The Preserve: Lehigh Library Digital Collections

# Taiwanese horror cinema

**Citation**

StojanoviÄ‡, NaÄ‘a. *Taiwanese Horror Cinema*. Vols. 43, 29 Oct. 2025, https://preserve.lehigh.edu/lehigh-scholarship/undergraduate-publications/perspectives-business-economics/perspectives-60-2.

Find more at https://preserve.lehigh.edu/

*This document is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.*

# Taiwanese horror cinema

Nađa Stojanović

Taiwanese horror films enjoy significant popularity despite comprising a small portion of domestic production. These films often draw on local folklore and address contemporary societal issues, with recurring themes of Taiwanese identity and historical trauma. This article explores why these films resonate so strongly with domestic audiences, arguing that their distinct appeal stems from folkloric elements and sociopolitical themes. A comparative analysis with Japanese and South Korean horror further highlights these unique characteristics.

## Introduction

Among popular film genres in Taiwan, horror stands out. Horror films constitute less than 5% of annual domestic film production yet consistently achieve disproportionate commercial success. Horror films in neighboring East Asian markets of Japan and South Korea do not exhibit the same trends. This distinct genre preference, despite limited production volume, warrants closer examination of the themes and narratives within Taiwanese horror that resonate strongly with the local audience.

Formally defined in the context of popular literature as "a genre focused on evoking emotions of dread, fear, and tension," horror encompasses films that elicit similar emotional responses through visual, auditory, and narrative elements (Prohászková, 2012). In light of horror's distinct success in Taiwan, this article examines the specific thematic and narrative choices that drive its popularity. Namely, the notable appeal of Taiwanese horror stems from its engagement with three key themes: local folklore, the conflict between modern and traditional values, and the fragmented Taiwanese identity. By analyzing how Taiwanese horror engages with these themes, this study situates the genre within the broader landscape of Taiwanese cinema and its cultural significance.

## Background

Film plays a critical role in shaping cultural identity and articulating social consciousness. According to the Taiwan Government Information Office (2006, as cited in Gao, 2007), "Film is the most important medium of modern culture. We watch the same movie so that we have the same dream, the same consciousness, and even the same culture." Beyond fostering collective cultural consciousness, cinema in Taiwan is also a site of competing narratives of identity and history. Any attempt to define a Taiwanese cinema must therefore consider the multiple oppressive regimes the island has been subjected to throughout its history and how such periods have shaped and continue to shape the Taiwanese identity.

### Early cinema, 1897–1945

The history of cinema in Taiwan dates to 1897, when a motion picture device was first used for makeshift screenings in Taipei (Lee, 2012). Early film screenings catered to predominantly Japanese audiences living in Taipei, as Taiwan had come under Japanese colonial rule in 1895.

In Japan, a labor movement activist, Takamatsu Toyojiro, used motion pictures to enhance the agitation aroused by the socialist speeches he gave while traveling with fellow union organizers (Lee, 2017). This innovative use of motion pictures caught the attention of the Japanese Prime Minister Itō Hirobumi, who persuaded Takamatsu to travel to Taiwan and hold film exhibitions that would educate the "ignorant" Taiwanese as to how colonial rule benefits them and encourage the Japanese to visit the newly acquired colony despite their prejudice against the locals (Lee, 2017; Wen, 2018).

Takamatsu's first film, *An Introduction to Actual Conditions in Taiwan* (1907), portrayed the assimilation of the Taiwanese population into the Japanese Empire, exaggerating the benefits of Japanese rule and the supposed harmony between the locals and their colonizers. Thus began the use of film for propaganda purposes by the colonial government—an early example of how cinema was leveraged to shape perceptions of identity and belonging in Taiwan.

The imperialization program aimed at assimilating the Taiwanese population by promoting Japanese language, culture, and values and encouraging allegiance to Japan. An important genre emerged:

 doi:10.18275/pbe-v043-002 

*Kōminka* films encouraged Taiwanese people to identify as Japanese and show loyalty to the emperor and the imperial state (Wen, 2018). Despite the strong assimilation efforts, the colonial government tolerated the importation of Chinese films into the 1930s but heavily censored films with Taiwanese participation in their production (Kellner, 1998; Neri, 2015).

When the Second Sino-Japanese War began in 1937, importing foreign films into Taiwan was prohibited (Neri, 2015). Two years later, in 1939, the Regulations of the Handling Motion Pictures Film Inspection Rule was implemented in Taiwan, modeled on the Film Law passed in Japan the same year, mandating that all scripts be inspected before film production and distribution. The law also required theaters to show Japanese-produced newsreels and culture films (*bunka eiga*) as part of each feature film program (High, 1986). As a result, until the end of the World War II, Taiwan cinema was almost entirely in the service of Imperial Japan, reinforcing a narrative of assimilation that would later contribute to Taiwan's ongoing struggles with collective identity (Lee, 2012).

