

The Villainous *Pontianak*? Examining Gender, Culture and Power in Malaysian Horror Films

Lee, Y. B.

School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia 11800 Penang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The *pontianak* is widely recognised as the most dreaded supernatural being in Malay folklore and mythology. Often described as a fearsome mythical creature with vampire-like qualities, she is said to have fangs, possesses ghost-like traits and can only be subdued using a sharp object which is usually a nail struck to the back of her neck. She is also recognised through her high-pitched shrieks, long flowing hair and a fondness for the blood of children. Despite possessing such fearsome and horrifying characteristics, the *pontianak* peculiarly remains popular among Malaysians as the horror film genre has always been popular among Malaysian and Asian audiences due to its deep roots in religious and superstitious beliefs. Many Asian nations have shared cultural, historical and social characteristics. Cross cultural influences across borders are common in shaping each other's culture and a number of Malaysian horror films have been influenced by the Noh and Kabuki-influenced 'shunen' (revenge) and 'kaidan' (ghost mystery) stories. While the horror film is in fact a commercial venture, the genre is also filled with socio-cultural and political contestations. As such, these narratives reflect certain socio-cultural and political anxieties of given moments within the location of the film's production. This paper therefore examines the pan-Asian cultural influences in the current wave of Malaysian horror. As the *pontianak* is also always female, this paper then examines how the employment of female monstrosity articulate male fears around female empowerment and suggests a broader challenge to a sense of normality, cultural and religious beliefs.

Keywords: Malaysian cinema, *pontianak*, horror, female monstrosity, power, cinematic villains

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E-mail address:

baljy@yahoo.com (Lee, Y. B.)

INTRODUCTION

The *pontianak* has become one of the most recognisable figures in Malaysian cinema. To date, there are more than 10 films produced from the 1950s until

the early 2000s about this iconic and instantly recognisable mythical creature. Notable films about this fearsome mythical creature with vampire-like qualities are *Pontianak* (1957), *Sumpah Pontianak* (1958), *Pontianak Gua Musang* (1964), *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* (2004) and *Pontianak Menjerit* (2005). In these films, the *pontianak* is always female, have fangs, possesses ghost-like traits, and can only be subdued by striking a nail to the back of her neck. The *pontianak* is also known to shriek in a high-pitched tone, has long flowing hair, and dons a long white robe. Despite possessing such fearsome and horrifying characteristics, the *pontianak* peculiarly remains popular among Malaysians as the horror film genre has always been popular among Malaysian audiences due to its deep roots in religious and superstitious beliefs.

The popularity and to a certain extent fascination of horror films is also one that transcends both time and space and has a popular following in Asia. Japan for example, is well known for its J-Horror films depicting blood and gore while horror films from Thailand are often laden with psychological elements. Horror films belonging to this wave of pan-Asian horror often contain distinctive characteristics but the one thing that is commonly shared is the gender of its monster/supernatural entity, which is often female. This employment of female monstrosity in such films however, does not merely articulate male fears of female empowerment. The monstrous female, which can present itself as the archaic mother, with a monstrous womb,

vampire, witch, possessed monster, castrator and castrating mother, is represented as abject, a being which threatens the stability of the symbolic order (Creed, 1996). The monstrous feminine while arousing dread and horror, problematises the symbolic order through the evocation of fear, unease, disquiet and gloom (Creed, 2004). For the restoration of order to occur, the abject needs to be rejected before it becomes too threatening (Creed, 2004). This paper therefore examines the emergence of *pontianak* films in Malaysia and their pan-Asian horror film connection. Secondly, this paper examines *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* as a case study to suggest how the employment of female monstrosity in Malaysian horror films poses a broader challenge to a sense of normality, and cultural and religious beliefs within a patriarchal society. This case study also examines if the *pontianak* exists as a villain that needs to be destroyed for the re-establishment of a sense of normalcy or a protagonist to defend and boost a status quo under threat.

