

Monsters in Asia

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Abstract

Monsters in films are not only alienated organisms, they often contain deeper cultural connotations and thinking. Among the many metaphors of monsters, trauma is the creative background that almost every monster cannot do without. Analyzing the narration of monsters in different Asian films can better understand the traumas. In our project, we selected the most representative monster-related films from Korea, Japan, and China, namely, *Host*, *Godzilla*, and *CJ7*. By analyzing the image of the monster, the relationship between the monster and man, and the end of the monster in the three films, we shed light on the trauma behind films, the response to the trauma, and the reflection brought by traumas. *Host* embodies the fear of modernity, *Godzilla* reveals the nuclear threat and worries about Japan's future, and *CJ7* is a struggle against the huge gap between the rich and the poor in the new century in China. About the end of the monster, they all have the willingness to think about the future of monsters and the coexistence of monsters and human society, rather than simply violent annihilation. The monsters in the three films all come from the trauma of their own social contradictions or historical trauma, which is a kind of reflexive thinking. Finally, we explore the possibility of healing wounds between East Asian countries with reference to each other's history and modernization experience from the perspective of inter-reference.

As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out in *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, the monster is a rich source for understanding cultural phenomena because it “always symbolizes something other than itself: it is always a displacement.”¹

The East Asian region is steeped in traditional Confucianism and has had a relationship of mutual communication and influence since ancient times, belonging to the same Greater Chinese Civilization. As the memory of ancient times fades, the complex international and regional wars and the strong involvement of post-war Western-led modernization in the region's development have carved out a very different "modern face" and unforgiving trauma in many parts of the three East Asian countries.

The multiple metaphors of historical trauma and disaster, economic pessimism, class entrenchment, and post-colonial dilemmas are intertwined in East Asian visual works that represent monsters. Our group attempts to analyze how three East Asian cultures reflect and deal with collective trauma through monster images, starting from typical monster images from three East Asian countries/regions: Japan, Korea and China.

1. Trauma in The Host

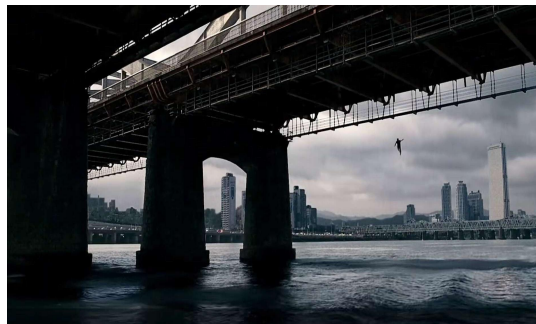
The birth of a monster is often the strongest metaphorical moment, because people will unconsciously trace back to the mother body that produced the monster. In Bong Joon-ho's film *THE HOST*, the monster has two origins, one of which is historical trauma. After the Korean War, the national pain over the division between North and South Korea was concentrated in the rising anti-American sentiment after 2000. As an independent country, South Korea has been seeking an equal international diplomatic status after its economic take-off, but it has never been able to get rid of the U.S. control in military, economic and political aspects, and the South Korean government does not even have jurisdiction over the U.S. troops in Korea. A modern "colonial" humiliation is spreading among the Korean people². In 2000, the morgue of the U.S. Forces in Korea illegally dumped about 80 liters of formaldehyde into the sewage system discharged into the Han River, causing strong protests and large-scale demonstrations among the Korean people, and this incident became the direct source of the film's host source.



¹ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster culture (seven theses)." *Gothic horror: A guide for students and readers* 198 (2007).

² 張紅秋."《漢江怪物》票房奇跡與韓國敘事." *書城* .04(2007):107-111.
doi:CNKI:SUN:SHUC.o.2007-04-031.

