

## Refereed Article

# Off to Other Shores: Transgressing Borders in Contemporary Sinophone Screen Media

Helen Hess

### Abstract

The concept of a border is most commonly understood in a geographical sense, referring to boundaries between nation states or specific locations, which are often fluid rather than clearly demarcated. However, borders can also denote boundaries between different materials, ontological states, or realms of existence. In Chinese folk religion, for instance, physical objects are believed to cross into the metaphysical realm through processes such as burning or vaporization, while humans employ various strategies to communicate with spirits and the dead. This paper examines how young women traverse the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical realms in contemporary Sinophone filmic narratives, focusing on the interplay between representations of supernatural phenomena, spirituality, and the negotiability of reality and identity with broader social realities and cultural discourses. Central to the analysis is the Netflix mini-series *Bì'ān zhī jiā* 彼岸之嫁 (English title: *The Ghost Bride*), an adaptation of Yangsze Choo's novel *The Ghost Bride*, set in late nineteenth-century colonial Malacca. The series follows Pan Lilan, a young woman forced into a ghost marriage who must enter the realm of the dead to confront supernatural violence and reclaim agency. The paper places *The Ghost Bride*—referring both to the Netflix series and the novel—in conversation with Tan Chui Mui's *Barbarian Invasion* (Chinese title: *Yemanren ruqin* 野蛮人入侵; Malay title: *Belenggu*), which offers a contemporary Sinophone perspective on spiritual and embodied forms of border-crossing beyond explicit ghostly encounters. Through an intersectional lens, this paper investigates how these transgressions and mediations—and the resulting states of in-betweenness—reflect and challenge gendered, classed, and ethnic hierarchies, arguing that such narratives offer imaginative blueprints for coexistence and plurality in the contemporary Sinophone world.

**Keywords:** border crossings, Sinophone screen media, Chinese popular religion, *The Ghost Bride*, *Barbarian Invasion*

**Dr. Helen Hess**, Postdoktorandin Sinologie, Asien-Orient-Institut, Universität Zürich, Schweiz.

[helen.hess@aoi.uzh.ch](mailto:helen.hess@aoi.uzh.ch)

## Introduction

This paper analyzes Sinophone<sup>1</sup> screen media that depict various forms of border crossings between the known world and imagined realms, exploring the functions of these crossings and their connection to lived realities. Sinophone texts frequently depict protagonists who cross between physical and metaphysical realms, often as a way to grapple with social and political issues, functioning as sites where the tensions between different cultural-linguistic forms, identities, and power structures are actively negotiated.<sup>2</sup>

In mainland China and Malaysia, representations of ghosts, spirits, and supernatural phenomena are constrained, reflecting broader regimes governing spirituality and religion.<sup>3</sup> In China, strict state censorship frames supernatural content as “feudal superstition,” limiting direct depictions of ghosts and requiring filmmakers to rationalize or allegorize spectral events within thrillers or mystery narratives (Pang 2011). As scholars of Chinese religiosity have noted, however, popular spirituality has never disappeared but persists in diffused, vernacular forms (Yang 2004; Chau 2011). Filmic ghosts in this context can thus be read not only as narrative compromises but also as traces of suppressed spiritual imaginaries under state regulation. By fusing Chinese folk beliefs with Malay and indigenous customs, Malaysian Chinese cinema depicts a more diverse spiritual landscape. Here, supernatural stories frequently express hybrid worldviews that prioritize kinship, ethics, and a sense of community over dogmatic religion (Lee and Balaya 2015). In both China and Malaysia, images of ghosts and otherworldly experiences are used to contemplate and subtly question social norms and expectations.

Taiwan, by contrast, provides a markedly more open environment for supernatural and spiritual narratives. Scholars such as Wu Chia-rong (2016) have shown that contemporary Taiwanese cinema and literary culture draw on *zhiguai*-inspired storytelling, Daoist, Buddhist, and folk traditions, as well as indigenous spiritual cosmologies, using haunted spaces and spectral figures to explore memory, urban modernity, and historical and cultural trauma. Building on Fran Martin’s (2003)

- 
- 1 The concept of the Sinophone has emerged as a controversial yet productive framework for understanding Chinese-language communities and cultural expressions beyond the borders of mainland China. It shifts the focus from the traditional notions of a Chineseness tied to the nation state to a more fluid and expansive understanding of Chinese culture as it exists in diverse global contexts. The term Sinophone encapsulates a range of linguistic, cultural, and political experiences of Chinese-speaking communities. It challenges us to think beyond the confines of nationalism and to consider how Chinese language and culture are reshaped and reimagined in spaces that are no longer defined by a singular homeland (Shih 2011, 2013; Hee 2019; Shi 2021).
  - 2 On language editing: I used AI-supported language editing tools for a first round of editing, followed by a second round of proofreading by a professional copy editor, whom I want to thank for the valuable feedback.
  - 3 In the PRC, article 25 of the “Regulations on the Administration of Movies” states under point 5 that what “propagates evil cults or superstition” is prohibited from being recorded in a movie (The State Council 2001). In Malaysia, the film censorship guidelines state that films should not oppose the values of Islam (Film Censorship Board Malaysia 2024).

insights into “reverse discourse,” non-human or liminal figures in the Taiwanese context can be understood as disrupting dominant ideologies and social hierarchies by making marginalized experiences visibly present.

In all three countries, supernatural representations can thus be read not merely as entertainment but as spiritually inflected devices that question dominant ideologies, negotiate secular boundaries, and invite audiences to reconsider social hierarchies and the porous limits between the human and the non-human. Taken together, these Sinophone contexts illustrate the range of approaches to the supernatural and spirituality in film. Against this background, this paper examines two transnational co-productions to explore how contemporary Sinophone cinema negotiates cultural, ethical, and narrative boundaries through engagements with the spiritual and spectral realms.

The first part focuses on the Taiwanese–Malaysian Netflix production *Bi'an zhi jia* 彼岸之嫁 (English title: *The Ghost Bride*, 2020)—hereafter referred to as *The Ghost Bride*—situating it within broader discussions of Taiwanese drama and its use of ghosts and other liminal figures. The series draws on spiritual imaginaries that are deeply embedded in local cultural traditions while circulating within a transnational production and distribution framework. The second part turns to the Malaysia–Hong Kong co-production *Barbarian Invasion* (Chinese title: *Yemanren ruqin* 野蛮人入侵; Malay title: *Belenggu*, 2021), which engages with existential reflection and the blurring of reality and illusion. Taken together, these two pieces provide complementary viewpoints on the representation of spirituality and its function in transnational Sinophone film.

The two works were chosen because they exemplify border crossing in multiple senses. As co-productions, they navigate national, linguistic, and historical boundaries, negotiating creative collaboration across different Sinophone contexts. They demonstrate how co-production itself can serve as a site where boundaries—national, linguistic, historical, and generic—are contested and (re-)imagined, demonstrating how transnational Sinophone cinema enacts both cultural and aesthetic crossings.

Methodologically, these productions are not treated as isolated case studies but are regarded as part of wider discursive formations within contemporary Sinophone film and media culture. Drawing primarily on cultural analysis in the sense proposed by Mieke Bal (2002), the paper examines how meaning is produced through recurring concepts, narrative structures, and visual strategies. Mieke Bal’s method of cultural analysis emphasizes the present as the primary site of interpretation rather than historical reconstruction (Bal 1997, 1999, 2002). From this perspective, films and series are regarded not as fixed historical artifacts but as dynamic sites of meaning, influenced by current practices of production, distribution, and reception (Bal 1999). This method enables an examination of filmic texts as culturally embedded and interrelated, situated within networks of fictional and non-fictional texts through which meaning is produced. In the context of this paper, a cultural analysis

perspective allows Sinophone films and series to be understood in relation to broader cultural, visual, and transnational contexts, rather than as isolated objects. In doing so, the two co-productions can be situated within ongoing cultural exchanges without being reduced to singular or exceptional cases.

Accordingly, the two primary works are analyzed alongside other contemporary Sinophone audiovisual texts, such as the Taiwanese Netflix production *Fanxiao* (返校, English title: *Detention*), the short film *The Busy Young Psychic* (*Shen suan* 神算), and the feature film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Chinese title: *Bu san* 不散), to provide a broader view of how spiritual and spectral elements appear across different cinematic contexts. Together these productions offer a way to trace patterns of transnational engagement, thematic concerns, and cultural negotiation in contemporary Sinophone screen media.

### **Crossing into Other Realms: *The Ghost Bride***

*The Ghost Bride* tells the story of a young woman who is forced into marrying a deceased young man to save her father. The mini-series is an adaptation of the English-language novel *The Ghost Bride* by Malaysian author Yangsze Choo. The six episodes of the series correspond to the six chapters of the novel and, despite some plot differences, I will analyze the series and the novel in conjunction.

