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The Othered Subject in *Koreatown Ghost Story* (2021)

Qian Zhang

Although *Asian horror* films often gain much attention as a category under the umbrella of the horror genre and are popular in American horror remakes, the category of *Asian American horror* remains conspicuously absent on the horror landscape. As Margaret Cho, who is the producer and plays the character of Ms. Moon in *Koreatown Ghost Story* (Park and Tenenbaum 2021), comments in an interview, “The diversity in American horror isn’t the best. So the fact that we’re doing an Asian American horror, I think is really exciting.” (Borders 2021, para.4) Along with *I Am A Ghost* (Mendoza 2014) and *Umma* (Shim 2022), *Koreatown Ghost Story* (2021) suggests the potential rise of Asian American horror cinema, which focuses on the fear that is central to the experience of Asian Americans. Through the lens of temporality, this essay examines how the theme of ghost marriage and the formal representation of spatial structure in the horror short *Koreatown Ghost Story* function as a means of rethinking kinship linearity in the Asian diaspora context. Thus, this rethinking of transgenerational inheritance reveals what I call a temporally Othered subject and uncovers the Korean Americans’ struggle to reach an open-ended future and maintain a connection to Korean culture and tradition.

Ghost Marriage: One Way to Approach Asian American Horror

Ghost-marriage stories grounded in Asian cultures are common in horror-themed American media texts, such as Yangsze Choo’s novel *The Ghost Bride* (2013), the TV series *Without a Trace: Devotion* (Polson 2009, S7E22) and *Bones: The Boneless Bride in the River* (Wharmby 2007, S2E16). Traced back to East Asian cultures, including Korea, China, and Japan, ghost marriage refers to an unusual form of matrimony involving at least one party that is dead. This form of marriage aims to form new social relationships, thereby serving a number of different material and symbolic functions, including ensuring the patrilineage (Schwartz 2010; Pasternak, Ember, and Ember 1997), pleasing the vengeful spirit, and assigning a living daughter-in-law for offspring and domestic work (Topley 1955; Schwartz 2010), among others (Malbrancke 2018; Schwartz 2010; Topley 1955; 1956; Freeman 1970; Schattschneider 2001). In literature,

TV series, and films, the theme of ghost marriage functions differently: the ghost marriage in *Bones* serves as an exotic element, which introduces the fear to the incomprehensible East to the primarily Western audience; meanwhile, the ghost marriage in Choo's work reconstructs the fear that comes from the Asian diasporic subject (Dalal 2020). *Koreatown Ghost Story*, akin to Choo's approach, uncovers a temporal ambiguity (neither past, future nor present) in the construct of subject position. Removed from linear chronology, the subject occupies an ambiguous temporal position, struggling to access the cultural past and to make sense of the futurity that is uncanny and doomed to be haunted.

Time Trouble and the Othered Subject in *Koreatown Ghost Story*

The juxtaposition of Koreatown and the ghost marriage creates the central horror in *Koreatown Ghost Story*. In the film, the ritual of ghost marriage takes place in Koreatown, drawing attention to the subject's struggle to maintain a connection to Korean tradition and culture. 'Koreatown' in the film's title identifies what Katherine Yungmee Kim calls "the overseas Korean diaspora," which indicates both "a community and a geographic location" (Kim 2011, 8). That said, Koreatown is displaced from Korea but maintains historical and social ties through the continuity of traditions, stories, and identities. It is also a part of the violently contested American myth of immigration, melting pot, and opportunity. Meanwhile, the ghost marriage, as mentioned earlier, aims to maintain family ties, or straighten a patrilineal kinship structure, thus allowing the dead (and often) younger generation to be 'imagined' in relation to a future via their living partner.¹ Paradoxically, it is worth noting that, since it involves the dead, a ghost marriage forecloses the possibility of reproduction within a bloodline. The tension between a future-oriented desire to integrate the past into a present life versus the closing off a natal future creates a form of temporal anxiety unique to the practice of ghost marriages.

¹ Lucas J. Schwartz (2010) points out that the "ghost marriage," or spiritual marriage, as a rare variation of marriage often goes beyond the conventional definition of marriage by anthropologists for its absence of economic and sexual union. Also, the conventional definition of marriage functions to culturally and/or legitimately secure childbearing. Schwartz's (2010) research focuses on two Asian societies: the Singapore Chinese and the Japanese. Due to the limited research on Korean ghost marriage and given the cultural influence among Eastern Asian societies, I use the research by drawing on the sharing meaning in the ghost marriage while being aware of the potential differences in the ghost marriage in Korean culture. For further reading, see Pasternak, Ember, and Ember (1997).

