Contemporary Chinese Horror Films: Genre, Censorship, Market

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The release in recent years of *Get Out, A Quiet Place, Fantasy Island, Happy Death Day,* and *Bird Box* has been a game-changer for the Hollywood film market. As Nicole Laporte observes, "when Jordan Peele won a best original screenplay Oscar for *Get Out* this year, it sent a message to everyone in Hollywood: Prestige horror is back."[1] While Western horror films thrive in today's film market, Chinese horror films seem to lack both an audience and mass appeal. Compared to the general Chinese film market, the Chinese horror market shrank several times in the past decade. This abnormal phenomenon has led me to a study of Chinese horror.

This study, which examines the market failure of the Chinese horror genre in film compared to its Western equivalent, is structured as follows. I first define the horror genre as it functions in the worldwide film industry and in academic study. Then I compare two specific films, Raymond Yip's *the House that Never Dies* (*Jingcheng Bashiyi Hao*, 2014) and James Wan's *Conjuring* (2013), in terms of their background, plot, central topic, color, and utilization of horror elements to illustrate the similarities and differences between Western and Chinese horror films. On the basis of this comparison, I examine unique aspects of Chinese horror films and limits on horror film production in China. To determine why such limitations on Chinese horror films exist, I analyze censorship in the PRC and in China's film market today. To

[1] Nicole Laporte, "Why horror movies are now more important than ever in Hollywood," *Fast Company*, July 11, 2018, see https://www.fastcompany.com/90199673/why-horror-movies-are-now-more-important-than-ever-in-hollywood, accessed March 1, 2021.

demonstrate how this policy damages the Chinese horror film industry, my research investigates how Chinese film policy targets audiences.

It isn't easy to compare two films made by two nations with relevantly different ideologies. I am not going into the length to compare two ideologies and identify the difference between these two markets, but mainly focusing on analyzing two films from their aesthetic feature, marketing wise strategies and results, and the possible cause of a nation's censorship. The thesis has a strong connection between art and the market. It demonstrates that art is one of the most important aspects of a successful horror film, but not the only components for a high box office. I am fully aware of the limitation of my work and trying to focus on drawing out a more vivid picture toward a matter that fewer people discussed in the field.

Existing Scholarship

Before examining this topic, I first want to give honorable mentions to scholars who previously have made significant contributions to similar areas of study. Erin Huang's book *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility* demonstrates the development of horror in recent years, primarily through the Umbrella Movement of 2014. Reexamining the horror industry in the post–Cold War, contemporary Sinophone world, including in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, Huang points out that, compared to the Euro-centered horror market and industry, in which monstrous representations shed light on the Industrial Revolution, in the Sinophone world the production of horror films is considerably more limited. Several differences distinguish the horror films of mainland China and Hong Kong. In mainland China, all films serve to construct a Marxist and socialist society, and horror is no

exception. Given Marxism's primary ideology, horror in mainland China has limitations. Erin Huang focuses on specific definitions and theological analyses of socialist China and how China adapts socialism and capitalism to formulate a "China model"[2]. However, she does not define horror as a genre, nor does she provide examples of horror films in post-socialist China.

Huang analyzes two films: Chan Tze-woon's *Yellowing* (*Luanshi beiwang*, 2016) and Ma-Xu Weibang's *Song at Midnight* (*Yeban gesheng*, 1937), a Chinese adaption of Rupert Julian's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). Unfortunately, these two films are not the best selection for a discussion and analysis of post-socialist China's horror industry. *Song at Midnight* was filmed in 1937, and so it does not represent post-socialist society prior to the reign of the PRC. *Yellowing* was produced in 2016, but the director is based in Hong Kong and the production team was established there; Hong Kong, of course, has asserted that it is not part of socialist China. Thus, this film, too, is not representative of post-socialist China's horror industry. Erin Huang's political theory—that in socialist China the horror form is a representation of urban society—is refreshing, and I agree with many of her points. Yet this thesis takes a different approach to the Chinese horror genre. After combining some of her theories about the social function of horror, I further develop the definition of horror as a genre and compare specific examples of films that exist in post-socialist China.

Horror

[2] Erin Y. Huang, *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 20.

Before entering into an in-depth discussion, I first need to clarify the definition of horror and introduce its possible prospects in China by comparing Chinese horror films to those in the West. Horror would seem to be a simple genre defined by its presentation of horror elements. These elements can include monsters, psychopaths, supernatural, and even recent high-tech creatures. "Yet," as Huang notes, "[the categorization is] not quite so true of horror, as evidenced by the sheer variety of characters, narrative events, and styles.[3]" It is clear that horror includes these elements and scary events in order to physically and psychologically shock and affect audiences (the reaction before emotion when horror is viewed), such as horror and fear. However, all these elements can be categorized as one genre itself, horror. Then, is it possible to discuss the horror genre as a coherent group of films? Judging from the scholarship of those who have examined the issue before me, the common wisdom is that "horror is not one genre, but several.[4]"

All these monsters, psychos, and supernatural creatures inhabit sub-genres gathered under the umbrella of horror. As Huang observes, because "those sub-genres change, so the boundaries of the genre as a whole shift. Therefore, it is perhaps better to think of the horror genre as a collection of related, but often very different, categories.[5]" This suggests that horror is a broad genre that is difficult to distinguish or analyze in specific films. Thus, to better understand exactly the general category of "horror," it is necessary to understand horror's function. All films designed to "scare, shock, revolt, or otherwise horrify the viewer[6]" can be

[3] Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.
[4] Cherry, *Horror*, 3.
[5] Cherry, *Horror*, 3.
[6] Cherry, *Horror*, 4.

classified as belonging to the horror genre. But this definition is complicated by the fact that filmmakers are continually pushing the limits and boundaries of horror to invent new ways of arousing these emotions in audiences[7]. In other words, horror is a genre that constantly evolves to fit the changing tastes of its audiences. Brigid Cherry defines her theory of the horror genre as follows: "The principal response is that horror film is designed to exploit is thus a more crucial defining trait of the horror genre than any set of conventions, tropes, or styles.[8]" She offers a generally satisfying review of the cultural significations and academic reception of an erstwhile genre that today remains as popular as ever.[9]

Based on the definition of horror just provided, it occurs to me that Chinese horror has arrived at a position where the number of production work decreases sharply every year. An article published recently in *Shanghai Observation*[10] notes that only fourteen horror films were produced in 2019. China today has a vast film market, but the relative failure of the horror genre in the Chinese film market is something of a mystery. In discussing the Chinese film market, I focus on mainland China and exclude Taiwan, Hong Kong, and all overseas Chinese communities. In this thesis the term "mainland China" means the state that has been controlled by the Communist Party of China, which limits the time frame to the period after 1949.

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[7] Cherry, *Horror*, 4.
[8] Cherry, *Horror*, 4.
[9] Matt Yockey, "Horror," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, No. 1 (2012):179-186, see https://www.jstor.org/stable/24353171?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents, accessed March 1, 2021.
[10] Ruoxiao Shi 石若萧. "Yuanxian xiaoshi de kongbupian quna le" 院线消失的恐怖片去哪了 (Where does Cinematic Horror Go). *Net Ease*, November 2, 2020, see https://www.163.com/dy/article/FQDPI5CU051285EO.html, accessed December 1, 2020.

Chinese horror should be defined in terms that differ from the definitions of horror provided in the constructed theories of current academic studies. In the West, where there is more than a hundred-year history of horror films, horror as a genre and horror theory are well defined. In China, where there is no mature horror theory, horror as a genre remains poorly defined. No doubt this can be attributed to the fact that the genre was borrowed from the West and the Chinese market for horror films remains very limited.

