



## Anti-Coloniality and the Politics of Sex and Sexploitation in *Love, Death and Robots* S01E08 “Good Hunting” (2019)

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### Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of anti-colonial resistance, gender politics, and sexual exploitation in *Love, Death & Robots* S01E08, “Good Hunting” (2019), through the lens of the Chinese fox spirit (*hulijing*) mythology. The *hulijing*, a shapeshifting figure in Chinese folklore, embodies themes of feminine autonomy, seduction, and transformation, serving as a potent symbol of both subjugation and empowerment. Set in colonial Hong Kong, the episode reimagines the fox spirit’s plight under British imperialism, depicting Yan’s forced metamorphosis from a mystical being into a mechanized object of male desire. Drawing on postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, the analysis highlights how Yan’s mechanical body becomes a site of colonial and patriarchal violence, yet ultimately a tool of defiance. The narrative critiques the dehumanizing effects of colonialism while celebrating subaltern agency, as Yan reclaims her autonomy through technological reappropriation. By juxtaposing traditional mythology with steampunk aesthetics, “Good Hunting” interrogates the erasure of indigenous cultures under modernity, offering a nuanced allegory of resistance. The paper argues that Yan’s transformation and rebellion reflect broader historical struggles of colonized women, challenging Orientalist narratives and reclaiming the *hulijing* as a figure of anti-colonial resilience. Through this lens, the episode transcends fantasy to engage with enduring discourses on gender, power, and cultural survival.

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### Introduction

#### The Fox Spirit in Chinese Mythology

The fox spirit, or “hulijing” (狐狸精), is a significant figure in Chinese mythology, folklore, and literature. The *hulijing* is renowned for its shapeshifting capabilities, frequently transforming into a stunning woman. It symbolises themes of feminine autonomy, seduction, and metamorphosis. This creature represents a complex dualism that goes beyond the straightforward dichotomies of good and evil because it can be both good and evil. Over the years, how the *hulijing* is portrayed has changed to reflect shifting societal views on women, sexuality, and power (Huntington, 2003: 172) <sup>[27]</sup>.

The earliest references to the fox spirit can be traced back to the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), where foxes were believed to possess magical abilities. In these early accounts, fox spirits were not inherently malevolent; their nature was more ambiguous, capable of both good and evil deeds. The belief was that foxes, upon reaching a certain age, gained the ability to transform into human beings, often women. This ability to shapeshift is central to the *hulijing*’s role in Chinese mythology (Kang, 2005: 45)

[29]. During the Wei and Jin dynasties (220–420 AD), the fox spirit's image began to crystallize into more defined archetypes. The nine-tailed fox, a powerful and ancient form of *hulijing*, became prominent during this period. According to Guo Pu's "Xuanzhongji" (Records from Within the Recondite), a fox could transform into a woman upon reaching fifty years of age and become a beautiful female or a spirit medium at one hundred (Huntington, 2003: 172) [27]. This period also solidified the association of fox spirits with supernatural knowledge and seductive powers.

The Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties further developed the fox spirit mythos. During these eras, fox spirits were depicted in literature and art as both divine and demonic figures. They could be protectors or seductresses, embodying the unpredictable nature of the supernatural. The fox spirit's ability to navigate between the human and spirit worlds made it a potent symbol in Chinese culture (Kang, 2005: 67) [29].

The Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636–1912) dynasties brought about a more nuanced portrayal of fox spirits, particularly in literary works such as Pu Songling's "Liaozhai Zhiyi" (Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio). This collection of stories features a variety of fox spirits, ranging from malevolent beings to virtuous and loving women. For example, the story "Chou Hu" ("Ugly Fox") depicts a beautiful *hulijing* named Hongyu, who uses her allure to steal men's hearts, reflecting both her dangerous and captivating nature. Conversely, other stories in the collection show fox spirits as loyal and compassionate, highlighting their moral complexity (Pu, 2008) [52].

Transitioning from these historical circumstances, a fundamental topic of the *hulijing* tale is metamorphosis. The fox spirit's capacity for transformation, particularly into an alluring lady, represents fluidity and the dissolution of distinctions between human and animal, as well as between truth and fiction. This transformative ability can be seen as a metaphor for social mobility and the potential for change in one's circumstances. It also reflects deeper philosophical questions about identity and essence.

