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THE RE-ORIENTALISED COSMOPOLITAN TURN IN YANGSZE CHOO'S *THE GHOST BRIDE*

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ABSTRACT. *The Re-Orientalised Cosmopolitan Turn in Yangsze Choo's* The Ghost Bride. The magical realist bestseller *The Ghost Bride* (2013) by Yangsze Choo was adapted into a Netflix original series in 2020. The story revolves around the female protagonist, Pan Li Lan, whose hand has been requested to wed the late Lim Tian Ching, making it a "ghost marriage" or "spirit wedding," and her, a ghost bride. With the financial woes that the Pan family is facing, Li Lan has to carefully consider this macabre proposal by the wealthy and prominent Lim family. In this article, the authors look at the novel and the Netflix series, *The Ghost Bride* and argue that it is a form of re-orientalised metropolitan cosmopolitanism, contrived for global consumption in the current global cultural marketplace. Set in 1893, in the colonial cosmopolitan port city of Malacca, the production employs the elite culture of the *Peranakan* Chinese and re-orientalises it. The critics will, therefore, examine the dynamics of re-orientalism and cosmopolitanism and eventually contend that the production of *The Ghost Bride* manifests a re-orientalised cosmopolitan turn in depicting a local culture for a global audience.

Keywords*: re-orientalism, metropolitan cosmopolitanism, magical realism, Peranakan Chinese, The Ghost Bride*

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REZUMAT. ***Turnura cosmopolită re-orientalizată în* The Ghost Bride *de Yangsze Choo*.** Bestsellerul magic-realist *The Ghost Bride* (2013) de Yangsze Choo a fost adaptat într-un serial original difuzat de Netflix în anul 2020. Când mâna protagonistei Pan Li Lan este cerută de răposatul Lim Tian Ching, perspectiva devine aceea a unei "căsătorii fantomatice" sau a unei "nunți spiritiste," cu ea ca mireasă fantomă. Date fiind problemele financiare cu care se confruntă familia Pan, Li Lan se vede nevoită să ia în considerare propunerea macabră a bogatei și puternicei familii Lim. Prezentul articol discută seria ecranizată de Netflix după romanul *The Ghost Bride* ca o formă de cosmopolitism metropolitan re-orientalizat, conceput pentru consumul global pe piața culturală globală actuală. Amplasată în Malacca, oraș-port colonial cosmopolit în anul 1893, producția exploatează cultura de elită a comunității chineze *Peranakan* și o re-orientalizează. Vom examina, așadar, dinamica re-orientalismului și cosmopolitismului cu intenția de a demonstra că producția *The Ghost Bride* marchează o turnură cosmopolită re-orientalizată în reprezentarea unei culturi locale pentru un public global.

Cuvinte-cheie: *re-orientalism, cosmopolitism metropolitan, realism magic, chinezi Peranakan, The Ghost Bride*

Introduction

In this article we will examine Yangsze Choo's novel *The Ghost Bride* and pay particular attention to the Taiwanese-Malaysian Netflix original series in six episodes, directed by Malaysian filmmakers, Ho Yu-Hang and Quek Shio Chuan, which was released on 23 January 2020. This series developed from a fourth-generation Chinese-Malaysian diasporic author Yangsze Choo's debut novel *The Ghost Bride* (2013). It is a speculative and magical realist fiction, which not only refers to the ancient Chinese tradition of "ghost marriage" and "spirit weddings" but also traverses the phantasmagorical world of the Chinese afterlife. The novel became a *New York Times* best-seller and attracted the attention of Netflix. This particular series was launched along with two other series as a part of the "long-gestating first batch of Chinese-language original series" of "three distinct, binge-friendly genres" (Brzeski 2019). According to Erika North, the then Netflix director of original content for Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan, it is the culmination of two years of hard work, and they have deliberately chosen three very different genres to represent the scope and breadth of their creative content categories. She emphasizes its uniqueness and states that "nothing quite like this has ever been released simultaneously in 190 markets" (Brzeski 2019).