**The Sinicization of Taiwanese cinema, 1949–1987**

After Japan's defeat in World War II, Taiwan was handed over to the Republic of China. Kuomintang (KMT), the ruling party on the mainland, took control of the island with a repressive regime. The local Taiwanese population soon became resentful of the corrupt conduct of the authorities. Tensions culminated on February 28, 1947, when an uprising against KMT was violently suppressed, resulting in mass casualties. This event, which later became known as the 228 Incident, had a profound effect on Taiwanese cinema, especially during the New Wave era.

After its defeat by the Chinese Communist Party on the mainland in 1949, KMT retreated to Taiwan and declared martial law, ushering in a period of authoritarian rule known as the White Terror. KMT sought to consolidate power, suppress dissent, and Sinicize Taiwan following 50 years of Japanese rule. A major shift occurred in the linguistic and cultural landscape of Taiwanese cinema during this period. The government heavily promoted Mandarin-language films, even though few people on the island spoke Mandarin at the time, reinforcing the state's vision of a singular Chinese identity. Local audiences and filmmakers rejected the push for dominance of Mandarin-language cinema, resulting in the emergence of Taiwanese-language cinema (*taiyupian*) in the late 1950s (Berry, 2022). By 1969, there were 1052 taiyupian productions made in Taiwan versus only 373 Mandarin-language films, pointing to a continued resilience of linguistic and cultural identity despite government efforts to impose a certain national narrative (Zhang, 2013).

The popular genre in the 1960s comprised "social news" films, which were based on real-life events and in the interest of sensationalism featured graphic images of homicides and violence. The social news genre is distinct from thrillers and horror but incorporates elements of both. As such, it served as a stepping stone for Taiwanese director Hsin Chi to pioneer the genre of gothic romance with a taiyu film, *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell* (1965).

Among known taiyupian directors, Hsin is the most often discussed by scholars (Berry et al., 2024). His feature film, *Alias Lover* (1965), was the first science fiction horror taiyu film (Rawnsley, 2013). Hsin was also innovative in his use of spatiality to illustrate conflicting values. This was already a common technique in taiyupian, used to reflect underlying tensions such as the dichotomy between Taiwan's agrarian past and rapid urbanization. Hsin's work, however, engaged more directly with anxieties surrounding cultural transformation (Lin, 2024). Instead of the traditional urban-rural contrast, Hsin juxtaposed a decayed, haunted Buddhist shrine with an opulent, Western-style mansion to emphasize the growing tensions between tradition and modernity and between local heritage and globalization.

By then, horror had gained footing in taiyupian but mostly in the form of opera (Liu, 2021), consistent with early horror in mainland China, where theatrical performances often served as a medium for supernatural storytelling. Taiwanese-language operas, however, distinguished themselves by drawing heavily from local Taiwanese folklore in contrast to studios from Hong Kong and the mainland, which idealized imperial China and leveraged a familiar aesthetic and Chinese music to relieve cultural anxieties and evoke nostalgia (Chen, 2016).

As the 1960s progressed, filmmakers like Yao Feng-Pan emerged as pivotal figures in the horror genre in Taiwan (Liu, 2021). Yao produced a series of Mandarin horror films, which drew on traditional Chinese ghost stories. Facing a drop in revenue, Yao realized that audiences grew tired of elements of Chinese culture (Liu, 2021). He turned instead to Taiwan's customs, religious beliefs, and local criminal cases. He produced *The Ghost Lover* (1976), based on a Taiwanese marriage ritual; *The Old Lock* (1977), based on a crime that occurred in Keelung in 1934; and *The Tale of Old House* (1979), based on traditional Taiwanese burial customs.

However, the rise of television and increased censorship affected the demand and supply for Taiwanese-language films, which ultimately contributed to the decline of taiyupian in the 1970s. Taiwan's cinematic landscape subsequently became dominated by the Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC), a state-sponsored studio. CMPC's new president, Kung Hong, proposed a production style called healthy realism that, while adopting the filmmaking style of Western realistic films, projected an idealized vision of Taiwanese society that aligned with KMT's national identity narrative and avoided exposing its underlying fractures (Hong, 2011). These films were initially well received but eventually faced rejection from audiences due to their repetitive thematic nature and adherence to conventions (Chiang, 2014).

**New Wave cinema, 1982–2000**

The Taiwanese New Wave marks a departure from healthy realism's conventional narratives and aesthetics. This shift also reflects a broader cultural transformation; traditional values and folklore-based storytelling receded in favor of contemporary social critique. The movement began with a four-part anthology, *In Our Time* (directed by Te-chen Tao et al., 1982), marking the beginning of analyzing real social phenomena in film and caring about realities of everyday life as well as restoration of a common Taiwanese identity.

The best example of the conflict between Old Cinema and New Cinema was the three-segment anthology *The Sandwich Man* (1983), directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsang Jong-cheung, and Wan Jen. The film was initially condemned by conservative critics for its negative depiction of Taiwan and satirical critique of its obsession with the US. Namely, in the third vignette, *The Taste of Apples*, a poor laborer's life briefly changes when he is hit by an American colonel's car and taken to the affluent US Naval Hospital in Taipei City. Eager to preserve diplomatic relations amid the Cold War, the US embassy provides for the man's medical treatment and showers his family with gifts, including apples—a rare, imported delicacy.

