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American Samurai, Chinese Sheriffs, and Hollywood's Tokyo

by Matthew Bolton



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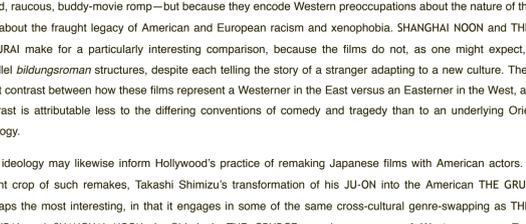
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Matthew Bolton examines the current mainstream fascination with Asian genre cinema, from the Chinese and Japanese period pieces in popular distribution, through the Hollywood remakes of Japanese horror films, to the Jackie Chan American adventure-comedies, in order to explore the conflicted representation and Orientalist ideology underlying this increased Asian presence in Hollywood.

The Western visitor to Asia who becomes more Eastern than the Easterners is a cultural archetype which continues to have currency in Hollywood films. In Quentin Tarantino's KILL BILL, PART II (2004), for example, David Carradine plays the eponymous Bill, a villainous reimagining of Caine, the mendicant martial artist of Carradine's 1970's television series KUNG FU. Caine and Bill alike return from China having mastered both the art of the warrior and an ersatz Eastern philosophy of detachment, enlightenment, and self-determination which owes as much to Stephen Covey as it does to Confucius. In Christopher Nolan's BATMAN BEGINS (2005), Bruce Wayne trains in a Himalayan martial arts school to gain the fighting prowess he will apply in Gotham City as Batman. While the titular head of the school is an Asian of indeterminate origin named Ra's Al Ghul (Ken Watanabe), its true leader is a Westerner played by Liam Neeson. But perhaps the character who most clearly fits this Westerner-turned-Easterner archetype is Nathan Algren, Tom Cruise's character in THE LAST SAMURAI (2003). While the film's imagery is indebted to Kurosawa, its story arc is a reread of James Clavell's *Shogun: the bildungsroman* of a man's transformation from *gaijin* to samurai. The Asia of all these films is a locus of trial and mastery, a place where the exceptional Westerner learns skills and values which effectively provide him with a second identity. In these narratives, Asian-ness—one part stoicism and two parts kung fu—is a commodity that an exceptional American may acquire and export.



The last five years have also witnessed the emergence of a film franchise which seems, at first glance, to represent an inversion of this archetype. In SHANGHAI NOON (2000) and SHANGHAI KNIGHTS (2003), as well as in Disney's AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS (2004), Jackie Chan plays a Chinese man who has traveled West. These films are worth a closer look, not because of the quality of their writing or production—each could be described as a broad, raucous, buddy-movie romp—but because they encode Western preoccupations about the nature of the East and about the fraught legacy of American and European racism and xenophobia. SHANGHAI NOON and THE LAST SAMURAI make for a particularly interesting comparison, because the films do not, as one might expect, follow parallel *bildungsroman* structures, despite each telling the story of a stranger adapting to a new culture. There is a great contrast between how these films represent a Westerner in the East versus an Easterner in the West, and this contrast is attributable less to the differing conventions of comedy and tragedy than to an underlying Orientalist ideology.

This ideology may likewise inform Hollywood's practice of remaking Japanese films with American actors. Of the recent crop of such remakes, Takashi Shimizu's transformation of his JU-ON into the American THE GRUDGE is perhaps the most interesting, in that it engages in some of the same cross-cultural genre-swapping as THE LAST SAMURAI and SHANGHAI NOON. In Shimizu's THE GRUDGE remake, a group of Westerners-gone-East find themselves doing battle with an undead Japanese family. Perhaps Hollywood cannot be faulted for wanting to cash in on the "J-Horror" boom, but the pattern of remaking these films, and the relationship between Americans and Japanese in THE GRUDGE, seems to point to the common presumption that undergirds THE LAST SAMURAI and SHANGHAI NOON: that while Eastern Culture can be acquired, one has to be born into Western Culture.