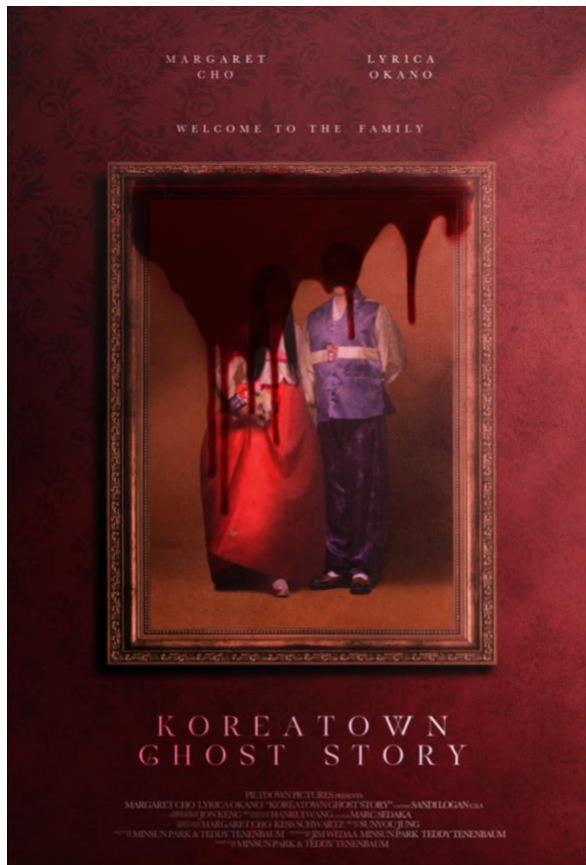


Figure 1: *Koreatown Ghost Story* poster

The film's poster emphasizes the cultural ambiguity and conflict central to the film. The poster recreates a marriage photo in which both partners are dressed in the traditional Korean dress, the Hanbok (see figure 1). While a curtain of blood covers the couple's faces, their bodies in traditional Hanbok become more stunning to the viewers. However, the bride has long straight hair, worn down; this clashes with the way hair is traditionally worn in Korean weddings (Ahn 2012), and is in fact more reminiscent of the trope of the female ghost in the contemporary Asian gothic.² Whereas the film's title emphasizes the story's geographic and the immigrant community, the poster emphasizes characteristics more broadly related to Korean

representations, downplaying the Korean American status of the film. In addition, throughout the film, the camera is rarely set outdoors, thereby obscuring the narrative's relation to the Koreatown that is mostly offscreen. This absence of an objectified view of Koreatown presents the town as an untraceable image, which challenges the common association between location and culture and further discloses the idea of Koreatown as a liminal space.³ The contrast between the emphasis on *Koreatown* in the film's title and the absence of image of Koreatown in the poster as well as the film, therefore, displaces the

² Including Korean horror and Japanese horror films, the dark long hair is iconic portrayal of the female ghost, who often revengefully returns from the past to punish the wrong doers or the patriarchal society. For further reading, see Lim (2009), Lee (2011), Hwang (2013), Martin (2013), Chung (2014), etc.

³ I would like to thank Sonia Lupher for raising this point.

“Americanness” of the Korean Americans’ experience and juxtaposes this absent imagery with anxiety about the characters’ Korean traditions and heritage.

The narrative explores the anxiety hinted at in the film’s title and promotional materials. During this holiday period of Chuseok, the Korean version of Thanksgiving that is observed in honor of ancestors and dead family members, a cancer-diagnosed acupuncture therapist, Ms. Moon (Margaret Cho) invites Hannah (Lyrica Okano) to complete a ritual of ghost marriage, which is unknown to her. In the past, Ms. Moon and Hannah’s parents, who were then alive and are now dead, have agreed to a marriage between Ms. Moon’s son Edward (Brandon Scott Halvorsen) and Hannah. Since Edward is dead, Hannah must marry Edward’s spirit to fulfill her parents’ promise and inherit Ms. Moon’s fortune in the future. Throughout the film, Hannah goes through her confusion of the arranged visit, then her resistance to the ghost marriage, and finally accepts her bond with this Korean American family. As the narrative closes, Hannah has transformed from an acupuncture-suspicious, orphaned single young Asian woman to a Korean American ghost’s wife, who is taking the lead role in the family after the ritual.