The overwhelmingly popular and commercially successful over-the-top (OTT) media services in recent times indicate that the process of creative content production is no longer confined to transferring any content from one medium to the other but is driven by the constantly shifting socio-cultural and economic configurations of the current times. As we examine *The Ghost Bride* as a global Netflix production, we perceive that it is largely dictated by variously assumed cultural identity markers and astute commercial interests, predominantly in its attempt to garner a wider viewership across the continents, including that of the younger generation as well. Therefore, in the course of our discussion, we will particularly focus on how the production re-constructs Chinese folklore and re-presents traditional cultural mores and practices through a fictional narrative, and argue that in order to cater to some conjectured ideas of the contemporary consumption habits, the production of *The Ghost Bride* eventually manifests a re-orientalised cosmopolitan turn in depicting a local culture for a global audience.

The Re-Orientalised Cosmopolitan Turn through Magical Realist Metropolitan Cosmopolitanism

The idea of re-orientalism, as proposed by Lisa Lau in her article "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals" (2009) indicates a different representation of the Orient, consigning "the Oriental within the Orient to a position of 'The Other'" (Lau 2009, 571). Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes further expand the idea in the introductory chapter of their edited volume *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The oriental Other within* (2011) which identifies the way in which Edward Said's influential ideas on orientalism, as evident in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), could be further extended to accommodate the ever-evolving alternative perceptions and visions, as a large number of diasporic, cosmopolitan postcolonial subjects all over the world are increasingly connected with each other, by virtue of the exponential rise in digital media and technologies.

Lau and Mendes acknowledge that the legacy of orientalism, as proposed by Said, is still relevant as it continues to construct specific cultures and identities. However, they also argue that the essence of orientalism has additionally acquired an alternative perspective in recent times, which they have termed "Re-orientalism." It is evident, as they claim, when "cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalised East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them, or by discarding them altogether" (Lau and Mendes 2011, 3). Consequently, such reconfigurations of cultural constructs necessitate novel modes of cultural analysis as Lau and

Mendes emphasize: "Re-orientalised discursive practices and rhetorical strategies are often sites of subversion where meanings are in constant flux," and this proposition exposes "the power of Orientalist discourse, while underscoring its instability and mutability, and as such provides avenues for questioning the endurance of Orientalist practices today" (Lau and Mendes 2011, 3).

Re-orientalism can perpetuate, as Lau and Mendes argue, through the process of self-Othering in various forms, relegating not just the self but the "other orientals they are regarded as representing, as Other" (Lau and Mendes 2011, 6), hinting at relenting to the dynamics of the expected cultural stereotypes, assumed to be fit for global cultural consumptions. Lau's views on re-orientalism are not unprecedented, as similar conceptualizations can be evinced over the last three decades. Lau and Mendes have justifiably acknowledged the various connotations of the comparable idea which are also in circulation, such as "ethno-orientalism" (Carrier 1992), "new orientalism" (Spivak 1993), "self-orientalism" (Dirlik 1996), "internal orientalism" (Schein 1997), and "reverse Orientalism" (Mitchell 2004).

However, our focus and utilization of the concept of re-orientalism, as we examine the novel and the Netflix original series, *The Ghost Bride*, will be predominantly based on our simultaneous examination of both the textual and paratextual features in order to identify how the productions "make a marketable commodity out of exoticising the 'Orient' or products from the 'Orient'" (Lau and Mendes 2011, 4). We will explore how postcolonial cultural producers exploit different re-orientalist strategies and inquire into whether such practices ensue from the complex power dynamics that dominate the current global cultural marketplace. Nevertheless, due to increasing movement and connectivity, exchange and interaction in the contemporary era, the physical and cultural distinctions between the Orient and the Occident are obviously getting blurred. Therefore, we contend that the current practice of re-orientalism often displaces the primacy of the West as the centre, and unfolds a non-Eurocentric cultural configuration, engendering a realignment of the centre-periphery dynamics. Such a viewpoint directs us to acknowledge the fact that contemporary literary and cultural productions, in pandering to the supposed demands of the "alterity industry" (Huggan 2001, vii), articulate, in Berghahn's words, a kind of exoticism which is "inflected by cosmopolitanism, rather than colonial and imperialist, sensibilities" (Berghahn 2017, 16).

