A Supernatural Sisterhood: Feminist Temporality and the Negotiation of Gender Identity and Agency in Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister*

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Abstract

Using Elizabeth Grosz's theory of feminist temporality and Steven Hitlin and Glen Elder's theory of temporal agency, this article examines three female characters' identity transformation and agentic efforts to move from the patriarchal past to the feminist and/or queer future in Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister* (2021). Across generations, three Malaysian Chinese female characters—one millennial diasporic girl, a local ghost, and a local goddess—navigate diverse agentic strategies to negotiate their gender identities; these strategies are expressed through their engagement with Confucian patriarchal norms, including compliance and resistance, at different temporalities. Despite contextual and temporal differences, all three characters form a supernatural sisterhood based on their shared struggles in a patriarchal heteronormative world. Through this sisterhood, the characters are not only empowered to resist Confucian patriarchy and history but also discover feminist solidarity and strength. This article also considers women's struggles with the past and future: the ghost and goddess cannot forget their traumatic past or leave the human world and find peace in the afterlife, while the millennial girl reflects on the past and embraces her queer future. This dynamic temporality ultimately illuminates a path towards a feminist and/or queer future that also involves memory and forgetting.

Keywords: temporality, queer future, feminist future, sisterhood, agency, gender identity

Introduction

Malaysian Chinese communities were historically rooted in Confucianism, a patriarchal social system characterised by rigid gender roles, which were passed down from one generation to the next through "the family and little traditions and formal teaching" (Philip 80). Confucian education shaped many Malaysian Chinese women's gender perceptions in relation to marriage, family responsibilities, and sexuality—specifically those raised in traditional

families that supported a gender binary in which the father possessed the most authority while the mother was subordinated—but had a relatively lower impact on women raised in westernised families that encouraged them to "broaden the scopes of action for women" (Thimm 70). Compared to westernised women, traditional Malaysian Chinese women were expected to be the submissive mother and wife with "no place or voice" (Chin, "Self-Censorship" 23) within the family order. This cultural bias also limited many Malaysian Chinese women's participation in the labour market and devalued their "potential roles in economic development for a patriarchal society like Malaysia" (Rokis 138), as they were mostly expected to manage household affairs and care for children. Consequently, these stereotypes of women's roles shaped a sexual division of labour that impeded many Malaysian Chinese women from achieving gender equality, both inside and outside the domestic sphere in history.

However, from the 1920s onwards, many Malaysian Chinese experienced dramatic shifts in gender identity due to social transformations in Malaysia, including the proliferation of "girls' schools" (Teoh 30) throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the "increased labour market participation of women" (Kaur 221) from the 1930s, the emergence of women's organisations advocating for "the betterment of women" (Lai 59) from the 1950s to 1970s, women's organisations' efforts on "violence against women" (Ariffin 420) in the 1970s and 1980s, and women's participation in politics in the 1990s. Apart from these local feminist movements, Western and transnational feminisms have also influenced Malaysian Chinese women's identities in the millennium, as they experience social and economic mobility by moving across "national borders" (Roces 2) for employment, education, and immigration. The negotiation and communication between transnational and local Malaysian Chinese women have led to the emergence of indigenous feminism that embraces both the "universalism of female rights and the particularism of cultural and religious practices" (Bong 42) in tackling the gender issues of

inequality, discrimination, and exploitation in the domestic, occupational, and sexual spheres. Evidently, the evolution of Malaysian Chinese feminism depends on women's continuous efforts to create, modify, and interpret their gender identities in response to the flux, shifts, and transitions of different temporal epochs.

Significantly, the articulations of Malaysian Chinese women's gendered history and experiences—including their negotiations with identity and agency as well as resistance against the phallocentric legacies of Confucian, local, and colonial discourses—can be found in Malaysian Chinese supernatural fiction in English, which is a part of local and transnational Malaysian literary output in the current millennium that taps into "the popular trends of pulp and speculative fiction, fantasy, horror, supernatural, noir, and crime" (Chin and Quayum 586). As a vital part of Malaysian Literature in English, the speculative fiction works authored by Malaysian Chinese women feature female-centric narratives that rewrite, reinterpret, or remediate women's identity, role, and place through alternative timelines or societies; they include Julya Oui's *Taiping Tales of Terror* (2014), which depicts sexual violence and transphobia in various timelines, as well as Cassandra Khaw's "Some Breakable Things" (2016) and Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* (2013), which respectively explore how the past is influenced by domestic violence and arranged marriage.