In this paper I examine horror films that were made to be targeted at mainland Chinese audiences during the PRC's reign. For the purposes of this study, *The House that Never Dies* is ideal because it was marketed to and its box office receipts primarily come from mainland China. The widely known specification in the film study is Sheldon Lu's transnational theory. Sheldon Lu's theory of transnational Chinese films provides a structure for the study of Chinese films. Lu emphasizes that the scholar who wishes to develop a comprehensive view of Chinese film should study film in a broad geographic and historical terrain, including mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and to some extent oversea Chinese communities. Even "to give the extensions and relations among distinct Chinese communities: the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and oversea Chinese, each has its own claim to China's past and present."[11] Since 1949, of course, these areas have been geopolitically split, and the divisions inevitably have led to differences in political ideology that have significantly impacted the region's film industry. The Chinese film industry, for example, has emphasized ethnic harmony and solidarity, while the film market in Taiwan and Hong Kong has been broader and more open to foreign influence. Given this variation, it is more useful for analytical purposes to narrow one's focus to

[11] Sheldon Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, (1997), 17.

a specific geographic area and time period instead of using Lu's transnational theory. I choose horror films under the PRC.

American horror film reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), considered one of his best films[12], the director applied extreme film techniques, showing horror and creating fear by manipulating camera movements, lighting, and the soundtrack. Indeed, Hitchcock used his camera to evoke a murder without actually showing the act. Hitchcock used film language to express a new view of horror. At the same time in China, the Great Famine (1958-1961) was underway, and the federal government was developing a close relationship (1950-1960) with the Soviet Union. Although China's film industry lacked funding to make commercial films, the nation was influenced by Soviet films. As Li observes, "Many classic films in Stalin's era had a positive effect on new China, because their narrative of the revolutionary war and the imagination of socialism and communism had affinity with the new Chinese understanding of the nature of revolutionary war and the assumptions on the model of socialist culture."[13] Due to the famine and the political environment, China did not develop a robust film industry, nor did horror emerge as a popular genre.

The absence of horror in Chinese films during the 1950s and 1960s greatly affected the production, marketing, and censorship of subsequent horror films in mainland China. Seeking opportunities, Chinese film directors have followed the mainstream, which has not included high-quality horror films. My decision to include in the mainland Chinese horror genre films

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[12] "Alfred Hitchcock," *Independent*, September 11, 2020, see https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/hitchcock-best-films-rebecca-birds-oscars-b421113.html, accessed March 15, 2021.

[13] Xiaohuan Li 李晓欢, "The Dissemination and Acceptance of Soviet Film in China (1950-1960)," (Master Diss., Chinese National Academy of Arts, 2014), 2.

made by Hong Kong directors reflects the fact that the ultimate target audience of these films is mainland China and that this was understood by those who financed and produced these films. Thus, I regard the *The House that Never Dies* as representative of Chinese horror films.

Comparison Between *Conjuring* and *The House that Never Dies*

Conjuring and *The House that Never Dies* both belong to the same horror sub-genre, the paranormal haunted house. Both films are adapted from folklore stories that were well known before their adaptation into films. While Conjuring got 407 million dollars box office, The House that Never dies also has grossed $49.52 million dollars at the box office. They both have outstanding box office in the horror genre. Yet the two films had significantly different outcomes: one enjoyed enormous success in the global film market; the other was barely recognized. Each story was made into a series of films, but while the *Conjuring* series was popular at the box office, *The House that Never Dies* series seemed to disappear in the film market.

The House that Never Dies, adapted from the book *Chao Nei No. 81*[14], concerns the legendary mansion at No. 81 on Chaoyangmennei Street in Beijing. The book describes the rise and fall of the Huo noble family within a one-hundred-year period. The movie divulges a different story element: love and hate between Huo's brother and the prostitute Dieyu Lu, and the discovery by Rouqing Xu of mysterious and paranormal events in a house that turns out to be haunted. *The House that Never Dies* tells the story that Rouqing Xu, the protagonist, moved

[14] Lei Yu 于雷. *Chaonei bashiyi hao* 朝内 81 号 (No.81 Chao Nei St, Beijing). (Nanjing: Jiangsu Literature and Art Publisher, 2013).

back to Beijing with her husband. They resided in Rouqing's family house the No.81 on Chaoyangmennei Street. After moving in, Rouqing experienced several paranormal events such as seeing ghost features on the first floor, watching herself falling from high, and the most importantly, having a chronological dream. The dream centralized in Dieyu Lu, a prostitute's love life that all happened in the same mansion decades ago. Dieyu Lu was cheated in the mansion and married to the deceased eldest son of the Huo family. Later, she had sex with the youngest son of the Huo family, whom she was in love with, and became pregnant. At the same time, the second young master also joined the army. Dieyu was looking forward to the young master's return and their departure from the mansion. However, he was killed in battle. Then, Dieyu, who has been under a lot of pressure and suffering, finally chose to commit suicide. Rouqing revealed a tragic story in the past through her dream. And in the process of searching for the truth, she found her husband's daughter, who had been hiding in the dungeon, is the one triggering all paranormal events in the house.

Conjuring, on the other hand, was inspired by Jay Anson's book *The Amityville Horror*, and it is adapted from a paranormal event investigation that actually took place. This film centers on the alleged real-life exploits of Ed and Lorraine Warren, a married couple who investigated paranormal events and assisted the Perron family, who in 1971 experienced increasingly disturbing events in their Long Island farmhouse. The investigation is famous because it featured eyewitnesses and alleged proofs of paranormal events in several media. The film Conjuring tells a horror story. Parron, who lives in the countryside, finds the Warrens and tells them about the bizarre things that have happened since they moved into a new house. First, their pet dog refused to enter the house on the first day of moving into the new home

and died outdoors the next day. Then there was their young daughter pulled by mysterious forces while sleeping. The Warrens go to Parron's house to check it out and confirm that there are multiple spirits, large and small, roaming the house, the most violent of which is a witch from the past century hanging from a tree in front of the house. Through Lorraine Warren's investigation, it was discovered that the suicidal witch had also sacrificed her 7-day-old daughter in the fire before she died. While they were investigating and collecting evidence to report to the Vatican for a formal exorcism, the spirits in the house began to move further, with the fiercest of them possessing Mrs. Parron's body and abducting her child for sacrifice. In desperation, Ed Warren performs an exorcism. Although Ed Warren had never exorcised a demon before, the Warrens had witnessed the ritual often, having followed the teachings for many years. Mrs. Parron finally awakened, and the power of motherly love allowed her to force the evil spirits back wholly. Thus, the tumultuous spirits that plagued the Parron family come to an end, and the Warrens add another chapter to their paranormal investigation journey.