DEFINING THE HORROR GENRE

The characteristics that constitute the horror genre are not fixed, as horror is a flexible genre open to varying interpretations. It varies according to the different audiences located within different contexts and moments, and is built on a set of familiar conventions and at the same time using different cultural resources drawn upon by both filmmaker and audience (Tudor, 1989). The horror genre therefore, should

be understood as a collection of related but often very different categories. As an overlapping and evolving set of conceptual categories, the horror genre is in a constant state of flux rather than being a distinct and unified set of films with shared conventions (Cherry, 2009). The simplest definition of a horror film is a film that intends to horrify and thrill a captive audience (Creed, 2005; Davis & Natale, 2010). This statement in itself is a paradox; it is contradictory as it contains two very opposing emotions. The paradox of the horror film lies in its alluring appeal of horrifying audiences. While the term 'horror' itself denotes feelings of fear, shock, disgust, and abjection, when put to screen, horror films can cross cultural, religious, and class boundaries by drawing on and appealing to a range of audiences from different classes, localities and beliefs. As one of the most lucrative genres in the cinema industry, the ability of the horror genre to continue drawing audiences to experience new frights and horrifying sights through morbid preoccupations with fear, death and monsters leads to the question that has fascinated and bewildered critics and academics alike: How do audiences continue to be attracted to something that causes fear and disgust?

This phenomenon of horror film's remarkable popularity and its continued acceptance by audiences has made the horror film one of the most provocative and controversial genres in cinema (Hutchings, 2008). The horror film emerges from being seen as a form of low culture to a form that often reflects the social, cultural,

and political anxieties of the time of its making. It explores fundamental questions about the nature of human existence and the contemporary sense of the world by intensely conveying synchronic associations and ideological and social messages of a certain historical moment (Prince, 2004). As the horror film is meant to draw negative emotions from the audience, it was once seen as a low form of culture (Prince, 2004), as an 'outsider', 'forbidden fruit', 'distasteful', 'tainted', and 'cultural other', existing at the margins of the mainstream with a taboo status (Cherry, 2009). Despite its marginal status, the horror genre has persisted since the inception of cinema. Audience perception of the horror genre has evolved since the days of early cinema. Horror has been a durable genre that has evolved from one generation to the next. The turnaround of horror from a genre existing on the fringes to a driving force in the mainstream locates it as possibly the most sustainable genre in cinematic history. In order to continually scare its audience, the boundaries of the genre have been completely shifted over time to constantly revitalise, evolve, transform, and hybridise into an extremely diverse set of sub-genres and new forms to offer thematic variations to its audience (Cherry, 2009). The durability of the horror genre can therefore, be explained through its ability to relate to the audience's perception of fear in line with shifting times.

THE MALAYSIAN *PONTIANAK* AND THE FILEM SERAM

In one of the most contemporary discussions about the *pontianak* in folklore and popular culture, Ng (2009) attributes the *pontianak* as possessing similar qualities to the Western vampire, as a hybrid creature that blends Eastern and Western characteristics of a vampire. The cinematic representations of the *pontianak* have blurred the boundaries between traditional belief and popular culture. This is because the *pontianak* has become a recalibration of Malay and Western folklore and popular culture, as she was created with fangs, ghost-like traits, and is subdued using a sharp object (striking a nail at the back of the neck).

Skeat's 1965 study on Malay folklore in Malaysia however, highlights the erroneous belief in the use of the term *pontianak* in current cinematic representations. According to Skeat, the *pontianak* is actually the child of the *langsuyar/langsuir*, a creature that shares similar characteristics? The *langsuyar/langsuir* is an incredibly beautiful lady who dies shortly after giving birth. She dies of shock upon hearing of her stillborn child and returns from the dead in the form of a *pontianak*. Upon returning from the dead, she claps her hands and flies onto a tree. In order to prevent such a transformation, glass beads are placed into her mouth, a chicken egg is placed under her armpits, and needles are pierced through her palms. This is done so that the dead woman is prevented from shrieking and flying, as her arms and movements have been limited. The *langsuyar* is fond of

fish and is easily recognisable by her green robe, long fingernails, and long jet-black hair. Cutting her nails and hair and stuffing it into a hole may subdue her. In doing so, she becomes a woman and is capable of being a wife and mother. While Skeat states that the *pontianak* should theoretically be termed as the *langsuyar*, this female vampire, however has been commonly referred to as the *pontianak* in societal folklores and popular culture. The *pontianak* should also not be mistaken for a certain place by the name of Pontianak located in the province of West Kalimantan, Indonesia. In fact, there is a myth that states how the place got its name as the early settlers at Pontianak were haunted by sightings of the *pontianak*. As such, the myth and belief in the existence of the *pontianak* stretches transnationally throughout Southeast Asian countries. In Indonesia, it is known as the "kuntilanak", in the Philippines, "tiyanak" and in Singapore and Malaysia, the "pontianak".