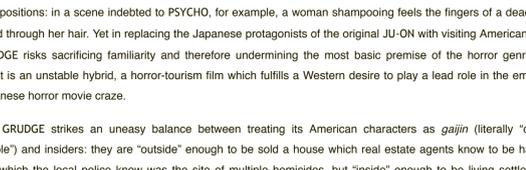
By the end of SHANGHAI NOON, Chan's character, Chon Wang, possesses the trappings of (Wild) Western Culture: a sheriff's badge, a trusty partner, and the anglicized name John Wayne. The final scene shows Wang and Roy O'Bannon, Owen Wilson's good-natured former outlaw, galloping down a ridge to bring frontier justice to a gang of train robbers. On the surface, then, Wang's story seems to mirror that of THE LAST SAMURAI, which ends with Nathan Algren donning vermilion samurai armor to fight alongside his honorable friend and *daimyo*, Ken Watanabe's Katsumoto. Yet Wang's emergence as a Western Hero constitutes not the film's climax, but its coda. In the film's climactic showdown, it is O'Bannon who becomes the Western Hero by finally learning to shoot straight. Wang, on the other hand, fights exclusively with the kung fu skills which he brought with him from China. Cruise's Westerner and Chan's Easterner are ultimately measured in the same scale, judged according to their mastery of Eastern culture as embodied in the martial arts. Thus while Nathan Algren by the end of his story has become a samurai, Wang's claim to heroism remains firmly rooted in his native culture. The narrative of the Easterner in the West is one not of an outsider achieving mastery of the local culture, but of an outsider demonstrating the value of the culture he has brought with him, and therefore being received with tolerance. Wang's sheriff's badge denotes not his mastery of Western culture, but Western culture's acceptance of him.

The mutually-reinforcing ideologies of these two films raise the question of whose fantasy SHANGHAI NOON is meant to serve: an Asian desire for inclusion in Western narratives of the nineteenth-century, or an American desire to possess a history of such inclusion? The film's choice of villain points to the latter. Lo Fong, a villainous Chinese expatriot who runs a brutal mining camp, has kidnapped the Princess Pei Pei out of greed and lust. Fong keeps order through the Gestapo tactic of collective punishment, warning the princess that if she runs away, he will kill one worker every hour until she is found. This willingness to trample on individual rights is central to the film's depiction of Chinese thought. The Forbidden City, in which the film opens, is shown as a place of groveling and prostration. The three imperial guards who initially accompany Wang on his journey are indistinguishable automatons. The American West, in contrast, prizes individuality and personal liberty. Wang's great breakthrough is his realization that he does not need to return the princess to the Forbidden City. Where the film's villain has broken from imperial rule only to set himself up as emperor of a labor camp, Wang and Pei Pei will abandon Eastern autocracy in favor of American egalitarianism. Indeed, the only barrier to their living happily ever after in the American West is a fellow Chinese who has imported to the new world their culture's disregard for individual rights.

Driven by an interventionist or revisionary impulse, SHANGHAI NOON systematically ameliorates the pervasive racism of the American West. By presenting the institutionalized oppression of Chinese workers not as a Western practice, but as an imported Chinese one, it ignores the history of the thousands of Chinese workers who were employed by American companies in the West to build railroads, dig mines, and perform menial labor under appalling conditions. Displacing this institutionalized racism onto a Chinese villain bowdlerizes the Old West, rendering it an enlightened enough milieu to accommodate a Chinese man as citizen and hero. The ordinary Americans of SHANGHAI NOON come across as bumblingly ignorant rather than ignominiously bigoted. While O'Bannon's derogatory reference to Wang as "just a Chinaman" leads to a crisis in their relationship, the outlaw ultimately learns to value his Chinese friend's cultural heritage. "Not everyone is as tolerant as me," O'Bannon warns Wang elsewhere; but, in truth, most characters are *nearly* as tolerant as he is. When the three Imperial Guards hitch a ride in a pioneer couple's covered wagon, the pioneer woman comments to her husband that they don't look like any Indians she's ever seen. "They're not Indians," the pioneer corrects his wife, "They're Jews." Dropping them off in town, he waves goodbye and calls out a hearty "shalom." Indians, Jews, Chinese—the average American embraces them all in the Old West of SHANGHAI NOON.

A similar charge of historical-revisionism might be made about the Meiji-era Japan of THE LAST SAMURAI, in which militant feudal warriors are represented both as gentle guardians of a pastoral lifestyle and as broadminded cultural ambassadors willing to judge their American prisoner-of-war on his individual merits. The film's plot hinges on samurai society being permeable enough to allow Nathan Algren to learn its code and rise through its ranks. As in SHANGHAI NOON's Old West, the inhabitants of this version of nineteenth-century feudal Japan must be infused with an early twenty-first century multicultural sensitivity for its basic premise to function. If SHANGHAI NOON's vision of the Old West represents an American fantasy of possessing a more inclusive history, then THE LAST SAMURAI represents a similar desire in regard to U.S. foreign policy and the "Americanization" of the East. The U.S. military's envoys to Japan, from Commodore Matthew Perry in 1854 to General Douglas MacArthur after the Second World War, had modernizing influences on the country. The U.S. military officer of THE LAST SAMURAI, in contrast, is constructed instead as a reactionary figure who sides with traditional Japanese culture against the forces of modernization. Where MacArthur outlawed the samurai *katana*, Algren would wield one.