After an initial screening to the press, an anonymous complaint was filed with the CMPC. As a result, the studio ordered changes to "dialogue, tone, behaviour, and the outdoor location shots in relation to images of poverty in the capital city" (Wang, 2013). Even the final scene, where the family eats apples for the first time, was removed, leading to the event being referred to as "the apple peeling incident." The attempt at censorship inspired significant public outcry after a journalist exposed the affair. The film was eventually fully restored.

According to I-Fen Wu (2006), "the success that Sandwich Man achieved at the box office loosened the strict censorship policies, gradually allowing the CMPC to be more flexible, more supportive of new directors and their individual styles." The phenomenon also emboldened filmmakers and cultural workers who came together in 1986 and drafted the "Taiwan Film Manifesto of the 76th Year of the Republic of China" (Emerson, 2019). The manifesto mainly scrutinized the government's encouragement of political propaganda in filmmaking and condemned Taiwanese critics for promoting the idea that Taiwanese films should be similar to those from Hong Kong and Hollywood, both foreign markets that saw great box office success in Taiwan.

With the lifting of martial law in 1987, New Cinema directors and screenwriters were further spurred to explore taboo subjects and revisit Taiwan's painful past (Ren, 2024). In 1989, Hou Hsiao-Hsien won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival with *A City of Sadness* (1989), a film about the 228 Incident and the surrounding civil unrest. Similarly, Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991) received international acclaim with its depiction of the White Terror and a real homicide case.

Both films, and many others from this period, exemplify a narrative style that forgoes melodrama and sensationalism in favor of a more subdued exploration of characters and overarching themes. The directors utilized long takes and minimal editing to reconstruct a particular historical atmosphere and allow audiences to be fully immersed in the film's setting. Both in intention and execution, New Cinema films diverge from the conventions established by Hong Kong and Hollywood at the time, an indication of the deliberate effort by filmmakers to differentiate their work from foreign influences (Emerson, 2019). From this point on, Taiwanese cinema achieved full artistic freedom in its choice of subjects and both thematically and officially broke free from ideological constraints.

**Modern Taiwanese cinema, 2000–present**

In recent years, Taiwanese producers and directors have been working to diversify the film industry by adhering to genre conventions (Pan, 2023). Between 2017 and 2021, comedy, mystery/thriller, family, and romance genres dominated domestic film production in Taiwan, collectively accounting for 70% of all films produced during that period, according to the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (2023). Though horror films comprised, on average, less than 5% of annual domestic film production during the same pe-

riod, they consistently brought strong box office performances. In 2022, three horror films were among the top 10 highest-grossing domestic productions (Taiwan Creative Content Agency, 2023). In fact, from 2020 to 2024, horror films have consistently ranked among the top 10 highest-grossing domestic productions. As shown in Figure 1, horror films have achieved a box office share more than six times their share of domestic production.

The figure compares each genre's representation in domestic film production with its presence among the top-grossing films over the same period. Whereas most genres exhibit ratios near 1, indicating a proportional relationship between commercial success and production share, horror demonstrates a significantly higher effect size, indicating that despite a limited share in overall production, Taiwanese horror films are received disproportionately well by domestic audiences. As explored later, a similar trend in horror consumption does not extend to other markets in East Asia. Moreover, according to the Bureau of Audiovisual and Music Industry Development (2024), from 2019 to 2024, none of the top 10 highest-grossing foreign films screened in Taiwan belonged to the horror genre.

Taiwanese filmmakers recognize this potential. Even though Hollywood blockbusters continue to dominate the local market, producers Aileen Li Yiu-Wah and Michelle Yeh have identified horror as a strategic opportunity for Taiwan's "toddling" film industry due to its relatively low production costs and strong box office performance (Mon, 2014).