The *hulijing* is often depicted as a seductive figure, using her beauty and charm to manipulate men. This portrayal taps into historical anxieties about female sexuality and power. The fox spirit's allure is both feared and desired, making her a symbol of the *femme fatale*. However, the *hulijing* also embodies female autonomy and resistance against patriarchal norms. By wielding her beauty as a weapon, the fox spirit subverts traditional gender roles and asserts her own agency (Louie, 1999: 843–844) [36].

The *hulijing*'s moral ambiguity is a defining feature of her character. She can be a protector or a destroyer, a loyal companion or a deceitful seductress. This duality challenges simplistic moral judgments and encourages a more nuanced understanding of human (and supernatural) nature. The fox spirit's actions often depend on the context and the individuals she interacts with, highlighting the complexity of moral choices (Huntington, 2003: 178) [27].

Alongside her alluring powers, the *hulijing* frequently possesses extraordinary knowledge and talents. This facet of her character connects her to overarching themes in Chinese mythology, including the longing for immortality and the pursuit of arcane knowledge. The fox spirit serves as a conduit between the human and divine realms, possessing the ability to confer benefits or curses (Kang, 2005: 102) [29].

The fox spirit remains a prominent presence in current Chinese literature and culture as we progress towards

modernity. Contemporary adaptations frequently re-examine the *hulijing*'s mythology to confront contemporary socioeconomic challenges, including gender equality and cultural identity. In Ken Liu's short fiction "Good Hunting," the *hulijing* is shown as a casualty of colonialism and industrialisation. The narrative reinterprets the fox spirit as an emblem of defiance against tyrannical powers, merging classical mythology with contemporary motifs (Liu, 2012a) [33].

The *hulijing* has also impacted wider East Asian popular culture, featuring in films, television programs, and computer games. These depictions frequently highlight the fox spirit's captivating and enigmatic qualities, appealing to viewers' intrigue in the otherworldly. The *hulijing*'s adaptability as a character permits diverse interpretations, spanning from horror to romance (Stevens, 2013: 153) [65].

In recent years, feminist scholars have scrutinised the *hulijing* myth through the perspective of gender studies. The portrayal of the fox spirit as a seductive and perilous lady is argued to embody historical misogyny and the scapegoating of women for society problems (Arsal & Yavuz, 2014: 167–178) [3]. By reinterpreting the *hulijing* as a symbol of female emancipation, these researchers underscore the capacity of myth to contest and undermine patriarchal ideologies.

The fox spirit, or *hulijing*, is a complex entity in Chinese mythology, representing themes of metamorphosis, allure, and female independence. Her representation has transformed throughout ages, mirroring shifting societal perceptions of women, sexuality, and authority. The *hulijing*, from ancient mythology to contemporary literature and media, remains a compelling emblem of both peril and empowerment.

As contemporary interpretations of the *hulijing* explore new dimensions of her character, this ancient mythological figure remains relevant and resonant, offering rich insights into human nature and cultural identity (Huntington, 2003: 182) [27].

In Ken Liu's narrative adaptation, "Good Hunting," the fox spirit takes center stage as a paragon of female power. The episode illustrates Yan's metamorphosis into a fox spirit as a narrative of empowerment and defiance against colonial subjugation, rooted in Chinese culture. Similar to ancient mythology, Yan's figure contests patriarchal conventions and societal expectations, exemplifying themes of female autonomy and emancipation (Fan, 2011: 301).

Set against the backdrop of a steampunk, postcolonial Hong Kong, "Good Hunting" delves into the complexities of colonialism and its impact on indigenous cultures. Yan's transformation from a traditional *hulijing* into a mechanical being represents the clash between indigenous traditions and colonial modernity. This conflict reflects Edward Said's concepts of Orientalism and colonialism, wherein the colonised endure Western dominance and exploitation (Said, 1978: 40) [58].

Ken Liu's narrative occurs during a period when China was contending with the ramifications of Western imperialism, especially the British occupation of Hong Kong. The historical backdrop is essential for comprehending the complete effects of colonialism on the characters and their environment. The advent of British technology and infrastructure, exemplified by the railway, illustrates the intrusive and disruptive essence of colonialism. The railway, constructed without consideration for local customs or beliefs, symbolises the imposition of external values and the

obliteration of native lifestyles. This is exemplified in a scene when a British engineer dismisses Chinese apprehensions regarding feng shui, demonstrating the colonisers' contempt for indigenous culture and spiritual beliefs (Liu, 2016: 15).