In Malaysian cinemas, the Malaysian horror film or *filem seram* were most popular during the 1950s–1960s and again in the early 2000s. During these times, it was films with *pontianak* themes that popularised this genre while other films used localised monsters, entities, beliefs, mythologies and superstition. This has allowed Malaysians to develop a deep sense of 'cultural verisimilitude' that invokes a deep sense of plausibility, motivation, justification and belief due to familiarity with the monsters in these films (Lee, 2012). For example, the release of the first *pontianak*, film *Pontianak* (1957),

caused certain members of the audience to lose consciousness as the images were reported to be too shocking. The release of *Pontianak* by B.N. Rao led to an intense rivalry between the two largest film studios Cathay-Keris and Malay Film Productions (MFP) of the Shaw Brothers.

Pontianak starred Maria Menado and her husband Abdul Razak was the scriptwriter. The film narrates the tale of the female protagonist Chomel's transformation into a *pontianak* who was abandoned as a baby and adopted by an old man who was an author. She grows up ugly and hunchbacked and is ostracised by the villagers. When the old man dies, he instructs her to burn all his belongings. As she is carrying out his instructions, she finds a book that reveals a secret potion to obtaining good looks. During a full moon, she makes the mixture, drinks it and passes out. However, she fails to notice a clause prohibiting her to ever taste blood. She awakens as a beautiful woman and eventually marries the son of a village head. Her transformation into a *pontianak* happens when her husband is bitten by a snake. In a bid to rescue him, she sucks the venom from his leg but the taste of blood tempts her to ultimately drain his body of blood. She vanishes but emerges as a *pontianak* who returns during the night to visit her daughter, terrorises the village, and kills men after seducing them. The film's success led to two sequels, *Dendam Pontianak* (1957) and *Sumpah Pontianak* (1958).

Being a commercial enterprise, these sequels were produced as 'commercial

feature films to continue telling familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations' (Grant, 2003). Two *pontianak* films - *Pontianak Kembali* (1963) and *Pontianak Gua Musang* (1964) - were directed by B.N. Rao. The Cathay-Keris *pontianak* films proved to be a winning formula with a total of five films released and the *pontianak* until today remains the most recognisable monster. The genre's success eventually led to spin-offs and copycat movies by MFP. In 1958, MFP released Ramon Estella's *Anak Pontianak*. However, MFP only produced two *pontianak* films, the other being *Pusaka Pontianak* (1964). *Pontianak* (1975) became the eighth and final *pontianak* film released before the 30 year hiatus in the production of *pontianak* films. Locally made horror films also lost their lustre with Malaysian audiences and the horror genre became almost non-existent.

In 2004, the *pontianak* returned to Malaysian cinema through Shuhaimi Baba's *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*. As the first *pontianak* film to be released in more than 30 years since the review of the Film Act in 1971 and the introduction of the VHSC (Violence, Horror, Sex, Counter-culture) policy, the film script was rewritten five times, given a rating of 18PL (A film that may contain a combination of either horror, violence, sex, politics, religion), and a disclaimer at the beginning to remind viewers that the film was fictional and that the *pontianak* is merely a figment of one's imagination.¹ The film achieved critical and commercial success by exploiting

the infamous *pontianak* myth which has deep mythical roots in Malaysia. The film became a local success as it was screened at 29 commercial cinemas, made a return of MYR3.2 million (US\$1.07 million), and received numerous accolades such as Best Editing and Best Male Supporting Actor at the *Festival Filem Malaysia 17* (17th Malaysian Film Festival), and 10 awards (including Best Film Production, Best Cinematography and Best Editing) at the 2004 Malaysian Film Workers Association (PPFM) Oscars.