## Taiwanese horror film

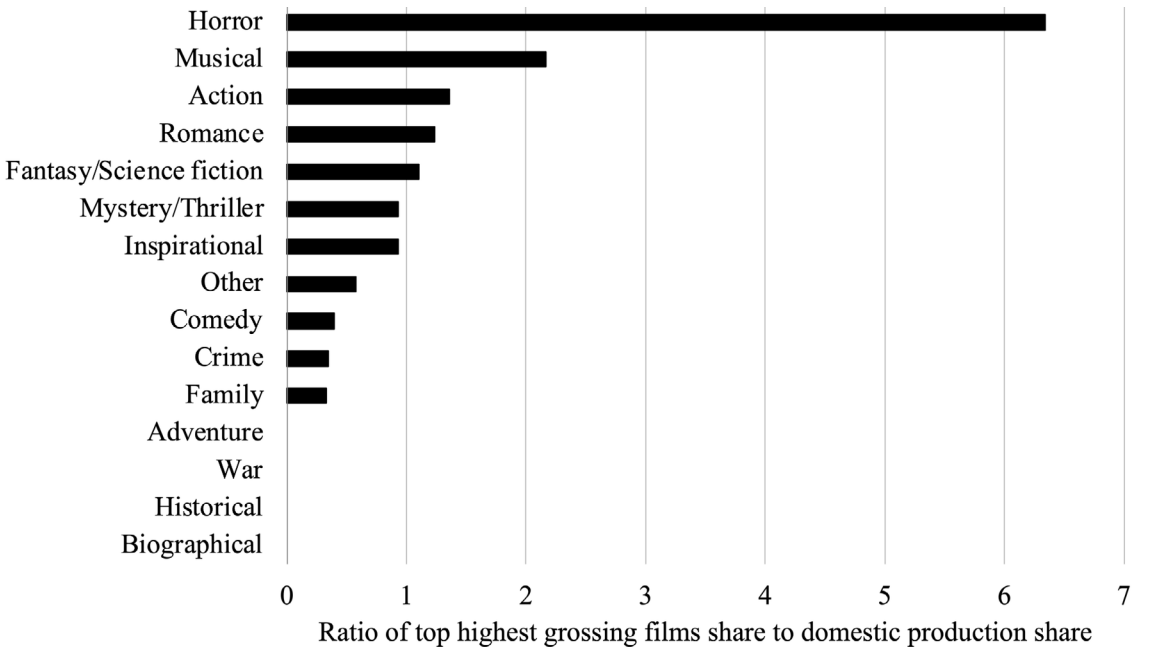
In light of such a distinct genre preference, which varies between domestic and foreign offerings, along with the limited production volume of horror films, the question arises, which factors contribute to the noteworthy appeal of Taiwanese horror films among local audiences? Several key themes define the genre: its engagement with local folklore, contemporary societal anxieties, and a fragmented Taiwanese identity.

### Folklore

Folklore is defined as "the unrecorded traditions of a people" (Brunvand, 1998). It broadly encompasses legends, superstitions, and stories. In Western horror, folklore has given rise to some of the genre's most enduring antagonists, including Dracula, inspired by Eastern European vampire myths; Frankenstein's monster, rooted in Gothic anxieties about the reanimation of the dead; and werewolves, drawn from medieval European legends.

Despite the widespread popularity of Western horror and its well-established conventions,

**Figure 1**
**Ratio of box office representation to production share by genre in domestic Taiwanese films**




*Source*: Author's calculations based on highest-grossing film lists from the Taiwan Creative Content Agency.

Taiwanese horror prior to the 1980s did not typically use identifiable elements from local folklore, notwithstanding a strong fascination with the occult and the supernatural among the Taiwanese (Boey, 2012). The same was true in Hong Kong, where, even though "Chinese folklore contains as many ghosts, demons, vampires, and assorted fiends as Western cultures," there was no great tradition of supernatural creatures (O'Brien, 2003). As a result, this vast source of material remained largely untapped until Hong Kong filmmaker Sammo Hung directed *Gui Da Gui* (1980), a film that combined elements of comedy and the martial arts genre with traditional Chinese ghost lore.

As *Gui Da Gui* achieved impressive commercial success, more directors began drawing from local and regional mythology to conjure antagonizing entities. Several factors led to this shift happening in Taiwan as well, including a growing interest in cultural preservation, the loosening of censorship laws, and the success of folklore-driven horror in neighboring markets. Today, nearly all contemporary Taiwanese horror films are adapted from local folklore, which is a distinguishing feature of the genre when contrasted with its international counterparts (Wu, 2024).

*The Tag-Along* (directed by Cheng Wei-hao, 2015), for example, is based on an infamous Taiwanese urban legend. In 1998, a popular television show aired an episode where a group of hikers displayed an amateur film they recorded on one of their hikes in Taichung. Throughout the video, a little girl in red can be seen following the group, yet none of the hikers noticed her at the time. Following the episode's airing, accounts and sightings of the little girl multiplied as people speculated her to be a *môo-sîn-á*, a mischievous spirit believed to dwell in the island's forests and mountains.

The film incorporates this legend into a contemporary horror narrative. The môo-sîn-á is reimagined as a creature that lures people to the wilderness by preying on their guilt and fear; in this case, the film's protagonists have failed in their familial or social obligations. Through this adaptation, *The Tag-Along* transforms a localized folk belief into broader commentary on duty and the consequences of neglecting it.

*The Bride* (directed by Lingo Hsieh, 2015) is based on the traditional Chinese practice of *ghost marriage*, where a deceased person is wed to a living individual or another deceased person. Historically, ghost marriages served to establish kinship ties between families (Topley, 2011). In contemporary practice, the ritual serves to ensure the deceased's inclusion on the family altar alongside their ancestors, a privilege that unmarried individuals do not receive (Freedman, 1970).

The film adapts this ritual into a horror narrative of a man coerced into a ghost marriage by the spirit bride's family, only to face her vengeance when the ritual is unexpectedly interrupted. By centering this practice in its plot, *The Bride* transforms a familiar tradition into a source of horror, drawing on anxieties surrounding marriage, obligation, and the consequences of disrupting ancestral customs.