### **Exploitation of Women in Colonial Hong Kong**

Colonial Hong Kong, governed by Britain from 1841 to 1997, serves as a significant case study in the analysis of colonial exploitation, especially concerning women. The British colonial administration enacted policies that sustained gendered and racial disparities, relegating women to mere instruments of labour and exploitation. This article delves into the sexual exploitation, cultural and social exploitation, and the resistance and agency of women in colonial Hong Kong, exploring how colonial rule exacerbated gender discrimination and how women navigated and resisted these oppressive structures (Chan, 1996: 11–23) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Sexual exploitation of women in colonial Hong Kong was pervasive, with colonial authorities and expatriates frequently engaging in practices that commodified and objectified Chinese women. Prostitution was both a symptom and a tool of colonial domination, with women being forced or coerced into sex work to survive economically (Chao, 2003: 71–107) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Prostitution in colonial Hong Kong was somewhat institutionalised, with brothels functioning with the implicit endorsement of colonial authorities. This institutionalisation aimed to regulate and control the sex trade, ensuring it serviced colonial goals while exacerbating the exploitation of Chinese women (El-Horr, 2021) <sup>[16]</sup>. Prostitution was often the last resort for women who had no other means of supporting themselves, reflecting the limited opportunities available to them under colonial rule (Chan, 1996: 15) <sup>[10]</sup>.

The colonial administration's approach to prostitution highlighted the racial and gendered hierarchies inherent in colonial rule. Chinese women were commodified and exploited, their bodies seen as sites of colonial control and sexual gratification for expatriates. This exploitation was exacerbated by the lack of legal protections for women, who were often vulnerable to abuse and exploitation without recourse to justice (Chan, 1996: 15) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Colonial governance imposed Western cultural standards and values on Hong Kong society, frequently undercutting traditional Chinese customs and beliefs. This cultural imposition significantly impacted women by reinforcing patriarchal systems and diminishing their social status.

The colonial administration advocated Western notions of femininity and domesticity, which conflicted with traditional Chinese gender roles. This imposition resulted in a cultural dislocation for Chinese women, who found themselves torn between preserving their cultural identity and conforming to colonial standards (Gromkowska-Melosik & Boron, 2023: 3) <sup>[22]</sup>. The focus on Western gender norms frequently led to the marginalisation of Chinese women's responsibilities and contributions to society.

The enforcement of Western education and religious customs further exacerbated the cultural exploitation of Chinese women. Missionary schools, in addition to offering instruction, propagated Western values that were at odds with traditional Chinese practices. This educational paradigm frequently undermined Chinese cultural heritage and fostered a sense of inferiority among Chinese women concerning their cultural identity (Feng, 2023: 112) <sup>[19]</sup>.

Despite widespread exploitation, women in colonial Hong

Kong were not solely passive victims. They discovered methods to resist and assert their autonomy, contesting the systems that aimed to subjugate them.

Women significantly contributed to labour movements and strikes, advocating for improved working conditions and equitable salaries. These movements were essential in emphasising the exploitative characteristics of colonial labour practices and advocating for reforms. Female labourers in the textile sector orchestrated strikes to contest inadequate wages and substandard working conditions. These acts of resistance were crucial in highlighting the struggles of women workers and promoting their rights (Bray, 2007: 45) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Cultural resistance arose when women endeavoured to maintain their cultural identity and contest the intrusion of Western norms. This resistance manifested in multiple ways, including the preservation of traditional customs and involvement in local organisations that advocated for Chinese culture and values. Women were crucial in safeguarding Chinese traditions and transmitting them to subsequent generations, so assuring the survival of their cultural legacy under the challenges posed by colonial rule (Gromkowska-Melosik & Boron, 2023: 6) <sup>[22]</sup>.