The monster's second origin is the collapsing Korean economy. In the film, a businessman commits suicide by jumping from a bridge into the Han River years after the formaldehyde dumping incident, and the businessman may be the first human meal eaten by the host.



the IMF's neo-liberal structural adjustment program after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, liberalization of trade, labor markets, and investment had a devastating effect on the Korean economy³. The rapid privatization of state-directed enterprises and banks (whose collective success prior to the crisis was hailed as the "Han River Miracle") and the subsistence of enterprises through layoffs led to massive worker unemployment and business bankruptcy. "According to Korean government data, the proportion of people living below the 'minimum living income'(a measure of poverty) went from 3.1 percent in 1996 to 8.2 percent in 2000 to 11.6 percent in early 2006. The Gini coefficient, a measure of inequality, jumped from 0.27 to 0.34. Social solidarity is disintegrating, with alarming increases in migration, family abandonment and divorce, accompanied by soaring suicide rates⁴." The post-IMF collapse of the Korean economy and the high number of suicides has been called the "IMF suicide" and became an element of metaphor in the film.

Meanwhile, in the environmental context, neo-liberalism has widened social inequality and unequal distribution of wealth, transforming Korean citizens into "disposable people"⁵. In order to attract foreign investment, the Korean government has repealed or weakened various environmental regulations in accordance with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund, for example, the government has abolished green belt regulations, reorganized national parks and weakened regulations to protect drinking water sources⁶. At the same time, the budget of the Ministry of Environment decreased from 1.51% of total finance in 1997 to 1.38% and 1.36% in 1998 and 1999, respectively.

In the face of the monster, the movie creates an absurd scenario: the United States and its experts fabricate a non-existent virus in order to cover up their crimes. The Korean

³ Hsu, Hsuan L. "The dangers of biosecurity: The Host and the geopolitics of outbreak." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 51 (2009).

⁴ Bello, Walden. "All Fall Down." *Foreign Policy in Focus* (July 3, 2007).

⁵ Crotty, James and Kang-Kook Lee. "The Effects of Neoliberal 'Reforms' on the Post-Crisis Korean Economy." *Review of Radical Political Economics* 38:4 (Fall 2006): 669-75.

⁶ Chomthongdi, Jacques-Chai. "The IMF's Asian Legacy." *Focus on Trade* (September 2000).

government is weak and incompetent, following the lead of the United States, and not only does not help the main character's family to rescue their child who was snatched by the monster, but also places them under house arrest to prevent information from leaking out. The only one fighting against the monster is the main character Kang Doo family, in order to save the family's children, they not only need to face the monster, but also to avoid the government's tracking.

If monsters are the embodiment of trauma, then confrontation with monsters symbolizes the actions of people in response to trauma. In this film, there is a satire on the hypocrisy and true hegemony of United States and an accusation of government incompetence, all acts of confrontation are done by a group of socially marginalized people, and in the end they are not successful in saving the child.



From this, we can see the plight of the lower class in Korea brought about by disorderly modernization: the government selling out the interests of the people for the sake of economic construction; the solidification of the class, where learning and hard work no longer create the possibility of class mobility; and the lack of security in the life of the nation, as well as the disillusionment of the morality of the group and the disintegration of social confidence.

The imbalance in response to the trauma reflects the ambivalence of Korea's fear and desire for modernization. It is difficult for them to give up their integration into the "Western" modern system, which symbolizes civilization and superiority, and difficult for them to bear the social deformities of overheated development.

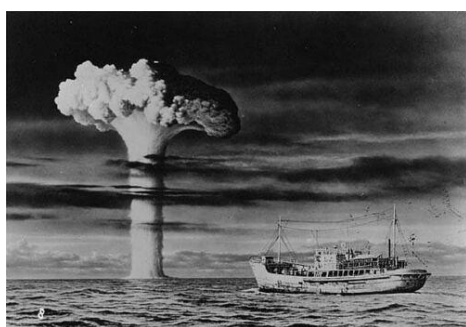


At the end of the film, the U.S. military and the Korean government collude to throw the so-called disinfectant, but in fact the highly toxic "yellow agent" into the Han River amidst the yellow toxic mist. In the diffuse yellow toxic fog, a sense of powerlessness spreads, and the family in the film fails to save their daughter, as if symbolizing the impotent and helpless Korea in the face of the trauma left behind.

2. Trauma in Godzilla

Godzilla has always been associated with anti-nuclear sentiment, anti-American sentiment or anti-war sentiment in general.