Together, these films exemplify a broader trend in Taiwanese horror. Folklore is reinterpreted within modern contexts and used not only as a narrative device but also as a means of exploring broader societal concerns.

**Contemporary societal anxieties**

Traditional values in Taiwan are rooted in Confucianism, which emphasizes family loyalty, social hierarchies, and harmony. These staple values of Taiwanese society have dictated family dynamics, gender roles, and filial expectations. However, the urbanization and globalization of Taiwan, particularly in the twenty-first century, have led to an increasingly individualistic society where younger generations tend to prioritize autonomy, career, and romance over familial obligations and societal conventions. This conflict became prominent following Taiwan's economic development in the 1960s and 1970s; at the same time, traditional cultural norms have continued to shape contemporary family patterns, resulting in increased tensions (Coombs & Sun, 1981; Yi & Chang, 2019).

Audiences may look to film for addressing conflicting and shifting values. Taiwanese horror films therefore may resonate with local audiences by rooting in contemporary societal anxieties. Through the characteristic conflict of the self and the other, horror lends itself particularly well to depicting discord between traditional and modern values within a rapidly evolving Taiwan.

In *The Tag-Along*, the supernatural threat is directly tied to neglecting traditional responsibilities. Wei, the film's protagonist, prioritizes his career and relationship over caring for his grandmother. When she vanishes, Wei is forced to confront his guilt over their strained relationship, which left her vulnerable to the môo-sîn-á. The film reinforces this connection by later shifting focus to Wei's girlfriend, Yi-Chun, who is haunted after expressing reluctance to marriage

and motherhood. Ultimately, to break free from the antagonizing entity's grasp, both characters must confront personal failings and adhere to traditional expectations.

In *Incantation* (directed by Kevin Ko, 2022), horror arises from violating inherited spiritual obligations. Li Ronan, the protagonist, disrupts a sacred ritual tied to her boyfriend's family's cult, unleashing a generational curse that threatens her and her daughter. Unlike *The Tag-Along*, which ties supernatural punishment to filial neglect, *Incantation* explores the dangers of rejecting familial religious traditions. The film reflects modern skepticism clashing with deeply rooted spiritual practices, reinforcing anxieties that breaking from tradition invites supernatural retribution.

Both *The Tag-Along* and *Incantation* illustrate how Taiwanese horror engages growing tensions between modern individualism and cultural expectations, portraying supernatural enforcers of tradition to evoke feelings of dread and fear in audiences.

**Fragmented Taiwanese identity**

Film can be used for constitution, destruction, or reconstruction of identity (Blake, 2013). Taiwan's complex history and struggle to form a coherent identity lend themselves especially well to certain horror tropes. Body horror, in particular, has long been used to illustrate internal conflict. Kawin (2012) theorized that this subgenre, wherein the human body is a vehicle for disturbing or grotesque imagery, can powerfully depict identity crisis. Body horror has become a significant element in Taiwanese horror, serving to illustrate the disintegration of autonomy and the loss of self.

*The Sadness* (2021), directed by Rob Jabbaz, exemplifies this connection between one's body and one's identity. The film follows a viral outbreak that violently transforms people into aggressive, sadistic creatures without rationale or self-control. As infected bodies mutate and descend into the grotesque, their physical transformations are not only horrifying but also symbolic of broader societal collapse and dehumanization in the face of external threats. The film effectively captures the terror of the loss of individual agency.

*Incantation* follows a secluded religious sect, dedicated to worship of a mysterious deity whose true form is never fully revealed. The deity is represented throughout the film in fragmented and obscured images—its body appearing disjointed and its face concealed beneath a red cloth. When the cloth is lifted toward the end of the film only to reveal a gaping black void instead of a face, the imagery suggests an identity defined by absence, resonating with Taiwan's geopolitical status, the contested sovereignty in a state of liminality. The horror of *Incantation* thus extends beyond the superficial into a broader allegory for invisibility where Taiwan, much like the veiled entity, is suspended between existence and erasure on the world stage.

The fears of subjugation and erasure, seen in *The Sadness* and *Incantation*, are particularly relevant themes within horror in the context of Taiwan's relationship with China. During the Cold War era, American horror films similarly served as allegories for geopolitical tensions and anxieties about the spread of communism. Narratives emphasized fear of infiltration, paranoia, and the struggle for autonomy, which directly mirrored the ideological standoff behind the Iron Curtain. Zombies, in particular, were used as a metaphor for unchecked expansion, dehumanization, and loss of individuality.

In contemporary Taiwanese horror, parallel thematic elements emerge. In *The Sadness*, discussed earlier, the depiction of a rapidly spreading zombie-like virus has been widely interpreted as a symbol of an external threat related to the perceived rise of China's political and economic power. Much like Cold War horror, the chaos portrayed in *The Sadness* echoes Taiwan's contemporary geopolitical concerns and painful history of oppression at the hands of authoritarianism.