According to Shuhaimi Baba, the film was more popular than Japanese and Korean horror films as Malaysian audiences could easily relate to the Malay language and the localised *pontianak* (Looi, 2011). That film was the first local horror film in the post-2000 era to be commercially screened overseas and at festivals in Spain, London, Bangkok, and Singapore; and to win awards for Best Director, Best Cinematography, and Best Music at the Estepona Horror and Fantasy Film Festival (Spain, 2004), and Best Actress at the Asia Pacific Film Festival (Japan, 2004). The local media, which covered the film's accomplishments extensively, helped the film gain extensive popularity while (re)popularising the horror genre. The popularisation and success achieved by this film then led to the emergence of a new 'wave' of *filem seram* in Malaysia. In 2011 alone, an average of one *filem seram* was released per month with various horror sub-genres and sequels being produced. The 'wave' of popular horror films in Malaysia can therefore, be

attributed to this film. The above illustration exemplifies the continued attraction and fascination of Malaysians towards horror films. This phenomenon will form the basis of my examination of contemporary Malaysian horror films and to explain its sudden (re)popularisation in Malaysian cinema. As a result, another two *pontianak* films were released, namely *Pontianak Menjerit* (2005), *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam 2* (2006) and *Tolong! Awek Aku Pontianak* (2011) The (re)popularisation of Malaysian horror films thus, marks the return of a repressed genre.

THE MALAYSIAN-PAN-ASIAN HORROR CONNECTION

Horror films have always been popular in Asia. Throughout the years, its audiences have been entertained by Malaysian *pontianak* films such as *Sumpah Pontianak* and *Anak Pontianak* in the 1950s–1970s; Indonesian horror films *Mystics in Bali* (1981) and *Pengabdian Setan* (1982) explored the mystical and supernatural in the 1980s, and the Hong Kong Chinese (hopping) vampire films in the 1990s such as *Encounters of the Spooky Kind* (1980) and *Mr. Vampire* films. As Asian countries have much in common culturally, there exist many similarities in the characteristics of their horror films. For example, James Lee's *Claypot Curry Killers* from Malaysia bears certain similarities to the cannibalistic acts in Fruit Chan's short film *Dumplings* in the *Three...Extremes* (2004) compilation: here, human flesh is used to enhance the flavour and saleability of a certain dish. As

such, it makes sense to examine how the Malaysian horror films are influenced by the current wave of pan-Asian cinematic horror. This is not to be confused with the Hollywood remakes of popular Asian titles such as *Ringu* and *Dark Water* (2002) that were produced using big budgets, stars, and special effects, Asian horror movies began as low-budget and independent productions without the presence of renowned stars or special effects (Rawle, 2010). This current wave of cinematic horror is greatly aided by the rise of digital film-making technology and the internet, and the release of *Ringu* and its subsequent sequels and prequel, that created shockwaves across the region and worldwide.

Beginning regionally in Asia, the *Ringu* phenomenon sparked immense discussions on the Internet, media, academia, and in the cinematic world. *Ringu*, a low-budget independent production, has similarly impacted on Malaysian horror films. The image of a slim figured Sadako dressed in a long white garment, with long straight hair parted to reveal only her left eye, crawling out of a television set and the curse of certain death after the viewing of a videocassette tape and the receiving of a phone call has greatly influenced the horror genre (this image of Sadako has influenced the portrayal of Meriam the *pontianak* in *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* and the *hantu nombor ekor* in *Sini Ada Hantu* (2011)). The possibility of such a horrendous being emerging from simple everyday appliances shocked and horrified millions of viewers regionally

and worldwide, as this image and storyline tore down the boundaries between what was possible and factual while questioning the fragility of life. The success of *Ringu* (Ring) and the theatrical releases of its sequels *Ringu 2* (Ring 2) (1999) and *Ring O: Birthday* (2000) led to the emergence of the J-Horror movement and eventual rise of the horror movie wave across Asia. Worldwide, the success of *Ringu* and J-Horror led to the film being remade by DreamWorks as *The Ring* (2002). This wave occurred as horror is a cinematic genre capable of transcending borders, because fear as a universal emotion has allowed the horror genre to move easily across cultures.

The pan-Asian horror film represents an incorporation of contemporary regionalism and globalisation that exists at the intra-, inter-, and extra textual levels. It is successfully exhibited and distributed across the Asian region and globally through Hollywood adaptations and taps into themes with strong regional and international significance (Knee, 2009, p. 69). The success of J-Horror, low-budgeted digital film-making and the ability of horror films to cross cultures and borders across Asia has led to the emergence of prominent titles from a number of Asian nations; from South Korea: Kim Ji-woon's *The Quiet Family* (1998); Thailand: Nonzi Nimibutr's *Nang Nak* (1999); Indonesia: Rizal Mantovani's *Jelangkung* (2001); Singapore: Djinn's *Return to Pontianak* (2001); The Philippines: Chito S. Roño's *Feng Shui* (2004); and Malaysia: Shuhaimi Baba's *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*

(2004). While this list is by no means exhaustive, the above films represent some of the pioneering works from different Asian countries, emerging after the success of *Ringu*.