Both the novel and the series are set in colonial Malacca in the late nineteenth century and tell the story of a young Malayan Chinese woman named Pan Lilan (潘丽兰). Lilan's father was once a successful spice merchant but became increasingly reclusive after his wife's death and lost much of the family fortune. The book also focuses on the father's opium addiction, but this aspect is left out of the series. In general, the series portrays the father as less passive and more responsible than the book.

The story begins with the father receiving an offer from the wealthy Mrs. Lim to marry Lilan to her late eldest son, Lim Tianching (林天青). Despite being poor, the father does not even think of accepting the offer. But the ghost of Tianching begins to haunt Lilan and the whole Pan family. Every night he gains access to Lilan's dreams and tries to get her to marry him.

In the book, it is her father's passivity that forces Lilan to take her fate into her own hands. She seeks out a medium with her Ahma, from whom she obtains a potion that is supposed to help her keep the spirit of Tianching away from her dreams. Instead, Lilan falls into a coma after taking the potion and her soul fails to return to her body. Thus, Lilan's soul makes its way to the Netherworld—the plane of the dead—to confront Tianching. In the series, the father falls ill and Tianching uses this circumstance to blackmail Lilan. Only if she becomes his bride will the father awaken from his coma.

Much of the novel and the series takes place in the Netherworld, where Lilan tries to expose Tianching's crooked dealings. Tianching manages to linger in the Netherworld instead of going before the judges who would decide whether he goes to hell or is reincarnated. His mother's offerings allow him not only to live in a huge estate with countless employees but also to bribe the judges so that he does not have to go before them. Lilan thus enters the realm of the dead, thereby occupying an intermediate stage between life and death.

*The Ghost Bride* presents various forms of boundary crossing, most notably the protagonist's journey to the Netherworld and back, as well as transgressions of normative social and discursive frameworks, such as stereotypical gender roles. The Chinese-language Netflix production exemplifies the transnational circulation and interconnection of narratives across the cultural Sinosphere, as it is based on an English-language novel by Yangsze Choo, a Malaysian-Chinese author residing in the United States.

Studies of Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride*, as well as its television adaptation, have framed both the novel and the series within an orientalist discourse, arguing that it is characterized by an exoticizing perspective. David H. J. Neo and Sanghamitra Dalal (2022, 2023) critique how the show simplifies and exoticizes complex cultural elements—particularly ghost marriages and Peranakan family traditions—for global consumption. They argue that the series departs from the novel's rich mode of storytelling, which reminds of oral storytelling, and complexly described family dynamics, adhering to more popular genres like horror and mystery. They also criticize the use of Mandarin, postmodern fashion choices, and stylized visuals as strategies that flatten cultural authenticity to fit global streaming standards (Neo and Dalal 2022, 2023). In another paper, the same authors analyze how, both in the novel and the series, traditional cultural elements are selectively commodified and aestheticized to meet the demands of the global cultural marketplace. Drawing on the concept of re-orientalism, they argue that the adaptation reshapes local traditions into narratives that reinforce global consumer expectations (Dalal and Neo 2022).

In contrast to Neo and Dalal, Barbora Vinczeová (2019) does not seek to distinguish between fictional representation and historical reality but instead analyzes how Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* transforms Chinese afterlife mythology into fantasy. She classifies *The Ghost Bride* not as magical realism, but as historical fantasy. Focusing on the depiction of the Netherworld as well as on fantastical beings, death rituals, and ghost marriage, Vinczeová argues that Choo largely preserves traditional beliefs while enriching them through detailed characterization. As Vinczeová notes, the underworld reflects Chinese myths in its portrayal as a bureaucratic purgatory, and spirits, demons, and dragons retain their mythic roles with added narrative complexity. Rituals such as ancestor worship and the burning of offerings operate as natural laws within the fantasy world.

The classification of *The Ghost Bride* as either magical realism or historical fantasy remains open to debate. Wu Chia-rong's concepts of "magical localism" and "magical nativism" may offer more appropriate frameworks than the category of magical realism, which is usually defined more narrowly than a mere blending of realist and fantastical elements (Wu 2016). What is evident, however, is that both the novel and the series diverge from realist representation—even in their ostensibly non-fantastical aspects. Rather than situating the series within traditional Chinese genres such as *zhiguai* or *chuanqi*,<sup>4</sup> I agree with Neo and Dalal, who position the narrative within a modern Taiwanese context shaped by a highly globalized and Western-oriented market economy—an environment that does not always accurately represent cultural, linguistic, or religious practices. Accordingly, this study's primary interest lies not in reconstructing specific historical events, but in revealing how mobility, transnationality, and identity are represented and negotiated across Sinophone contexts in the 2010s and 2020s. Rather than approaching the work as a historical source, it is read here as part of the contemporary Sinophone cinematic discourse in which it circulates. This aligns with the principles of cultural analysis, which encourage viewing a work not as a direct historical account but as a product of the cultural and ideological forces at play during its creation.

As Mieke Bal argues, cultural analysis differs from conventional understandings of history by emphasizing the critic's embeddedness in the present. It highlights how we interpret cultural objects—always shaped by the past—through the lens of contemporary social and cultural contexts, creating a "cultural memory in the present" (Bal 1999: 1). Historical references hence function less as evidence of the past than as present-day discursive formations, shaping the meanings attributed to border crossing and transnational belonging.

This perspective highlights how texts are shaped by and contribute to dominant discourses that are constructed and contested, rather than fixed or factual. Analyzing a work thus involves uncovering the cultural narratives and power relations that inform its production, showing how meaning is generated through discourse rather than through a straightforward recounting of historical events.

---

4 The *chuanqi* (传奇) genre, which was popular in the Tang and Song dynasties, is characterized by its mixture of historical fiction, supernatural elements, and complex storytelling. The term *chuanqi* roughly translates to "story of the marvelous," and these narratives often involve extraordinary events, fantastical creatures, and moral lessons. Within the *chuanqi* tradition, one of the four main thematic categories is *zhiguai* (志怪), which focuses on supernatural, strange, and eerie occurrences. The *zhiguai* theme encompasses stories of ghosts, spirits, and otherworldly experiences that blur the line between the physical and metaphysical realms. These supernatural elements are not only meant to entertain but also serve as reflections of societal anxieties, moral questions, and philosophical ponderings, often challenging the boundaries of human experience and understanding. By intertwining the supernatural with the everyday, *zhiguai* narratives contribute to the richness of *chuanqi* tales, creating a dynamic interplay between the real and the unreal that continues to influence Chinese literature today (Campany 1996: 21–30).

To that end, the following analysis has three objectives. First, it situates relevant studies within recent scholarship on representations of Southeast Asia in the Sinosphere. Second, it compares *The Ghost Bride* with other Taiwanese fantasy dramas produced during the same period. Third, by bringing *The Ghost Bride* into a dialogue with *Barbarian Invasion*, this paper presents a counterexample of border crossing as a strategy of intervention in Sinophone transnational cinema.

The previous studies of *The Ghost Bride* introduced above are to be positioned in a broader scholarly discourse that criticizes traditions of representing the “East”—particularly the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia—through exoticizing and othering lenses. This is consistent with what Brian Bernards refers to as “Nanyang orientalism,” a representational mode that constructs the Nanyang (or “South Seas,” referring to Southeast Asia) as a mysterious, feminine, and often haunted space, designed primarily for consumption by an external, often Western, gaze. Similar critiques have been applied to other cultural productions, for instance in E. K. Tan’s study of postwar Hong Kong cinema (Tan 2010) and Lim Choon Bee’s work on gender and locality in *Xingbie yu bentu*, which argues that the feminization of Nanyang is closely tied to a patriarchal and colonial visual logic (Lim 2009: 86–93).

What distinguishes *The Ghost Bride*, however, is its subtle subversion of these conventions. While the setting and aesthetic may initially appear to fall within the bounds of Nanyang orientalism—rich with mysticism, ancestral ghosts, and opulent Qing-style imagery—the narrative centers on a female protagonist, Lilan, who resists objectification and plays an active role in shaping her destiny. Instead of being a passive figure within a male-centered world, Lilan exercises significant agency. Her journey through both the material and spiritual realms challenges the traditional framing of Nanyang as a feminized, inert backdrop to male exploration or desire.