The House that Never Dies does not have a solid background story. Bearing in mind that the PRC constantly censors online posts and publishing materials, there is no proof today in any media form that this urban legend occurred. The legend of Chao Nei No. 81 is described on the internet, in one book, and in a blog corner. Citing bloggers in Zhi Hu, people have declared that many paranormal events occurred in this house, including ghost sobbing in the middle of the night and a ghost sighting. The abandoned house suddenly turned into a hotspot for adventurous people who wanted to see paranormal events. According to the Baidu Knows, ghost image videos from the house had previously been posted on the internet. But when authorities concluded that the allegations were harming the PRC’s political image and the local

real estate market, all writing and videos about the house were banned from the internet. In other words, aside from unreliable allegations by bloggers and some urban legends, there is no solid evidence that true paranormal events occurred in the house. Because of the story's uncertainty and the lack of a reliable historical background, it stands in marked contrast to *Conjuring.*

The authenticity of the *Conjuring* story would seem to be proved by multiple lines of evidence and by other similar stories. The Warrens recorded their investigations and proofs in multiple media, and many witnesses claimed to eyewitness the paranormal event. Many critics remain highly skeptical. The Enfield poltergeist case, which occurred several years later in England, seemed to strengthen the Warrens' allegations. The case involves a claim of supernatural activity at 284 Green Street, a council house in Brimsdown, Enfield, London, between 1977 and 1979. It involved two sisters.[15] Testimony supplied by members of the community and some local police seemed to strengthen the claim. Likewise, videos seemed to prove that the family had in fact experienced paranormal activities. As noted in numerous report and stories, "A video camera in the room next door caught her [Janet, the young daughter] bending spoons and attempting to bend an iron bar."[16] A tape recorded Janet, a young girl, speaking in the voice of "Bill", an old man, who had a "habit of suddenly changing

[15] Will Storr, "The Conjuring 2: what really happened during the Enfield Haunting?" *The Daily Telegraph*, October 31,2017, see https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/06/13/the-conjuring-2-what-really-happened-during-the-enfield-haunting/, accessed on March 1, 2021.
[16] Rosemary Guiley, *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (New York: Facts on File, 1994), 109.

the topic—it was a habit Janet also had."[17] At the time, the documentation of these events in several media—all new in the 1970s—seemed solid, and given the absence of Photoshop and video editing outside of professional settings, the possibility that the paranormal events had been faked seemed unlikely. But skeptics like Joe Nickell criticized the evidence both in the London and the Amityville case. He alleged the family in the Enfield poltergeist case and the Warren couple in the Amityville case were eithers frauds or actors. He argued that the videoed "proofs" could have been produced by remote-controlled still cameras or other tools (the photographer who shot the proofs was not present when the events occurred).[18] Yet despite these criticisms, the Warrens became famous and soon were lecturing and giving speeches for various media outlets and at colleges. The publicity lent credibility to their claims, and over the course of decades, they became very well-known paranormal investigators. Their cases include Annabelle, Amityville, Cheyenne Johnson, Snedeker house, and a werewolf event. Although critics sharply doubted the veracity of these events, the Warrens' notoriety only strengthened their reputations as reliable sources.

After *Conjuring 1*'s extraordinary performance at the box office (over $300 million), the director James Wan turned to the Warrens' other investigation cases, producing *The Conjuring 2* (2016), *Annabelle* (2014), *Annabelle: Creation* (2017), *Annabelle Comes Home* (2019), *The Nun* (2018), and *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019), which together are called the *Conjuring* Universe. Wan's use of the Warrens' stories and documentaries as a hook to attract audiences worldwide

[17] Deborah Hyde, "The Enfield 'Poltergeist': A Sceptic Speaks," *The Guardian*, May 1, 2015, see https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/may/01/the-enfield-poltergeist-a-skeptic-speaks, accessed January 13, 2021.
[18] Joe Nickell, *The Science of Ghosts: Searching for Spirits of the Dead* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2012), 275.

achieved huge success, both because the stories are thrilling to discover and because they seem deeply authentic to many Western audiences.

The combination of the book, the folklore, and the allegedly real events drew audiences who shared similar religious backgrounds. The Warrens were devout Catholics, Ed Warren was a lay expert on demonology, and their belief in the supernatural and a world beyond informed their investigations.[19] James Wan recognized that his main audience were religious people who had faith in love and a higher power, and many of whom were predisposed to regard allegations of paranormal activities non-critically. For this audience, the film *Conjuring* was not simply a channel to see a horror film; it also was an anchor for the audience to explore the religious, the supernatural, or both. Moreover, the events depicted in *Conjuring* were already well known from documentaries and books. Thus, many in the audience were already familiar with some of the story's elements, and this may account in part for the film's success. The story of *The House that Never Dies*, in contrast, was much less well known by its target audience. Despite these differences, both films achieved a high aesthetic as horror films.

Conjuring and *The House that Never Dies* both have great film aesthetic value. One of the most significant aspects of this value is the use of color. Film color leads horror culture. In the death culture of China, red and black are often related to birth and death, and so color tones resonate emotions of horror. In contrast, the origins of western horror lie in gothic

[19] "11 Things You Need to Know About Legendary Paranormal Investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren," *Travel Channel*, 2021, see https://www.travelchannel.com/shows/devils-road-the-true-story-of-ed-and-lorraine-warren/articles/11-things-you-need-to-know-about-legendary-paranormal-investigat, accessed March 10, 2021.

literature and films, and the cool grey tone of these films often evokes the horror emotion in western audiences.

Following these patterns, *The House that Never Dies* employs red and black to connote fortunate and unfortunate events, such as weddings and funerals. In the film, the haunted house is captured in greys and blacks, and these cool tones create a cold and depressing atmosphere. Black is all around the house, and the deep ends of the hallways are always filmed in black. In total blackness there are only odd sounds, like a baby crying or a child laughing. The director uses total black to create a mysterious atmosphere, and its darkness petrifies both those in the film and those who watch it. Against the black color that surrounds the buildings and that serves as the background tone, the film's most memorable color is red. Because *the House that Never Dies* is filmed around two central topics, posthumous marriage[20] and revenge, the protagonist Lu wears a traditional bright Chinese red dress to her wedding and when she performs a ritual in honor of her posthumous marriage.

The box office success of *The House that Never Dies*, which focuses on a haunted house, can be attributed to the fact that its major horror element is familiar to most Chinese audiences: the ghost marriage. For many centuries, the ghost marriage was a traditional practice in parts of China. Chinese traditional culture seems to be inseparable from the practice of the wedding and funeral marriage, or the secretive and fascinating wedding of the underworld. "Underworld marriage," also known as Yin wedding, the underworld match, and ghost relatives, is an element of ancient Chinese folklore that refers to the marriage of people

[20] Posthumous marriage: *minghun* 冥婚, is also known as ghost marriage. The marriage ritual occurs between the dead and the dead. In some rare cases, marriage occurs between a dead person and a living one.

who are dead. After the marriage ceremony, the deceased spouses are buried and continue their “marriage” behavior in the underworld.[21] As noted by Yan, this special form of marriage "originated in the Yin Shang period and still exists in some parts of China.[22]” However, because of the PRC's opposition to and prohibition of feudal superstitions, ghost marriages, when they occur, are now performed in secret. Stories about underworld marriage are passed by word of mouth, and knowledge of the practice is widely shared. Thus, it is no surprise that a movie that has underworld marriage as its theme would attract a large number of Chinese viewers.

As the vengeance that is mentioned above, Lu wears red when she commits suicide. In China, we believe that if someone dies while wearing red clothes, that person will turn into a ghost that strongly resents the world and is motivated by a spirit of vengeance. Red and black content characterizes Chinese horror culture and its philosophy toward live and death. The use of black, which surrounds and fills the house, suggests a lack of the living and the presence of death and those who are dead. Red, in contrast, represents life and blood. When Lu wears red clothing, whether as a wedding dress or during mourning, the color sharply contrasts with the black and grey background. She appears like a drop of bright blood atop a deep and mysterious hole. Red and black are visual symbols of death and blood, and they initiate fear; both are deeply embedded in traditional Chinese culture.