Then, there are Zen Cho's works, including three novellas, *The Perilous Life of Jade Yeo* (2012), *The Terracotta Bride* (2016), and *The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected in Water* (2021). She has also authored a collection of short stories, *Spirits Abroad* (2021), and four novels, namely *Sorcerer to The Crown* (2015), *The True Queen* (2019), *Black Water Sister* (2021), and *The Friend Zone Experiment* (2024). *Black Water Sister* (*BWS*) is a particularly important work as it explores difference and heterogeneity among local and transnational Malaysian Chinese women across three generations in relation to their sexual viewpoints,

agentic actions, future goals, and gendered experiences in a supernatural context, as well as involving the imagination of a feminist and/or queer future.

Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz's theory of feminist temporality and Steven Hitlin and Glen Elder's theory of temporal agency, this article examines how three female characters exercise agency to move from the patriarchal past to a feminist and/or queer future in *Black Water Sister*. This temporal movement is critically dependent on the characters' reflections on their traumatic experiences and memories. Their reflections not only prevent a return to and repetition of their past, which is a barrier to individual development and transformation, but can also enable them to "make new and meaningful beginnings" (Kohn xiii) beyond historical constraints. *In BWS*, the characters' engagement with the past is manifested through their agentic behaviour, including resistant and non-resistant actions that express their individual desires and feminist goals across time and generations. By discussing the characters' distinctive desires, this article can illuminate Malaysian Chinese women's identity transformations that reflect past struggles as well as feminist aspirations towards a better future.

The discussion of gender and the feminist future is important, as this topic has received scant academic attention in the field of anglophone Malaysian supernatural fiction. The few existing studies on gender predominantly focus on Confucian patriarchal history and present; they include the analysis of tensions between Confucian women's duties and personal desires (Satkunananthan 43), male supremacy (Ng, *Interrogating Interstices* 168), and the absence of female agency (Ng, "Malaysian Gothic" 86). Other scholars have also discussed complex temporality in anglophone Malaysian Chinese supernatural fiction, such as reflections on the traumatic past (Wisker 212), the depiction of liminal time (Masson 69), and women's sacrifice and past secrets hidden behind death (Satkunananthan 48). Notably, two important articles have examined the concept of "future" in Zen Cho's works: Malaysia's post-postcolonial future,

where the "self and other are reconceived as different yet equal" (Chin, "Interracial Relations" 647) in *Spirits Abroad*, and a queer future that highlights "a fuller range of gender potentiality" (Chin, "Queering History" 16) in *The Order of the Pure Moon Reflected in Water*. However, these previous studies seldom connect female agency with temporality or examine how women's desires and agency affect their gender identities and feminist future at different temporalities.

Addressing this research gap, our study contends that temporality plays a critical role in rethinking women's identities and agency in supernatural fiction, as the power of futurity enables us to reconceive alterities to women's identities and what they can be. As our analysis will show, Malaysian Chinese female characters across the three generations in *BWS* may be constrained by the past, but they also work towards a possible feminist future through different agentic strategies. In the course of our analysis, we also demonstrate how the three female characters resist and subvert existing sexual structures and gender perspectives according to their unique desires and experiences. Our analysis of the difference and heterogeneity in characters' experiences and goals is enhanced by the employment of Grosz's feminist future, which will help highlight sexual difference in the field of anglophone Malaysian Chinese supernatural fiction. More significantly, our discussion transcends the dominant scholarly focus on the oppressed past and present of women by illuminating the path towards the characters' feminist and/or queer future, which also involves memory and forgetting.

Theorising Feminist Temporality and Agency

This article employs Elizabeth Grosz's theory of feminist temporality and Steven Hitlin and Glen Elder's theory of temporal agency to analyse the representations of female agency and temporality in BWS. Grosz's theory of feminist temporality is discussed in two works: *The Nick of Time* (2004) and *Time Travels* (2005). Central to both works is the concept of the

feminist future, which refers to the objective of feminist movements in relation to "sexual difference" (Grosz, *Time Travels* 171). Grosz uses the concept of sexual difference to oppose gender binarism in the patriarchal world, where women are commonly portrayed as the "supplement of men" (*Time Travels* 174), such as wives, mothers, and daughters. The patriarchal discourse's neglect of women's unique experiences and real identities has led to the assertion that the recognition of "sexual difference has yet to take place" (174) and can only be achieved in the feminist future.

To realise sexual difference in the feminist future, women should be empowered with the position of knower who can make a "revolution in thought" (165). Their revolutions include two forms: one refers to traditional feminist movements that seek gender equality within the existing patriarchal structure, and the other means "a proliferation of alternative and different discourses" (175) that transcend patriarchal discourse. In either movement, the foundation of making a feminist revolution is the awareness of the past and present "oppression of women" (162), as the deep understanding of women's experiences is crucial for avoiding the repetition of past trauma and for developing a future beyond patriarchal histories. However, if women are incapable of "letting go of memory" (*Nick of Time* 116), they cannot think or see the future. Thus, maintaining a "balance between cultivated memory and a privileged forgetfulness" (116) is essential in moving from a traumatic past to a feminist future. In this process of developing a feminist future, women's patriarchal past and present "coexist" (*Time Travels* 228), which enables them to "digest history" (*Nick of Time* 118), reflect on and learn from the past, overcome present obstacles, and move towards the feminist future.