This complexity complicates a straightforward orientalist reading. While the surface aesthetics of *The Ghost Bride* may seem to replicate orientalist tropes, the narrative itself disrupts the patriarchal logic often at the heart of Nanyang orientalism. In this sense, Choo’s work opens up possibilities for reimagining the Nanyang not just as a site of exotic fantasy, but also as a space for feminist rearticulation and resistance. While Nanyang orientalism is often associated with a patriarchal logic that feminizes Nanyang and objectifies the feminine as the Other, the female protagonist in *The Ghost Bride* demonstrates considerable agency.

I argue that the Lim family represents the wealthy Chinese elite in colonial Malaya, with Lim Tianching serving as a symbol of both the corruption and oppression perpetuated by this elite. His character also embodies the systemic oppression of women, a condition that persists as a lingering societal memory. At one point, Lim Tianching states that there is nothing he cannot have, further asserting his dominance by tyrannizing his own mother, whom he manipulates into indulging his desires by making frequent offerings of paper money and luxury items. His actions reveal a profound disregard for others, as evidenced by his fathering a child out of wedlock, abandoning the woman, seducing and blackmailing his brother’s fiancée, and

ultimately being murdered due to his actions. Thus, Lim Tianching becomes emblematic of a patriarchal order.

In contrast, Lilan rejects conventional gender roles from the outset. Although she is initially made into a “ghost bride,” she takes control of her fate. Refusing to be passive, she does not allow herself to be haunted by dreams but instead enters them, intervening in events within them. By the end of the narrative, Lilan rejects a traditional life as a wife and chooses instead to embark on a mission to save the world alongside Erlang, who repeatedly stands by her side through the course of the events.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of the story, Lilan undergoes significant personal development, evolving from a childlike figure into a self-confident young woman.

*The Ghost Bride* can be interpreted as an allusion to the entanglement of the wealthy elite with the colonial regime. The elite, much like in colonial times, possess the power to tyrannize those less financially privileged. However, in this context, the exploitation is not through labor but in the form of a ghost who continues to haunt a young, unmarried woman even after his death. These dynamics highlight the power imbalance driven by both class and gender differences. As such, the series can be read as a critique of both patriarchal and capitalist power structures.

Due to their history of migration, the influence of British colonial rule in Malaysia, events during the Second World War, the Cold War, and the process of decolonization and Malaysia’s independence, the Chinese population in Malaysia (hereafter referred to as the Malaysian Chinese) constitutes a hybrid community—one situated between worlds on multiple levels.

As an ethnic minority with limited political representation but considerable economic strength, the Malaysian Chinese community navigates a complex historical and political landscape, particularly through its complex and often ambivalent relationship with China (Rae and Witzel 2008; Yen 2008). Certain events from the community’s history resurface in uncanny forms. For instance, memories of communism or of the inter-ethnic conflicts in 1969 often take the shape of haunting recollections, emerging in the collective consciousness as unresolved echoes of a turbulent past (Show 2016; Show 2021). These spectral memories intertwine with contemporary struggles, casting a long shadow over the present and complicating the community’s sense of identity and belonging. In this manner, the past continuously disrupts the present, challenging both individual and collective efforts toward reconciliation and progress.

### Spooky Encounters and Chinese Folk Religion

*The Ghost Bride* is not the only example of a recent Taiwanese drama production in which a young woman is confronted with supernatural encounters. *Fanxiao* (返校, English title: *Detention*), for example, is a Taiwanese TV series produced by Netflix

---

<sup>5</sup> Erlang, also called *erlang shen* (二郎神), is a river and warrior god in Chinese folk religion (Cheung 2023).

and the Taiwanese Public Television Service. The series of eight episodes first aired in 2020. It is based on a video game with the same title, which was produced by Red Candle Games and released in 2017. There is also a feature film based on the same video game, which first aired in 2019.

Set in 1999 at Greenwood High School, *Detention* follows a transfer student who inadvertently enters a restricted area on campus. There, she encounters the ghost of a girl who used to be a student at the same school, and who unveils the school's concealed history of the past three decades. The narrative intertwines the oppressive political climate of Taiwan's White Terror era<sup>6</sup> with local legends, exposing the persecution faced by students and teachers who dared to seek freedom amidst stringent censorship. *Detention* combines elements of horror and supernatural folklore with a poignant exploration of Taiwan's complex history, offering viewers both a thrilling and educational experience.

Min-tser Lin (2024) explores how the 2019 feature film version of *Detention* fits into Taiwan's broader efforts to forge a cohesive national memory of the White Terror. Lin argues that the film plays a pivotal role in shaping this collective remembrance by downplaying or erasing politically sensitive aspects of the past, particularly the affiliations of some victims with the Chinese Communist Party. By using a spooky framework, Lin argues, the film conceals the deeper political implications of the historical events it portrays. Lin suggests that the movie's central character embodies a sense of innocence and ignorance that inadvertently reveals the limitations of Taiwan's nationalistic commemorative project, illustrating the tension between the country's desire to move forward and the unresolved complexities of its history.

Another example is a Taiwanese short film by Chen He Yu (2013) titled *The Busy Young Psychic* (*Shen suan* 神算), which in 2017 was adapted into a TV series titled *Teenage Psychic*. Both the short film and the series portray the daily life and experiences of Xiao Ya (小雅), a teenage girl with spiritual medium abilities.

The short film opens with a typical morning in Xiao Ya's life: she has breakfast with her family and then rushes to a ceremony before school. At school, Xiao Ya is depicted helping a friend feel safe from ghosts in the restroom. When a senior invites her to his birthday party, she hesitates, torn between her social desires and her responsibilities after school. Seemingly romantically interested in the senior, Xiao Ya visits her master after school to explain that she cannot assist at the temple. He insists that her responsibilities take precedence, emphasizing filial piety and duty. Xiao Ya stays, but when he presents her with ceremonial clothing, she refuses to change or to remove the makeup she had applied for the party.

She then assists several individuals with spiritual consultations, though with little enthusiasm. Despite planning to leave at 10 p.m., she is pressured to stay. A wealthy

---

6 The politics of severe repression of dissidents during the martial law period in Taiwan, which lasted from 1949 to 1987, is commonly referred to as White Terror (Hsiao 2021: 4–5).

man, Zhang Laoban, arrives, demanding help for his terminally ill wife. Xiao Ya insists that the illness is medical, not spiritual, and refuses his payment. Tensions rise until she is pushed by someone, triggering a trance in which she becomes possessed by the deity Xuan Nü (玄女). Speaking through Xiao Ya, Xuan Nü declares the wife's fate sealed and urges Zhang to repent, warning him that divine judgment awaits him.

Afterwards, Xiao Ya retreats in exhaustion and calls her friend to cancel her plans for the party. Her friend informs her that the senior is about to make a wish, only for him to publicly express affection for another girl. Xiao Ya listens in silence, then hangs up, visibly saddened. Later, Zhang is seen praying at the temple. Moved by his desperation, Xiao Ya offers him comfort and performs a ritual, ultimately choosing her duties over her personal desires. The film concludes with Xiao Ya encountering her senior on her way home and gifting him a baseball bat, to which he responds with a grateful hug. The final scene shows Xiao Ya practicing baseball alone on her terrace. Through this narrative, the film explores the life of a teenager torn between the demands of her "normal" life and her responsibilities as a spiritual medium. It illustrates how these duties cause her to miss out on many of the typical experiences of adolescence.

Although their plots differ significantly, these series share several key similarities: (1) Each features a female protagonist who, in some capacity, has access to the metaphysical realm; (2) These female leads all struggle to balance their "normal" lives with their supernatural abilities and each is in some way haunted by encounters with supernatural forces; (3) The narratives are all coming-of-age stories, in which the female protagonists gain increasing agency throughout the plot; (4) The series all portray myths and practices rooted in Chinese folk religion. In the following, I will focus on this last aspect.

### **Traveling to Other Worlds**

Chinese popular religion—also referred to as folk religion—is a deeply embedded aspect of Chinese cultural life, characterized by flexible practices such as ancestor worship, temple visits, and local rituals. Functioning largely outside formal religious institutions, it is frequently intertwined with Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, resulting in a highly syncretic tradition. Despite processes of modernization and state regulation, folk religion remains widely practiced, particularly in rural areas, and has experienced a revival since the late twentieth century as individuals seek meaning, moral guidance, and community. The tradition exhibits significant regional, social, and gender-based variation, and although it is not officially recognized by the state, certain practices are selectively supported for their perceived contributions to social harmony and cultural heritage (Zhang et al. 2021; Wong 2011). As the context analyzed in this paper includes the broader Sinosphere—specifically Taiwan and Malaysia—this study also draws on scholarship concerning the practice of Chinese folk religion among diasporic communities in Southeast Asia.