Conjuring takes a different approach to film color. Its color usage is determined not only by culture and tradition but also by film-making technicalities. Two main colors are featured in *Conjuring*: grey and gold. The use of the cool grey tone throughout the film reflects gothic film

[21] Na Yan 严娜,“An Exposition about the Historical Representation and the Cultural Implication of the Ghost Wedding,” (Master Diss., Guizhou Normal University, 2016), 1.
[22] Yan, “An Exposition about the Historical Representation,” I.

history and relentlessly represents western horror culture in gothic terms. For audiences, the grey and green color tones create an oppressive environment. Compared to *The House that Never Dies*, which uses a limited color scheme of tints to depict its haunted house, *Conjuring* is captured in cold and depressing colors, and it conveys to its audiences a message that is depressed and sad. In only a few places in the film is there a shred of gold color. When Warren investigates outside his house, during a big finale, when he defeats the evil spirit, the gold color imitates sunlight, which symbolizes love, wisdom, hope, and magic[23]. Chinese horror films tend to adopt traditional Chinese cultural emotions, while in recent works western horror has tended to recreate western gothic film culture. Both take different approaches to colors, and their color schemes reflect different cultural mechanisms, but each plays with color's symbolic meanings to create the desired atmosphere. Regarding aesthetic value, both *Conjuring* and *The House that Never Dies* perform fairly well. Each has its own target audience, and this was taken into consideration during film making.

Like a film's aesthetic appearance, the creation of suspense is a significant component that impacts the horror effect. How to play with suspense is a key question in horror film making, and using it correctly can elevate a horror film into a successful work of art. *Conjuring* and *The House that Never Dies* both use suspense to serve the purposes of horror and create intense feelings. According to a psychological model of tension and suspense, tension and suspense are closely related to processes of prediction.[24] The model proposes that these

[23] "What does the color gold mean?" *99designs Team*, 2021, see https://99designs.com/blog/qa/color-gold-mean/, accessed March 10, 2021.
[24] See the Section "Expectation, Prediction, Anticipation".

predictive processes are a basic principle of human cognition[25] and brain functioning,[26] and they can play a central role in emotion.[27] In a film, the human brain especially reacts to horror when suspense and tension occur. Directors use this to direct emotion in audiences and they play with it by employing suspense. There are two methods of using suspense: suspense front and suspense post. [28] Tension and suspense are key elements in horror films, and where to place or reveal the suspense determines a film's tone. "Suspense front" refers to introducing a film's secret to the audience at the film's start. Here the main focus is not the revelation of the film's secret but the protagonists solving of problems, and the thrill is mechanized by the characters' unsettled fate. "Suspense post" is the more traditional structure, wherein the film establishes a puzzle and lets audiences solve it along with the characters. In this case, the main driving force is discovering the film's secret and revealing the truth. [29]

The House that Never Dies uses both methods of suspense to structure the film. In the Min Guo story, which occurs in the past, the film uses "suspense front": the audience already knows that the Huo family would not allow Huo Lianqi to marry a prostitute, and this

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[25] Here you have international citations, but then you use mostly footnotes. You might need to be consistent. Gregory, 1980; Dennett, 1996.

[26] Same problem here Bar, 2007; Bubic et al., 2010; Friston, 2010; Arnal and Giraud, 2012; Clark, 2013.

[27] Moritz Lehne and Stefan Koelsch, "Toward a General Psychological Model of Tension and Suspense," *Front. Psychol*., February 11, 2015, see https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00079, accessed March 10, 2021.

[28] Translation: "suspense front," xuanyi qianzhi 悬疑前置; "suspense post," xuanyi houzhi 悬疑后置.

[29] Jinping Long 龚金平, "Jingsong waiyixia de aiqing meihuo -- lun *jingcheng baishiyi hao* duiyu guochankongbupian de qishi yu jingshi"惊悚外衣下的爱情魅惑——论《京城 81 号》对于国产恐怖片的启示和警示 (Under the Horror Format -- Discussing the Enlightenment and Warning of Chinese Horror Film by Analyzing *the House that Never Dies*). *New Films* 5, (2014): 86-90.

knowledge is the secret. The plot then focuses on how two young couples circumvent secular biases and the house rules. Yet the solution, posthumous marriage, exceeds audience expectations because it is neither expected nor logical. [30] In the same film, "suspense post" is employed in the modern story line: the audience accompanies Xu Rouqing (the protagonist) into the haunted house and experiences mysterious, ominous, and supernatural events. These events lead to a big reveal—the paranormal episodes in the "haunted house" are caused not by ghosts but by Zhao Yitang's living daughter. Unfortunately, given all many mysterious events shown in the film, this explanation is anticlimactic rather than dynamic. Neither suspense method, in other words, produces a satisfying result.

Unlike *the House that Never Dies, Conjuring* shows the alleged events in simple chronological order. It uses suspense post only: like the protagonist, the audience follows all the leads and solves the puzzle along the way. The film is simultaneously a movie and a game, and the audience experiences both excitement and tension. Following the Warrens, the audience gathers knowledge and figures out the hidden messages. The film's main questions, and the source of its suspense, are whether there is a supernatural presence, what that presence is, and how it can be removed. The film is engaging because it addresses a series of questions by examining the experiences of the victims and evidence gathered by the Warrens. For instance, when the film examines whether there is a real spiritual presence in the house, it presents the results of the Warrens' scientific investigation. Specifically, ghost-capturing cameras and traps that can detect the movement of supernatural beings show audiences the

[30] Long, "Jingsong," 87.

evidence through the camera lens. This is not a new suspense formula, but James Wan's logical use of it explains why audiences still find this film exciting.

Jinping Long has stated that the film *The House that Never Dies* creates a new way to use suspense in contemporary Chinese horror films. This innovation, he contends, is groundbreaking and will lead to the future of Chinese horror films[31]. I agree with Long that it is revolutionary for a Chinese horror to contain such a complex suspense setting, and *The House that Never Dies* does an excellent job of creating suspense. However, Long focuses only on where the suspense is placed, and he ignores the essential purpose of using suspense in horror films. In horror films, the point of employing suspense is to build tension, but this is not the centerpiece. Successful suspense attracts audiences and public attention to the plot. However, directors and creators must always remember that revealing the truth lies at a horror film's core. Revealing the truth answers questions and relieves the suspense that has built up during the film, but it also reveals the film's core value. That core, which often concerns significant matters, can reveal the director's or the writer's ideological perspective—which can be philosophical or religious—on the world.

Conjuring does a perfect job of conveying religious belief to its audiences. In contrast, *The House that Never Dies* resolves all supernatural powers and every abnormal event through rational explanations. *Conjuring* starts with an investigation of whether ghosts occupy the Parron's house, and it provides a strong hook to young audiences that want to see spooky images and gruesome videos. But the core value of the film is expressed through the discovery of spirits, including an evil spirit, which are fought in the film's climax. Ed Warren uses a bible

[31] Long, "Jingsong," 88.

and a cross to perform an exorcism, while Lorain Warren calls on the love of Parron's daughter and of God to awaken Parron's soul, which is now entrapped in a possessed body. These actions send a message: the love of family and a strong belief in God protect us from the darkness that surrounds us. *The House that Never Dies* opens with a strong introduction that suggests that all possibilities are unrealistic and a dream that seems to travel back in time. The film raises many questions about abnormal phenomena and keeps the audience wondering whether there are ghosts in the house. Yet unlike *Conjuring*, which conveys a positive message that is linked to and promotes religious belief, *The House that Never Dies* explains all abnormal events as products of psychological disorders, dreams, and tricks played by the male protagonist's ex-wife. By the film's end we understand that all of the paranormal events depicted were hallucinations induced when the ex-wife of Xu's husband drugged the protagonist. The puzzle, in fact, is a mental issue and the deep, dark secrets and desires that are buried in everyone's heart.