The U.S. occupation of Japan ended in 1952, but the nuclear threat from the U.S. did not. In March 1954, the U.S. detonated a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb, releasing a massive amount of radioactive fallout. A Japanese tuna boat, the *Fukuryu Maru* had also been hit by fallout. The entire crew developed radiation sickness, and one member soon died. It has aroused the concern of Japanese society about the nuclear issue.⁷ In 1954, Japan's Toho Studios unleashed *Godzilla* directed by Ishirō Honda. In the movie, the submerged ancient monster "Godzilla" awakened due to the hydrogen bomb test explosion and attacked the Japanese capital Tokyo.



The film opens with a ship sinking in an explosion, killing everyone on board. Immediately afterwards, an intense white light arises in the distance and a mysterious monster rises from the depths of the ocean. The white light, searchlights and air raid sirens in the film are reminiscent of the American bombing of Japan. Godzilla was dormant at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean until he was awakened by the hydrogen bomb test. It resembles an anthropomorphic image of the atomic bomb, with rough skin that mimics the burned skin and scars of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a highly radioactive footprint and the ability to emit rays from its mouth. Through its portrayal of Godzilla's origin and image, "The films transfer onto Godzilla the role of the United States in order to symbolically re-enact a problematic United States-Japan relationship that includes atomic war, occupation, and thermonuclear test"⁸

⁷ Brothers, Peter H. "Japan's Nuclear Nightmare: How the Bomb Became a Beast Called 'Godzilla.'" *Cinéaste* 36, no. 3 (2011): 36-40.

⁸ Chon Noriega. "Godzilla and the Japanese Nightmare: When 'Them!' Is U.S." *Cinema Journal* 27, no. 1 (1987): 63-77.



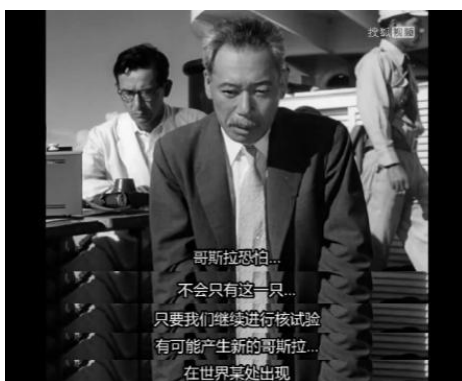
As a transitional creature between sea creatures and land creatures, Godzilla carries Japan's anxieties and concerns about itself. Japan is also a transitional monster, inspired by the U.S. hydrogen bomb tests, caught between its imperial past and its post-war industrial future in 1954⁹.

The movie shows the use of violence, media, and technology to deal with the disaster brought by Godzilla. First of all, violence cannot affect the monster, shells and rockets just make the creature's hard and impenetrable fur change direction. Violence even brought negative effects, making the monster more powerful and violent. The portrayal of military means reveals a strong sense of irony, showing an anti-war and anti-nuclear sentiment. Secondly, the media plays an intermediary role. The media acts as the point of view of the film on the one hand. When people first see Godzilla emerging from the ridge, the point of view is equivalent to that of a reporter with a camera in the crowd of witnesses. The media perspective, on the other hand, becomes the point of view of the film itself. Throughout the film, the reporter acts as a character to drive the story forward. Godzilla's arrival is transmitted by radio pulses, people witness the disaster on television, evacuation orders are announced by radio. The journalist, as an intermediary between society and the monster, represents an institutionalized attempt to discover social anxiety and its causes and solutions. In the end, Dr. Serizawa uses the mega-powerful technology he invented to repel Godzilla, sacrificing himself for humanity. To prevent the destructive power from being released into the world as it was during the war, he insisted on destroying all materials. This also highlights the rationality of Japan's use of "good" science.¹⁰ The film ties science and morality together, and the "good" science of Japan conflicts with the "bad" science of the United States.

The Godzilla movie ends with the monster swimming out to sea in an almost melancholy scene, filled with restrained music and close-ups of pensive faces, while Dr. Yamane whispers alone: "I don't think that Godzilla will be the last one. If the hydrogen bomb test explosion continues again, that Godzilla's kind may still appear somewhere in the world".

⁹ Crowder, R.J., Chhem, R.K., Aziz, A.Z. "Godzilla Mon Amour: The Origins and Legacy of Nuclear Fear in Japan." In: Shigemura, J., Chhem, R. (eds) *Mental Health and Social Issues Following a Nuclear Accident*. Springer, Tokyo. (2016): 3-14.