Chinese folk religion can be defined as not having any “canonical scriptures, no unified institutions independent of secular institutions—such as the family, the clan and the guild—and no professional priests. It is mainly transmitted through vernacular fiction and oral storytelling” (Gentz 2013: 113). Moreover, the diversity of its local expressions makes it difficult to define Chinese folk religion as a singular, unified tradition. For example, the practices observed among Chinese communities in Malaysia differ significantly from those in mainland China or Taiwan. More broadly, it is common for individuals who engage in daily rituals—such as burning incense for deities or ancestors—to reject the notion that they are participating in a formal “religion.” In pre-modern China, such practices were typically classified as social customs (*fengsu*) rather than as formalized teachings (*jiao*) (Gentz 2013: 113).

The phenomenon of ghost marriage (Chinese: *minghun* 冥婚 or *yinhun* 阴婚), historically practiced in certain regions of China as well as among Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, is closely tied to Chinese popular religion. Two primary forms of ghost marriage can be identified: (1) marriage between two deceased individuals and (2) marriage between a deceased person and a living individual. The former was often conducted when the eldest son of a family died unmarried, as Confucian norms dictated that a younger brother should not marry before his elder sibling. In such cases, the family would seek an unmarried deceased woman to be posthumously wed to the deceased son (Topley and Bernardi 2011). The latter form occurred, for example, when a male fiancé died before the wedding; the ritual ensured that the bride could still be incorporated into the fiancé’s family lineage (Wang 2016: 88–90).

The themes of ghost marriage and mediumship are widespread in contemporary Sinophone filmic narratives. One of the first movies with the theme of ghost marriage was a Hong Kong movie titled *Gui xinniang* 鬼新娘 (English title: “The Bride from Hell”), which was released in 1971. Another Hong Kong movie with the same Chinese title was first shown in 1987. More recent examples include the 2017 Filipino movie titled *The Ghost Bride* and the Chinese movie *Huang miaocun zhi moguan xinniang* 黄庙村之魔棺新娘 (English title: “The Ghost Marriage”), which was first shown in 2018. In most of these movies, a young woman is forced into a marriage with a deceased man, usually for financial reasons.

Although historically practiced, ghost marriages were typically less morbid or sensational than their portrayals in popular culture suggest. Usually, they involved the marriage of two individuals after death, which was intended to bring peace to their souls and their families. The marriage of a living young woman to a deceased man, as portrayed in *The Ghost Bride*, appears to be extremely rare (Gu and Xu 2014).

Additionally, Lin Ho-chun (2020), who also mentions *The Ghost Bride* as one among several examples of contemporary Taiwanese film and drama that represent

ghost marriages, highlights that the phenomenon in Taiwan has a different history and has been widely represented in popular culture.<sup>7</sup>

However, as my reading of *The Ghost Bride* is primarily interpretive, I do not undertake a detailed analysis of historical or contemporary ghost marriage practices. Instead, I focus on the motif of crossing into the Netherworld—a theme more explicitly highlighted in the series' Chinese title, *Bi'an zhi jia* (彼岸之嫁), which can be translated as “marriage on the other shore” or “marriage across the shore.” The term *bi'an* (彼岸) refers to “the other shore” or “the other side,” often symbolizing the afterlife or spiritual realm in Chinese cultural and religious contexts. The Chinese title thus underscores the crossing between the world of the living and that of the dead.

In Chinese folk religion, the boundary between the physical and metaphysical realms—between the living and the dead—is often regarded as permeable. A central belief holds that individuals who die unjustly or who are not afforded proper burial rites cannot transition peacefully into the afterlife. Instead, their souls remain in the world of the living as hungry ghosts, condemned to wander in a state of unrest and dissatisfaction (Kuah 2024: 74–76).

This belief is most vividly expressed during the Hungry Ghost Festival, an important event in the Chinese lunar calendar observed on the 15th day of the 7th month. During this time, it is believed that the gates of the Netherworld open, allowing spirits to reenter the mortal realm. Families perform rituals and offer food, incense, and other items to appease these spirits, both to bring them peace and to prevent them from causing misfortune (DeBernardi 1984). These practices reflect the continued influence of the dead on the living and the reciprocal obligations between the two worlds. According to Chinese folk religion, there are three realms of existence: the heavenly realm or plane (*yangjian*, 阳间), the human realm or plane (*renjian*, 人间), and the Netherworld, in the novel and the series also referred to as the “plane of the dead” (*yinjian*, 阴间) (Kuah 2024: 27–34).

The Ghost Festival serves as a ritual reminder of the ongoing interactions between the living and the dead, where the metaphysical and physical realms are not separate but continuously shape one another. In the following section, I will explore the concept of borders and the act of crossing them in more detail.

According to standard English dictionaries, the noun “border” encompasses three primary meanings. The first includes three sub-definitions: (a) a line demarcating one country or state from another; (b) a boundary separating different places; and (c) a specific, often politically or historically significant, border (e.g. “the border”). The second meaning refers to a decorative design that runs along the edge of an object,

---

7 The wide absence of the phenomenon in mainland Chinese popular culture is also to be considered as being related to the censorship of everything that represents any form of superstition.

such as a rug or wallpaper. The third denotes a narrow bed of plants arranged along the edge of a garden or walkway.

The concept of a border is therefore intrinsically connected to space and place. It is most commonly understood in a geographical context, particularly in relation to borders between nation states. Similarly, borders between locations—such as between urban and rural areas—are often fluid and not clearly delineated. However, this discussion seeks to explore another dimension of the term, one that aligns more closely with the second and third definitions mentioned above: borders between different materials or substances. This includes physical transitions between land and water, as well as between different states of matter—such as liquid water, solid water (ice), and gaseous water (water vapor).

In Chinese folk religion, it is commonly held that physical objects can be transferred into the metaphysical realm through a change in their state of matter—for instance, by being burned (as in the case of incense or paper money) or vaporized (as with food offerings). The belief underlying these practices is that the essence of the offering, once transformed, can cross into the spiritual domain, allowing ancestral spirits or deities to partake of the substance.

DeBernardi (2006: 92) describes an invocation that she heard sung by practitioners of Chinese folk religion in Penang, Malaysia, which illustrates the role of incense in mediating the boundaries between deities and humans, as well as between the physical and metaphysical realms. To better contextualize this belief system, it is useful to briefly outline the principles of correlative cosmology, a foundational framework in traditional Chinese thought.

In the classical period a correlative cosmology took shape in China which is still influential in the Sinosphere today. Accordingly, the cosmos in Chinese popular religion is not conceived solely as an interaction of impersonal forces but is also understood as being inhabited by sentient spiritual entities that engage with the human world and shape human lives. According to Clart (2012), these beings generally fall into three main categories: gods, ghosts, and ancestors—most of whom are of human origin.

Ancestors are deceased individuals who continue to be honored by their living kin through rituals and offerings, ensuring their ongoing care and presence in familial life. Ghosts, by contrast, are also spirits of the dead but differ from ancestors in that they lack surviving descendants to perform the necessary rites. As a result, they remain unattached to any lineage and are believed to cause disruptions or misfortunes in the world of the living. Gods, the third category, are understood as powerful supernatural entities associated with the maintenance of public order and moral values. They are commonly envisioned as part of a celestial hierarchy, modeled after bureaucratic institutions, with the Jade Emperor at its apex (Clart 2012: 222; DeBernardi 2006: 81–91).

The boundaries between these categories, however, are not rigid; spiritual beings are capable of shifting from one category to another. For example, when a family line

ends or fails to perform the necessary ancestral rites, an ancestor may transform into a ghost. Conversely, a ghost can be elevated to the status of an ancestor if posthumous descendants adopt the spirit and perform the required rituals. Similarly, ghosts that exhibit significant spiritual power and use it to benefit the living may ascend to the rank of gods (Clart 2012: 222).

This underscores the importance of proper burial rites and sacrifices. It is to be noted that gods, ghosts, and ancestors are differentiated ritually by the types of offerings presented to them and the locations where these offerings are made. For example, in many traditions, gods are given an odd number of incense sticks (representing *yang* 阳), while ancestors are given an even number (representing *yin* 阴). Gods receive gold “spirit money,” while ghosts and ancestors are offered silver money. Additionally, food offerings for gods are uncooked and uncut, while those for ghosts are cooked but uncut, and offerings for ancestors are both cooked and cut (Blake 2011).

This explains how material objects are believed to transcend the boundaries into the metaphysical realm. The distinction between the physical and the metaphysical realms appears to be closely tied to concepts of dematerialization and invisibility. When considering what separates the physical from the non-physical, haptic qualities and visibility emerge as the two most significant criteria.