Both films ask, "Are there ghosts in the world?" The answer to this question constitutes the core value of each film. As Warren has said, the "Diabolical forces are formidable. These forces are eternal, and they exist today. The fairy tale is true. The devil exists. God exists. And for us, as people, our very destiny hinges upon which one we elect to follow" (1:45:30, *Conjuring*). In *Conjuring*, Ed Warren answers the question. Into *the House that Never Dies*, the question is answered when Xu asks her psychologist whether there are ghosts, and the psychologist replies, "Yes. There are ghosts everywhere" (55:45, *The House that Never Dies*). Later the psychologist explains that ghosts "live in everyone's heart" (56:17, *The House that Never Dies*). The internal ghost to which she refers are the mental issues and dark desires that

everyone has. As their answers to this key question reveal, each film embraces a different ideology: one advocates a particular religious belief; the other dismisses paranormal events, explaining, on the one hand, that all are caused by humans and, on the other hand, that the only true ghost in the world is the evil that resides in peoples' minds and hearts.

Each of the messages delivered to audiences by the two films is motivated by good intentions. Yet creating a strong impression is important. *Conjuring* is the more persuasive and effective film because its logic makes sense and the methods employed by the protagonists to find and remove evil spirits appear reasonable. In contrast, *The House that Never Dies* explains that its "ghost" is the ex-wife's daughter, who hides alone in the house's dungeon and frightens Xu—a revenge requested by her mother. Because of PRC censorship, the film cannot portray a paranormal horror that is caused by actual ghosts. Consequently, the director is obliged to provide rational explanations of events that otherwise would appear paranormal. This explanation of the film's puzzle is flawed because it is not logical. Specifically, it is highly unlikely that the ex-wife's daughter, who is said to have caused the events, could have lived by herself in the dungeon for such a long period of time. This forced explanation threatens to ruin the whole film.

The film manipulates Chinese audiences because it is culturally authentic, and the rationality of the storyline is important. Like *Conjuring*, *The House* discloses suspense and promises the start of a new life, and in each the protagonists are forced to abandon their home. But the Chinese film does this less effectively. The audience does not see the struggle that leads to the abandonment of the house or its aftermath. The protagonists casually leave their home

as if it were a temporary vacation cabin, taking with them only a single bag. The emptiness of the now abandoned haunted house is not explored.

In the *Conjuring*, in contrast, the audience sees a real house filled with real domestic things occupied by the Parrons, a real family. Having just bought and moved into the house, Mr. and Mrs. Parron, who are the parents of five children, worry deeply about the financial repercussions of abandoning it, although unspeakable paranormal events are happening within it. The director, Wan, uses his camera to capture the reactions of people who face real, extreme circumstances, and the protagonists' torment is rational and credible. Where, they worry, will they live next, and will a house said to be haunted find a buyer? Their concerns were well founded. Having described their experiences in a best-selling book, the Parrons found no one wanted to buy the house for years afterwards. Perhaps they expected to make a large profit, but it was not until 2019 that the house found a stable buyer—a paranormal specialist who rented out the house on a nightly basis.

Responding to the huge commercial success of horror films, scholars have focused on the horror aesthetic. Horror is often associated with Western aesthetics[32]. Yet Chinese horror has a strong connection with Chinese traditional culture, and its aesthetic qualities are very different from those found in western horror. Chinese horror emphasizes the establishment of a horror atmosphere, and the horror emotion in Chinese films is rendered through the careful use of negative space[33]. While Western horror films develop horror elements primarily through the plot, in Chinese horror films, horror is invoked mostly through the use of darkness,

[32] Xiaoman Hong 洪潇楠, "Chinese Horror Films Analysis," (PhD Diss., Jilin University, 2014), IV-V.
[33] Hong, "Chinese Horror," IV-V.

unconventional sounds, and the actors' expressions of terror. These forms of expression, which are unique in the global, Western-dominated horror film framework, express China's subtle beauty. Yet Chinese horror films have not been well received, and Chinese or Western audiences continue to prefer Western horror films, which seem to more effectively inspire physical and psychological fear. Chinese horror films reflect Eastern aesthetics and elements. Their commercial failure is puzzling, given that other Chinese films, such as *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), which reflect similarly distinctive Chinese sensibilities, have found a strong international audience. Yet for the moment, the Chinese horror film industry has effectively disappeared.

Comparing and contrasting these two films, we see that both achieve artistic value through their use of color and suspense. But censorship in China prevented *The House that Never Dies* from performing better. Eliminating gruesome scenes and excluding supernatural and religious explanations of the paranormal negatively limited the film's box office performance and it diminished the likelihood that the film could serve as the foundation of a future series.

Essential Elements of Horror Films

Even though *Conjuring* and *the House that Never Dies* both had strengths and weaknesses, their ticket market earnings were significantly different, showing that the Western film evoked a significantly better audience reaction. Especially when we count the ticket receipts for the films in these series, it is apparent that the *Conjuring* series achieved huge success while *the House that Never Dies* was never able to create a comparable box office

miracle. To better understand why, despite their many filmmaking similarities, *the House that Never Dies* did not have a better outcome while *Conjuring* became a success, it is necessary to identify the core elements of horror and understand why people are attracted to it. Comparing what Western horror does to Chinese horror clarifies the current limitations of the latter and could lead to possible solutions.

Whenever people talk about the pleasures of horror, there are always two controversial reactions. Some people love the genre, while others ask, "how could anyone want to be horrified, disgusted even, unless there was some deeply hidden reason of which they were not aware?"[34] Is there something potentially wrong with horror fans? Given that horror invites affect that people try to avoid in daily life, such as fear, deception, and desperation, scholars are endeavoring to discover the psychological motivations for the attraction. Freud illustrated this matter in "'The Uncanny,' in which he invokes the castration complex, primary narcissism, and the "compulsion to repeat."[35] Unlike Freud's ideology, Robin Wood and his colleagues have made use of the concept of "surplus repression,"[36] which they distinguish from Freud's original "basic" repression. Surplus repression, Wood argues, is the product of particular cultures in their relationship to sexual energy, bisexuality, female sexuality, and children's sexuality.[37] In this sense, horror films become an outlet for repressed sexual energy. For instance, in the film *The Exorcist*, there are many vivid and graphic images of child pornography. The violating words "Fuck me, fuck me," said by an innocent child, creates both discomforting energy and brings out

[34] Andrew Tudor, "Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasure of a Popular Genre," *Cultural Studies* 11, No. 3 (1997): 446
[35] Tudor, "Why Horror," 446.
[36] Tudor, "Why Horror," 446.
[37] Tudor, "Why Horror," 446.

the awkwardness of repressed child sexuality. This uneasiness creates tension and even excitement. Studies shows that male audiences tend to gain more pleasure when the victim in the horror film is an innocent young girl.[38] The sexual tension conveys joy. As Christian Metz, in his classic work of psychoanalytical film theory, "The Imaginary Signifier," argues, the modern, capitalist film industry has "film pleasure alone as its aim."[39] And because viewers enjoy horror films due to their representation of bodily waste, which satisfies an unconscious wish to return to a pleasurable period in infancy,[40] more and more horror films manifest sex scenes and play with sexual tension. Moreover, because horror can be conceived as both a "safety valve" when repressed affects threaten to surface and a symbolic reminder of the fearful consequences if the "rules" of sexual behavior are broken, horror can provide an escape space that allows viewers to breath and relax.

Horror also gives pleasure because members of the audience usually can exercise some control over the movies. As Freud articulated, with horror, people have a chance to overcome their fear. Malcolm Turvey stated in his book *Philosophical Problems Concerning the Concept of Pleasure in Psychoanalytical Theories of the Horror Film* that, “There is a compulsion to repeat those traumatic events that were passively experienced [as infants] in an effort to gain mastery over them.”[41] This demonstrates that through watching and engaging in horror films, audiences gain power by overcoming their fear. The plausible ability to take control of one's fear is no

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[38] Carol J. Clover, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” *University of California Press* No. 20 (Autumn, 1987): 187-228.
[39] Malcolm Turvey, *Philosophical Problems Concerning the Concept of Pleasure in Psychoanalytical Theories of the Horror Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 70.
[40] Turvey, *Philosophical Problems Concerning*, *p.* 71.
[41] Turvey, *Philosophical Problems Concerning*, *p.* 72.

doubt pleasurable. Besides, viewers often realize that they can experience the journey alongside the protagonists, who usually win by the film's end. The mission of seeking out the monster and defeating it gives pleasure to audiences. This mimics Aristotle's ideology of catharsis in the *Poetics*. A Greek play, like film today, allowed an audience to vent and experience trauma, and it provided a source of relief for strong oppressions.

