

Rewriting East Asian Posthumanism: Techno-Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Ghost in the Shell

Feichi Ma

*Yuanpei College, Peking University, Beijing, China
2200017484@stu.pku.edu.cn*

Abstract. Since its release in 1995, Oshii Mamoru's animated *Ghost in the Shell* has been praised as a landmark of Japanese cyberpunk, in which dense cityscapes, prosthetic bodies and questions of "what counts as life" are tightly woven together. The 2017 Hollywood remake directed by Rupert Sanders adopts the basic setting and numerous iconic images, but relocates them into a different visual, industrial and cultural regime. This article uses the two versions not to measure "fidelity" to an original, but to examine what happens when an East Asian science-fiction imaginary is translated and repackaged for a global market. Framed by debates on Orientalism and ornamentalism, the analysis asks how much of *Ghost in the Shell*'s philosophical core, rooted in specific East Asian cultural traditions, survives this process, and what this case reveals about the possibilities and limits of future cross-cultural adaptations.

Keywords: *Ghost in the Shell*, Techno-Orientalism, Cultural Translation, Ornamentalism, Posthumanism

1. Introduction

In global science-fiction circulation, research on cross-cultural adaptation has moved beyond "fidelity" debates toward structural analyses of industrial power, casting practices, and narrative rewriting, yet it still lacks mechanism-oriented close readings of how Hollywood reduces a text rich in East Asian intellectual resources into an export-friendly visual spectacle and displaces meaning through the production of "Asian surfaces." Against this backdrop, this article compares Mamoru Oshii's 1995 animated *Ghost in the Shell* with Rupert Sanders's 2017 live-action remake to examine the translation and repackaging of an East Asian science-fiction imaginary for a global market, framed by Orientalism and ornamentalism. It asks: how does the 2017 film articulate Orientalism through adaptation (including the city's neon collage and the preservation of marketable "Asian" signifiers), and how does the anime itself risk a pragmatic self-Orientalist "substitution" strategy in transnational circulation? Further, through what narrative and cultural frameworks does the film rewrite the anime's East Asia-inflected posthuman openness, grounded in techno-animist imaginaries, into an identity narrative structured by human exceptionalism? Methodologically, the study conducts a two-version comparison using close textual reading and visual analysis, guided by Orientalism and ornamentalism.

The significance lies in shifting debate beyond an isolated casting controversy to the structural logic of cross-cultural adaptation, and in proposing that meaningful future dialogue requires engaging with the techno-animist and posthuman thinking behind the franchise rather than merely appropriating its symbols and aesthetics.

2. The mechanical Geisha as spectacle

Building on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, David Morley coins techno-Orientalism in *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (1995) to name a post-Cold War representational pattern in which "the Orient" (especially East Asia) is coded through technological futurity, simultaneously hyper-modern and permanently other, familiar as a style but distant as a culture. In this sense, *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) does not merely include scattered "Asian" motifs; rather, its cityscape, signage, and geisha-coded imagery collectively organize an electronic landscape where East Asian signifiers become a coherent visual language for the future. Morley's diagnosis captures the affective work performed by such aesthetics: Through the projection of exotic (and erotic) fantasies onto this high-tech delirium, anxieties about the 'importance' of Western culture can be, momentarily, screened out. High-tech Orientalism makes possible 'cultural amnesia, ecstatic alienation, serial self-erasure [1]. When read against the film, the quotation clarifies how spectacle can "screen out" cultural anxiety by converting alterity into consumable surfaces. This also helps explain why the live-action adaptation's politics of representation came to be narrated primarily through Scarlett Johansson's casting controversy, which rapidly became the public's focal point. Yet precisely because attention clustered around casting, the opening image of the red-clad "geisha" mechanical body was comparatively sidelined. Even in limited discussions, this figure more directly exposes—at the level of visual design—how the film mobilizes Asian female symbols to generate spectacle, while reassembling an updated, high-tech version of a familiar Orientalist template.