Additionally, the future is characterised by "the openness of becoming" (*Nick of Time* 184), which implies the difference and unpredictability of the feminist future. These differences in the feminist future result from the unique needs of women from various "socially

subordinated groups" (*Time Travels* 183), including queer and other sexual, racial, and ethnic minorities. As such, Grosz's arguments on sexual difference and feminist future are deemed critical to "post-queer considerations" (*Ruffolo* 387).

While Grosz emphasises women's capacity to exert "agency" (*Time Travels* 72) in the process of creating a future different from their patriarchal past and present, her theory does not explain individuals' different agentic strategies across various temporalities. Therefore, Hitlin and Elder's theory of temporal agency is brought in to improve our theoretical framework.

Building on Emirbayer and Mische's understanding of agency as "temporal-relational contexts of action" (970) and Flaherty's perspective of temporal agency as a fundamental aspect of "social action" (18), Hitlin and Elder propose four types of temporal agency in "Time, Self, and the Curiously Abstract Concept of Agency" (2007). The first form of agency is existential agency, which refers to the universal human capacity for taking autonomous action and having free will that spans "all temporal horizons" (176). The second type of agency, termed pragmatic agency, means the ability to innovate, resist, and make choices when routines are interrupted at "knife's edge" (176) moments by concentrating on external surroundings. Notably, the knife edge moment draws from Mead's concept of the "instantaneous" (190) present.

The third form of agency, termed identity agency, represents "the habitual patterning of social behaviour" (Hitlin and Elder 179), including role enactment and identity performance. By adhering to "social expectations" (181), individuals can self-identify as agents in society and receive positive "external feedback" (180). Finally, the fourth form of agency is life course agency, which involves actions with long-term influence and the ability to make "long-term plans" (182) within one's life trajectory.

Grosz's theory of feminist temporality and Hitlin and Elder's theory of temporal agency provide an invaluable theoretical framework for our analysis of *BWS*, a novel that describes a Malaysian Chinese community deeply influenced by Confucian patriarchal discourse, including the tradition of filial piety and gender norms. Grosz's theory critically supports the representation of temporality, feminist struggles, and future in *BWS*. Her contention about the inability to forget the past enables our discussion of why the goddess and the female ghost cannot find peace after death. Furthermore, her arguments on the revolution in thoughts and digesting history enrich our understanding of how the millennial girl develops her feminist and queer future. More importantly, the novel describes different feminist movements: the ghost and the goddess resist patriarchal violence, while the millennial girl challenges the Chinese tradition of filial piety and pursues a feminist and queer future that respects sexual difference. By using Grosz's idea of sexual difference to explain the diversity of feminist struggles and the feminist and queer future in BWS, we extend the focus on the power differentials between men and women in relation to new ways of thinking about desire, power, and innovative practices in response to shifting gender identities over the past century and the millennium.

Hitlin and Elder's theory is complementarily used to analyse the agentic actions of the female characters. The concept of existential agency highlights the capacity of female characters to take autonomous action at any time. Identity agency is employed to demonstrate how female characters adhere to the Confucian patriarchal norms and filial piety to achieve normative identities in Malaysian Chinese communities, whereas pragmatic agency enables us to analyse female characters' resistance at critical moments. Life course agency facilitates the analysis of the millennial girl's life plans in relation to her revolution in the supernatural sisterhood and patriarchal structure in Malaysian Chinese communities. Notably, Hitlin and Elder's theory has been applied in two studies on gender: Broomhall discusses Asian women's "agency" (6) within Confucian patriarchy, and Burke analyses women's agency in gender-

traditional religions, including resistance and compliance (3-4). These studies highlight the potential of Hitlin and Elder's theory in discussing the different agentic strategies of the female characters who negotiate with Confucian patriarchal discourse and history in BWS.

Evolving Gender Identities of Malaysian Chinese Women within Confucian Patriarchal Discourse

This section provides the background to the changes in Malaysian Chinese women's gender identities and roles in relation to Confucian patriarchal discourse. Confucianism has shaped Chinese societies and influenced diasporic Chinese communities for a long time, such as Malaysian Chinese communities. Conventionally perceived as a male-dominated ideology, Confucianism significantly affects the gendered perspectives of many Malaysian Chinese women, particularly those raised in traditional families that support Confucian gender values, roles, and filial piety.