Often, the theme of the ghost marriage produces an anxiety associated with temporality. For example, drawing on Asian literature, Yu Wang (2016) explicitly connects ghost marriage to the temporal anxiety attributed to the modernization of time. Wang (2016) argues that modern literary authors often rely on the theme of ghost marriage to unleash a “nostalgia for an unrecoverable ethics-based society,” which is labeled ‘premodern.’ Akin to the ghost marriage in Wang’s (2016) research, the one in *Koreatown Ghost Story* also unleashes the anxiety that can be attributed to the difficulty of properly positioning the self in time. However, this temporal anxiety cannot be explained as simply a nostalgia for premodern social relations. As a child of Korean immigrants, Hannah is not herself directly familiar with Korean culture: She is puzzled by the wooden Korean mask attached to Ms. Moon’s front door (see figure 2), is resistant to acupuncture (a traditional medical approach backed by Asian philosophy and beliefs) and is surprised by the existence of the Chuseok festival. In many ways, Hannah identifies not with her Korean heritage, but with American traditions and cultural life. This is exacerbated by the fact that her parents died when she was young, leaving her literally orphaned and cut off from her Korean cultural heritage. Therefore, the theme of ghost marriage here plays a role in re-bonding to the Korean tradition and culture, though in a troubling way. This re-bonding to the ethnic traditions is a journey for Hannah to rewrite Korean-ness into her subjectivity.



Figure 2: “Ms. Moon answers her door (00:49) in *Koreatown Ghost Story*.”

The kinship lineage juxtaposed with cultural transmission contributes to the meaning of inheritance in this film. However, kinship lineage or tradition inheritance does not occur in a natural progression. Consequently, via re-forming a transgenerational linkage (by specifically positioning Hannah into Ms. Moon’s family), the ruptures and tension across generations are revealed. As discussed, the ghost marriage *per se* may imply a problematic theme that has to be inherited (the marriage agreement from Hannah’s dead parents and the ritual of the ghost marriage from the old generational beliefs). It is especially worth noting that the cinematic spatial construction with an emphasis on barriers in the film underscores the conflicting wills across generations. These spatial barriers delay and obstruct Hannah’s movement, dramatizing her confusion and reluctance in her twofold journey: the re-familiarization with Korean culture together with the ritual of the ghost marriage. Specifically, the space *per se* is introduced as a hybrid space—a Victorian house filled with Korean cultural signifiers, such as an altar for Chuseok, Hahoetal masks, hanbok dresses, and acupuncture. Accordingly, each room’s functions shift: an altar set in the living room to honor the dead during Chuseok, the circular open space is packed with cups and needles for acupuncture therapy, the kitchen allows a female ghost in hanbok to haunt... In this sense, Hannah’s physical movement in this space is akin to a tour in a museum of Korean culture while the ghost marriage takes place ahead of Hannah’s acquiescence.

Furthermore, the film pays close attention to the use of doors—opening and closing doors—to intensify Hannah’s struggle in this hybrid space. For example, the focus on closed doors onscreen, sharply separating room-spaces

from each other, reorients Hannah's physical experience in the space. Her confined movements reflect her psychological variations, including waiting, confusion, shock, and fear, and all these emotions contribute to a depiction of the young generation's delay in comprehension of the older generation's plan. Notably, the doors that are opened by Ms. Moon (see figures 2 and 3), as well as the ones that Hannah cannot open, create a contrast between passes and the impasse, which could also symbolize the asynchronization between generations. For Hannah, almost every door represents a rupture in space, requiring a permission of the elder generation (Ms. Moon) to allow her to pass through. This permission by Ms. Moon echoes an imposed obligation to Hannah's inheritance. As such, the use of spatial barriers reveals a difficult and delayed path for the young generation to reconnect to the tradition; the self-conscious confusion and reluctance are a struggle in the younger generation during the process of comprehension of the transgenerational inheritance.



Figure 3: Ms. Moon blocks a door with the Haboetal mask during the ritual of ghost marriage (10:03) in *Koreatown Ghost Story*.

This future seems not exclusively promising; along with the ghost marriage, the film adopts the image of the dead son, Edward, to further renegotiate the image of the hopeful future. Notably, Edward is the only identifiable ghost in the film.⁴ His photos stand on the altar, surrounded by traditional Korean food and fresh fruits (see figure 4). Often, Chuseok functions to honor the ancestors and celebrate the familial unions (“Chuseok: Korean Thanksgiving Day” n.d.). However, the altar has only Edward. Along with the

⁴ The female ghost in the kitchen appears anonymously, therefore limited knowledge helps us to identify her as an either grandmother or a maid in charge of domestic work.

dying Ms. Moon, this missing reference to the ancestors uncovers a visual absence, disrupting the kinship lineage, thereby derailing the Moon family in its patrilineal trajectory to maintain the kinship inheritance. The film renders a future built on the ghost marriage, thereby binding the potential with haunting by all ghosts (Edward, as well as the unexplained ghost dressed in Hanbok appearing in the kitchen) in Ms. Moon's house. The haunting in the future thus releases an anxiety associated with this upcoming alternative space-time, which reveals the subject as an improper temporal being, challenging a "proper" temporal relation to the linear past-present-future framework.



Figure 4: "Edward's photos are on the alter (3:08) in *Koreatown Ghost Story*."

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