As Donna notes in her essay *Oriental Ornaments: Yellow face and Painful Objectifications* in Sanders's *Ghost in the Shell*, the geisha's marginalization in public debate stems partly from the film's technical treatment of her form. This treatment renders the performer's body as unmistakably mechanical rather than recognizably human, meaning that viewers are never confronted with the "real flesh" beneath the yellow face prosthetics. Consequently, the visibility of yellow face, and thus the political legibility, is significantly diminished [2].

In Figure 1 from the Sanders version of *Ghost in the Shell*, the red-clad mechanical geisha stands as the most condensed embodiment of how technological body is racialized into a decorative object throughout the entire film. At her first appearance, audiences do not see a person but an exaggerated replica of a traditional geisha mask: white on the surface, with bold red patterns. This image itself evokes the "uncanny valley" effect.

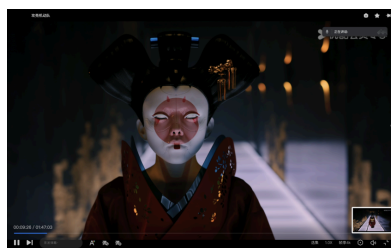


Figure 1. Author's screenshot captured from *Ghost in the Shell* (2017)

In the behind-the-scenes feature Adam Savage *Behind the Scenes of Ghost in the Shell!*, host Adam Savage interviews Richard Taylor from Weta Workshop, who details the special effects process used to create the mechanical geishas. The performer behind the red-clad mechanical geisha, Rila Fukushima, had played Yukio in *The Wolverine 2*, and her presence in this film is now regarded as a compensatory gesture within Hollywood's "whitewashing" controversy. However, in the production narrative of this film, Taylor acknowledges Fukushima "already has an extraordinary face" while emphasizing the team still needed to make her "digitally perfectly symmetrical" to match their imagined "archetypal geisha" [3]. In other words, the real Asian face is still viewed as "not good enough" and requires technological modification to become a standardized Oriental image, one that can be infinitely worn and replicated.

From this perspective, the mechanized geisha exemplifies techno-Orientalism: as David Morley observes, "The Japanese are unfeeling aliens; they are cyborgs and replicants" [1]. It also aligns with Anne Anlin Cheng's concept of "ornamentalism." The screen is filled with Asian symbols, yet Asians with genuine subjective agency are nearly absent. The mechanical geisha fits this logic precisely: she is a technologically sophisticated body, combining 3D printing, mechanical engineering, and digital post-production, while being explicitly coded as Asian. Cheng reminds that ornament has long been entangled with "the Orient" in aesthetic and intellectual history, and ornamentalism specifically describe how personhood is constructed through ornamental acts such as clothing, prosthetics, and surface details, a process especially evident in racialized female bodies [4].

The red geisha is the direct visualization of this mechanism: the face of an Asian actress is extracted, modified, and perfected into an infinitely reusable mask; her Asianness becomes a removable, replicable, borrowable surface, something that others can repeatedly put on. Notably, this character does not appear in Mamoru Oshii's animated film. In the live-action version, the mechanical geisha seems to function merely as a prompt for the protagonist's contemplation of the tension between mechanical bodies and humans; any cyborg could serve this narrative purpose. Yet the film's aesthetic exaggeration of geisha traits transforms her into a spectacle, concretely materializing the fantasy of the "yellow woman" as pure ornament: eternally beautiful, eternally usable, yet never regarded as a full subject.

Viewed this way, the technological body itself operates as a mechanism for entrenching racial fantasies. The mechanical geisha no longer prompts questions like "who counts as human"; instead, she quietly reinforces a hierarchy. Within this hierarchy, the image of the Asian woman is placed between the white protagonist and the cyberpunk world, serving as a decorative interface that can be infinitely replicated.