By satisfying curiosity, the experience enhances one's religious belief. In films such as *Conjuring(2013)*, *Insidious(2010)*, *Dracula(1992)*, and *Annabelle(2014)*, the instrument to defeat evil is belief in God and in a superior power. Since these films were made in a Christian-based society, the figure of the savior and of God both encourages belief and conveys the doctrine that only God can save you in a dark time. For people who believe in God, watching this type of film assures them that they would have nothing to fear if a similar situation affected their lives. For non-believers, the message of these movies is that those who do not believe in God will face the darkness by themselves and suffer greatly. Therefore, a horror film not only fulfills an audience's curiosity; it also orchestrates religious belief in those who watch it.

In summary, people are led to horror because they want to feel excitement and vent oppressions that are deeply buried in their consciousness. In the western structured horror film, the key elements are sexual content, extreme violence, and disturbing images, and they sometimes conclude with religious beliefs. These components create a path for people who are seeking novelty or who want to fulfill a desire to vent stress by watching gruesome images. However, those ingredients are all banned from Chinese big screen.

Censorship

I begin my discussion of censorship by providing below the relevant section of the regulations of the Chinese Film Administration.

Film Administration Regulations

Article 25 Films shall be prohibited from containing the following contents:

(1) being against the fundamental principles laid down in the Constitution;

(2) jeopardizing the unification, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State;

(3) divulging State secrets, jeopardizing the security of the State, or impairing the prestige and interests of the State;

(4) inciting hatred and discrimination among ethnic groups, harming their unity, or violating their customs and habits;

(5) propagating cults and superstition;

(6) disrupting public order and undermining social stability;

(7) propagating obscenity, gambling or violence, or abetting to commit crimes;

(8) insulting or slandering others, or infringing upon the legitimate rights and interests of others;

(9) jeopardizing social ethics or fine national cultural traditions;

(10) other contents banned by laws, administrative regulations and provisions of the State.

The technical quality of films shall conform to the standards of the State.

Judging from the Chinese Film Administration Regulation article 25, superstition, violence, and any image that can harm social ethics are not allowed in films shown in China.

Scholar Sa Xu of Gansu Law School demonstrates the importance of film regulation in China and discusses the need for censorship. The influence of a film on its audience is double-edged: one side is negative, the other is positive. On the positive side, a film can carry forward patriotic spirit and convey the value to society of truth, goodness and beauty. However, because films are commercial ventures, film producers are likely to exaggerate violence, pornography, crime and other plot lines in an attempt to gain high box office profits[42].The importance of film censorship lies in the government's ability to examine film content in advance and decide whether a film that will have a negative influence should be banned or modified before its release.[43] Xu describes the importance of censorship and its necessity in film history. As long as we have films, film regulation will be needed so that everyone can watch and enjoy movies. In China, that regulation becomes embedded in film production and marketing at the beginning of the film-making process. I agree that censorship is necessary, but the over-censorship of films and of subgenres such as horror can produce a huge loss of art in the Chinese film industry. To better understand this censorship, we need to first examine the history of Chinese censorship and what exactly it regulates under the PRC. Rousseau, who advocates censorship in his book, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, states that "Censorship supports morality by preventing opinions from being corrupted, by preserving their integrity through wise applications, sometimes even by defining them when they are still uncertain."[44] He believes that censorship preserves the good in mankind—a view shared with the PRC.

[42] Sa Xu 许洒, "On the Perfection of China's Film Review System" (Master Diss., Gansu University of Political Science and Law, 2019), pp. I-III.
[43] Xu, "China's Film Review System," p. II.
[44] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses,* trans. G. D. H. Cole (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Limited, 1950), p. 245.

Chinese film censorship started in China prior to the formation of the PRC government. Zhiwei Xiao's essay "Anti-Imperialism and Film Censorship During the Nanjing Decade, 1927-1937," outlines the contours of a national policy of film censorship.[45] In 1927, the Nationalist Party established a film censorship board to ban "superstition" and "sexual content" in imported movies. Right after the Qing government, whose rule rested on the feudal idea that the nation's leader/emperor governs under the divine mandate of heaven, the CCP tended to identify itself as opposed to the Qing government; therefore, anything that related to superstition was banned. Yet the CCP also was trying to protect a vulnerable, immature, and incipient Chinese film industry from a foreign "culture invasion."

In its earliest form, film censorship aimed to eliminate negative influences on Chinese society and particularly negative images of the Nationalism government. But after 1922, a new regulation, intended to improve the movie experience, was added that forbid gruesome images on the big screen. Because the film *Zhang Xin Sheng* 张新生(1922) caused a horrible watching experience among audiences, the regulation body added this new regulation to the law.[46]

Film censorship in China has endured through the twentieth century in China, and it flourished after 1949. The post-1949 film industry imposed additional regulations, the most important of which was that film texts must render Marxist, Maoist, and socialist interpretations of Chinese history.[47] Given that Maoist, and the entirety of the socialist Chinese ideology opposes religious ideas, this regulation eliminated religious content from films. Yet

[45] Sheldon H. Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1997), p. 5.
[46] Xu, "China's Film Review System," p. 12.
[47] Lu, *Transnational*, *p.* 7.

because the focus of the Chinese film industry during this period was propagating the politically correct and the “mainstream,” horror films, which on the whole do not advocate for the CCP, began to vanish because did not fit into this project. Further contributing to the fall of the Chinese horror film genre was the socialist requirement that films should contribute to the reduction of internal ethnic and cultural differences in order to create "ethic harmony and solidarity."[48] In other words, through censorship, the national requirement that all films serve the purposes of the mainstream meant that films that did not produce appropriate content were eliminated, and they were replaced by films that did.

After 1994, the Hollywood film rush had a huge impact on the Chinese film industry. Although commercial films have a better film market and produce greater profits, the CCP did not bend its censorship rules to accommodate these goals. In 1998, the CCP constructed a committee that regulates the film industry. From the perspective of the CCP, films are political and national tools, and this purpose overrides the goal of commercial and leisure value.

Because films provide paths to information and knowledge, it is important that there should be some control over their content. Moving people away from the wrong path and securing the nation is ideal and it is a means of achieving political domination. But doing so in a manner that reduces the commercial and art value of films can negatively affect the film industry.

Market and Audience Preferences

[48] Lu, *Transnational*, 7.

Both censorship and market and audience preferences play a vital role in the success or failure of horror films in China. Many art forms need to exist, but if limits are placed on the markets for art, including film, then artists may or may not insist on making it. The low quality of Chinese horror affects audience interest in them. As the box office numbers for the *House that Never Dies* reveal, people will be willing to see and discover horror films if they concern practical matters. For example, cultural representation is an important element that attracts audiences. Suspense, too, plays a big part in marketing.