In pan-Asian horror cinema, the majority of filmmakers and producers have a preference for regional and global production approaches because of their cosmopolitan backgrounds and overseas educations; while the rise and popularity of the internet and digital media have allowed audiences access to information regarding local and national cinemas across Asia (Choi & Wada-Marciano, 2009). The cultural exchanges illustrated by the current horror boom across Asia are also caused by the transnationality of human and technological capital. Cinematic representations in pan-Asian horror, however, differ from Hollywood-established patterns as Asian horror films began as low-budget and independently produced productions without the presence of renowned stars or special effects (Rawle, 2010). Many 'ghosts' in Asian horror films are created with likenesses and traits similar to Sadako's and the movies contain excessive images of blood and gore. Known as the '*onryo*', they are females dressed in the long flowing white gown of the burial kimono, have long straight hair, lifeless eyes on a vacant face, move by crawling in a spider-like motion and embody female murder victims returning from the dead as spirits seeking revenge as seen in Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-on: The Grudge 2* (2003). While the

cultural exchanges illustrated by the current horror boom across Asia are caused by the transnationality of human and technological capital, their themes, style, and exhibition patterns, however, carry strong regional and international significance.

Many Asian nations have shared cultural, historical and social characteristics as cultural flows have easily occurred across borders. A great number of horror films in the current wave of Asian horror while shaped extensively by the Noh and Kabuki-influenced '*shunen*' (revenge) and '*kaidan*' (ghost mystery stories) of *Ringu*, also employ localised elements of religious beliefs, customs, traditions and values. Common themes often explored in Asian horror movies are curses, urban legends and mythical tales such as the masked woman with a mutilated face in *Carved* (2007), vengeance for a transgression in *Shutter* (2004), and tales of haunted buildings or houses that represent a displacement of being 'unreconciled to the past and unconsolated by the present' (Parry, 2004) through spectral nationalities and postcolonial hauntings as captured in *The Maid* (2005). The use of regional themes places their works within an 'Asian Cinematic Imagined Community' of different locations, classes and nationalities.² In short, these phenomena represent a sense of postcolonial fear in Southeast Asian nations such as Malaysia, Singapore, and The Philippines.

**THE CINEMATIC MALAYSIAN
PONTIANAK: *PONTIANAK HARUM
SUNDAL MALAM***

The story of *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* takes place in pre-independence Malaysia in a local village known as *Kampung Paku Laris*. *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* tells the story of Meriam, a distinguished “*gamelan*” dancer, whose beauty many covet. Even the local ruler grants her the honorary title of “*Primadona*” due to her prominence and talent as a dancer. Two friends, Marsani and Danial, who also live in *Kampung Paku Laris* fall in love with her at the same time. Meriam eventually weds Danial and when she is heavily pregnant, her merchant husband is killed in an accident at sea. Marsani then attempts to fill in the void left by Danial. He tries to force himself onto Meriam but as she resists and flees, she is stabbed in the abdomen by one of Marsani’s thugs standing watch outside her home. As she lies dying, her unborn child is miraculously saved. Strange events eventually start taking place at *Kampung Paku Laris* and those closely aligned with Marsani are found dead. It is believed that Meriam has returned in the form of a *pontianak* seeking vengeance and retaliation upon those who have wronged her.

The story then continues to 2003 and Marsani is now in his golden years. He continues to be haunted by the death of Meriam and is still obsessed about her rejecting his love and advances. Marsani also remains paranoid as he continues to worry about Meriam’s continuous vengeance upon

him and his family. In order to protect his family and lineage, he attempts to prolong his lifespan by undergoing plastic surgery and ozone treatments. One day, a girl by the name of Maria, who bears similar looks with Meriam, emerges in his life. Marsani becomes distraught not only because of her striking resemblance with Meriam, but also because strange events once again start happening to those close to Marsani. Marsani’s paranoia becomes even more intense as he is quite certain that Maria is actually Meriam who has returned to exact her vengeance upon him. He then fears for the lives of his grandson Norman and his wife Ana as unexplained shadows begin to emerge around them. One day, they discover a tomb at the place where Norman works and the scent of a tuber rose lingers at their home. These paranormal activities affect the marriage of Norman and Ana and even the sanity of Maria, as she herself wonders if indeed she is a *pontianak* as Marsani finds a scar at the back of her neck.