Women in colonial Hong Kong established social organisations and advocacy groups to champion their rights and enhance their social standing. These organisations facilitated a platform for women to articulate their concerns and collaborate towards shared objectives. The formation of women's associations facilitated the resolution of concerns related to education, health, and legal rights, thereby empowering women to assert control over their lives and champion social change (El-Horr, 2021) <sup>[16]</sup>.

Many women individually undertook acts of protest against colonial exploitation. This encompassed opposing coerced marriages, seeking education in defiance of cultural norms, and discovering means to sustain themselves and their families autonomously. These acts of individual defiance exemplified the resilience and resolve of women to surmount the restrictive frameworks established by colonial governance (Chan, 1996: 20) <sup>[10]</sup>.

The colonial exploitation of women in Hong Kong was complex, involving sexual, cultural, and social aspects. British colonial governance intensified gender and racial disparities, subjecting Chinese women to institutional exploitation. These women were not only passive victims; they actively resisted and negotiated restrictive frameworks, asserting their agency in diverse manners. The ramifications of this exploitation persist in modern discourse on gender, racism, and colonialism, underscoring the necessity for a sophisticated comprehension of colonial histories and their enduring effects.

### **Anti-Coloniality and the Politics of Sex and Sexploitation in “Good Hunting”**

Ken Liu's novel, “Good Hunting,” is situated in an era when China was contending with the ramifications of Western imperialism, notably the British influence in Hong Kong. This historical backdrop is essential for comprehending the complete effects of colonialism on the characters and their environment. The implementation of British technology and infrastructure, exemplified by the railway, shows the intrusive and disruptive essence of colonialism. The railway, constructed without consideration for local customs or beliefs, symbolises the imposition of foreign values and the

obliteration of native lifestyles. This is exemplified in a scene when a British engineer dismisses Chinese apprehensions regarding feng shui, demonstrating the colonizers' contempt for indigenous culture and spiritual beliefs (Liu, 2016: 15).

Yan's metamorphosis from a conventional hulijing into a mechanised being symbolises the conflict between indigenous culture and colonial modernity. Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject is relevant here; the abject refers to that which is cast out, repelled, yet fascinating (Kristeva, 1982: 10) <sup>[30]</sup>. Yan's forced metamorphosis from flesh to machine illustrates the colonial desire to control and commodify the other, turning her into a spectacle and an object of fascination and horror.

Edward Said's theories on colonialism and imperialism offer a framework for comprehending Yan's exploitation. Said contends that colonialism establishes a hierarchical binary, civilising the 'other' through subjugation (Said, 1978: 59) <sup>[58]</sup>. In "Good Hunting," the colonisers objectify Yan's mechanical body, diminishing her to a simple instrument for their gratification and dominance. This metamorphosis highlights the dehumanising consequences of colonial authority.

Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry, wherein the colonised imitate the coloniser while still posing a threat, is manifest in Yan's travel (Bhabha, 1994: 86) <sup>[4]</sup>. Yan's mechanical body emulates colonial technology, yet it serves as a vehicle for her resistance. She subverts the intended purpose of her transformation, using her new body to reclaim agency and power, challenging the colonial narrative.

Expanding on this, Yan's mechanical transformation specifically subverts colonial power structures by turning the tools of her oppression into instruments of resistance. The very technology that was intended to dehumanize and control her becomes a source of empowerment. By mastering and repurposing this technology, Yan undermines the colonial assertion of superiority and control, demonstrating that the colonized can adapt and subvert the colonizer's tools to reclaim autonomy and agency. This act of rebellion is a direct challenge to the colonial order, illustrating the potential for technology to be a double-edged sword—capable of both oppression and liberation.

Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern's voice is also pertinent. Spivak contends that the subaltern cannot speak within the dominant colonial discourse (Spivak, 1988: 271) <sup>[64]</sup>. Yan's transformation and subsequent rebellion represent her reclaiming of voice and agency. Her metamorphosis into a mechanical fox spirit is an act of resistance, subverting the colonial desire to silence and control her.

Liang's transformation from a demon hunter to Yan's ally signifies an anti-colonial stance. Initially complicit in the colonial mission to eradicate spirits, Liang's evolving understanding of Yan's humanity and his role in aiding her transformation reflect a rejection of colonial ideology. This alliance underscores the story's critique of colonialism and its celebration of resilience and solidarity among the oppressed.

