**Hide-and-seek:**

**Hidden Elements from Asian Folklore in**

**Children’s Literature**

**And**

**Popular Culture**

**By**

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Many of us might not recognise the wide use of elements from Asian folklore in Children’s Literature and contemporary popular culture.

For example, one of the most interesting ideas in the Harry Potter books, apart from Quidditch, must be the Horcrux.

**The Horcrux**

JK Rowling invented the word (horcrux first made an appearance in the 5th book - Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix) but the concept is ancient; hiding in plain sight in Asian folklore and fairy tales.

* The concept of a horcrux originated from the East. In fact, almost all the 'deathless' villains have horcruxes - the secret of their invincibility. There are a few references in the *1001 Nights/Arabian Nights*. In *Folktales from India*, by AK Ramanujan, there is a story from Kashmir called The Ogress Queen. A shapeshifting*rakshashi* took the form of a beautiful woman and married a king. The rakshashi successfully managed to get rid of the king's seven other wives by framing them as blood thirsty rakshashis. Their fate was grim - they were thrown into a salt mine. Fortunately, the son of the youngest wife survived and tried to kill the rakshashi but to no avail. Finally he found out that her soul was hidden in a bird (a starling) which is kept in a cage hidden deep in the forest...

**Example 1: Swan Lake**

The prince witnesses a group of swans transform into young maidens as night falls on a lonely lake. He falls in love with the most beautiful of them all, Odette, the Swan Queen. Odette tells him, her story: she and all the other maidens are under the thrall of a sorcerer named Von Rothbart. They are cursed to spend the day in the form of swans, only changing into maidens after nightfall. Siegfried and Odette dance the night away until sunrise... The sorcerer appears on the scene and summons Odette to him. Odette is compelled to obey and changes into a swan as do all the other maidens... Odette manages to tell Siegfried that the only way to break the spell is to declare his love for her...

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At his coming-of-age ball, Siegfried sees Von Rothbart with someone who is the spitting image of Odette - she is the Black Swan, Odile. They dance and Siegfried declares his love for her. But he sees the real Odette running away, realises that he made a terrible mistake and pursues her. But it is too late for him to break the curse. Odette forgives him but she can no longer live as a slave of Von Rothbart and decides to take her own life. In some versions of the story, she is killed accidentally. Her death not only frees her from the spell but destroys Von Rothbart. His death in turn breaks the spell on all the other maidens.

Why does Odette's death kill Von Rothbart? If you've read the Harry Potter books you will probably realise that Odette must be a horcrux for Von Rothbart, just as Harry Potter was for Lord Voldemort. Is Voldemort based on Von Rothbart?

**Example 2: The Frog Princess.**

This is not the Disney version but the original Russian folktale, *Tsarevna Lyagushka*.

In this story, Princess Vassilisa enjoys a perfectly beautiful Spring day when a powerful wind swept her away into a strange garden where she is confronted by a sorcerer called Kaschey the Deathless. Kaschey offers her all the wealth in the world and asks for her hand in marriage but Vassilisa laughs at him and calls him old and ugly. Kaschey summons his enchanted mirror and forces Vassilisa to look into it and she turns into an ugly frog. The only way to break the spell is for a someone to fall in love with her. Vassilisa is condemned to live in the swamp...

Prince Ivan's arrow lands in the swamp and the frog princess finds it. To keep his promise to his father, Prince Ivan must marry the frog. Even after the marriage, he never sees Vassilisa in human form, because he falls asleep the moment Vassilisa transforms into a woman at nightfall.

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When he finally sees Vassilisa as a woman, at a Royal ball, he falls in love with her but makes the mistake of burning her frog skin... Vassilisa is swept away by Kaschey again.

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Kaschey is even more diabolical than Von Rothbart. In the story, Ivan is told that Kaschey's life is 'at the point of a needle which is inside an egg, which is inside a duck, which is inside a hare which is inside a stone box located on top of an ancient oak tree." The only way to kill Kaschey is to break the tip of this needle...

Are there more fairy tales with horcruxes?

**Example 3: Snow White.**

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It is quite possible that the magic mirror in Snow White is a Horcrux. The mirror probably contained a fragment of the Queen’s soul. Did the queen know this? Most probably not, otherwise she would never have destroyed the mirror and herself in the process. It must have been created unintentionally, probably when she spent so much time looking into this cursed mirror, and talking to it. Mirrors used to be very rare in the past, and there are many superstitions associated with it, particularly the belief that one’s soul can be trapped in a mirror.

**Part 2: Mythical Creatures**

**Dragons:**

**Western Dragons:** Fierce and destructive fire breathing creatures known for their huge appetites and their obsession for gold and precious gems (according to Tolkien)

**Asian Dragons**: The Dragon of the East is a symbol of auspicious power and success.

These legendary creatures are associated with fluid energy. Dragons were thought to influence weather and moving bodies of water. In old China, the Dragon, known as Lung,was a symbol of Imperial power and the emblem of the Emperor. The Imperial Throne was known as the Dragon Throne.

East Asian Dragons are further sub-divided by their country of origin-

Chinese Dragons – five clawed

Korean Dragons – four clawed

Japanese Dragons – three clawed

The Dragon is also one of the celestial guardians of the four meridians. They are: Azure Dragon of the East, Vermilion Bird of the South, White Tiger of the West and Black Tortoise of the North. They are also associated with the four elements: Wind (Dragon), Fire (Phoenix), Water (Tiger) and Earth (Tortoise).