From the 1850s to 1930s, many Malaysian Chinese women were moulded into rigid Confucian gender roles as respectable housewives who followed the ideal feminine virtues of "industriousness, patience, and artistic skill" (Cheah 78). Despite these gender constraints and their subjection to the Confucian order, the women could rise in status and authority as they were elevated from wife to "mother-in-law and grandmother" (Khoo 123) within the family system. After their husbands' deaths, the women further empowered themselves through "the position of matriarch" (123) by controlling the younger women in their families, including their daughters and daughters-in-law. This hierarchical system of women oppressing other women capitalises on filial piety that emphasises parental authority and children's obedience and deference to elders.

However, from the 1930s onwards, their identities changed rapidly, as they gained access to increased professional opportunities in the public sphere. Due to transformations in

the "structure of Malaysian Chinese entrepreneurship" (Chin et al. 345) and the developing "education level" (345) for women in the 1930s and 1940s, increased numbers of Malaysian Chinese women, even those from traditional families, left the domestic space to seek jobs in unskilled areas that include "tin mining, plantation and agricultural labour, domestic service, and construction" (Lee 323). From the 1950s to the 1960s, women's organisations established and worked for the "welfare and advancement of women" (Lai 59), such as equal pay, paid maternity leave, and reducing discrimination against married women. In the 1970s, women further benefitted from the New Economic Policy and obtained relatively equitable payments and opportunities in "professional, technical, administrative, and managerial work" (Stivens 22). Women's heightened economic status also empowered them with greater autonomy over their "fertility outcome" (Chin et al. 347), leading to them having fewer children in the 1980s; this marked a departure from the Confucian belief that women were responsible for the family's "continuation of the lineage" (347). In the 1990s, women's organisations turned their attention to "violence against women" (Ariffin 420) and advocated for amendments to relative laws, which was achieved by the passage of the Domestic Violence Act in 1995.

Despite the above evolution in women's jobs and status, few Malaysian Chinese women "held office in the male-dominated unions" (Crinis 53) and industries before 2000. In the millennium, many Malaysian Chinese women have been empowered to choose or mediate between career and family; for example, those with a tertiary education can choose to actively participate in the workforce, while others temporarily "quit [their] full-time jobs for child-bearing" (Chin et al. 349) but then go back to their professional fields. Evidently, contemporary Malaysian Chinese women have cultivated the "self-consciousness, autonomy, and sense of gender equality" (349), which motivates them to pursue professional jobs as teachers, lawyers, and entrepreneurs. Armed with economic independence and professional status, they have also increased women's representation as leaders in "management and administrative jobs" (Omar

105) in various fields, including banking, health care, education, and public sectors, which helped break stereotypes and barriers in these same male-dominated spheres.

Although these gender shifts have greatly impacted many Malaysian Chinese women's traditional and domestic roles, notably seen in their rising status in the workforce and increasing influence within the family, they have still had to contend with and overcome patriarchal constraints and barriers throughout the decades. Women were expected to conform to Confucian gender roles of wife and mother as well as safeguard their feminine propriety and morality in the family and society from the 1930s to 1960s; for instance, women had to be careful with their behaviour and appearance due to being scrutinised by "families, teachers, and the general public" (Teoh 93). Women were further taught to obey their husbands by not exposing their beauty in public in the 1970s and 1980s, as their beauty was considered as a sign of seduction and the cause of "rapist/perpetrator's action" (Ariffin 419). Even in the 1990s, many Malaysian Chinese women maintained their roles as "preservers of traditions" (Thimm 76), as a large number of working women felt responsible for looking after and caring for their children and elderly; furthermore, women from conservative families still conformed to their subordinate roles and perceived men as the "patriarchs" (Chin et al. 346). Interestingly, the cultural subordination of Malaysian Chinese women also extends to the supernatural realm, where men traditionally hold authority over temples and rituals, while women are restricted from entering the temples or practising certain forms of prayer during their menstruation due to perceived "impurity" (Ramli et al. 417), even in contemporary Malaysia.

Apart from gender, sexual diversity has become a significant focus among Malaysian Chinese individuals who come out as lesbian or gay, despite this action sometimes meaning "leaving the family, parents, and culture" (Chou 259); such coming-out acts also conflict with Confucian injunctions of filial piety that demand the fulfilment of "parental expectation" (96)

and the avoidance of shaming one's family. By embracing a queer identity, Malaysian Chinese women are also unable to fulfil the traditional "duty to reproduce" (25). As a result, it has been difficult for Malaysian Chinese lesbians to reveal their sexual orientation or obtain acceptance from family members who adhere to heteronormativity and filial piety.