*Detention* (2019), directed by John Hsu, further exemplifies how Taiwanese horror engages with historical trauma and political oppression. Set during the White Terror, the film follows a group of students and teachers who secretly participate in a banned book club, only to be persecuted by the KMT regime. Drawing on Jameson's (1986) concept of national allegory in third-world texts, *Detention* transforms the horrors of state surveillance, ideological control, and betrayal into supernatural threats, mirroring Taiwan's struggle for identity amid authoritarian rule (Wu, 2024).

Taiwan's ongoing struggle with its collective identity is deeply embedded in the politics of naming. In Taiwanese folklore, names hold power and can determine one's fate and worth. Calling out a person's real name, for example, is thought to break the spell of môo-sîn-á and restore the victim's autonomy (Wu, 2024). The power of names extends beyond folklore into Taiwan's political reality. Taiwan has had a number of international naming disputes, notably the 2018 referendum in which voters, under external pressure, rejected the proposal to compete in the Tokyo Olympics under "Taiwan" as opposed to "Chinese Taipei."

A similar theme appears in *Incantation*, where the central deity's face is covered by a cloth with an inscription stating, "Fortune and misfortune depend on each other; life and death depend on the name." The film repeatedly features this incantation spoken in Taiwanese dialect, further emphasizing the island's internal linguistic and cultural divisions. *Incantation* uses horror to engage with Taiwan's contested identity, where name, much like sovereignty, determines both recognition and survival.

## Comparisons

To further contextualize the distinct appeal of Taiwanese horror films, a comparative analysis of foreign horror films in Taiwan and horror in neighboring East Asian markets is essential.

### Foreign horror films in Taiwan

According to the Taiwan Creative Content Agency (2023), Taiwanese films constituted an average of approximately 9% of all films screened in Taiwan annually from 2018 to 2022. During the same period, the average share of domestic films in Taiwan's box office revenue was 13.3%, with no more than three domestic films appearing in the top 10 highest-grossing films in any given year. As discussed previously, horror films have consistently occupied at least one of these limited spots. The same cannot be said for foreign horror in Taiwan. Though specific data on the share of horror films in foreign productions screened in Taiwan are limited, in North America—the largest source of foreign films imported to Taiwan—horror accounts for only 6.1% of domestic production (The Numbers, 2025).

However, the absence of foreign horror from Taiwan's top-grossing films cannot be explained by production share alone. Even when foreign horror films are screened in Taiwan, they tend to follow different thematic and narrative conventions. Many Western and East Asian horror films released in Taiwan rely on psychological horror rooted in individual trauma rather than the folklore-driven, culturally embedded anxieties that characterize Taiwanese horror. While certain themes are prominent both in foreign and domestic horror, Taiwanese horror ties these elements to local folklore and historical events, making them more resonant with domestic audiences. This divergence in content may contribute to foreign horror films' weak performance in the domestic market.

### Horror in East Asia

Across East Asia, horror occupies a notable role in domestic film industries and enjoys cultural significance. Comparing Taiwanese horror to that of Japan and South Korea—two neighboring markets with similar economies and well-established film industries—highlights its distinct position both in terms of its reception among domestic audiences and its thematic tendencies.

Japan has a long tradition of horror cinema, but its popularity with domestic audiences has waned in recent years. Since 2020, only one horror film has appeared among the annual top 10 highest-grossing domestic films (Motion Picture Producers…, 2024), aligning with a broader trend showing that horror is significantly less popular in Japan compared to the global average (Follows & Nash, 2021). This trend suggests that the genre may not resonate strongly with Japanese audiences, potentially because its core themes lack cultural urgency.

Japanese horror films explore themes of individualism and isolation, with supernatural threats serving to heighten feelings of loneliness and anxiety that permeate modern life in Japan (Ladd, 2018; McRoy, 2008). While Japanese horror uses supernatural threats to examine such broad concerns like the alienation brought on by modernization and technological advancement, Taiwanese horror is more directly tied to the island's immediate sociopolitical anxieties. This difference is especially evident in their portrayal of shared identity. Japanese horror rarely engages with questions of identity, a defining characteristic of Taiwanese horror, a difference that may stem from Japan's well-established national identity, which has not faced recent threats of erasure or subjugation, unlike Taiwan, whose history of colonization and present-day contested sovereignty continue to shape its narratives.

The emphasis on identity extends to the use of folklore, from which both genres draw heavily. Japanese horror films frequently feature *onryō*, vengeful spirits that are a familiar and integral part of Japanese culture (Paciorek, 2018). In contrast, Taiwanese horror frequently incorporates lesser known, highly localized folklore, using it as both a narrative device and a means of cultural preservation. By grounding its horror in these traditions, Taiwanese cinema reinforces its distinct heritage and offers audiences stories that feel immediate and personally relevant. This localized approach, and its engagement with pressing societal anxieties, may explain the enduring appeal of Taiwanese horror among domestic audiences.