In *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, much emphasis is placed on the careful construction of costumes that reflect 1940s Malaya, an era when the early *pontianak* films were produced. The portrayal of the *pontianak* in *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* bears certain similarities as well as differences with the *pontianak* of the 1960s. First, Meriam differs from the early day *pontianak* in the films produced by Cathay-Keris and MFP. This is because Meriam has supernatural powers that enable her to fly and climb trees. Second, the advancement of technology and computer generated

images (CGI) has led to the evolution in the make-up and costume of the modern day *pontianak*. Meriam does not wear a rubber mask and neither does she have fangs.

The *pontianaks* however, bear certain similarities. First, the *pontianak* from films such as *Pontianak Gua Musang* and *Tolong! Awek Aku Pontianak* have the capability to disguise themselves as a beautiful woman to seduce, charm and lure their male targets using their beauty. Once they have trapped their targets, they then transform back into an unsightly form before killing their victims. Very often, these targets are individual men who have wronged them during their lifetime. As such, the *pontianaks* in such movies employ the Noh and Kabuki-influenced 'shunen' (revenge) plot. This is similar to the horror movies from Japan, South Korea and Thailand whereby the murdered woman returns from afterlife seeking justice. She is portrayed as a phantom or apparition and kills her perpetrators and their allies. It is only after achieving this her soul is able to rest and justice restored.

The emergence of the *pontianak* as a form of 'living dead' however, transgresses Islamic beliefs as the *pontianak* that continues living after death defies *Barzakh* or the timeframe between death and *akhirat* (afterlife). During *Barzakh*, the soul of the dead hovers above the body in the grave and is in a state of repentance while waiting to be resurrected on *akhirat*. The belief in the *pontianak* transforming into a human however, defies this Islamic belief but echoes the superstitious beliefs in the

Malay *adat* and themes of folktales and superstition in pan-Asian horror films. This is because in Malaysia, *adat* (culture) and Islam play a significant role in the lives of the Malay community. *Adat* has its roots embedded in remnants of Hinduism, as Islam only arrived during the 15th century reign of the Malacca Sultanate Empire (Verma, 2004). The existence of *adat* and customs (magic, superstition, spirit worship, taboos), shamanic practices (*pawang*, *dukun* or *bomoh*) and beliefs (*jin* [genie] and *iblis* [Devil]) which predate Islam have existed continuously in Malay culture, but are viewed by Islamic fundamentalists as challenging Islam (Shamsul, 2005).

As such, the *pontianak* emerges as a nebulous figure. The *pontianak* is a nebulous figure not only because of her existence as a being neither dead nor alive but also because of her ambiguous role as it is not clear if she is a villain or hero. While she is brutally murdered and at times possibly slandered before her death, her return from the afterlife seeking death and destruction to those who have murdered her or her loved ones could either be read as a form of vigilance or revenge. On one hand, she could be seen as a villain or antagonist due to the chaos, destruction and murder of those regardless of their innocence; on the other, she could be read as a hero or the protagonist as she seeks justice for those who are oppressed. It must however, be noted here that her role either as antagonist or protagonist represents the changing role of women in Malaysia. The increased number of women holding important portfolios and

significantly contributing economically, socially, politically and culturally can either be viewed as an empowerment of women or as a threat towards the patriarchal order in society. In addition, Malaysian films such as *Penarek Becha* (1955), *Sembilu* (1995) and *Ombak Rindu* (2011) have conventionally stereotyped women as weak, passive and submissive within a male-dominant and Malay-centric culture. The *pontianak* however, is a different representation of woman as she has supernatural strength and abilities and is capable of destabilising the equilibrium of the film's plot. Yet, the need to restore equilibrium through the destruction of the *pontianak* in which the transgressor must be punished occurs. As such, the *pontianak* as a threat needs to be destroyed so that social order can be restored. This can be achieved by getting rid of the villains and redrawing the boundaries by repressing the threat of the *pontianak*. The empowerment of the *pontianak* can be seen as a method of bolstering patriarchy in society as the *pontianak* is projected as the unfamiliar threat that needs to be feared as it causes harm and destruction. The *pontianak* metaphorically represents a 'castration threat' or the empowerment of women in society that is threatening patriarchy. In creating 'landscapes of fear' through the *pontianak*, the *pontianak* generates a social construction of the fearful in society (Tudor, 1989, p. 5). In order for a return to normalcy and departure from a fearful landscape, the solution is to destroy the *pontianak*, which is in effect, a dismissal and rejection of the castration threat which could possibly destabilise the patriarchal order.

