

When Female Ghosts Came back

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1. Introduction

Ghost books, films or paintings have provided us a special perspective of the question of, for example, subjectivity, memory, trauma, and power which are believed to be shared by ghosts and human beings, spiritually.

Arnika Fuhrmann, a Post-Doctoral Associate professor in Cornell University is conducting an interesting research on Thailand ghost films, or horror films. Her paper of Nang Nak (Fuhrmann 2009), a Thailand ghost wife is exactly an excellent and inspiring work in such a field, which concerns the desire, the embodiment, and also the Buddhist Melancholia¹. The paper reveals that, general character of female ghosts is commonly accepted by various cultures, namely, the extreme fragility of women strengthened by the death. Sometimes, they appear as being deficient in goodness; or, they are regarded as the origin of horror. And also, the research sets a good example that female ghosts, the heroine in most ghostly legend, are the lenses through which we can look into a specific community, even where an androcentric culture dominates.

The ghostly legend, a unique realm in the study of ancient Chinese literature has also been paid close attention recently, while the concept of female ghosts is far from clarified. In this paper, I will firstly introduce the negative images of female ghost in ancient China and the origin of such horrors. And I will go to the Sung Dynasty 宋代 (960□1279) to show you a variety of anti-fear narrations rising up back then. Some narrations are efforts to alienate female ghosts whom they called the evil one, and others, like Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism², endeavored to do the connecting work, in either boring theories or interesting legends.

Undoubtedly, the ghost is never a typical Confucian theme. Like the Sophist Protagoras of Abdera says "Man is the measure of all things", Confucians refused to estimate anything over human beings/ the humanity. I have not tried to examine the ghost belief in Confucianism, but rather to illustrate how the Confucians reconstruct the theoretical system when they were faced the challenge of the ghost from both other scholars and Confucian classics. My working assumption is that even though the Neo-Confucians tried dealing with the ghost with the material theory, consequently they provided a unique perspective for the humanity.

¹ Arnika Fuhrmann, "Nang Nak-Ghost Wife: Desire, Embodiment, and Buddhist Melancholia in a Contemporary Thai Ghost Film," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, "Translation and Embodiment in National and Transnational Asian Film Media," Guest Editor: Bliss Cua Lim, 31.3 (Fall 2009), 220-247

² Not all Confucians in Sung Dynasty could be counted as Neo-Confucians. The term used here refers to Li Hsiao Chia 理學家.

2. Yin-yang and Doubly-yin

In ancient China, as Zeitlin (2007) suggests, a shade who is a woman can be imagined as doubly shy and vulnerable³, and thus, doubly-Yin.

As you know, Yin 陰 is a term most commonly used in reference to a kind of special material force in Chinese philosophy. As early as 700 B.C., yin 陰 and yang 陽 had been two pervasive concepts in I Ching 易經 (*the book of Changes*), *Tao Te Ching* 道德經 and etc. Half a century later, around 200B.C, Confucians in Han Dynasty 漢代 developed the yin-yang concept and proposed the interaction theory between Tien 天 (the nature and the history) and Jen 人 (human beings). The following one thousand years were the time when a large number of scholars continuously made contributions to the yin-yang theory and when two pairs of definitions were almost fixed and widely accepted.

The gender-oriented embodiment of yin and yang is the pattern of husband and wife. To extend the pattern; more generally, yang is another name of masculine, and yin, surely, femininity. The interaction between men and women will be fluent and flourishing if yin and yang keep the balance. Through describing their different physical body and prescribing different behavior formations, medicine books⁴ and rites books back up the gender division in a practical way. The following passage was excerpted from a medicine book in Sung Dynasty, while it was almost the same as the passage from *Pei Chi Chien Chin Fang* 備急千金方 (Golden Prescriptions for Emergencies), a medicine book in Tang Dynasty 唐代.

Question: Why is it much easier for women to get ill than men?

Answer: The woman is the aggregation of all the yins, and is of concomitance with the damp. When she grows up to fourteen years old, the yin material force overflows and emotions overwhelm; therefore, organs inside hurt and appearance damaged outside. In general, the woman is indulged in the love, hatred, envy, and tristesse, so it is difficult to cure her completely. And that is why it's much easier for the women to get ill⁵.

The other life-based one claims that the death is what we refer to when we are talking about yin. While as same as the pattern of women and men, in which yin-yang usually appear as two interacting forces rather than two specific and separate sexual symbols, the yin- yang boundary line between life and death is fluid unless the death happens in fact. The death changes human beings to ghosts; meanwhile yin totally takes over what yang managed before. Correspondingly, the yin material force pervades the netherworld where dead people are said to reside.