### **Constructing Alternative Realities: *Barbarian Invasion***

*Barbarian Invasion* (2021), which the remainder of this article shall focus on, is a Malaysia–Hong Kong co-production that transcends the boundaries of genre, language, and cinematic convention. Written and directed by and starring Tan Chui Mui, the film premiered at the 24th Shanghai International Film Festival, where it was awarded the prestigious Jury Grand Prix at the Golden Goblet Awards (SIFF 2021).

In academic circles, discussions of Tan Chui Mui’s *Barbarian Invasion* are still emerging, with one of the few contributions being Sheau-Shi Ngo’s review that reads the film’s dual narrative as an “empathetic odyssey,” reflecting on identity, embodiment, and self-reclamation in independent Malaysian cinema (Ngo 2024). In contrast, non-academic analyses are more numerous, but tend to focus less on theory and more on the film’s thematic and cultural impact: critics such as Kumar (2022) and Linnarz (2021) situate *Barbarian Invasion* as a personal and metafictional work that blends genre with autobiographical reflection on artistic practice and motherhood, and highlight its significance within the Malaysian New Wave and its success on the festival circuit.

*Barbarian Invasion* centers on Moon Lee, an actress and single mother, who travels with her son Yu Zhou to a seaside town in Malaysia to meet her friend Roger, who is a film director. Moon has starred in several of his films in the past. Roger and his assistant Cathy pick them up at the pier.

The next day, Roger introduces his project while Moon plays with Yu Zhou at a swimming pool. He recounts a story about the old sword master Miyamoto Musashi, who defeats a younger opponent by using the blinding sunlight at sunset.<sup>8</sup> Roger explains that while the younger swordsman believes his sword is everything, the older master understands that everything can be a sword—even sunlight. Roger connects this idea to filmmaking: when he was young, film was everything to him; now that he is older, everything is film. Life itself is a film, he says. He reveals that he wants to make a Southeast Asian action film inspired by the Hollywood success *The Bourne Identity* (2002).

During a car ride, Roger explains the plot of the planned film. The film starts with a group of fishermen, who rescue a wounded woman from the South China Sea. She has lost her memory but can speak multiple languages and possesses exceptional fighting skills, which is to be the film's central theme. Roger wants Moon to play the female lead. Although interested, she hesitates, saying she can barely take care of her own child at the moment. She is worried that she is not ready to take on a film project again.

Nevertheless, Roger takes her to a martial arts school where Moon is supposed to train in martial arts with Master Loh. Similar to Moon, Loh is initially sceptical of taking on this task, insisting that he teaches kung fu, not acting, and that learning kung fu requires years of dedication. Eventually, he agrees to train Moon intensively every day for one month. Moon still doubts herself and suggests using a body double for the fight scenes, but Roger persuades her by reminding her that she has already mastered demanding skills for previous films. He argues that doing her own stunts would strengthen her comeback after her rather long absence from the film business due to her maternity leave. Ultimately, Moon agrees and begins training.

The training is gruelling and discouraging at first, but Moon persists. While she trains, Yu Zhou stays with Roger's assistant. At one point, he runs away, alarming everyone, and is later found playing with a new friend: a Malay girl. Moon continues her training and seems to make progress. However, Master Loh remains extremely strict, pushing Moon to her limits, including a group exercise in which she is attacked by all the other students at once.

On her way home one day, Moon encounters a Buddhist monk who often sits by the roadside. He asks her whether she knows where she is going and gives her a Chinese booklet titled “是谁拖着尸体在走路？” (*Who is dragging this corpse?*). In another encounter, the monk reads her palm and tells her that her body is not the prison of her mind but rather the opposite: her mind is the prison of her body.

Meanwhile, Roger informs Moon that the producer wants her ex-husband Juilliard to play the male lead. Moon argues that she cannot possibly perform love scenes

---

8 Roger refers to a famous Japanese novel by Yōshikawa Eiji titled *Musashi* (Original title in Japanese: *Miyamoto Musashi* 宮本武蔵) which was first published in 1935. For an English translation of the novel see Eiji 1995.

with someone she hates in reality. She tells Roger that he has to choose between them. When Roger's assistant asks him why Moon hates her ex-husband so intensely, Roger guesses that actually the opposite might be true: that she still loves him.

In a pivotal training scene, Master Loh tells Moon that she has to feel her own body in order to express herself. When she asks what her "self" is, he does not respond with words. Instead, he responds with his fists by repeatedly striking her and asking who was hit, who feels pain, who blocks, and who ducks. When Moon finally answers "me," he challenges her to consider whether she now understands who her "self" is. Although rather brutal, this experience seems to be a turning point in Moon's training. Shortly afterward, Moon proves her progress by successfully fighting multiple opponents during a test, which she passes to general celebration.

Later, Roger reveals that the Chinese producer of the film prefers Chinese actors and that they have suggested that Moon be replaced as the female lead by a wealthy Chinese actress who is offering substantial funding for the movie. Although Roger insists Moon is the best actor for the role, her refusal to work with Juilliard further complicates the matter. Feeling sidelined, Moon decides to leave. Although Roger later claims he has rejected the funding and wants her to stay, Moon insists on departing regardless.

Before leaving, Moon meets Master Loh one last time. He gives her two fighting sticks and explains that the main goal of learning kung fu is acquiring self-awakening. Accordingly, he asks her to promise never to fight in any competitions, never to fight in the streets, and never to tell anyone that she has learned kung fu.

After her meeting with Master Loh, Moon walks back home with Yu Zhou. When they pass a store with toys for children, he wants his mother to buy him a toy gun, just like the one his Malay friend has. But Moon refuses to buy him one. When he insists, she walks ahead to encourage him to follow, but a car suddenly stops in front of the toy shop and Yu Zhou is kidnapped. Moon chases after the car unsuccessfully, then remembers the tracker she previously gave her son and tracks the kidnappers down. From this point on, the film shifts into action-movie mode.

Moon confronts two men and fights them using the sticks Master Loh gave her earlier that day. After a while, a third, stronger man appears and eventually overpowers Moon. She is knocked unconscious and thrown into the sea. Her motionless body washes up on the beach, where Burmese refugees arrive by boat. One woman tries to help her, telling her friend that Moon was beaten by an agent, and takes her to a van. The driver initially takes Moon but later throws her out.

The next morning, two police officers find Moon sleeping on a bench in a public park and assume she is Burmese. She fights them off and escapes, hiding in a phone repair shop. The shop owner, Adnan, shelters her and protects her from the police. Moon speaks several languages but remembers nothing about herself and introduces herself as "Mai." Adnan attempts to identify her online using her photo, but finds no trace, realizing that someone has erased her digital existence. The only clue is a tattoo

on her waist reading “Yu Zhou” in Chinese characters, which Adnan interprets as a possible mission code.

Using AI, Adnan traces a location linked to her identity. Together they investigate a nightclub and realize afterward that they are being followed. Back at Adnan’s place, they cut and dye Moon’s hair. Looking in the mirror, she asks herself who she is in multiple languages. She later teaches Adnan basic self-defense.

One night, a man from the nightclub breaks in. He first beats Adnan down and then attacks Moon. She defeats him, and she and Adnan discover a photo of both of them on his phone. Moon decides to leave Adnan to uncover her identity. Before she leaves, Adnan kisses her and they sit by the shore together. Suddenly, Moon remembers that the characters for “Yu Zhou,” which are tattooed on her body, refer to the name of her son.

Adnan and Moon return to the pier and walk through a market hall. Suddenly the man from the nightclub appears and stabs Adnan directly in the back—echoing Adnan’s earlier remark that he is not afraid of being stabbed from behind. Someone then shouts “Cut,” revealing that this entire sequence is part of a film shoot. Yu Zhou runs toward Adnan, calling him “Dad,” revealing that Adnan is in fact Juilliard, Yu Zhou’s father. After several retakes, Moon is shown alone on the beach at night, removing her wig and sleeping in a hammock.

It turns out that interwoven with the main narrative is a metafictional “film within the film,” in which Moon portrays an immigrant perpetually engaged in conflict and flight. This secondary narrative mirrors and amplifies Moon’s real-life struggles, as she increasingly identifies with the character she plays. The distinction between actress and role, fiction and reality, begins to dissolve.

The next day, Moon wanders through an oil palm plantation and encounters a young Buddhist monk who directs her to his master at the top of a hill. Guided by two dogs, she meets the master—the Buddhist monk whom she has encountered several times before. They sit in silence until nightfall. The following day, the master offers her a choice between his closed hands. She chooses one that contains something that looks similar to an acorn but apparently has a very sour taste. After eating it, Moon meditates with the Buddhist master under a banyan tree. The master emphasizes that identity is not defined by name, profession, or relationships. In the end he asks her: “Who are you?” And finally, after some more meditation, he hands something to her and walks away.