The above discussion highlights the evolving gender identities and roles of Malaysian Chinese women over time, which reflect enduring conflicts and negotiations between individual desires and Confucian patriarchal discourse, including gender roles and filial piety. These changes related to women's gender identities are explored in *BWS* through the three female characters: Black Water Sister, who symbolises the traditional woman of the 1920s; Ah Ma, who epitomises the women in the transitional period from the 1950s to the millennium; and Jess, who embodies the millennial lesbian. We now turn to the analysis of these three characters and their negotiations with Confucian patriarchal discourse across different temporalities.

A Ghostly Sisterhood: Resisting Confucian Patriarchy and History

In *BWS*, Zen Cho narrates the journey of Jess, a nineteen-year-old millennial diasporic Malaysian Chinese girl who returns to Malaysia from America. Following her return, Jess becomes involved in her family business and is compelled to become a spirit medium of Ah Ma and Black Water Sister. Ah Ma, who was born in the 1950s and dies in the new millennium, is Jess's grandmother and the previous spirit medium of Black Water Sister. Black Water Sister is killed by her husband at the age of twenty in the 1920s; she later becomes a special goddess, positioned between the high gods like Kuan Kong, and Ah Ma's ghost. The three characters, including Black Water Sister, Ah Ma, and Jess, work together to protect the temple of Black Water Sister from demolition in a land development plan proposed by Ng Chee Hin, the "fifth richest man in Malaysia" (Cho 41). When protecting the goddess' temple, the three women

exercise different agentic strategies to negotiate their positions in a patriarchal Malaysian Chinese community, which range from compliance to resistance in relation to traditional gender roles and filial piety. Based on their agentic actions, this section analyses Black Water Sister's and Ah Ma's distinct experiences and desires across generations, and their refusal or inability to let go of their traumatic past and memories. It also discusses the formation of their supernatural sisterhood and feminist solidarity. The following section will focus on Jess in comparison to Black Water Sister and Ah Ma, in particular her involvement in the sisterhood and path towards a feminist and queer future.

Through descriptions of female resistance and negotiation, *BWS* reveals Black Water Sister and Ah Ma's shared oppressed past and traumatic experience of gender bias and violence at the hands of their abusive husbands. While alive, Black Water Sister and Ah Ma are confined to the domestic space and "mundane tasks" (6), mainly household chores like washing, cooking, and caring for babies. Through these gender practices, these two characters exert identity agency to comply with the common and traditional image of submissive housewives in conventional Malaysian Chinese communities in the 1920s and 1970s. However, their conformity and contribution to the family are not appreciated or recognised; instead, their husbands resort to domestic violence to reinforce women's subordinate status and solidify male authority within the family. This common female experience of male abuse and aggression reflects a period when many Malaysian Chinese women were strictly regulated by Confucian gender rules and had little agency or power to resist male authority and power. As the violence reaches an intolerable level, Black Water Sister and Ah Ma begin to change based on their distinct experiences in their respective timelines of the 1920s and 1970s: Black Water Sister, who tragically dies at her abusive husband's hands, transforms into a hungry ghost after her death, while Ah Ma changes into the family breadwinner as Ah Kong, her husband, "was not

responsible" (117) and always "drunk" (278). Notably, the characters' changes reveal not just the fluidity of gender identity, but also women's potential for change and transformation.

Black Water Sister's traumatic experiences with patriarchal violence compel her supernatural transformation and empowerment after death, but her great hatred of her husband also reduces her to a hungry ghost with a dark desire to "poison healthy minds [and] blight lives" (347) of other violent men. While her act of killing male abusers can be read as a form of existential agency that enables her to resist patriarchal violence after death, it is nonetheless disturbing as she resorts to the same violence that killed her. Nonetheless, killing is also a compensatory mechanism that enables her to temporarily break free from the shackles of the past, including her painful memories. By killing these violent men, she also assists many helpless Chinese wives, such as Ah Ma, in improving their lives and family status. Ironically, her murderous act invokes both the "fear and belief of the living" (347) in the women whose lives she saved; this belief eventually transforms her from a hungry ghost into a goddess who is worshipped by humans, with her own temple. Notably, her path to becoming a goddess comes about entirely because of her assistance to other women, as well as the long-term prayers of other people to "avert [her] vengeance" (346). Thus, she became a goddess without the support of other "high gods" (256) like Kuan Kong, the Monkey God, or the Jade Emperor. This development contrasts sharply with the normal patriarchal routes of advancement in Chinese religion that are centred on the strength and decision of the supreme male deity, such as "getting promoted by the Jade Emperor" (346). Black Water Sister's identity transformation thus represents a revolution in thought that reflects a unique path for women to attain divinity through their resistance against patriarchal violence and by finding mutual support among women.