3. From strategic self-orientalism to aesthetic commodification

Although scholars such as Susan Napier have characterised the aesthetic style of the 1995 *Ghost in the Shell* as *mukokuseki*, a form of statelessness that deliberately blurs the boundaries of the nation-state to construct a supposedly universal cyberpunk imaginary [5]. This article argues that such *mukokuseki* is more accurately understood as a mode of self-Orientalism, insofar as it actively accommodates Western imaginaries of "the East." More intriguingly, by appropriating Hong Kong's ambiguous and chaotic urban landscape, the anime attempts to detach its narrative from a specifically Japanese context. Taiwanese cultural studies scholar Liao Yung-chao has published two essays closely on this topic. In "From Decaying City to Abundant Metropolis: On the Cultural Translation/Signification of Asian Urban Imagery in the *Ghost in the Shell* Duology", he argues that the film's reconfiguration of national symbols exposes Japan's complex geopolitical positioning between Western powers and its Asian neighbors. It also reflects the formation of Japan's postwar

"soft nationalism", an ideology referring to Japan's simultaneous resistance to U.S.-led political and economic intervention while relying on Cold War-era privileges to join Western developed nations. This fosters reluctance to be grouped with other Asian countries at a comparable developmental level. The film's urban aesthetics and cultural arrangement visually embody this contradictory national sentiment [6].

The *Ghost in the Shell* creative team deliberately converts Japanese cultural markers into Hong Kong-style streetscapes and ethnically Chinese figures; the only direct Japanese references are the Japanese names assigned to governmental institutions and bureaucratic bodies. This is easily observed by comparing animated imagery with the live-action Hong Kong footage that inspired it. (The following figure 2 illustrates this point concretely.) [7]



Figure 2. *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and Hong Kong location comparison

Hong Kong location photograph reproduced from David, "Recreating *Ghost in Hong Kong*," Randomwire, August 3, 2011, accessed December 17, 2025.

Scholars further note that Section 9, the government unit tasked with addressing new forms of cybercrime, positions Motoko Kusanagi not as the grassroots cyborg hero common in Western sci-fi, but as an agent of a technologically superior Japan quietly challenging U.S. hegemony. In contrast, the Hong Kong-derived New Port City is portrayed as a chaotic social underclass populated by petty criminals and disposable bodies, implying that these figures function only as manipulable tools for hackers and lack any autonomous agency [8].

In other words, Oshii's version protects Japanese culture identity by masking it behind a de-Japanized urban surface, thereby preventing it from becoming the direct object of an Orientalist gaze. By substituting Hong Kong imagery, the film sustains Japan's cultural subjectivity and symbolic capital in the global market, offering a covert response to Western hegemony and shaping audience perception indirectly.

Sanders's live-action adaptation, however, retains Oshii's Hong Kong-derived urban framework while reintroducing numerous readily recognizable "Japanese" visual markers, such as Japanese signage, geisha imagery, and architectural motifs. The result is a hybrid "pan-Asian" landscape, with a Hong Kong substrate overlaid with decorative Japanese elements. This hybridity does not restore Japanese identity but instead further stylizes and commodifies it as a freely deployable aesthetic resource within Hollywood production. Consequently, the film exemplifies techno-Orientalist logic:

diverse Asian cultures are collapsed into a consumable futuristic spectacle, while a white protagonist remains the narrative center. Whereas Oshii's film employed visual translation as a strategy to maintain Japanese cultural agency, the live-action version fully appropriates this self-Orientalizing image system into Hollywood's visual economy, turning "Asia" into a detachable, endlessly replicable style rather than a set of historically distinct cultures.

From this perspective, self-Orientalism can be viewed as a pragmatic strategy in transnational cultural circulation, similar to "General Tso's Chicken" in overseas Chinese restaurants: it is not an authentic East Asian dish but commercially effective. However, its risk lies in unintentionally reinforcing Western frameworks of perception and flattening internal East Asian cultural distinctions (e.g., conflating Chinese, Japanese, and Korean elements). In this sense, Oshii's substitution strategy ultimately proves unsustainable: Hollywood shows little interest in distinguishing between advanced or peripheral Asian contexts and instead treats East Asian symbols broadly as decorative components.