Moon is then shown walking on water, which, however, turns out to be a filmic trick. There is a “bridge” right under the surface of the water, which is not seen from a distance, making it look like Moon is walking on the surface of the water. In the final scene, Moon sits beside Juilliard and Yu Zhou on a swing, while Roger attempts to walk on water himself, holding two fighting sticks and practicing kung fu.

## The Ocean: Aesthetic Presence and Allegorical Function

The ocean has a prominent presence throughout *Barbarian Invasion*. Visually, the seaside repeatedly frames key moments of training, reflection, violence, and transformation. The beach functions as both a place of discipline and exposure, where Moon trains her body, is tested by Master Loh, and later fights for her survival. The ocean's constant movement, sound, and visual texture contribute to the film's tactile, embodied aesthetic.

At the same time, the ocean carries a strong allegorical charge. It is the site where the Burmese refugees arrive, foregrounding contemporary histories of displacement and migration across Southeast Asia. It is also the place where Moon—or Mai, the role she plays—loses her memory after being thrown into the water, emerging from the ocean with no past and no fixed identity, yet speaking multiple languages associated with Southeast Asia. Mai can be read as a transnational citizen—a Southeast Asian subject shaped not by national borders but by movement, contact, and exchange, which can be read as a reference to refugees' status of statelessness and of trying to build a new life and identity abroad. The ocean thus symbolizes transnational connectivity across Southeast Asia, linking different shores, peoples, and histories.

In recent years, scholars working on the subject of Southeast Asia have increasingly used water as a metaphor for cultural, historical, and political connectivity rather than division. Brian Bernards, drawing on Epeli Hau'ofa, positions the ocean not as a boundary but as a generative and connective space, fostering movement, exchange, and relational networks across islands (Bernards 2015: 12–13; Hau'ofa 1993). This archipelagic imagination challenges state-centered and nationalist notions of culture, emphasizing diversity, circulation, and ongoing interaction across maritime spaces. Similarly, Prasenjit Duara (2021) employs the ocean as a metaphor for history itself, conceptualizing processes as circulatory, interconnected, and relational, attentive to multiple human and non-human agencies.

I argue that in *Barbarian Invasion*, the element of the ocean serves as a powerful symbol that destabilizes rigid structures, including the binary between “reality” and “illusion”—most notably represented by the alleged ability to walk on water. Water becomes a medium through which boundaries dissolve, echoing the film's larger themes of fluid identity and the collapse of linear, fixed narratives.

Moon's and her character Mai's search for personal identity can be read allegorically as a search for a Southeast Asian identity. Like the region itself, she is multilingual and culturally layered: she speaks Malay, Chinese, Burmese, and other languages, yet does not know who she is. Mai's amnesia reflects the historical fragmentation of Southeast Asia, shaped by colonial borders, migration, and cultural overlap. As a character who moves between languages and social contexts without a stable origin, Moon embodies an identity that is relational rather than fixed. The ocean, which facilitates both loss and connection, reinforces this allegory by positioning Southeast Asia as a region defined by circulation rather than rootedness.

In this context, the role of Yu Zhou is also worth analysing. Although he has a Chinese name and his mother is obviously Malaysian Chinese, she communicates with him in Malay, which is uncommon among Malaysian Chinese, who usually speak to their children in either Chinese or English. In Yu Zhou's case, the reason why his mother speaks Malay with him seems to be that Juilliard, Yu Zhou's father, is Malay. This invites an allegorical reading: A Malaysian Chinese mother, representing the mother land, and a Malaysian Malay father, representing citizenship, having a child together, raising questions of the identity of the next generation.

### Identity, Alienation, and the Self

*Barbarian Invasion* explicitly references the film *The Bourne Identity*. Roger repeatedly frames his project as a Southeast Asian version of the film and the narrative mirrors key tropes of the Hollywood action film: an amnesiac protagonist with exceptional fighting skills, erased digital traces, and a structure driven by pursuit and escape. However, the film systematically subverts these genre conventions through strategies of defamiliarization, or what Bertolt Brecht described as the *alienation effect* (1964: 91–100, 132–135). By repeatedly revealing the film set, exposing retakes, and collapsing the boundaries between fiction and reality, *Barbarian Invasion* interrupts narrative immersion and prevents the viewer from fully identifying with the action spectacle. The familiar structure of the action film is made strange: instead of seamless suspense and emotional absorption, the audience is prompted to reflect on the constructed nature of cinema itself.

For instance, Moon has several encounters with a spiritual master who imparts his wisdom. However, it remains unclear whether this figure functions as a character within the staged film or as a real person, a deliberate ambiguity that defamiliarizes the viewer's perception of reality. In this way, the film transforms the Hollywood action narrative into a self-reflexive meditation on identity, performance, and embodiment. Action cinema becomes a vehicle for questioning how identities—cinematic, personal, and cultural—are produced, rehearsed, and performed.

In this way, the film shifts attention away from distinguishing between the real and the unreal and toward the realm of experience. Similar to the kidnapping scene described above, the experiences of Moon the actress and the character of Mai that she portrays overlap to a significant degree, emphasizing the film's preoccupation with experiential truth rather than ontological certainty. In this way, *Barbarian Invasion* engages with the metaphysical with sincerity and depth, grounded in lived experience rather than spectacle.

A similarly blurred line between real life experience and filmic construction can be observed in the work of other Malaysian Chinese filmmakers, such as Tsai Ming-liang, a Malaysian Chinese director based in Taiwan. In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), Tsai stages a nearly empty cinema screening of a classic martial arts film by King Hu titled *Dragon Inn* (1967), where characters drift through the space as

spectators rather than active agents. The film emphasizes the residual traces of presence, from the gestures of the ticket clerk to the fleeting glances and postures of the audience, creating an environment in which subjectivity is fragmented, relational, and impermanent. By blurring the boundaries between cinematic performance and lived experience, Tsai foregrounds identity as a process of becoming, defined not by decisive action but by duration, attentiveness, and relational engagement.

Read through this lens, *Barbarian Invasion* similarly constructs Moon's identity as contingent. Her interactions with the spiritual master, her oscillation between herself and the martial-arts character she portrays, and her navigation of overlapping social and professional roles all reflect the porous, experiential, and processual qualities of subjectivity that Tsai's film exemplifies. This emphasis on impermanence, relationality, and negotiation over fixed essence resonates with broader tendencies in Sinophone cinema, which through its positioning on the margins of China and Chineseness, its transnational circulation, and its attentiveness to local, minoritized, and heterogeneous positionalities underscores the contingent nature of the experiences it portrays (Shih 2007). *Barbarian Invasion* thus exemplifies a Sinophone cinematic sensibility that values a negotiation of identity as part of a logic in which marginality, relationality, and transnational positioning shape cinematic subjectivity.

Feminist concerns further deepen this notion of alienation by linking it to the female body and lived experience. In one scene, Moon tells Roger's assistant that when she was pregnant, strangers on the street wanted to touch her belly. She reflects that becoming a mother apparently means that a woman's body suddenly belongs to society. Here, alienation operates not only as a cinematic technique, but also as a social and embodied condition: Moon is estranged from her own body through public ownership, expectation, and surveillance. Her physical training and eventual mastery of martial arts can thus be read as a gradual recovery of agency and selfhood. In this sense, *Barbarian Invasion* stages alienation in a twofold manner: as a strategy that distances the viewer, and as an existential condition that Moon must confront and negotiate through embodied practice.

Related to the theme of alienation in the second sense, Buddhism plays a central role throughout *Barbarian Invasion*. It provides both a philosophical and spiritual framework that reframes alienation and identity. As mentioned above, Moon repeatedly encounters a Buddhist monk, who later turns out to be a master. This master mainly poses questions rather than offering answers, guiding her toward an understanding of the self as impermanent, relational, and spiritually aware. Most explicitly, he gives her a booklet titled *Who is dragging this corpse?*, a Chan meditation question, or *huatou* (話頭). The question challenges the assumption of a stable, autonomous self by asking who—or what—moves the body through the world. Its purpose is to destabilize identification with the body and direct the practitioner toward experiential insight into non-self, rather than mere conceptual

understanding (Strong 2015: 315–316; Woo 2020). This spiritual dimension is further emphasized when the monk later tells Moon that the body is not the prison of the mind, but the mind is the prison of the body.

These Buddhist teachings resonate with the film's broader exploration of alienation, adding a spiritual component. While Brechtian alienation distances the viewer from cinematic illusion, Buddhist philosophy introduces a different form of estrangement: the recognition that the self is not fixed, owned, or singular, and that spiritual insight involves letting go of rigid attachments. Moon's—or Mai's—amnesia, her shifting identities as Moon and Mai, and her eventual calm acceptance of not knowing who she is can thus be read not as a loss to be corrected, but as a movement toward Buddhist non-attachment and spiritual awareness.