Cosmopolitanism remains a contested term and has been explored by different critics from widely different angles. While Ulf Hannerz opines that cosmopolitanism "entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrast, rather than uniformity," indicating a "willingness to become involved with the Other" (Hannerz 1996, 103), Timothy

Brennan points out that the term might also indicate developing different ideas of ethnocentrism or perpetuate the continuing asymmetries of power within inclusive conceptions of global culture. Thus, Brennan proposes: "With an almost allegorical resonance in the centres of imperial power, a dialectic within the field expresses itself most acutely in cosmopolitanism" (Brennan 1997, 27). Referring to the stereotypical practices of certain postcolonial novelists and the cosmopolitan alterity industry, that often play the intermediary roles of external cultural commentators, having an eye on the export market, Brennan witnesses a "formulaic quality," which he terms as "the politico-exotic" (Brennan 2006, 61). He observes that, as specific cultural productions tend towards catering to the demands of commodification, they gradually lose their "ability to shock, and therefore to reorient value" (Brennan 2006, 61).

Graham Huggan, in his much-referenced *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001) comments with regard to Brennan's observations: "Postcoloniality meets cosmopolitanism in a variety of carefully managed products, packaged for easy consumption as a readily-identifiable global corpus" (Huggan 2001, 12). This cosmopolitan alterity industry, as Huggan suggests, carefully exploits cultural difference and turns it into a globally marketable commodity through offering "a range of available options for both the producers and consumers of culturally 'othered' goods" (Huggan 2001, 12). Yet, the commercial success of such cultural products in oriental packaging also clearly indicates that such practices of commodifying cultural differences could command certain aesthetic values, which Huggan has identified in terms of "the exotic." However, he significantly differentiates between these two terms — "exotic" and "exoticism."

According to Huggan, the word "exotic" is used widely and thus commonly misunderstood, as exotic is not an inherent quality to be found in certain people, places or objects, whereas "exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* — one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery" (Huggan 2001, 13, emphasis in the original). Thus, since exoticism could simultaneously incorporate strangeness and familiarity in different degrees in response to different circumstances, it could also acquire complex layers of aesthetic, ideological, political and commercial dimensions, depending on the perspectives of the producers and the consumers. Moreover, exoticising certain people, places or objects is also a conscious manipulation which applies specific "exoticist codes of cultural representation" (Huggan 2001, 20) in order to satiate the "global 'spectacularisation' of cultural difference" (15).

David Neo's dissertation, *The Cosmopolitics of Magical Realism in Cinema* (2011), explores the complex cosmopolitan alterity industry particularly through magical realist films and conceives the notion of minoritarian and metropolitan cosmopolitanism. Minoritarian cosmopolitanism is preoccupied with minoritarian modernity (often associated with the Left)—third world realities (and) of refugees, diasporic people, migrants and exiles; in contrast to Aihwa Ong's (more Rightist) work on "elite transnationalism" and "flexible citizenship," which Neo conceptualises as metropolitan cosmopolitanism that generates capital and fetishizes localism for global consumption. Neo also argues that the magical realist cosmopolitics of metropolitan cosmopolitanism enables Hollywood to accept and harness magical realism to further generate capital. Peng Cheah and Bruce Robbins in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (1998) posit cosmopolitics to be the dynamics of "the mutating global field of political, economic, and cultural forces in which nationalism and cosmopolitanism are invoked as practical discourses" (Cheah and Robbins 1988, 33). We will, therefore, explore the cosmopolitics of metropolitan cosmopolitanism in *The Ghost Bride* production in order to illustrate the cosmopolitan alterity industry of Netflix, demonstrating how Netflix's branded identity, contrived for global reach, is part of its "original programming" and "content" that it has developed since 2013 (Laboto 2019).

The narrative of *The Ghost Bride* is contextualized within the historical cosmopolitan port city of Malacca, which was part of the Straits Settlements of British Malaya.[3] It begins in the year of 1893 and introduces the Lim family, a prominent and wealthy Peranakan[4] Chinese family. They request the poorer Pan family for the hand of their daughter, Pan Li Lan (Huang Peijia), to be the ghost bride of their late heir, Tian Ching (Kuang Tian). Therefore, the proposal of marrying the dead Tian Ching is actually a proposal of "spirit-wedding" where Li Lan would have to become the ghost bride. Such a morbid proposition might appear as a convenient solution to the Pan family's financial woes; but Tian Ching deceitfully lures Li Lan into the netherworld (in the series), and the production explores her adventures in the underworld—the unknown land,

[3] The British Straits Settlements consisted of Malacca (Melaka is the decolonised name that is currently used), Penang and Singapore.