The shared ideology of SHANGHAI NOON and THE LAST SAMURAI is distinctly Orientalist, in that it treats Asian identity as a collectible fetish. This ideology may be at work not only in screenwriting, but also in the Hollywood boardroom. While there has been a boom in the number of Asian films to be shown in American theaters, an interesting pattern emerges when one considers which Asian films are released and which films are remade. Generally speaking, the Asian films which have been screened in mainstream American theaters have historical settings: CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON, HERO, HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS, ZATOICHI, and the *anime* features of Miyazaki and others. When Kurosawa's SEVEN SAMURAI was remade as THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN or his YUJIMBO as A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS, the American Western—in big studio and spaghetti phase, respectively—was in its ascendancy. It was fortuitous for the studios that stories set in the bandit-ridden countryside of Warring States-era Japan carried over so well to the American frontier. Today, the Western genre has entered its postmodern phase. Filmmakers who create a contemporary Western do so with the awareness that they are commenting on a genre whose day has passed. It is at once the audience's familiarity with and relative distance from the generic conventions of the Western which makes it so easy to lampoon. The Japanese or Chinese period piece, on the other hand, is an eminently viable and popular genre. Relocating any of these films to an American setting would be quite the boondoggle. Indeed, these Asian operatic portrayals of the good, the bad, and the ugly may play so well in America precisely because they fill the void left by the demise of the Western.



Another set of films, all set in contemporary Japan and most of them horror movies, have instead been remade with American actors: THE RING, THE GRUDGE, DARK WATER, and the romantic-comedy SHALL WE DANCE. Other remakes are in the works. On one level, the practice of remaking "J-Horror" movies points to the portability of the genre: everyone likes a good scare. Yet on some level, remaking such films seems to imply that while Asian identity is central to a story set in the mythic or historical past of China or Japan, it is extraneous or distracting in a story set in the present day. THE RING, for example, which was shot in the Pacific Northwest, effaces any connection to the Japan of the original RINGU. DARK WATER, too, loses its Asian identity once set against the backdrop of the Manhattan real estate market.

Perhaps the most interesting of these horror remakes is one which retains its Japanese setting: THE GRUDGE (2004). Takashi Shimizu's American version of his film JU-ON (2000, 2003). Both films (as well as the GRUDGE sequels which Shimizu has directed in Japan) revolve around a house haunted by the undead Saeki family: mother Kayako, son Toshio, and husband Takeo, who murdered the family before killing himself. Anyone who crosses the threshold of the house will be relentlessly pursued by this family of ghouls. Like JU-ON, THE GRUDGE is set in Tokyo, but in this version all of the major characters are Americans who are working or studying in Japan. Where THE LAST SAMURAI filmed an A-list Hollywood actor into a Japanese samurai movie, THE GRUDGE imports B-list actors into a "J-Horror" film, with Sarah Michelle Gellar, Bill Pullman, and William Mapother playing a student, a professor, and a businessman on extended stays in the East.

But the presence of these Americans in Tokyo strains the conventions of the horror genre. Horror movies are built on the juxtaposition of the familiar and the unimaginable. It is this juxtaposition which makes the shower scene in PSYCHO, to go to a *locus classicus* of the genre, so terrifying: everyone has taken a shower, so everyone can relate to Leigh's vulnerability at the moment she is attacked. Both versions of THE GRUDGE rely on such unsettling juxtapositions: in a scene indebted to PSYCHO, for example, a woman shampooing feels the fingers of a dead hand laced through her hair. Yet in replacing the Japanese protagonists of the original JU-ON with visiting Americans, THE GRUDGE risks sacrificing familiarity and therefore undermining the most basic premise of the horror genre. The result is an unstable hybrid, a horror-tourism film which fulfills a Western desire to play a lead role in the emerging Japanese horror movie craze.

