) (2011), Gorylah Pictures.
23:59: The Haunting Hour, Gilbert Chan (dir.) (2018), Gorylah Pictures.
7 Letters, Junfeng Boo, Eric Khoo, Jack Neo, K. Rajagopal, Pin Pin Tan, Royston Tan and Kelvin Tong (dirs) (2015), Chuan Pictures.
Afterimages, Tony Kern (dir.) (2014), Mythopolis Pictures.
Bait, Kimble Rendall (dir.) (2012), Bait Productions; co-production with Australia.
Blood Ties, Chai Yee-Wei (dir.) (2009), Oak 3 Films.
The Blue Mansion, Glenn Goei (dir.) (2009), Tiger Tiger Pictures.
Bring Back the Dead, Thean-jeen Lee (dir.) (2015), Weiyu Films.
The Coffin, Ekachai Uekrongtham (dir.) (2008), Cineclick Asia; co-production with South Korea, Thailand and USA.
Demons, Daniel Hui (dir.) (2018), 13 Little Pictures.
The Eye, Pang Brothers (dir.) (2002), Applause Pictures; co-production with Hong Kong and Malaysia.

The Eye 2, Pang Brothers (dir.) (2004), Applause Pictures; co-production with Hong Kong.
Faeryville, Tzang Merwyn Tong (dir.) (2014), INRI Studio; co-production with USA.
A Fantastic Ghost Wedding, Meng Ong (dir.) (2014), Scout Pictures; co-production with Taiwan and Hong Kong.
Ghost Child, Gilbert Chan (dir.) (2013), Zhao Wei Films.
Ghost on Air, Cheng Ding An (dir.) (2012), Merelion Pictures.
The Ghosts Must Be Crazy!, Boris Boo and Mark Lee (dirs) (2011), Neo Studios.
God or Dog, Hugo Ng (dir.) (1997), LS Entertainment.
Greedy Ghost, Boris Boo (dir.) (2012), Asia Tropical Films.
Haunted Changi, Tony Kern and Andrew Lau (dirs) (2010), Mythopolis Pictures.
Hell Hole, Sam Loh (dir.) (2019), mm2 Entertainment.
Hsien of the Dead, Gary Ow (dir.) (2012), Monkeywrench.
Konpaku, Remi Sali (dir.) (2019), Studio59 Concepts.
Lang Tong, Sam Loh (dir.) (2014), mm2 Entertainment.
Macabre, aka *Darah*, Mo Brothers (dir.) (2009), Gorylah Pictures; co-production with Indonesia.
The Maid, Kelvin Tong (dir.) (2005), MediaCorp Raintree Pictures; co-production with Hong Kong and Philippines.
Medium Rare, Arthur Smith (dir.) (1992), Derrol Stepenny Productions.
Mee Pok Man, Eric Khoo (dir.) (1995), Zhao Wei Films.
Men in White, Kelvin Tong (dir.) (2007), Boku Films.
My Ghost Partner, Huang Yiliang (dir.) (2012), Red Group Studio.
The Offering, Kelvin Tong (dir.) (2016), Boku Films; co-production with USA.
Painted Skin, Gordon Chan (dir.) (2008), MediaCorp Raintree Pictures; co-production with China and Hong Kong.
Pulau Hantu, telefilm, Esan Sivalingam (dir.) (2008), Hoods Inc. Productions.
Red Numbers, Dominc Ow (dir.) (2013), Silver Media Group.
Repossession, Ming Siu Goh and Scott C. Hillyard (dirs) (2019), Monkey & Boar.
Return to Pontianak, Djinn (dir.) (2001), Vacant Films.
Revenge of the Pontianak, Glenn Goei and Gavin Yap (dirs) (2019), Tiger Tiger Pictures.
Rule Number One, Kelvin Tong (dir.) (2008), Boku Films; co-production with Hong Kong.
The Second Coming, Raymond Ng and Herman Yau (dirs) (2014), Imagine Nation Films; co-production with Hong Kong and Taiwan.
Siew Lup, Sam Loh (dir.) (2016), mm2 Entertainment.
The Spirit Compendium, Foo Fung Koon (dir.) (2008), Pro-Action Production.
The Tattooist, Peter Burger (dir.) (2007), Daydream Productions; co-production with New Zealand and Netherlands.
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