As for Ah Ma's transformation into the family's breadwinner, it undoubtedly aligns with broader historical development in the Malaysian Chinese community from the 1950s to 1970s, when women obtained more autonomy and economic status by seeking professional opportunities outside the domestic space. The gains in women's rights and their attendant empowerment, including acts of agency, are crucially reflected in Ah Ma, whose transformation from an obedient housewife to a fearless fighter is highlighted when she resists patriarchal power by "[beating] [Ah Kong] back" (186) at a knife-edge moment when she is "almost killed" (329) by him. Her pragmatic agency in fighting back symbolises a radical subversion of and departure from the patriarchal rules that demand women's obedience to men in traditional Malaysian Chinese families.

By seeking her freedom from a bad marriage, Ah Ma further undermines Confucian cultural and gender traditions by cheating on Ah Kong (with Ng) and praying for Black Water Sister to kill Ah Kong. Although Ah Ma's infidelity and desire for Ah Kong's death can be read as immoral (especially the latter), they nonetheless articulate her deep longing to be rid of the oppressive patriarchal chains that control her life, and pursue her individual freedom and happiness. By espousing a rebellious feminist identity and rejecting the label of a subjugated and loyal wife, Ah Ma undermines the Confucian image of women as supplements of men. Although Ah Ma's agentic resistance and subversion play a vital role in articulating the novel's feminist vision, we should not overlook her equally important relationship with Black Water Sister, a powerful goddess. The goddess fulfils Ah Ma's prayer for Ah Kong's death by nudging "a speeding car so it crossed paths with [Ah Kong] on a motorbike" (279), which ultimately liberates Ah Ma from her abusive marriage. In return, Ah Ma becomes the spirit medium of the goddess, serving and protecting the goddess' temple both in life and after death.

Worth noting is how their collaboration highlights women's ability to be their own saviours when confronted with patriarchal violence, due to their strong aspirations and agency of resisting male abusers, rather than relying on other men to rescue them. In this sense, Ah Ma and Black Water Sister have successfully broken the gender stereotype of weak women and challenged the myth of salvation encoded by patriarchal ideology in Confucian society. More importantly, their collaboration in killing Ah Ma's violent husband symbolises a revolution in thought, as it reveals the progression from solitary struggles to tackle patriarchal violence, to a sisterhood that mutually benefits both goddess and spirit medium; this supernatural sisterhood moreover underscores sexual difference that emphasises feminist solidarity and shared needs of women across different temporalities and socially subordinated groups, including Black Water Sister of the 1920s and Ah Ma of the transitional 1970s.

However, women's empowerment also invokes male anxiety due to the loss of patriarchal authority, as evidenced by Ng's reaction to Ah Ma's role as a spirit medium. His reactions are marked "with dread" (305), which leads to the termination of their relationship. Motivated by her strong agency and desire for independence after Ng's departure, Ah Ma decides to continue her work as a spirit medium and become the matriarch "who cari makan [made a living] for the family" (117); she also single-handedly "[brings] up two children [Jess's mother and uncle]" (117). As the family matriarch and thus a potent symbol of female empowerment, Ah Ma not only breaks gender stereotypes of female inferiority and subordination, but also makes a revolution in thought by disrupting the Confucian patriarchal family system and establishing a matriarchal structure, while male figures like Ah Kong and Ng are completely excluded from dominant positions within her family. However, despite her high status, Ah Ma still fails to achieve happiness, as she holds onto her anger and painful memories of Ng's betrayal, even after death. Unable to let go of her past, Ah Ma is ultimately transformed into a "hungry ghost" (146) who "cannot move on to the next life" (285).

Similarly, Black Water Sister is unable or refuses to forget and let go of the past, even though she is a powerful goddess. She is trapped in the constant recurrence of her death moment when her violent husband kills her. This recurring death moment reflects not only her suffering but also her innate desire to change the past—a knife-edge moment when she could have exercised pragmatic agency to "raise the knife over her murderer" (348) and kill him. Unfortunately, with her husband dead over "a hundred years" (351) ago, Black Water Sister is unable to take revenge and can only imagine the act of killing her husband. While this imagined act cannot rewrite her traumatic past, it nonetheless expresses the message about patriarchal violence and oppression to contemporary women, like Jess. In this sense, Black Water Sister can only illuminate previously overlooked or silenced parts of women's sufferings, rather than rewrite patriarchal history or change the fates of dead people.