THE GRUDGE strikes an uneasy balance between treating its American characters as *gaijin* (literally "outside people") and insiders: they are "outside" enough to be sold a house which real estate agents know to be haunted and which the local police know was the site of multiple homicides, but "inside" enough to be living settled lives which can be disrupted by the emergence of the horrific. The Japanese homeowner in the original film had a senile mother living with him and a sister working nearby. In other words, he was living a rooted, regular life. In the remake, this same nuclear family—mother, son, daughter-in-law, daughter—has for some reason uprooted itself from America to move to Japan. It strains credulity not only for the whole Williams family to have relocated, but for the elderly American mother to be living in a traditional, *tatami*-matted room just off the kitchen—a room which suited her Japanese counterpart in the original film. Just as easily as the senile mother adapts herself to this non-Western room, so do almost all of the Americans adapt themselves to Japanese language and culture. The Williams' short-lived wife is the only one who seems to struggle with making the cultural transition. Karen (Sarah Michelle Gellar), an exchange student and volunteer social worker, and Peter (Bill Pullman), a college professor at a Japanese university, speak enough Japanese to negotiate all of the interactions required by this film. Even the Williams sister, who is stalked in her workplace, can blurt out enough Japanese to direct security to the proper floor. Simply put, there is no language barrier for these Americans. Their assimilation is aided by the fact that the Japanese police detective, like Katsumoto of THE LAST SAMURAI, speaks fluent English. This mastery of language is the factor that most decisively allows the Americans to function as foreign protagonists and to "replace" the Japanese characters of the original film. It is the badge of their "insider" status.

Another odd development arises from Shimizu's sticking closely to his original script: there are no true cross-cultural relationships in this film. The Americans have all brought their friends and love interests abroad with them—the four members of the Williams family have each other, Karen has her American architect boyfriend, and Peter has his American wife. Where Nathan Algren and Chon Wang traveled alone and therefore found themselves bonding with foreign companions, the Americans of THE GRUDGE are wholly insular. The one instance of cross-cultural desire in this film, shown in an extended flashback, is Kayako Saeki's uninvited obsession with Peter. It is on account of this obsession that her husband kills Kayako, their son, and himself. So in point of fact, the only Japanese with whom the Americans have meaningful relationships are the ghouls who stalk them. Since the Japanese police and security guards prove to be relatively ineffectual, the story essentially becomes a showdown between living Americans and undead Japanese.

The transformation of the character of the visiting social worker, from Megumi Okina's Rika in JU-ON to Sarah Michelle Gellar's Karen in THE GRUDGE, is striking. Whereas Rika was largely passive, leaving the police work to the professionals, Karen takes on the role of detective herself. She uses the internet to uncover the truth of the original murders, confronts the detectives with her evidence, and ultimately attempts to burn the haunted house to the ground, an failure undertaken by a retired police officer in the original film. Where the police officer's attempt ended in action and death, Karen both torches the ghoul and survives. Rika dies off-screen, but Karen is still alive and kicking at the end of her film. Karen overrides the episodic structure of the original film, which dispatched with each of its victims in turn, by surviving to the end and being the last character on screen. She has therefore outdone both the Japanese character on whom she was based, the Japanese police in both films, and the Japanese ghoul family. In the final scene, Karen enters a room in the morgue to identify the body of her dead boyfriend. Standing over the corpse, she hears from behind her the signature creaking rattle of the undead Kayako Saeki. As the camera pulls back, we see that she is standing back-to-back with the ghoul. The screen goes black, leaving unanswered the question of who will survive this final fight. There is no doubt, however, where this tableau is drawn from: Karen and Kayako are positioned in the back-to-back starting position of the Western gunfighters' showdown. The American heroine will fight her Japanese nemesis not according to the conventions of the Japanese horror film, but according to those of the Western.

Lest there be any doubt that THE GRUDGE enacts a specifically American fantasy of inclusion and mastery over an Eastern culture and genre, consider for a moment whether its premise would have any appeal for an American audience were it to be reversed. A Japanese extended family moves to an American city, where they unwittingly purchase a haunted house. Coincidentally, the spirit haunting this particular house is that of an American woman who had an obsession with a Japanese professor. Marshalling a heavily-accented, two-hundred word English vocabulary ("Hello," "Thank you," "Where are your parents?") which somehow serves them in every supernatural cross-cultural encounter, and aided by an ineffectual, philosophizing American homicide detective who happens to speak fluent Japanese, members of the family and of the larger expatriate Japanese community unravel the house's mystery and do battle with its ghosts. Could such a film be anything other than a comedy?

The irreversibility of THE GRUDGE therefore speaks to the same Orientalist fantasy that informs THE LAST SAMURAI and SHANGHAI NOON. Where Nathan Algren goes East to find purpose and enlightenment, Chon Wang comes West to make us laugh. If genre is a form of cultural shorthand which encodes complex ideologies through the deployment of familiar conventions, then the manipulation of the Western, Samurai, and Horror Movie conventions in SHANGHAI NOON, THE LAST SAMURAI and THE GRUDGE speaks to a conflicted Western attitude toward the Easterner: a desire at once to accept and to dominate, to learn from and to master, to befriend and to defeat.



This is Matthew Bolton's first submission to SYNOPTIQUE.

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