¹⁰ Hamilton, Robert F.. "Godzilla After the Meltdown : the evolution and mutation of Japan's greatest monster." *明治大学国際日本学研究* 7, no.1 (2015):41 - 53



Instead of celebrating the monster's retreat, the film reveals the incompleteness of the narrative. They acknowledge the necessary confrontation avoided in the narrative and the need for contemplation outside the narrative to understand what the monster's return means. The ending also foreshadows the monster's return; after all, the nuclear threat represented by the monster never left. The film attempts to link the imaginable monster to the unimaginable nuclear disaster, enabling Japan to examine repressed anxieties in their historical context by textualizing the historical experience. Godzilla thus becomes a symbol of nuclear, violence, and catastrophe, serving as a bridge between March 11 and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

3. Trauma in CJ7

Differing from the film blooming in Japan and south Korea, after entering the 21st century, HK films had been soundless for several years on the international stage. The emergence of CJ7 in 2008 changed this situation. CJ7 was directed by famous Hong Kong actor Stephen Chow and jointly produced by companies from Hong Kong and the mainland. CJ7 grossed HK \$51,440,832 at HK, ranking seventh at the box office of Chinese-language films in Hong Kong film history. The box office of CJ7 in the Chinese mainland even broke through the 200 million CNY mark.¹¹ Besides, CJ7 was a new milestone for Asian cartoon visual effects in the early 21st century. In 2008, the alien monster CJ7 in the movie was a great hit due to its lifelike and lovely image that was created by exquisite visual technology.¹²

CJ7 is a comedy film about the life of an adorable boy, called Zhou Xiaodi, and his loving father living in a slum and what changes as CJ7, a cute alien fluffball from outer space, appeared. As we can know from the following pictures, CJ7 is an alien fluffball monster, left by a UFO that strays into the earth. the origin of CJ7 is different from the Host and Godzilla, which were first normal creatures morphed into giant monsters with fierce-looking and huge destructive power due to certain reasons.

¹¹ Neman, Daniel. "The Space Alien Is Cute, Just Not Cute Enough to Save 'CJ7.'" Knight-Ridder/Tribune Business News 2008: n. pag. Print.

¹² Rizov, Vadim. "Reviews: Films: 'CJ7.'" Sight and Sound 2008: 54–56. Print.



Picture 2 shows the intimate interaction between the boy Zhou Xiaodi and CJ7. Unlike other monsters, CJ7 behaves like a lovely pet dog accompanied by the little boy. However, the CJ7 is the key to understanding the film and the traumas behind the happy ambiance. Now we put the occurrence of CJ7 into the settings of Xiaodi's family and social status. Xiaodi grew up with his father only, living in the slums. Because of the poor family, Xiaodi, as a representative of the underclass suffered lots of discrimination and injustice from teachers and classmates. But CJ7's coming brings respect and admiration to the boy. The money-oriented society leaves hopeless trauma to the poor.¹³ Severe uneven distribution of social wealth and resources leads the poor to lose confidence to transcend classes and change their destinies. But CJ7 works as an abnormal method, which could change the underclass situation.



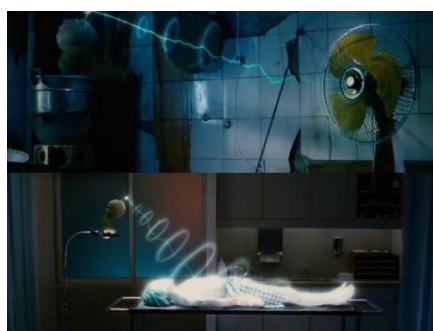
Nevertheless, the change in Xiaodi's life due to the occurrence of CJ7 may not provide enough evidence for our argument. Now we move to the details about how Xiaodi wants and asks CJ7 to create something to change his life. Firstly, Xiaodi's grade was always at the bottom of his class. He got few scores on every exam, which frustrate his father. He required CJ7 to create the super-glasses that help him get full marks easily through cheating. He urgently hoped to end his suffering with the superpower of CJ7, like Doraemon. Whatever Xiaodi's requirements and others' lust, these actions imply a human's temptation and selfish intention for a new creature. Focusing on Xiaodi's behavior, what he required CJ7 does represent his intention to overturn the discrimination attached to him, that is, the poor, and achieve a respectable status even though this process needs some absurd imagination. In the early 21st century, a time of rapid economic development, economic development benefits from the sacrifice,

¹³ 楊青芝. “《長江 7 號》的感動元素.” 電影文學 6 (2008): 49-50. Web.

exploitation, and indifference of the underclass, like rural migrant workers in cities.¹⁴ In this film, CJ7 could be a positive fantasy for them to earn what they deserve and need. Faced with traumas, the monster works as a tool to express the desire for change in this film.