Moving to South Korea, that country is one of the largest markets for horror globally, with strong domestic and international interest in the genre (Follows & Nash, 2021). Since 2020, one horror film has made the list of top 10 highest-grossing films each year (Korean

Film Council, 2023). Given horror's estimated share of domestic film production, such performance is proportionate.

A significant thematic element in South Korean horror is social commentary, addressing issues such as urbanization, capitalism, and the erosion of traditional values—not unlike Taiwanese horror (*Exploring the dark art*…, 2024). However, while Taiwanese horror frequently engages with questions of identity and historical trauma, South Korean horror is more often preoccupied with class struggle and systemic injustice, themes that have become increasingly relevant in modern South Korean society.

South Korean horror also draws heavily from its own rich mythology, incorporating spirits and other mythical creatures into its narratives. These supernatural elements serve as metaphors for the collective traumas and fears of the society (*Exploring the dark art*…, 2024). In this respect, Korean horror shares similarities with Taiwanese horror in its use of folklore; Korean horror shares many of the same influences as Japanese horror as well (Byrne, 2014), reflecting the broader regional influences in East Asian horror, where certain supernatural themes and symbolic representations transcend geographic boundaries. Taiwanese horror distinguishes itself by grounding its supernatural elements in highly specific cultural and historical contexts. Rather than using well-known regional motifs, it prioritizes local folklore as part of a broader effort toward cultural preservation, making it not only a genre of entertainment but also a medium for cultural expression extending beyond traditional horror conventions.

## Conclusion

The notable appeal of Taiwanese horror among local audiences can be attributed to the genre's thematic and narrative foundations, which draw from history, folklore, and contemporary social pressures to create narratives that resonate with local audiences. As political tensions rise and questions of national identity become more urgent, the genre's roles as both an escape from and a reflection of these concerns become even more significant. Horror has always been shaped by the fears of its time, and in Taiwan, those fears are increasingly tied to uncertainty about the future. This ongoing tension is what makes the genre so compelling—and why it will likely continue to evolve in ways that speak to both local and global audiences

## References


Berry, C. (2022). *Taiwanese-language cinema in the martial law era as a cinema of the Cold War* [Recorded lecture]. Spotlight Taiwan Helsinki.

Berry, C., Ghermani, W., Neri, C., & Rawnsley, M. T. (2024). Introduction. In C. Berry, W. Ghermani, C. Neri, & M. T. Rawnsley (Eds.), *Taiwanese language cinema: Rediscovered and reconsidered*. Edinburgh University Press.

Blake, L. (2013). *The wounds of nations*. Manchester University Press.

Boey, D. (2012). *The national specificity of horror sources in Asian horror cinema* [Ph.D. thesis]. Queensland University of Technology.

Boss, P. J. (1989). *Death, disintegration of the body and subjectivity in the contemporary horror film* [Ph.D. thesis]. University of Warwick.

Brunvand, J. H. (1998). *The study of American folklore: An introduction* (4th ed.). W. W. Norton.

Bureau of Audiovisual and Music Industry Development. (2024). *Statistics of Taiwan Cinema*. Ministry of Culture.

Byrne, J. (2014). Wigs and rings: Cross-cultural exchange in the South Korean and Japanese horror film. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, *6*, 184–201. doi: 10.1080/17564905.2014.961708

Chen, Q. (2016). *The others: Desire, anxiety, and the politics of Chinese horror cinema (1989-2015)* [Ph.D. dissertation]. Ohio State University.

Chiang, M.-H. (2014). *Healthy realism: paradoxical aesthetics, ideology, and nation-building in Taiwan cinema 1964-1982* [Ph.D. dissertation]. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Coombs, L. C., & Sun, T.-H. (1981). Familial values in a developing society: A decade of change in Taiwan. *Social Forces*, *59*, 1229–1255. doi: 10.1093/sf/59.4.1229

Emerson, A. (2019, July 2). *The beginner's guide: New Taiwanese cinema*. Film Inquiry.

*Exploring the dark art of Korean horror movies: A deep dive*. (2024). The Korean in Me.

Follows, S., & Nash, B. (2021). *The relative popularity of genres around the world*. American Film Market.

Freedman, M. (Ed.). (1970). *Family and kinship in Chinese society*. Stanford University Press.

Gao, Z. (2007). Serving a stir-fry of market, culture and politics – On globalisation and film policy in Greater China. *Policy Studies*, *30*, 423–438. doi: 10.1080/01442870902899889

High, P. B. (1986). Japanese film theory and the national policy film debate: 1937-1941. 中部大学国際関係学部, *2*, 133–149.

Hong, G.-J. (2011). Tracing a journeyman's electric shadow: Healthy realism, cultural policies, and Lee Hsing, 1964–1980. In *Taiwan cinema* (pp. 65–86). Springer. doi: 10.1057/9780230118324_4

Jameson, F. (1986). Third-world literature in the era of multinational capitalism. *Social Text, 15*, 65. doi: 10.2307/466493

Kawin, B. F. (2012). *Horror and the horror film*. Anthem Press.