Noël Carroll articulated in his book *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* that Hobbes, interestingly, thought of curiosity as an appetite of the mind; with the horror fiction, that appetite is whetted by the prospect of knowing the putatively unknowable, and then satisfied through a continuous process if revelation, enhanced by imitation of proofs, hypotheses, counterfeits of causal reasoning, and explanations whose details and movement intrigue the mind in ways analogous to genuine ones. [49] This statement indicates that viewers gain satisfaction by solving the puzzle of the mystery that lies hidden in horror movies. For instance, in the film *Conjuring*, audiences have a reasonable chance of solving the puzzle together with the Warrens, determining whether there are ghosts in the haunted house and then identifying ways to defeat the evil spirit. A film structured in this manner is no longer just a horror movie; it is also a game that the audience plays and experiences side by side with its characters. People's curiosity and their willingness to participate in a film is critical. Maintaining a Chinese market for horror will be possible only if it includes high-quality films. Chinese horror films are generally not of good quality for three reasons: filming technique difficulties, funding

[49] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 36.

shortages, censorship, and a lack of study and understanding of the theoretical concept of horror.

Even if we resolve all of these issues, there still might be problems with the quality of horror films. In China, social stresses have a significant impact on the box office performance of horror films. Horror films are typically aimed at the young generation, and China's young people are now under colossal pressure and have limited leisure time to watch movies. In the past few years, stand-up comedy has gained in popularity, and in 2020, even during the economic depression, it emerged as the most popular form of performance. Current trends suggest that the Chinese entertainment market is moving towards comedy rather than horror. There are horror films on the market, but they make little profit. Perhaps because the horror film imposes stress on an audience before it provides relief, people in China living under extreme working pressure seem not to prefer it as their to-go choice.

The failure of Chinese horror films probably has little to do with marketing. Two to three years prior to its release, *The House that Never Dies* was effectively and intensively marketed through high-quality publicity. The publicity was distributed primarily through television, then the dominant entertainment media, and its crew actively participated in the final publicity campaign. The film's trailer perfectly captured the horror elements that characterize traditional Chinese stories, and audiences embraced the assertion that the film focused on Asia's most important haunted house. With little mainland Chinese competition in the horror film genre, *The House that Never Dies* rose to the top of the market. Its success can be attributed in part to its evocation of a folklore—underworld or ghost marriage—already familiar to the mainland audience—a theme skillfully emphasized in the film’s high-quality trailer.

For the moment, the Chinese horror film industry has failed, but the success of *The House that Never Dies* demonstrates that a market for high-quality Chinese horror films exists. China certainly has the technical expertise to make such films and to promote them to Chinese audiences. For such films to be successful, the focus needs to be film quality and the story's deep core concept.

Rethinking

Finally, this paper will analyze the impact of horror movies on the spiritual component of people's lives to elaborate on the possible negative effect horror may have on people. Horror movies as we know them bring sensory enjoyment to people through stimulation of the brain's cortical nerves. "What happens for most people is that you have an arousal of your sympathetic nervous system and an activation [to produce] adrenaline," said AP Psychology doctor Heidi Mathers.[50]

The neuronal stimulation of the cerebral cortex by a horror movie resembles one's response to a roller coaster ride. "The emotion theory states that our interpretation of these same physiological cues can be different depending on the individual," said Mathers.[51] As posited in emotion theory, each person has a unique response to this kind of stimulation: some people like horror movies; others resist watching them.

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[50] Farhia Osman, "Psychological Effects of Horror Movies," *Zephyrus*, October 26, 2015, see https://edinazephyrus.com/psychological-effects-of-horror-movies/#:~:text=Horror%20movies%20can%20cause%20a%20wide%20variety%20of,fear%20and%20anxiety%20from%20watching%20a%20scary%20movie, accessed April 8, 2020.
[51] Osman, "Psychological Effects."

As Osman notes, "One of the most noticeable side-effects is sleeplessness."[52] Insomnia is a symptom of the real side effects of horror movies: the residual fear and anxiety that comes from watching a scary movie.

One study shows that some of those who watched the film *The Exorcist* experienced "fainting, vomiting, running out of the theatre and [some] experience[d] other forms of reactions to stress. The principal symptoms identified by Horovitz include 'loss of control over thought and emotions, denial and numbing..., extremes of anxiety, general tension and impaired relationships and psychophysiological disorders.'"[53] The fact that viewers of horror film are likely to experience such unpleasant reactions attracts some and drives others away. In summary, viewing horror increases anxiety, and the body responds to anxiety through loss of sleep, loss control over thoughts, vomiting and so on.

Even when people know that they are only watching a movie and that the action depicted is not real, they will react psychologically and physically to it, particularly when the genre is horror. This is so because movies are experienced as real. As Mathai remarks in reference to an adolescent viewer, "At the time of viewing the film, they were faced with loss of a parent or spouse to whom they had marked feelings of ambivalence."[54]

Those fully engrossed in a movie sense that they are entering the movie and thus find that their emotions are being pulled by the movie's minutiae. The emotion that underlies this response is human empathy. Through an act of imagination, people react to horror movies with

[52] Osman, "Psychological Effects."
[53] John Mathai, "An Acute Anxiety State in an Adolescent Precipitated by Viewing a Horror Movie," *Journal of Adolescence*, No. 6 (1983): 197.
[54] Mathai, "An Acute Anxiety State," 199.

both empathy and fear. The unique human emotional response of empathy opens up corresponding emotional changes and vulnerabilities. Through this emotional portal horror films can, to some extent, play an educational role. That is, the director conveys his or her understanding of society and analyzes social values through the venue of the film. Horror films warn people that both good and evil can eventually be rewarded. Of course, in recent years, more and more horror films are concerned not with retribution—the traditional core of the horror genre—but with society's dark side. A good example of the latter is the 2020 Mexican horror film *New Order*, which ends with a denial of justice and society cast into a chaotic and complex state. The movie's bad guys do not receive appropriate punishment; instead, they live well. The emotional and psychological effects of watching such a film are not limited to the two-hour viewing experience; instead, the sense of fear and depression that the movie induces persists long afterwards.

Because horror films innovate in response to changes in society, the search for new horror elements and new interpretations of horror elements consumes horror film directors. The horror film genre, in other words, is constantly changing. Perhaps because of innovations in special effects and the introduction of new horror elements, those who view horror films continue to experience fear. And because directors continue to push the boundaries of the genre, horror films now have an increasingly profound spiritual impact on people.

In recent years, more and more horror films have focused on political and social issues; indeed, the main element that induces horror in these films is their realism. For viewers, such films deepen mental anxiety. "Our family doesn't watch horror movies because we tend to view

these events as threatening, and then we start to associate the trigger in horror movies with real life events," warns Mathers.[55]

There is no doubt, then, that horror films can impact viewers psychologically, inducing states of anxiety that can lead to social problems. Because horror films trigger anxiety, people who are inherently anxious or vulnerable can experience significant negative effects on their mental health. Dr. Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center, observes that "Chronic anxiety increases the sensitivity to startle-eliciting stimuli, thus making people who are already stressed and anxious more likely to respond negatively."[56] These negative effects have prevented horror films from becoming a mainstream genre.

There is also the issue of whether horror films can promote or induce psychotic behavior among viewers. As discussed above, horror can be a vent for people to release desire and suppressed oppression. However, it can also be a trigger for mental illness. A psycho-phenomenological case study shows that viewing horror can lead to different psychological illnesses. In a 20-year-old male patient, depressive and anxiety symptoms less than 6 months duration were induced by film *Hannibal*.[57] Fortunately, the patient responded positively to antidepressant and cognitive behavior therapy. This suggests that among those exposed to horror films, some will experience a worsening of mental illness and its symptoms. Among those who suffer from bipolar disorder, for example, a common trigger of the bipolar state is

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[55] Osman, "Psychological Effects."
[56] Marnie Vinall, "Are Horror Movies Bad for Your Mental Health?" *Healthline*, 2020, see https://www.healthline.com/health/how-do-horror-movies-affect-your-mental-health#takeaway, accessed April 7, 2020.
[57] S. Soman, J. Parameshwaran and J. KP, "Films and Fiction Leading to Onset of Psycho-Phenomenology: Case Reports from a Tertiary Mental Health Center, India," *European Psychiatry* 41, No. 1 (March 2020): 747.

stress.[58] Among the vulnerable, watching or binge-viewing horror films could, because it induces stress, trigger bipolar disorder. Some people become obsessed with horror films. As Soman observes, "Viewing films compulsively, obsessive ruminations on horror and fictional themes can lead to onset of psychopathology of both psychosis and neurotic spectrum."[59] In other words, horror films can trigger mental problems in viewers who have existing or latent mental problems or who obsessively view them.