How about the rest of Asia? Southeast Asia and South Asia seems to lack the dragons which are so pervasive in East Asian Folklore. I believe the Naga takes the place of the dragon in this part of the world.

**The Naga** - In South Asia and Southeast Asia, the Dragon is known as the Naga. The supreme Naga is Anantha-Sesha, the symbol of time and eternity, and brother to Manasha, goddess of snakes and fertility.

There are four types of Naga:the Heavenly Nagaguards the celestial palaces; the Divine Nagabrings rain to the earth; the Earthly Naga guards the mineral resources under the earth, and the Hidden Naga,is the naga spirit.

**Example: Harry Potter**

Female nagaare called Naginiand can shape-shift into beautiful women who seduce men into the watery depths.

In the Harry Potter books, Lord Voldemort's familiar and most important Horcrux is a Nagini.

Nagasare fierce enemies of the Garuda,a race of bird-men. They make an appearance in popular culture, in the series, *Lost Girl.*

**Example: *Lost Girl***

In the second season of Lost Girl, Lachlanthe Ash (king of the Fae) turns out to be a Naga.The Fae world is divided into Light Fae and Dark Fae, two factions who are constantly battling for dominance. It eventually emerges that the Ash is a Light Fae, despite his manipulative and ruthless nature. Not surprisingly, he had to battle the Garuda, an extremely powerful Dark Fae. As the battle with the Garuda draws closer, Lachlan must convince Bo (the protagonist) to help him against this formidable foe. Although the Garuda actually kills Lachlan in their final battle, Bo and her allies manage to kill the Garuda with the venom obtained from Lachlan, in his Naga incarnation.

Research: *Eight Treasures of the Dragon*

There is a hidden dragon in the tale of Sang Nila Utama. According to folklore, the Dragon King of the Sea gave a jewel to Raja Suran, the founder of Sri Vijaya. As Sri Vijaya was a Thalassocracy, this gift symbolically gave Sri Vijaya the right to rule the seas. When Sri Vijaya was attacked by Majapahit, Sang Nila Utama took the jewel and escaped with it to Bintan. On the way to Temasik, his ships were hit by a huge storm and were in danger of sinking. Sang Nila Utama had to return the Jewel of Sri Vijaya to the Sea King in order to save his ship and the lives of the people on board. The significance here is that, Sri Vijaya lost the right to rule the seas, after it’s defeat by Majapahit.

**The Phoenix**

**There are two types of phoenix:**

**The Firebird.**

A magnificent bird with feathers of vermilion and gold. It is a creature of fire and is sometimes depicted surrounded in an aura of flames. The Phoenix is the emblem of ancient Lebanon which used to be called Phoenicia. Its people were the Phoenicians, the people of the Phoenix.

According to legend, a Phoenix will build itself a nest of cinnamon twigs when its life is about to end. The dying Phoenix will rest in the middle of the nest and ignite it; both the nest and bird will burn into ashes. Then the ashes will burst into flame again and a new Phoenix will be reborn from its ashes!

The Firebird represents the element of fire and symbolises immortality. It is an important part of Russian and Central Asian folklore.

**The Chinese Phoenix/Feng Huang**

The Chinese Phoenix is more likely to be surrounded by verdant plants and flowers. This fabulous bird is called Feng Huang in China; is the second most important legendary animal, after the Dragon. It is also one of the four Celestial Guardians in East Asian culture and is known as the Vermilion Bird of the South. Feng Huang is a symbol of renewal and rebirth.

In ancient South-East Asia and India, two races of bird-like creatures were said to exist; they are the gentle Kinaree and the fierce Garuda. A similar bird-human hybrid called the Tengu exists in Japanese folklore. The Garuda and the Tengu are bitter enemies of the Naga and the Dragon as they feed on serpents.

**Example: Phoenix Song/Lagu Cenderawasih**

Arohan is desperate for a guitar. So when Arohan’s grandmother gives him an old bamboo flute for his birthday, he is upset. But the *xiao* is no ordinary flute. An instrument steeped in the myths and legends of China, the *xiao* has its own special magic, as Arohan is soon to discover. When his brothers go missing on the slopes of the hill behind their home in Malaysia, Arohan must ensure they return safe and sound. But does he have what it takes to placate the guardian of the bamboo grove and summon the mythical phoenix?

**Fox Spirits**

Another very popular creature in contemporary fantasy is the Fox Spirit. The The Fox Spirits encountered in folklore are usually females and appear as young, beautiful women. They are perceived as deceptive at best and dangerous at worst. Fox Spirit is pervasive in East Asia and go by different names, according to their country of origin: Kitsune, Kumiho and Huli Jing. They are unknown in Southeast Asia and South Asia.

**Kitsune**

The Fox Spirit is known as Kitsune in Japan. In Japanese folklore, Kitsune is usually female; although he most famous Fox Demon in popular culture is a boy, Naruto. Kitsune can be benevolent or malevolent. According to legend, the older the Kitsune, the more tails it acquires and when it reaches the age of 1,000 years, it becomes a nine-tailed fox demon.

The Kitsune also made an appearance in the popular TV series, Grimm, during its 5th season.

**Kumiho**

In Korea, the Fox Spirit is known as the Kumiho and it is almost always female and always malevolent. The Kumiho has an insatiable appetite for flesh and blood. It is also a shapeshifter and can take the form of its victim.

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**Huli Jing**

The Huli Jing in Chinese culture can be either male or female. They are usually depicted in folklore as witty, elegant and fond of wine. Among the Chinese community in Malaysia, Huli Jing has come to refer to women who steal the husbands of other women.