[4] *Peranakan* is a Malay word which means "locally born". It, therefore, refers to communities which formed out of mixed ethnic ancestry, predominantly with the Chinese (*Baba Nonya*), Arab (*Jawi Peranakan*), European (Eurasians) and Indian (*Chetti Melaka*) merchants who intermarried local women—out of which, the *Peranakan* Chinese is the largest. *Peranakan* communities in Malaysia have always been marginal communities. The *Peranakan* Chinese in the Straits Settlements became a cosmopolitan elite community with British colonisation and helped the British develop the Straits Settlements. Many became wealthy from tin and rubber, and the early 20th century witnessed the golden age of *Peranakan* culture.

which is termed by Yangsze Choo in the novel as the "Plains of the Dead." The production of *The Ghost Bride* thus exoticises Chinese folklore, particularly the ancient Chinese tradition of "ghost marriages" or "spirit-weddings," and engages the cosmopolitan for commercial purposes, exploiting and commodifying cultural specificities, particularly that of the *Peranakan* culture, to be sold (streamed) to a global audience.

The commodification of *The Ghost Bride* is further evident in the selection of the language used for the Netflix production. Choo's novel is written in English, however, the series is produced in Mandarin. Apart from trying to reach the Chinese population (the largest population in the world) the production in Mandarin apparently appears to be more "authentic" to the global audience, befitting the Chinese theme and content. The commercial benefits of a Mandarin language production for *The Ghost Bride* are also obvious, as the New York bestseller is enjoying even more sales since the release of the series in Mandarin, essentially because of fetishized localism reaching an international audience. Zainir Aminullah, the executive producer of the Netflix production, reveals that:

> […] it was decided to be Mandarin because we wanted to reach as wide and as diverse an audience as possible. Although the original material was in English, we thought that with the visual medium the authenticity of the actors delivering their lines in the Peranakan culture instead of English would be a lot more authentic than delivering it in English. **So the decision was taken to shoot the series in Mandarin which we thought would cast a much wider net globally in terms of acceptance (Cheema 2020).**

Zainir's remarks are inaccurate, as the southern *Peranakans* speak a Baba Malay patois and the northern *Peranakans* speak *Hokkien*. However, the naming of the characters in the novel such as Tian Bai and Tian Ching are not names in *Hokkien* (the dialect group of most *Peranakans*) but in Mandarin. *Peranakans* have never traditionally spoken Mandarin, and most of them, being anglophiles, would be more comfortable speaking in English. Such intentional use of Mandarin, therefore, exemplifies re-orientalising the production for presumed commercial benefits. Zainir further points out:

> This is a big headline for us and Malaysians within the industry. It's a Malaysian intellectual property in terms of the book, the author, a Malaysian cast, and crew. ***I would say close to 99 percent of everybody involved were Malaysians.*** We also have an international cast from Canada, U.S., and Taiwan. But in terms of the production crew, it's entirely Malaysian except for one or two supervisors. We're proud because we were able to demonstrate at the global scale for a global audience that this series was entirely developed, packaged, and delivered by Malaysians (Cheema 2020, emphasis in the original).

He seems to deliberately discount the fact that the visible main cast are Taiwanese and that it has been described as a Taiwanese-Malaysian (and not the other way around) production. The emphasis on the Malaysian involvement illustrates global cultural flows and the cosmopolitan alterity industry demonstrating the cosmopolitics of metropolitan cosmopolitanism. Here, we do not just witness the dynamics of Chinese transnationalism (Malaysian *Peranakan* Chinese, Taiwan and China), but Malaysia has also been roped into the transnational imaginary of *The Ghost Bride* production, subscribing to a pan-Asian re-orientalised cosmopolitan turn, which also engages with fetishized localism at the same time. Consequently, in the following sections of our discussion, we will be focusing on the representation of certain specific cultural aspects in *The Ghost Bride* and examine how *Peranakan* culture has been consciously re-orientalised and re-constructed in order to align it with global commercial demands of the Netflix original productions.