Moon's ability to navigate the shifting boundaries between her roles as mother, actress, and autonomous individual mirrors this logic. Her evolving identification with the martial arts character she portrays further reinforces this alignment, illustrating identity as a dynamic process. Read through this framework, *Barbarian Invasion* situates Moon's personal transformation within an understanding of identity not as a stable essence but as an ongoing negotiation with social, professional, and historical forces. In the film, the dissolution of boundaries between Moon's lived experience and the fictional narrative she inhabits expresses a fluid nature of identity. Moon's journey is marked by her capacity to respond to fluctuating demands across different roles, illustrating identity as a continuous process of becoming rather than a static state.

Moreover, the film reflects a broader critique of the limitations imposed by traditional narratives and gender roles. Moon's navigation between different aspects of her identity challenges the binary conceptions of selfhood, resonating with cultural movements that emphasize intersectionality rather than fixed categories. The concept of intersectionality was coined by Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1989; Cho et al. 2013). Intersectionality highlights how overlapping oppressions—based on race/ethnicity, gender, class etc.—interact to shape lived experiences of discrimination and privilege in complex and interdependent ways. This theoretical framework challenges singular or universalizing notions of identity, instead emphasizing the multiplicity and relational nature of social positioning.

*Barbarian Invasion* thus criticizes and renegotiates cultural, political, and cinematic structures. Furthermore, on a meta level, the film consciously exposes its own construction, revealing the mechanisms of cinema and blurring the boundary between reality and fiction. This reflexivity prompts viewers to interrogate not only the narrative itself but also the broader systems of storytelling, power, and representation.

The title evokes the historical period of migration during the Roman Empire while also referencing a sinocentric worldview rooted in the concept of *tianxia*. The idea of *tianxia* is a hierarchical vision of the world with China at its center (Wang 2017).

Through such allusions, the film critiques imperialism and dominant narratives of “civilization versus barbarism” and “center versus margin,” suggesting that such constructs are employed to legitimize control and marginalize the “other.” By placing an undocumented woman at its center, the film turns the margins into the center, to borrow bell hooks’ approach of “choosing the margin as a space of radical openness” (hooks 1990).<sup>9</sup>

*Barbarian Invasion* combines Hollywood action tropes with the multilingual storytelling characteristic of Southeast Asian indie cinema, incorporating Mandarin, Cantonese, and Malay, thereby reflecting both local and global influences. With a narrative focused on a woman’s personal transformation and self-empowerment, it addresses themes that have transnational resonance while remaining firmly rooted in a distinctly Malaysian context. Tan’s self-reflexive approach, evidenced by her dual role as both director and lead actress, further engages with global film discourse, positioning the film as a compelling example of transnational cinema.

In contrast to *The Ghost Bride*, which foregrounds female agency but relies on commodifying and at times exoticizing aesthetics, *Barbarian Invasion* adopts a markedly different visual language. While *The Ghost Bride* is characterized by vivid colors, bright lighting, pompous costumes and sets, and rapid shot changes, *Barbarian Invasion*’s visual style situates it firmly within a New Wave tradition and aligns it closely with the distinct aesthetics of Tan Chui Mui’s earlier films. Rather than adopting the polished look of mainstream action cinema, *Barbarian Invasion* relies heavily on handheld camerawork, creating a sense of immediacy and physical proximity. Additionally, its aesthetics are characterized by dim lighting and subdued colors. Even in scenes shot in daylight, the colors remain slightly foggy, evoking the humid climate of Southeast Asia.

## Concluding Remarks: In-Between Worlds

In conclusion, it can be stated that both *The Ghost Bride* and *Barbarian Invasion* center on women as heroes, depicting their courage and resilience in extreme, often unsettling situations. Each narrative portrays their respective female lead confronting “spooky” or threatening circumstances that push them to their limits, though the nature of these challenges differs. In *The Ghost Bride*, the liminality lies between the physical and metaphysical worlds, as the heroine navigates the supernatural alongside human society, highlighting her spiritual growth and ethical agency. In *Barbarian Invasion*, the boundary blurs between reality and performance, creating suspense and estrangement that encourage reflection on impermanence, identity, and spiritual insight.

In each narrative, the female protagonists are portrayed as strong, complex figures who assert agency over their own destinies. In *Barbarian Invasion*, this theme is

---

<sup>9</sup> bell hooks—pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins—chose to write her name in lowercase to shift attention away from herself and toward her ideas, emphasizing the work over the author (hooks 1989).

explored in a particularly elaborate way: the character in the secondary narrative—the film within the film—demonstrates notable physical strength and embodies a vision of female empowerment for a marginalized and silenced woman.

The protagonists navigate multiple liminal spaces: between the physical and metaphysical realms, childhood and adulthood, and evolving cultural, religious, and gender roles. In *The Ghost Bride*, these transitions pertain not only to identity formation but also to the psychological and emotional burdens of existing “between worlds.” While such dual existences are often demanding, they confer a distinctive capacity to transcend immediate realities and facilitate personal transformation. This form of mediation emerges as a vital, though frequently underappreciated, skill that enables the characters to navigate complex cultural and personal terrains.

Both *The Ghost Bride* and *Barbarian Invasion* engage closely with themes of identity formation, cultural memory, and history. Rather than presenting historical events from a macro-historical perspective, they adopt a micro-historical approach, rendering history as subjective and fragmentary—deeply embedded in personal experiences and visions, understood both as acts of imaginative projection and as moments of hallucinatory perception.

Drawing on elements of Chinese folk religion, spirituality, and martial arts philosophy, the narratives interrogate social inequalities tied to gender, ethnicity, and class. Through their struggles, the protagonists reclaim agency and contest traditional roles, using the supernatural to critique broader societal injustices.

These works also highlight the diverse experiences within the Sinophone community, particularly in Malaysia—a community often stereotyped as a wealthy elite but, in reality, marked by considerable heterogeneity. They demonstrate how navigating multiple worlds mediates a range of cultural practices and values, connecting traditional Chinese knowledge to contemporary contexts. In doing so, the stories reflect a recurring theme within the Chinese diaspora: the simultaneous search for ancestral roots and the cultivation of new ones.

At the level of production, both filmic narratives exemplify forms of border transgression and transnational connectivity. *The Ghost Bride* is a Taiwanese adaptation of an English-language novel by a Malaysian author residing in the United States. *Barbarian Invasion*, a transnational film, exemplifies cross-border collaboration between Malaysia and Hong Kong, featuring multilingual dialogue and integrating a range of global cinematic styles. Both underscore the transnational interconnectedness of the contemporary cultural Sinosphere, albeit through markedly different approaches.

Ultimately, while switching between worlds can be burdensome, it can also serve as a vital form of mediation. These narratives provide valuable models for negotiating the coexistence of different communities and cultural practices in the modern Sinosphere. By employing narrative disruptions, they challenge traditional values and offer new perspectives on subjectivity. Their references to Chinese popular

religion exemplify its core characteristic: though grounded in theoretical teachings, it remains fluid, evolving, and deeply embedded in everyday life.

## References

- Bal, Mieke (1997): *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2nd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bal, Mieke (1999): "Introduction", in: Bal, Mieke; Gonzales, Brian (eds): *The Practice of Cultural Analysis*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1–14.
- Bal, Mieke (2002): *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Bernards, Brian (2015): *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Blake, C. Fred (2011): *Burning Money: The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Brecht, Bertolt (1964): *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Edited and translated by John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Campany, Robert Ford (1996): *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chau, Adam Yuet (2011): *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*. London: Routledge.
- Cheung, Corinne (2023): "Chinese Mythology 101: Erlang Shen", in: *Localiz – My Life in Hong Kong*, <https://www.localiz.com/post/chinese-mythology-101-erlang-shen> (accessed April 28, 2025).
- Cho, Sumi et al. (2013): "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis", in: *Signs* 38(4): 785–810.
- Choo, Yangsze (2013): *The Ghost Bride*. New York: William Morrow.
- Clart, Philip (2012): "Chinese Popular Religion", in: Nadeau, Randall L. (ed.): *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 219–235.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams (1989): "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", in: *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1: 139–167.
- Dalal, Sanghamitra; Neo, David (2022): "The Re-Orientalised Cosmopolitan Turn in Yangsze Choo's 'The Ghost Bride'", in: *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Philologia* 67: 241–256.
- DeBernardi, Jean (1984): "The Hungry Ghosts Festival: A Convergence of Religion and Politics in the Chinese Community of Penang, Malaysia", in: *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 12(1): 25–34.
- DeBernardi, Jean (2006): *The Way That Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Duara, Prasenjit (2021): "Oceans as the Paradigm of History", in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 38(7–8): 143–166.
- Film Censorship Board Malaysia (2024): "Garis Panduan Penapisan Filem 2024 [Film Censorship Guidelines 2024]", <https://www.mygp.gov.my/garis-panduan-penapisan-filem> (accessed May 5, 2025).
- Gentz, Joachim (2013): *Understanding Chinese Religions*. Edinburgh: Dunedin.
- Gu, Chunjun; Xu, Keqian (2014): "Netherworld Marriage in Ancient China: Its Historical Evolution and Ideological Background", in: *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 13(38): 78–109.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli (1993): "Our Sea of Islands", in: Waddell, Eric et al. (eds): *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*. Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2–16.
- He, Yu Chen (dir.) (2013): *The Busy Young Psychic (Shen suan)*.
- He, Yu Chen (dir.) (2017): *The Teenage Psychic (Tongling shaontü)*. HBO Asia.