Given their downside, we can understand why horror movies do not effectively promote core socialist values, nor do they contribute to the building of a socialist society, and this accounts for the CCP throughout lukewarm view of horror movies. In China, cheap horror movies sell sex and gore in order to attracting audiences, but they have little real educational value. Such productions, which can aggravate social instability, are incompatible with CCP's political philosophy, and so it is understandable that they are not widely promoted in mainland China.

In a country that has freedom of expression and cultural diversity, all kinds of cultural products should exist and should be tolerated. This open way of thinking is very much in keeping with the capitalist market and the advanced cultural philosophy of Western society. Yet despite its value, such liberalization can have drawbacks that can induce problems. Both excessive governmental freedom and interference can affect the development of a cultural industry. In today's China, a certain amount of order is needed for the goals of socialist society

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[58] Madeline R. Vann, "9 Most Common Triggers for Bipolar Mood Episodes," *Everyday Healthy*, October 18, 2017, see https://www.everydayhealth.com/bipolar-disorder-pictures/biggest-triggers-of-bipolar-mood-swings.aspx, accessed April 8, 2020.

[59] Soman, Parameshwaran and KP, "Films and Fiction Leading to Onset of Psycho-Phenomenology," p. 747.

to be achieved. Chinese society and from Western societies differ, and this component of Chinese society is a necessary product of this era and this country. Although the Chinese government's excessive censorship of the film industry has affected the development of horror films, the actions are necessary in some cases. I am not complying to such policy, but it is wise to understand the complexity of a nation's political actions.

A utopia is an imagined community or society that possesses highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities for its citizens.[60] In such a society there would be no need for horror films that relieve stress. Similarly, if the dark side of society is the source of nourishment for horror films, then in a nearly perfect society, there would be no need for horror films that examine contentious social issues. In other words, if and when a utopian society is realized, horror films will cease to exist. Perhaps in that era, horror films, like mythical stories, will become legends.

Conclusion

After discussing the horror genre with two specific horror films, and the consequences of horror films, it is time to answer the last question. Why is it so important to have horror films? Is horror film necessary in today's film market?

Before going into that, I need to have a quick disclaimer. Because of the pandemic and recent tensions between China and the US, my research has been more limited than I had planned. For example, it was difficult to obtain certain Chinese materials important for my research. Thus, most of the central ideas in this paper are based on analyses of English-

[60] Henry A. Giroux, "Utopian Thinking Under the Sign of Neoliberalism: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Educated Hope," *Democracy & Nature* 9, No.1 (2003): 91–105.

language texts. Moreover, there are relatively few Chinese-language studies of Chinese horror films. My conclusions and analysis are based on the materials that I was able to gather.

Based on my research, Chinese horror reached its peak in the 2010s, and the *House that Never Dies* had the highest box office receipts in Chinese horror history. But censorship eliminated most of the core values and critical elements that attract audiences to the genre. A viewer who wants to watch a horror film has certain expectations, and a film that fails to meet these will not succeed commercially. In the end, the *House that Never Dies 2* was a significant failure and reflected in its failure we can see glory of an earlier genre of Chinese horror films that has now passed.

Is there a place, then, for horror in the Chinese film market, and can the popularity of the horror genre in China be revived? The first option, of course, is to let the genre die out. Horror films seldom promote CCP political values. Thus, their production is not facilitated by the government, and, consequently, most commercial horror films in China lose money. Horror films that do advocate the PPC's political values and promote its political image, such as *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhan Lang 2*, Wu Jing, 2017), do enjoy tremendous box office success; indeed, this film's success can be partly attributed to the fact that the CCP promoted it. Yet many horror movies in China are less successful. From this experience one might conclude that under the PCR's reign it would be wise to avoid making horror films.

But if we do not want Chinese horror film production to disappear, a proper film rating system might be a useful tool for saving it. The PRC previously considered using the Hollywood rating system, but because that system only provides information that audiences use to choose what films to watch, and because it does intervene in the market, it is not suitable for China.

But times have changed. With the introduction of FAST (Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical radio Telescope) the PRC has now achieved total surveillance, and it can enforce on a large scale the rules implemented by a ratings system. With the FAST surveillance system that CCP is using now, the web cam can instantly identify the person and categorize him/her into the appropriate rated movie. For instance, if an underaged kid goes to the cinema and wants to bypass with a fake ID, the camera in the cinema would capture the kid's face and immediately identify him or her as an underaged audiences and forbids the further purchase. Why, then, is it important to preserve the horror genre in Chinese films? Are their motivations to do so beyond gaining the profit?

In evaluating the value of the horror genre in Chinese films it may be useful to emphasize not the profitability (or lack thereof) of such films but their potential contribution to civic education.

This thesis examines the issues that horror faces today in the PRC film market. The genre should be preserved because historically it has played a significant role in Chinese film culture. Horror broadens the diversity of the film industry and can serve a tool to educate people about religious beliefs and critique wrongful behaviors. Karma and conscience are critical topics for horror. Two essential qualities motivate people's behavior, desire and fear. Horror often contains both qualities: a desire to be protected by a higher power and worry about being exposed to a dark force. Thus, horror films can be used for educational purposes.

Saving horror would preserve a type of art form. The Renaissance boosted Western cultural advancement, and numerous valuable artworks were produced by artists who blossomed. In China, during the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Period, the

"hundred schools of thought content" rule promoted high-quality cultural developments. These examples tell us that it is vital to have an environment in which the artistic product is baked into a diverse market and can compete with other products. Within such an eclectic atmosphere, creators have a better chance to exceed the accomplishments of the previous generations.

Horror is also tool for examining political and social perplexities. Like stand-up comedy, horror films are an extreme form of expression that can be used to advocate for ideological values and political beliefs. Moreover, horror themes can serve as metaphors for political issues, and as such, horror can serve as a tool of political criticism that audiences can easily digest. For instance, *Get Out* uses a new form of horror to point out racism. Similarly, *Candyman*, set in Chicago's infamous Cabrini Green housing development, examines systemic racism and the power of prejudice. *Rosemary's Baby* is concerned with rape culture and concerns about consent. Horror films induce chilling effects in audiences that watch events that mimic those of the real world; thus, the films push audiences to extremes, encouraging them to think about and reevaluate society.

Horror films are also a device for critiquing social behavior. For example, the study of horror films facilitates the study of behavioral psychology and people’s collective unconscious. As noted above, horror tends to relieve both stress and suppressed desires buried in our minds. Directors and writers in the genre keep finding new ways to scare people, and so they must repeatedly to go to new lengths to expose the true horror that exists in people's minds. Because horror reflects our desires and fears, both of which evolve, it holds up a mirror to a society's health and its collective unconscious.

The collective unconscious exists only at a theoretical level. Once we understand horror and how it can be used to understand society as a whole, we will more fully understand the collective unconscious. When that point is reached, we might be able to place the collective unconscious more fully in the realm of practice and less in the realm of theory. Perhaps the study of horror film production and its effects on people will lead us toward solid proof of the collective of its existence.

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