Although Black Water Sister and Ah Ma are unable to move towards the next life, they still have existential agency that enables them to maintain their sisterhood and resist male authority across all temporal horizons, even after death. They even compel Jess to be part of their sisterhood and attempt to kill Ng's son in order to "scare off that bastard [Ng], make sure he won't come and kacau [disturb]" (167) the goddess' temple anymore, which effectively protects female authority in the supernatural sphere. However, this sisterhood cannot be considered as a successful form of feminist future because of internal gender conflicts and hierarchical inequalities. The goddess occupies superior status in this sisterhood and controls Ah Ma to serve her both in the human world and afterlife. The goddess also compels Jess to become her spirit medium through the "horrible fantasy" (357) of what can happen if Jess disobeys her orders, such as making Jess bleed, exposing her sexuality, and threatening her family with violence. Similarly, Ah Ma uses Confucian rules of being "obedient, compliant, filial" (52) to force Jess into the spirit medium role while ignoring Jess's personal desires. These examples show that Black Water Sister and Ah Ma do not respect Jess's difference; they

are only intent on controlling Jess, who is viewed only as a granddaughter or a female of junior status in the patriarchal family hierarchy. Their coercive measures thus reflect a deep internalisation of Confucian hierarchy and filial piety that highlight elders' absolute authority and dismissal of children's desires. Ironically, this ghostly sisterhood reproduces the Confucian patriarchal structure even as it resists it, which fundamentally contradicts Grosz's concept of respecting sexual difference. By failing to respect difference, and refusing to forget their past, both Black Water Sister and Ah Ma are also unable to move forward—they cannot leave the human world or find peace in the afterlife. Still, it is important to note that both supernatural characters powerfully contribute to Jess's development of identity and agency, as their experiences and sisterhood provide invaluable lessons and a foundation that support Jess's feminist and queer future.

Negotiating Filial Piety and Pursuing a Feminist and Queer Future

Although the ghostly sisterhood in BWS has negative aspects, it nonetheless lays the feminist foundation that Jess can build on, as she learns from Black Water Sister's and Ah Ma's traumatic experiences to develop her own feminist and queer future. As this section demonstrates, Jess's movement towards a feminist and queer future is enabled by her acts of agency, including her assistance in liberating Black Water Sister and Ah Ma from their painful memories and past, her negotiation with filial piety and heteronormativity, and her contribution to the supernatural sisterhood, in which sexual difference is respected.

Unlike Black Water Sister and Ah Ma, Jess does not endure patriarchal violence but instead struggles between filial expectations and personal desires. Whether in America or Malaysia, Jess exerts identity agency to conceal her sexuality and maintain a heteronormative identity as a "filial" (228) daughter as she is "bound to her parents" (268), who also perceive lesbians as "not nice" (3) due to their inability to continue the patrilineal line, which constitutes

a violation of filial piety. To spare her parents' feelings and maintain the family bond, Jess has to conceal, even suppress, her desire to "be open about loving women" (269). Her struggles related to sexual identity reflect a fact discussed earlier: it is difficult for Malaysian Chinese lesbians to come out to their parents under the Confucian injunction of filial piety, even in the contemporary world.

Although Jess's concealment of her lesbian identity reflects her obedience to filial piety, we should not overlook her pragmatic agency to assert her subjectivity and independence. At many knife-edge moments of being compelled to become a spirit medium by Ah Ma and Black Water Sister, Jess actively rejects their requests by saying, "I don't want to be your medium" (84); she also exerts pragmatic agency to break or destroy important ritual objects, including the altar, incense urn, and the idol of the goddess, in her resistance against their unreasonable demands. Despite these efforts, Jess's resistance is ineffective, and she is forced to become the spirit medium of Black Water Sister and Ah Ma, who can freely control her body. Although Jess is angry with Black Water Sister and Ah Ma, she feels that she has an "obligation" (52) to help fulfil her grandmother's wish—"saving the temple from [Ng's] development" (268)—and decides to "accept her fate" (268) to become the goddess's spirit medium. She later realises the benefits of being a medium, such as possessing the supernatural power to fight against Ng, a "powerful and criminal human, but human nonetheless" (268). At the same time, she is praised as a "good girl" (276) by Ah Ma, which is a form of positive external feedback that encourages Jess to adhere to cultural expectations as a filial child, while also reinforcing her sense of identity as a Malaysian Chinese woman. This analysis thus shows the ambiguity and ambivalence of Jess's negotiation with filial piety and her own identity and agency, which must thus be considered when thinking about the feminist and/or queer future, as women's struggles are not just caused by patriarchal discourses, but also by intra-gender power dynamics, in which women can oppress/subordinate other women.

Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, women's collaborative sisterhood is a source of empowerment. By continuing in Ah Ma's role as spirit medium of the goddess, Jess advances the revolutionary feminist movement and thought begun by Ah Ma and Black Water Sister in previous generations. Like Ah Ma, Jess also breaks the male dominance in Chinese religion, where male mediums—such as Jess's uncle, who is "the chairman of the temple committee" (68)—control all temples and rituals. As a spirit medium, Jess successfully protects the goddess's temple by persuading Ng to change his development plan. In contrast, Jess's uncle fails to protect the goddess's temple and is even "thrown in jail" (310). The contrast between Jess and her uncle not only underscores the female spirit medium's power over patriarchal authority, but also challenges entrenched gender biases in traditional Chinese religion and culture, which label women as "useless" (72).