Kellner, D. (1998). New Taiwan cinema in the 80s. *Jump Cut*, *42,* 101–115.

Korean Film Council. (2023). *Yearly box office*. Korean Film Biz Zone.

Ladd, C. (2018). *Beyond Godzilla: Reflections of national identity in Japanese horror films*. Digital Commons@ Butler University.

Lee, D.-M. (2012). A brief history of Taiwan cinema. [Adapted from D.-M. Lee. *Historical dictionary of Taiwan cinema*. Scarecrow Press.]

Lee, D.-M. (2017). How cinema arrived and stayed in Taiwan. In N. Deocampo (Ed.), *Early cinema in Asia* (pp. 129–139). Indiana University Press. doi: 10.2307/j.ctv3hvcfh

Lin, F. (2024). Translation and transformation of Taiyupian: From gothic romance to "family complex." In C. Berry, W. Ghermani, C. Neri, & M. T. Rawnsley (Eds.), *Taiwanese language cinema: Rediscovered and reconsidered*. Edinburgh University Press.

Liu, F.-J. (2021, August 23). *Semiosphere and Taiwan's horror movies of the 1970s*. The International Academic Forum Research Archive.

Mon, Y.-F. (2014). *Cinema as a sensory circuit: Film production and consumption in contemporary Taiwan* [Ph.D. thesis]. University of London. doi: 10.25602/GOLD.00009784

Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan. (2024). [National film overview in 2023]. Eiren.org. https://www.eiren.org/toukei/img/eiren_kosyu/data_2023.pdf

Neri, C. (2015). Haunted island: Reflections on the Japanese Colonial Era in Taiwanese cinema. In Morris, A. D. (Ed.) *Japanese Taiwan: Colonial rule and its contested legacy* (pp. 171–184). Bloomsbury Academic. doi: 10.5040/9781474220026.ch-009

The Numbers. (2025). *Market share for each genre 1995-2025*. Nash Information Services. https://www.the-numbers.com/market/genres

O'Brien, D. (2003). *Spooky encounters: A Gwailo's guide to Hong Kong horror*. Headpress.

Paciorek, A. (2018). Phantasms of the floating world: Tales of ghostly Japan. In *Folk horror revival: Field studies*. Wyrd Harvest Press.

Pan, Y. (2023). Fragile national identity in Taiwanese historical film: A narrative analysis of selected case studies from the 1980s to 2010s. *Annali Di Ca' Foscari. Serie Orientale*, *59*, 129–156. doi: 10.30687/annor/2385-3042/2023/02/005

Prohászková, V. (2012). The genre of horror. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, *2*.

Rawnsley, M. (2013). Taiwanese-language cinema: State versus market, national versus transnational. *Oriental Archive*, *81*, 437–458.

Ren, K. (2024). *The rebellious slowness: Youth culture, political resistance and historical reminiscence in Taiwan new cinema* [M.A. thesis]. McGill University.

Taiwan Creative Content Agency. (2023). *Key data of movie industry in Taiwan*.

Topley, M. (2011). Ghost marriages among the Singapore Chinese: (1955). In J. DeBernardi (Ed.), *Cantonese society in Hong Kong and Singapore: Gender, religion, medicine and money*. Hong Kong University Press.

Wang, W.-J. (2013). *Crossing borders in Taiwan new cinema: Historiography, popularity, postcoloniality* [Ph.D. dissertation]. University of Exeter.

Wen, L. J.-H. (2018). Magic lantern shows and screen modernity. In Yeh, E. Y. (Ed.). *Early film culture in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Republican China: Kaleidoscopic histories* (pp. 51–70). University of Michigan Press. doi: 10.3998/mpub.9731616

Wu, I-Fen. (2006). Taiwanese New Cinema. In D. Eleftheriotis & G, Needham (Eds.), *Asian cinemas: A reader and guide* (pp. 364–368). Edinburgh University Press.

Wu, Y. (2024). Haunted family: The representation of national identity in Taiwanese horror films. In B. Wilson & S. A. Osman (Eds.), *The Asian family in literature and film*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Yi, C.-C., & Chang, C.-F. (2019). Family and gender in Taiwan. In J. Liu & J. Yamashita (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of East Asian gender studies* (pp. 217–235). Routledge.

Zhang, Y. (2013). Articulating sadness, gendering space: The politics and poetics of Taiyu films from 1960s Taiwan. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *25*, 1–46.

**NAĐA STOJANOVIĆ**

Nađa graduated with highest honors from Lehigh University in May 2025 with a B.S. in computer science. As an undergraduate, she served as head teaching assistant for a robotics class and a grader for several computer science classes. For her capstone project, she helped develop software for tracking patient adherence to tuberculosis treatment, which took her to the Philippines for fieldwork. She was also actively involved in research, contributing both to the Neural Engineering Lab and the Brain Imaging and Computation Lab. Nađa is currently pursuing an M.Phil. in cognitive neurosciences at the University of Cambridge.