Reinscribing *Cherita Rumah Tangga* as a Netflix Original

Cherita rumah tangga is a Malay term, which loosely translates to "household tales," is a form of family oral storytelling. They are usually fascinating stories of family intrigues, particularly with prominent *Peranakan* families, where traditionally a few generations with concubines and maids lived under the same roof. Ancestor worship and reverence to the dead form the central belief system of the *Peranakan* Chinese, where the dead (usually elders and ancestors) are appeased to ensure blessings and well-being for the family. Ancestral homes or *rumah abu*,[5] which is also a Malay term with a Chinese concept, literally translating as "house of ashes," are part of the family prestige and the idea emanates from the practice of using joss sticks during ancestor worship, where the ashes from the joss sticks symbolize the ancestors. The ancestral hall within the *rumah abu* contains the *sin chee*[6] or ancestral tablets of the family along with the family portraits. It is important for the *Peranakan* Chinese families to maintain the *rumah abu* and the responsibility is shouldered by the eldest son, who carries the patrilineal family name and inherits a larger

[5] *Kampong Belanda* (which translates to "Dutch Village") is essentially the Heeren Street area (that has been renamed Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock and also known as the millionaire strip of Malacca), was where the elite *Peranakan* Chinese once lived. Most houses on Heeren Street were *rumah abu* of prominent families—however, many of these *rumah abu* have been sold and turned into commercial establishments and boutique hotels. Currently, only a few families still hold on to these *rumah abu*. In Penang, since *Hokkien* patois is spoken, the *Hokkien* term for the ancestral home, *kong chu*, is used instead.

[6] These ancestral tablets bear identical information found on the deceased's gravestones—the information of their descendants.

share of the family estate, whereas his wife is expected to perform ancestor worship on a regular basis. Therefore, the grim idea of acquiring a living ghost bride is mainly to ensure that the practice of the ancestor worship could continue to be observed sedulously within the family. *Nonyas*[7] are required to cook elaborate meals and perform all the customary practices. This is the function Li Lan in *The Ghost Bride* is supposed to fulfil.

In the narrative of *The Ghost Bride*, Lim Tian Ching assumes the responsibility of the eldest son since he is the only son of Lim Teck Kiong. But Teck Kiong is actually the second son from the previous generation. Tian Bai (Ludi Lin), Tian Ching's cousin, is actually the rightful heir and son of the eldest brother from the previous generation; however, this is minimalised (not explained) in the Netflix series. But the novel clarifies that Tian Ching's father (Teck Kiong) did initially agree that his late eldest brother's son (Tian Bai) would be the family heir. However, with time, Teck Kiong changed his mind to favour his own son, Tian Ching (Choo 2013, 14). Such complicated family intrigues were typical and part of the *cherita rumah tangga* of many prominent *Peranakan* families. Concubinage further compounds the family intrigues and since there were usually great wealth (and also recognition) at stake, family members, including concubines, would often tussle for as much as they could get for themselves and their sons. These family intrigues were skilfully captured by Choo in the novel when Li Lan is in the magical realist Plains of the Dead or hell (which is more complex than the living Lim family on earth). The Lim mansion and estate in the netherworld were ("magical realistically") built on what the earthly Lim family burned to their dead and ancestors.

In the Plains of the Dead in the novel, Li Lan meets the rancorous ghost of the third concubine of her (paternal) grandfather, whom Li Lan had never heard of before (on earth) and her sordid tragic tale is revealed (which is not dealt with in the series). She was a maid from another household and her lover was the second son of that household; when she became pregnant, she thought he would marry her. But he decided to propose to Li Lan's mother instead. However, Li Lan's mother rejected him and married Li Lan's father. Thus, the maid had to abort her baby and later became the third concubine of Li Lan's (paternal) grandfather. To secure her position in the family, she schemed to seduce Li Lan's father (her stepson) in order to conceive a son, but was unsuccessful. When Li Lan's mother became pregnant, this maid (who had also become her step mother-in-law) tried to harm her. But Li Lan's father rescued

[7] *Nonyas* refer to *Peranakan* women and *Babas* to *Peranakan* men; *Nyonya* is also a variant spelling. The "English pluralised" form of *Nonyas* have become colloquialised and accepted in the English used in Malaysia and Singapore; so we are adopting this in this paper. The same goes with *Babas*, *Peranakans* and other words like *kebayas.*

his wife by wrenching her away from a physical brawl which sent the maid to her death as she fell down the stairs and broke her neck (Choo 2013, 201-207). Such intriguing and salacious *cherita rumah tangga* in the novel fetishises *Peranakan* culture.