Crucially, the role of spirit medium empowers Jess with the supernatural ability to "share the same body" (86) with the ghost and goddess, which enables their souls and minds to "cleave together" (351)—an act that supernaturally fuses past and present temporalities, thereby collapsing linear time. This supernatural coexistence moreover allows Jess to access Black Water Sister's and Ah Ma's memories related to their sufferings and contributions, including "the rubber trees" (35) that Ah Ma depends on for a living, and "the jungle" (175) where Black Water Sister dies. As "nobody remembered" (213) what both women went through—a sign of patriarchal history's erasure, silencing, or neglect of herstories—these forgotten memories thus reveal their loneliness and struggles while in the human world. By understanding the historical tragedies and losses suffered by Black Water Sister and Ah Ma, Jess not only feels "sympathy" (346) for them, but also learns that she, like them, is also subjected to the Confucian heteronormative and patriarchal discourses as she has to keep her sexuality "a secret from anybody" (343) without anyone's help, in order to conform to the Confucian values and rules of the Malaysian Chinese family, including filial piety. Realising

their shared loneliness and helplessness, Jess decides to participate in the supernatural sisterhood to help them let go of the past and "[lay them] to rest" (358).

Exerting pragmatic agency, Jess succeeds in disrupting Black Water Sister's recurring death moment by saying, "It's time to put it down" (351); by urging the goddess to forget her hatred of her violent husband, Jess also helps the goddess to be healed of her dark, violent, and murderous urges. For Ah Ma, Jess exerts life course agency by making a plan to fulfil her grandmother's desire of teaching Ng "a lesson" (331) about respecting women's contributions, as he never appreciated Ah Ma when they were together in "the gang world" (187). By successfully implementing her plan, Jess redefines Ah Ma's real identity from a lover "who wants to profit from [Ng]" (304) to an important contributor in Ng's enterprise, which breaks women's traditional roles as supplements of men. With the resolution of their hatred and grievances, as well as the fulfilment of their desires, the goddess and ghost are able to "leave" (358) the human world and find peace in their afterlife.

What makes Jess distinct from the other two female characters is her ability to digest history and reflect on the past, as she understands the detrimental effects of holding onto personal grievances, hatred, pain, and regrets. By learning from Ah Ma's and Black Water Sister's traumatic past, combined with her own desire to "move on" (356), Jess decides to "come out as a lesbian" (288) to her family towards the end of the novel. Although *BWS* does not explicitly show Jess's coming out to her parents, her decision to be honest about her lesbian identity nonetheless reflects her existential agency as a modern gendered individual of the millennium, since she has the capacity to make genuine choices based on free will and personal "lifestyle preferences" (Hakim 69). Jess's agency also points the way forward towards her feminist and queer future. Notably, Jess's feminist and queer future is also built on Black Water Sister and Ah Ma's experiences and sisterhood of resisting Confucian patriarchy. Towards the

end of *BWS*, all three characters leave their patriarchal past to move on in different ways due to their sisterhood, which highlights respect for sexual difference, and the lessons learned from the past.

Conclusion

Zen Cho's *Black Water Sister* describes complex female agency, diverse feminist struggles, and a feminist and queer future through three female characters. It highlights Black Water Sister and Ah Ma's shared oppression under Confucian patriarchy and their paths of empowerment. The former first becomes a hungry ghost by clinging onto her anger and grudges after death, then transforms into a special goddess due to her followers' devotion and beliefs; the latter, on the other hand, obtains economic independence and a degree of freedom while alive. Black Water Sister and Ah Ma also establish a supernatural sisterhood to resist patriarchal violence and raise women's status in family and religion. However, both are unable to leave the human world or find peace after death due to their inability to forget the past.

In contrast, Jess is able to reflect on the past and negotiate agency and personal desires, which enables her to help the other two women find peace in their afterlives and embrace her own feminist and queer future. Despite lessons from the past, Jess's feminist and queer future would not have been possible without Black Water Sister and Ah Ma's sisterhood, in which sexual difference is respected. Through the sisterhood, too, the novel taps into contemporary Malaysian Chinese women's achievements, which are similarly rooted in their predecessors' feminist contributions, resistance against Confucian patriarchy, and ongoing quest for a better future in a patriarchal context. By reflecting on the enduring and complex feminist struggles of Malaysian Chinese women in the past and present world, Black Water Sister ultimately illuminates the gendered possibilities of moving from a patriarchal past to a feminist and queer future.

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