- Hee, Wai Siam (2019): *Remapping the Sinophone: The Cultural Production of Chinese-Language Cinema in Singapore and Malaya before and during the Cold War*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Ho, Ming-sho (2025): *Be Water: Collective Improvisation in Hong Kong's Anti-Extradition Protests*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hong, Seok-Joon (2016): "The Social Formation and Cultural Identity of Southeast Asian Frontier Society: Focused on the Concept of Maritime Zomia as Frontier in Connection with the Ocean and the Inland", in: *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 5(1): 28–35.
- hooks, bell (1990): "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness", in: *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 149–156.
- hooks, bell (1989): *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press.
- Hsiau, A-chin (2021): "Introduction: Get Real", in: *Politics and Cultural Nativism in 1970s Taiwan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1–12.
- King Hu (dir.) (1967): *Dragon Inn (Long cheng)*. Taiwan: Shaw Brothers Studio.
- Kuah, Khun Eng (2024): *Ancestor Worship in the Diaspora Chinese and China Universes: The Making of a Collaborative Cultural Basin*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kumar, Kalash Nanda (2022): "Film Review: Barbarian Invasion Is a Triumph of Malaysian Cinema", in: *The Vibes*, 2 December, <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/culture/78911/film-review-barbarian-invasion-is-a-triumph-of-malaysian-cinema> (accessed April 9, 2026).
- Lee, Bruce (1975): *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. Edited by John Little. Santa Clarita, CA: Ohara Publications.
- Lee, Hsiao-chung; Balaya, Anidita (2015): "Spirits of the Margins: Chinese Malaysian Cinema and the Supernatural", in: *Asian Cinema* 26(2): 37–55.
- Lim, Choon Bee (2009): *Xingbie yu bentu—Zaidi de mahua wenxue lunshu (Gender and the Local—Local Discourses of Mahua Literature)*. Ampang: Mentor Publishing.
- Liman, Doug (dir.) (2002): *The Bourne Identity*. Universal Pictures.
- Lin, Ho-Chun (2020): "Taiwan jindangdai minghun jiqi rengui guanxi tanlun (Contemporary Underworld Marriages in Taiwan and Their Human-Ghost Relationships)", in: *Shida xuebao* 65(1): 51–72.
- Lin, Min-tser (2024): "De-Politicizing and Dis-Remembering the White Terror Through Gothic: The Grand Narrative and Embarrassed Politics of Collective Commemoration in the Movie *Detention*", in: *Manusya: Journal of Humanities* 27(1): 1–23.
- Linnarz, Rouven (2021): "Malaysian New Wave director Tan Chui Mui's Barbarian Invasion Wins the Jury Grand Prix at the 24th Shanghai International Film Festival", in: *Asian Movie Pulse*, 19 June, <https://asianmoviepulse.com/2021/06/malaysian-new-wave-director-tan-chui-muis-barbarian-invasion-wins-jury-grand-prix-at-the-24th-shanghai-international-film-festival/> (accessed April 9, 2026).
- Martin, Fran (2003): *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Neo, David H. J.; Dalal, Sanghamitra (2022): "The Cosmopolitics of Asian Magical Realism: Decentralisation and Localisation of Chinese Folklore in the Global Netflix Series *The Ghost Bride*", in: Samuel, Michael; Mitchell, Louisa (eds): *Streaming and Screen Culture in Asia-Pacific*. Cham: Springer, 249–264.
- Neo, David H. J.; Dalal, Sanghamitra (2023): "Fetishizing Localism and Adapting Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride*", in: Chua, Brandon; Ho, Elizabeth (eds): *The Routledge Companion to Global Literary Adaptation in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge, 236–244.
- Ngo, Sheau-Shi (2024): "An Empathetic Odyssey: A Film Review of *Barbarian Invasion* (2021) by Tan Chui Mui", in: *Wacana Seni* 23: 102–105.

- Pang, Laikwan (2011): *Creativity and Its Discontents: China's Creative Industries and Intellectual Property Rights Offenses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rae, Ian; Witzel, Morgen (2008): *The Overseas Chinese of South East Asia: History, Culture, Business*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, James C. (2009): *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Shih, Shu-mei (2007): *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Margins*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Shih, Shu-mei (2011): "The Concept of the Sinophone", in: *PMLA* 126(3): 709–718.
- Shih, Shu-mei (2013): "Introduction: What Is Sinophone Studies?", in: Shih, Shu-mei; Tsai, Chien-hsin; Bernards, Brian (eds): *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1–16.
- Show, Ying Xin (2016): "Mapping the South Seas: The Communist Fiction of Ng Kim Chew", in: *Zhongshan Renwenxuebao* 1: 97–116.
- Show, Ying Xin (2021): "Narrating the Racial Riots of 13 May 1969: Gender and Postmemory in Malaysian Literature", in: *South East Asia Research* 29(2): 214–230.
- SIFF (2021): "Winners of the 24th SIFF Golden Goblet Awards", <https://www.siff.com/english/content?aid=4e490d1c-6d11-4659-8a20-bb6d93fc9d04> (accessed April 9, 2026).
- Strong, John S. (2015): *Buddhisms: An Introduction*. London: Oneworld.
- Su, I-Hsuan; Chuang, Shiang-An; Liu, Yi (dirs) (2020): *Detention (Fanxiao)*. Netflix; Public Television Service.
- Tan, E. K. (2010): "Hong Kong Cinema and the Portrayal of the Nanyang Chinese in the 1950s and 1960s", in: *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4(2): 155–168.
- Tan, Chui Mui (dir.) (2021): *Barbarian Invasion (Yemanren ruqin / Belunggu)*. Da Huang Pictures.
- The State Council (2001): "Regulations on the Administration of Movies", [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/laws\\_regulations/2014/08/23/content\\_281474983043763.htm](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/laws_regulations/2014/08/23/content_281474983043763.htm) (accessed April 25, 2026).
- Topley, Marjorie; DeBernardi, Jean (2011): "Ghost Marriages among the Singapore Chinese: (1955)", in: DeBernardi, Jean (ed.): *Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Tong, Chee Kiong (2004): *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Tsai, Ming-liang (dir.) (2003): *Goodbye, Dragon Inn (Guo fu long cheng)*. Taiwan: Atom Films.
- Vinceová, Barbora (2019): "The Concept of Afterlife: Transforming Mythology into Fantasy in Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride*", in: *Ostrava Journal of English Philology* 11(1): 45–56.
- Wang, Ban (2017): "Introduction", in: Wang, Ban (ed.): *Chinese Visions of World Order*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1–22.
- Wang, Yu (2016): "Ghost Marriage in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature: Between the Past and the Future", in: *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 10(1): 86–102.
- Wong, Wai Yip (2011): "Defining Chinese Folk Religion: A Methodological Interpretation", in: *Asian Philosophy* 21(2): 153–170.
- Woo, Jeson (2020): "Illuminating a Truth: Dṛṣṭānta and Huatou", in: *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 11(9): 443.
- Wu, Chia-rong (2016): *Supernatural Sinophone Taiwan and Beyond*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.
- Wu, Kai-yu; Quek, Shio-chuan; Ho, Yu-hang (dirs) (2020): *Bi'an zhi jia (Married to the Other Shore)*. Netflix.

- Yang, Mayfair Meihui (2004): *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yen, Ching-Hwang (2008): *The Chinese in Southeast Asia and Beyond: Socioeconomic and Political Dimensions*. Singapore: World Scientific.
- Yoshikawa, Eiji; Terry, Charles S. (trans.) (1995): *Musashi*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.
- Zhang, Chunni et al. (2021): “Exploring Chinese Folk Religion: Popularity, Diffuseness, and Diversities”, in: *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 7: 575–592.