Yan's character development throughout "Good Hunting" is a profound representation of resistance and resilience. Initially introduced as a mystical hulijing, Yan's life is disrupted by the encroachment of colonial forces. The industrial revolution brought by the British disrupts her world, stripping her of her magical abilities and forcing her into prostitution to survive. This deterioration signifies the extensive erosion of cultural identity and autonomy endured

by colonised populations. Nevertheless, Yan's narrative transcends mere victimhood. Her coerced metamorphosis into a mechanical entity, although designed to enhance her dehumanisation, ultimately serves as the impetus for her empowerment.

Ken Liu's depiction of Yan's struggle also resonates with Frantz Fanon's analysis of the psychological effects of colonization. Fanon describes how colonialism dehumanizes the colonized, reducing them to objects or machines to be controlled and exploited (Fanon, 1963: 22) <sup>[18]</sup>. Yan's transformation and subsequent rebellion can be seen as a rejection of this dehumanization, a reclaiming of her identity and humanity in the face of oppression.

Moreover, the alliance between Yan and Liang reflects the possibility of solidarity and resistance among the colonized. Liang's journey from a demon hunter complicit in the colonial mission to a supporter of Yan's rebellion illustrates the potential for awakening and resistance. His character journey signifies a wider appeal for the oppressed to consolidate against their shared adversary, underscoring the significance of collective action in the struggle against colonialism.

The narrative examines the convergence of colonialism and patriarchy, highlighting their roles in exploitation and oppression. Yan's journey from being a traditional hulijing to a mechanical fox spirit symbolizes the resilience and adaptability of colonized peoples. As noted by Liu, this tale has an anti-colonial theme, highlighting the experience of being a member of a colonized population (Liu, 2012b).

Yan's mechanical transformation serves as a compelling visual and metaphorical embodiment of the convergence of gender and colonial subjugation. The colonial governor who converts her into a mechanical being does so to fulfil his own depraved needs, illustrating how colonial forces frequently exploit and dominate the bodies of colonised women. The violence inflicted upon Yan's body symbolises the overarching cruelty of colonialism, which aims to subjugate and exploit indigenous cultures.

Furthermore, Yan's transformation serves as a reflection on the convergence of gender and technology. Bray (2007: 37) <sup>[6]</sup> asserts that technology can either oppress or empower, contingent upon its application. In "Good Hunting," technology initially subjugates Yan, converting her into a mechanical entity for colonial gratification. She reclaims and repurposes this technology to assert her autonomy and fight colonial rule.

Yan's metamorphosis into a mechanical fox spirit critiques the dehumanising consequences of colonialism and patriarchy. The mechanical body, once a representation of Yan's oppression, transforms into a formidable instrument for her insurrection. By commandeering the technologies employed to subjugate her, Yan not only undermines the colonial power structures but also reconstitutes her identity and individuality. This act of reclamation challenges the colonial narrative that sought to strip her of her humanity, turning her mechanical form into a symbol of strength and defiance.

Yan's journey also reflects the broader historical context of women's oppression and the stigmatization of powerful women as witches or demons, a theme explored by Aarsal and Yavuz (2014: 167) <sup>[3]</sup>. Yan's final metamorphosis and insurrection represent a reclamation of her identity and authority, contesting the historical and cultural stigmatisation of formidable women.

Yan's definitive insurrection against her oppressors becomes a formidable declaration of defiance. By regaining her mechanical shape and utilising it to resist, she converts her enforced identity into a source of strength. This act of defiance is a reclamation of agency, a rejection of the colonial narrative that sought to reduce her to a mere object. Yan's journey from victim to victor highlights the resilience and strength of the colonized, offering a message of hope and empowerment.

### Conclusion

The animated adaptation of "Good Hunting" employs the fox spirit as a powerful symbol of female power and resilience against colonial exploitation. Yan's transformation and her ultimate act of rebellion critique the dehumanizing effects of colonialism while celebrating the subversive potential of marginalized identities. Through the lens of Kristeva, Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, the episode's steampunk setting highlights the collision between traditional culture and colonial modernity, showcasing the enduring power of transformation and resistance. By reimagining the hulijing in a colonial context, *Love, Death & Robots* offers a nuanced exploration of identity, power, and defiance in the face of oppression.

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