As already mentioned, the importance of the dead features strongly in *Peranakan* Chinese beliefs, and many resources are spent on the dead to ensure that they are well provided for in the afterlife, which is felicitously illustrated in *The Ghost Bride*. Both the novel and the series capture the *Hokkien*[8] practice of *kong teck*, which could often be expensive, as paper hell notes, paper ingots, replicas of houses, cars, other worldly materials and even effigies of servants are burned for the dead so that they could enjoy them in their afterlife. Mme Lim is depicted frequently and devotedly burning joss paper, furniture and multiple servant effigies to ensure that Tian Ching is well provided for in the afterlife. In fact, when Tian Ching wants or needs something, he will magically appear in his mother's dreams, making his requests known, and she will burn them in the earthly world so that he could have them in the netherworld.

Choo indicates that even though it is not very common, the idea of ghost marriages appears to be more familiar with the overseas Chinese communities (particularly in South East Asia and Taiwan). She states: "I was surprised to find that many mainland Chinese had never heard of such practices, and could only assume that it was due to the Communist influence which discouraged superstitious behaviour for decades" (Choo 2013, 386).[9] Thus, the morbid Chinese tradition of ghost-marriages and spirit-weddings has been fetishised into a marketing strategy to appeal and sell the series to a global audience. *The Ghost Bride* production, therefore, re-orientalises the idea of ghost marriages (which do not happen frequently), the Chinese funerary rites such the *kong teck*, and its conception of the afterlife, in order to create original content and programming of easy consumption for a Netflix global audience.

COMME des GARÇONS (CDG) Hell

We now pay attention to the costume production in *The Ghost Bride* as we notice that outfits and attires of the protagonists are imagined and designed

[8] *Hokkien* is a Chinese dialect of Southern China, mostly spoken in the province of Fukien; most *Peranakan* Chinese of the Straits Settlements are *Hokkien*.

[9] An article online (ABC News) says that ghost marriages are a 3,000 year-old Chinese practice that is still happening in rural China. There is a black-market demand for female corpses, since men in China outnumber women, as Chinese culture favours sons over daughters. Therefore, historically there is a high rate of female infanticide. Apparently thirty years ago, a female corpse for a ghost bride can cost 5,000 yuan; now it is 150,000 yuan; some would even kidnap and murder for ghost brides (Xu and Xiao, 2018).

in a significantly distinct manner. The paperback cover of the novel depicts presumably Li Lan lying on her side in a gold embroidered dress, which appears to be a postmodern oriental ensemble, instead of what has been traditionally worn in the 1890s Malacca. The cover design apparently strives to portray a dreamy, romantic image—a fragment of her lower face, a vine creeper at the top left corner, and a blurred image of roses on the third lower part of the cover. Had it been the context of Malacca in 1893, as the initial chapter of the novel presents, all *Nonyas* would be wearing the *baju panjang*—a calf-length top without buttons, fastened by *kerosang* or brooches of gold and diamonds or other precious stones, and worn with a *sarong batik* (batik tube). The *baju panjang* was replaced by the *sarong kebaya* only in the second half of the twentieth century as Peter Lee points out in his seminal volume, *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World 1500-1950*. However, in the novel, the "two good dresses" (Choo 2013, 9) that Li Lan has inherited from her mother do not appear to be *baju panjang* as they are usually not embroidered. The embroidery on the collar and sleeves of the dresses suggest that they might be *kebayas* (embroidered waist-length tops also without buttons fastened with the *kerosang* and worn with the *sarong batik*) but the embroidered collars and cuffs cannot be unpicked as Choo mentions (2013, 10), as it would have ruined the *kebaya*.