4. The politics of translation: how Hollywood rewrites East Asian posthumanism

In Oshii Mamoru's 1995 *Ghost in the Shell*, the central question is: once the body and memory become fully technologized, what qualifies as "life"? The film draws on Ryle's and Koestler's concept of the "ghost in the machine" to ask how subjectivity might persist in a world where both the brain and society are saturated with code [9]. Oshii's film does not treat technology as the enemy of the mind but rather as a medium of possible transcendence, while the biological body recedes into a ghostly residue within the technological landscape. In the anime, the Puppet Master demands recognition as a living being and seeks union with Motoko, pushing this logic toward a radical posthuman conclusion: the film acknowledges that a "ghost" can emerge from information itself and ends with a new subject no longer coinciding with a single human individual. This is why Daliot-Bul argues that the Japanese *Ghost in the Shell* advances ontological inquiry "to new frontiers of posthumanism." [10]

In contrast, the 2017 live-action adaptation recentralizes the narrative by curbing the openness described above: the main plot retreats to the protagonist's search for her true origins, recovery of memory, and restoration of a coherent self-identity. Daliot-Bul's assessment is crucial here: whereas Oshii's version gestures toward a subsequent stage of subjective metamorphosis, Sanders's film functions more as an elegy for something lost—Kusanagi clings to the remnants of a prior self (memory, autobiography, and a small amount of organic tissue) and refuses to step into the next stage of human evolution [10]. This narrative closure is not simply a matter of being "shallower" or "deeper"; rather, it reflects an adaptation strategy: once the work enters a Hollywood-led global genre-production apparatus, the open posthuman subject gives way to personal trauma and identity-recovery arcs that are more readily legible to mainstream audiences.

Some scholars argue that this openness is closely tied to specific cultural contexts. Concepts such as *kami* and *inochi*, transformed through Shinto and Buddhism, enable Japanese popular culture to imagine robots, prosthetic bodies, and AI as beings endowed with life or spirituality. In contrast, American science fiction more often favours a classical anthropocentric stance [11]. This claim has its merits. Certain cross-cultural studies elaborate on this point: for example, in *Cross-Cultural Differences in Comfort with Humanlike Robots*, researchers conducted a social survey on Japanese and American respondents' acceptance of humanoid robots. Results indicate that Japanese participants were more likely to understand robots as entities possessing mind/life, whereas American participants, under conditions of high human likeness, more readily experienced discomfort or rejection [12]. Such findings do not denote an essential difference in "national

mentality," but they can serve as ancillary evidence for thinking about narrative legibility: why an attitude of coexistence between technology and life can be naturalised in some contexts, yet is more readily read as transgression and taboo in others. From this perspective, Hollywood's decision to revise the ending for a global market may also be shaped by considerations of audience acceptance.

Within Japanese culture itself there are also intense technophobic and disaster-driven narratives. Similarly, Anglophone science fiction is by no means lacking in radical posthuman imaginaries. The differences between the two versions can also be explained through industrial factors such as genre positioning, audience expectations, and the management of capital risk. This study does not seek to reduce the divergence to a single cultural essence. The anime's choice is not an exclusive product of Japanese culture, yet it is undeniable that Hollywood's adaptation decorativises and displaces Asia in a way that compresses the original's conceptual architecture.

5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion of Orientalism extends beyond decorative "Asian" elements to a deeper problem. When Hollywood chooses to turn Asia into ornament through Orientalist mechanisms, cross-cultural adaptation can produce a structural effect in which surface signs crowd out underlying ideas. From this perspective, industrial power, casting practices, and narrative rewriting may become mutually entangled, compressing a text rich in intellectual resources into an export-ready visual spectacle. Similar dynamics are evident in commercially successful games and films such as *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Doctor Strange*: Asia is tasked with supplying futurity and exoticism, while value judgments and narrative agency ultimately revert to Western subjects.

Accordingly, this article argues that meaningful cross-cultural dialogue in the future should depend less on appropriating the neon-saturated visual surface of *Ghost in the Shell* and more on engaging with the posthuman thinking that underwrites it. Only then can East Asian creators and audiences cease to function merely as suppliers of stylised visual motifs and instead participate, as equal intellectual agents, in defining what counts as life, who counts as a subject, and to whom the future of global science fiction belongs.

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