The climax of this film is that all the superpowers of CJ7 are only Xiaodi's illusion. CJ7 cannot create anything but only could repair broken machines and heal illnesses. Xiaodi's father died of a mistake at work, making Xiaodi devastated. CJ7 used all its energy to save



Xiaodi's father, but it became an ordinary doll because of running out of energy. The end of CJ7 discloses the reality the poor suffers under the scene of a new era of economic prosperity. It actually exposes the helplessness of the poor in the face of the disparity between the rich and the poor and the uneven distribution of social resources.

CJ7 originated from the desire to struggle with the helplessness of the bottom and the injustice of fate and die in saving cherished people around him. In the face of trauma, relying solely on the help of whimsical powers is not a reliable way, and down-to-earth efforts with the people around you are the real way to recover from that. This is the discipline of using family affection by the mainstream discourse. Even when we are in trouble, we cannot break social stability by abnormal means. The emergence of monsters is not only an abstract response to traumas but also to explore the possible ways to solve the trauma. In this film, monsters cannot simply and rudely complete the reconciliation between people and trauma, but remind us to return to ourselves, to reflect on the social system, and need the common strength of society to face the trauma.

¹⁴ 楊青芝.“《長江7號》的感動元素。”電影文學 6(2008): 49-50. Web.

Conclusion

For Adorno, the representation of unspeakable suffering is a subversive act. He says, "It is necessary to give voice to suffering, which is the condition of all truth because suffering is an objectivity that weighs heavily on the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is to be conveyed in an objective way."¹⁵ The images of monsters from the three different countries we have selected have been widely recognized and resonated on a regional scale at different times because they retell the trauma in a restrained yet subtle way. The purpose of the representation of trauma, whether it is to "mirror" trauma in a fully realistic way for reflection, or to appropriately fictionalize the truth in a non-realistic way to mitigate the cruelty of the truth, should not be to perpetuate hatred and pain, but to help society to build consensus and heal the trauma. *Host*, *Godzilla*, and *CJ7* work in the same direction of healing trauma, exposing social problems through the medium of film, and the fear brought by the monsters in the film has dissolved the hidden sufferings of people in the real world.

However, the images in films are limited, we still need to see the existential worries and developmental cages that the Japanese cannot ignore behind *Godzilla*, the powerlessness of Koreans against class solidification and Western manipulation as reflected in *Host*, and the forgotten poor people under the super-speedy development of China society under the warm representation of *CJ7*. These traumas are still something that no East Asia country can ignore. Renowned trauma theorists and therapists, Drilau and Judith Herman, both believe that trauma cannot be faced alone, and that recovery is only possible in relationship.¹⁶ Recovery from trauma should be based first and foremost on restoring the rights of survivors and building new relationships. The inter-reference mentioned by Kuan Hsing Chen in his book "Asia as a Method" may be similar to the "relationship building" in individual trauma treatment. The three monsters used in the text are rooted in their own society, but the traumas they express are closely related to modernization. The common cultural and historical backgrounds provide a natural glue for the three countries to refer to each other and solve social problems.

For example, Japan's sound social security system can inspire China, where development is unbalanced and aging is becoming increasingly visible. China's well-developed grassroots administrative organizations can help South Korea to solve the current situation of a large number of marginalized people living in disorder...Of course, inter-reference is much more than that. The significance of understanding "trauma" and studying trauma lies in the fact that trauma, as a window into the subconscious of society, may help East Asian countries to see each other better and solve the real dilemma within their own society through deep and wide inter-reference.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, NY: Continuum Press, 1987, pp. 17-18, p. 41.

¹⁶ Herman J. *Trauma and Recovery*[M]. New York: Basic, 1992

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