The Netflix series, on the contrary, contrives a situation where Li Lan's nanny has been asked to buy Li Lan appropriate clothes to attend the Lim family's party, so that it could provide the directors and the costume designer with the opportunity to showcase the *Peranakan kebaya*. However, the production deliberately deviates from displaying conventional *Peranakan* attire. Traditionally, the wealthy *Nonyas* were meticulous with their *sarong batik*—often acquired from Pekalongan;[10] the embroideries of their *kebaya*; and most importantly, their jewellery, as this distinguished the *Peranakans* from the *sinkhek* (the later Chinese immigrants) who could not afford such extravagance. As one of the directors of the series, Ho asserts that their primary aim in creating the Netflix production is to cater to fun and entertainment, which does not need to be necessarily true to historical facts: "*So it was confirmed, we were not going to make a historical film*. It should be youthful, fun and entertaining" (Cheema 2020, emphasis in the original). Therefore, instead of dressing Li Lan in an elegantly embroidered *kebaya*, a colourful *sarong batik*, and exquisite *Nonya* jewellery, she is portrayed wearing a garish lace top with sequins and a plain pink flare skirt, and no *Nonya* jewellery at all, as she attends the Lim family's party. Consequently, the directors and the producers of the series consciously

[10] The *Nonyas* favoured *batik* from this particular area in Indonesia as it catered specifically to *Nonya* taste—the motifs of the *batik* were Chinese motifs and they were done in vibrant colours; unlike the usual browns of most *batik*.

re-orientalise and exoticise the "cumbersome" traditional look through opting for a "postmodern" style, thus discarding the distinctive cultural practices of the cosmopolitan, elite, and aristocrat *Peranakans* of the Straits Settlements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Similarly, in the novel, Tian Ching's mother is depicted in a *baju panjang* of mourning colours (Choo 2013, 12)—which is culturally inaccurate. The *Peranakan* Chinese have a tradition of mourning for three years for their parents, and so *Nonyas* will usually also have a special set of silver and pearl jewellery since the mourning period is so long, because gold and diamond jewellery are not allowed during the morning period. But the *Peranakan* Chinese will never mourn for their children, as it is considered improper and inappropriate as they are a generation younger. Neither can one host a party if there is a death in the house, but this happens in the series. Tian Ching's mother in the series is neither seen in a proper *baju panjang* nor *kebaya*—a *Nonya* of her stature would usually favour the *baju panjang* as it would give her the opportunity to display all the accompanying family jewellery with it. It is evident that both the author of the novel and the producers of the series, in their attempts to commodify the traditional *Peranakan* Chinese culture, eventually hastily assembled certain cultural markers of the ancient Chinese and the *Peranakan* Chinese, and misappropriating both, eventually created a marketable fetishised and exoticised production in a re-oriental packaging of an original content.

Tian Ching, who mostly appears in hell and in Li Lan's dreams, is presented as vivacious and playful, a paragon of fashion and style, which certainly conforms to the directors' vision. The cosmopolitan influence of colonisation at the turn of the twentieth century has indeed influenced the *Babas* to appear stylish and dapper in their western suits, however, Lim Tian Ching/Tian Tze-Kuang in the series with his beautifully groomed shoulder length hair, and in a variety of trendy fashionable clothes that ranged from T-shirts to fur coats is a far cry from the traditional elegant style. In episode 4 of the series, when Tian Ching welcomes Li Lan in the Plains of the Dead, he is seen to be wearing a white T-shirt and colourful striped pants with a blackish-grey damask thigh-length coat with brooches, with colourful beaded necklaces hanging on his neck. Later, when Li Lan is having dinner with him, he appears in a greenish-grey silk *changshan*[11] with a huge peacock brooch (ironically Li Lan wears no jewellery but Tian Ching does) pinned to its Mandarin collar and a fur coat, which he eventually throws off as he invites Li Lan to dance a tango with him! Such an exhibition of garish opulence culminates in Tian Ching's banquet, the masquerade ball, which is specifically conceived for the series. The

[11] Also known as *changpao* or *dagua* which is a Chinese gown with a mandarin collar for men.

scene, however, eventually descends into a fashionable Comme des Garçons hell of guests, complete with the costume designer's domino masks, the directors' postmodern ensemble, and the set designer's evocation of the gothic, as the banquet table of carcasses as food decorated with pearl necklaces is paraded in full display. Such cultural appropriation and the commodification of cosmopolitan re-orientalism for commercial gains are evident, particularly with the Netflix series, which is pandering to the popular taste of a global audience.

Orientalist Chinoiserie?