The role of the *pontianak* can also be seen as a positive departure from the usual stereotypical roles given to women as the *pontianak* destabilises the plot of the film. The transformation of the *pontianak* from a beautiful woman into a horrifying creature challenges the scopophilic pleasure (Mulvey, 1989) obtained through the cinematic gaze. This transformation challenges the notion that women need to be objectified as beautiful sexual objects to be noticed in terms of looks, body shape and reflection. The transformation of the *pontianak* from beautiful to horrifying demonstrates how the *pontianak* empowers herself by being in charge of her sexuality without having to succumb to classical narrative structures that often objectify the woman as passive and as sources of visual pleasures. The *pontianak* therefore does not play the role of a submissive housewife, nagging mother-in-law or a scantily dressed female character with a low IQ or as sexual prey. The *pontianak* is instead portrayed as a figure of authority and intelligence who can think, manipulate and cunningly presents the threat of castration towards her nemeses who are often men who have wronged her in the past. She achieves this by her loud shrieks and costume designs which is meant to cause shock and horror among the audiences. As the *pontianak* is often dressed in a long, white flowing robe with long hair, this image of horror is shared by the horror films of other Asian cinemas. For example, Sadako from *Ringu* similarly wears a long white robe which is a burial kimono indicating how this female figure has been provided with "*carte blanche*" to carry out

her destructions. While the *pontianaks* do not wear a Japanese burial kimono due to cultural and religious differences, the white costume would metaphorically symbolise her new sense of power, innocence and the completion of a life cycle as she has been given a new lease of life by returning from the dead. The long flowing hair while aiming to scare its audiences, also indicates how the *pontianak* retains her female identity and does not need to succumb to the needs and wants of gender identity as defined by society. Her ability to move from one realm to another and travelling without being confined to gravitational rules also indicates how the female body is no longer confined to the shackling and authority of male regulation and control. As such, the role played by the *pontianak* either as a villain or hero eventually becomes a threat towards the social order and status quo of patriarchy in any given Asian society and reflects the increasing empowerment and liberation of women in societies across Asia.

CONCLUSION

For many years, Malaysian-made horror films have been popular among its audiences. While there exists numerous mythological and fearsome creatures supernaturally or within one's state of mind, the *pontianak* has become the most popular and feared creature in Malaysian folklore and cinema. The *pontianak* as the female monster or supernatural entity has become iconic in some way, shape or form. In particular, the female *Pontianak* has become possibly

more iconic, memorable and feared than their male counterparts. The empowerment of this female figure through its ability to return from the underworld in order to exact her vengeance on those who have wronged her articulates a sense of fear about the empowerment of women. It leaves the *pontianak* in a state of ambiguity of not being alive nor dead. As such, the act of vengeance of the *pontianak* who returns to kill those who have murdered her as an act of righteousness can also be ambiguously interpreted. Her sense of notoriety for such reasons could either place the *pontianak* as a hero or villain – depending on whether her acts of vengeance are interpreted as acts of cruelty or vigilance. Whatever the status one confers on the *pontianak*, of being either a hero or villain, it is important to note that the cinematic portrayal of the *pontianak* itself as a protagonist breaks away from the usual weak and submissive portrayal of women in Malaysian cinema. This characteristic of female empowerment, which is shared by the horror films of Japan, South Korea and Thailand, becomes a positive departure from the usual stereotypical portrayal of women in cinema while challenging patriarchy in such Asian societies.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Introduced in 1996, films released in Malaysian cinemas were rated according to six categories: U; PG-13; 18SG; 18SX; 18PA; and 18PL. Under the new censorship guidelines released in 2010, these ratings have been revised to U (Suitable for general viewing); PG-13 (Children under 13 may not be admitted unless with parental guidance); and 18 (For adults aged 18 and above for the film may contain mild violence, horror, sex scenes, nudity, sexual dialogues/references, religious, social or political aspects). It was also verbally agreed that scenes of ghosts emerging from graves and too much blood would not be shown, and that the *pontianak* could only appear in dream-like sequences.

² I borrow Benedict Anderson's concept of the Imagined Community (1991).