Andaya and Watson Andaya observe that divergent cultural traditions converged in the port cities of Malacca to create a new and integrated cosmopolitanism (2016, 20) and this is exemplified in the hybrid *Peranakan* architecture that was a combination of eclectic influences. Lee Kip Lin in *The Singapore House 1819-1942* and Julian Davison in *Singapore Shophouse*[12] describe the *Peranakan* architectural style as Chinese Baroque, English Georgian, Victorian Eclectic, Gothic, Edwardian Baroque and Neoclassical which integrated Chinese, European and Malay ideas and influences, becoming unquestioningly cosmopolitan. And Quek (the other director of the series) in an interview reveals that: "Actually, the majority of filming was done in Iskandar Puteri, Johor Baru. It is set in Melaka, but so many of the heritage sites we filmed in were so well preserved and suited the era. We had references that we could replicate" (Nathan 2020). In the same article written for *The Malaysian Reserve*, we are also informed that the series was filmed in Penang, Taiping and Ipoh. Interestingly, there was no filming done for the Netflix series on the actual location of Malacca, where the narrative is set in.

Such is the current reality of filming production work, where there are many practicalities to consider—very few filmmakers these days have the luxury of being true auteurs insisting on the authenticity of the set and costumes. However, the *Peranakans* with a discerning eye can distinguish from the frontages, whether it is a Malaccan or Penang *Peranakan* house[13] and what has been filmed as the front of the Pan residence is a typical Penang *Peranakan* house and not a Malacca *Peranakan* house. The Lim family house shown in the

[12] There are subtle differences in the *Peranakan* architecture of Malacca, Penang and Singapore. But Singapore being a global city with good infrastructure has always been the flagship of *Peranakan* revival. Therefore, more books on *Peranakan* architecture have been produced in Singapore than the other two Straits Settlements cities.

[13] The *pintu pagair* or the screen doors are different. In the south (Malacca and Singapore), the *pintu pagair* are usually about three-quarters of the main door; whereas in Penang, they are usually the length of the main door.

series is actually the Cheong Fatt Tze – The Blue Mansion[14] hotel in Penang;[15] however, the production team have simply changed the colour of the building and the Chinese characters on façade of the Chinese gate to read: "A Grove of Trees,"[16] which is the meaning of the family name, Lim. We would like to also highlight that with increasingly advanced technology such as computer-generated images (CGI), images are often simulated. Alterations of actual images such as changing the colour of a building and the Chinese characters of a façade may be changed. Alterations may be produced with a simple click. It would be impossible to recreate 1893 Malacca, but one might argue that it might be more "authentic" to film in Malacca. The practices described above are today common practices of the filming industry—to alter and simulate environments and settings; where accuracy is frequently compromised. Therefore, would the use of Penang *Peranakan* buildings be a misrepresentation of Malacca and constitute a form of orientalist chinoiserie—when such misappropriations are a common practice of the industry and when recreating 1893 Malacca is an impossibility? Would it be accurate or fair to describe it as re-orientalism? It is re-orientalism, but we think it is more essential to understand the significance of the aesthetic, ideological, political and commercial dimensions behind these cultural products, which we have strived to elucidate in our discussion.

Conclusion

We have thus examined how the global dynamics of commodification and exoticisation of cultural practices have re-constructed and re-presented the Chinese folklore of spirit-wedding and the uniqueness of *Peranakan* Chinese culture in *The Ghost Bride* production, which manifests the re-orientalised cosmopolitan turn as a form of metropolitan cosmopolitanism. However, we have, more importantly, interrogated the observation made by Lau and Mendes regarding the power of orientalist discourse; and how the postcolonial cultural producers exploit and commodify different re-orientalist strategies and whether such practices ensue from the complex power dynamics that dominate the current global cultural marketplace. Therefore, through our particular focus on analysing the representation of the traditional stories of family intrigues, and exploring the ways of conceptualizing set, costumes, and locations of the production, we contend that manipulating and exoticising certain codes of

[14] According to Cilisos, the Netflix series was filmed at The Blue Mansion: https://cilisos.my/5-malaysians-killing-it-in-the-global-entertainment-scene-who-are-not-henry-golding/ (9 May 2021).

[15] Another point to note is that Malaccan *Peranakan* bungalow houses had stronger European influences than Chinese.

[16] The Chinese characters on the actual Cheong Fatt Tze gate façade are different.

cultural representation to appeal to the global masses is realized to be an easy marketing strategy for a capital-generating series of popular culture, such as *The Ghost Bride*.

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