³ Zeitlin, *The Phantom heroine: ghosts and gender in seventeenth-century Chinese literature*, 3

⁴ For more details about medicine books, please refer to Charlotte Furth, *A flourishing Yin : gender in China's medical history, 960-1665*. Berkeley : University of California Press, c1999.

⁵ Ch'i Chung Fu, *Nü ke bai wen* 女科百問, 1-2

Although yin should be well defined in the pattern of yin-yang as to the classics, the negative trend in yin gives a hint to the excessive femininity and the deficient/insufficient vitality. Consequently, if you follow it, female ghosts who fit in both two definitions appear as Chi yin 極陰 (doubly- yin) in tales and theories where female ghosts take the roles of almost vampires. Through inappropriate sexual acts with living men, female ghosts endeavor to obtain the positive material force *yang* from them with their feminine charm, and leave them physically weak and psychologically independent. As Zeitlin (2007) says, the fiery yang force of the living man is engulfed by the damp yin force of the female ghost⁶. Therefore, the female ghosts are looked upon as an evil power that cast a destructive influence on human community. Here is a passage from a ghost story.

But presently, a woman came out, amazing and gorgeously dressed. Mr. Hu 胡 knew who she was (since he had been waiting for this moment for two months) and so, he hurried over to her. The woman said, fear not for I am the one who resides in this hut (a hut at the corner of the wall looked like a shrine), and so touched by your deep love as to come. Mr. Hu went into raptures. He entered the hut right away and didn't leave until the midnight. Since then, it replaced studying and seeing parents, and became his daily routine. Meanwhile, Mr. Hu felt thoroughly exhausted and lost his appetite.⁷

The story is excerpted from *I Chien Chih* 夷堅志 (Recordings of Anecdotes), a typical ghost novel written by a Confucian officer Hung Mai 洪邁 (1123-1202). Actually, it is almost a standard plot of ghost stories in Sung Dynasty (960-1279), which reveals the real situation to some extent. To suit the remedy to the case, various anti-fear narrations rose up as efforts to alienate the evil ones.

3. Anti-fear Mechanisms

From the point of an earthly view, cutting the spatial tie between ghosts and human beings in burial rituals⁸ is the most effective method, for a large number of people in Sung Dynasty tended to place coffins in empty rooms or in temples instead of burying corpses according to the orthodoxy Confucian rituals. Therefore, a decree issued during 1086-1094 related the appropriate burial rituals with the political career⁹. According to the decree, civil officers and literati were required to set the good example of model ritual- practicers and loyal Confucianism disciples, in other words, to alienate rather than disseminate superstitious rumors.

More metaphysically, the Taoist priests proposed another method. They expelled or killed female ghosts by sticking them *Tao fu* 道符 (Taoism Code), and call the end

⁶ Zeitlin, *The Phantom heroine: ghosts and gender in seventeenth-century Chinese literature*, 2

⁷ From the story of Ms. Hu 胡氏子, in *I Chien Chih*

⁸ But, of course, preserving the ancestor worship.

⁹ To To, *The History of Sung Dynasty* 宋史·志第七十七·禮第二十七.

of the story. Since the theoretical structure of Taoism was partly put into application in Chinese classical medicine, such a method sometimes showed itself up as the plot of seeing a doctor.

Taoist priests cured the hero once and for all as soon as the female ghost disappeared. No one knew where the female ghost was gone and no one cared, for she was exactly the origin of debility. In contrast to previous incredibly close intercourses, alienation resolutely denied the ghost, while affirmed the horror.

Two months with the woman made Mr. Yeh 葉 weak and exhausted, and then badly ill. While, the woman stopped coming again as soon as he moved to another apartment and he saw a doctor¹⁰.

Both spatial and medical alienations are conducted in the story above. And another narration is Buddhism, which suggested men cut off the sexual desire through observing the loathsome transition from a graceful female corpse to decayed flesh, and eventually to the horrible skeleton. Such a suggestion implied that the nature of women lied in the rancid flesh and the ghastly skeleton rather than in the adorable and alluring body that mortal men saw from their Avidya (ignorance, confusion). It intended to associate the uncertain lust with the uncertain death, but, in effect, associated the women with the death and brought about the concept of doubly-yin.

Neo-Confucians raised totally different anti-fear narrations for female ghosts. Firstly, no evidences could be found in the neo-Confucian literature in Sung Dynasty that they ever showed any motivation to overlie these two definitions of yin, even though *Chi Yin* 極陰 (utmost-yin), *Tai Yin* 太陰 (extremely-yin), *Chun Yin* 純陰 (pure-yin) are terms coined to refer to the excessively endowed yin material force or pure spiritual beings.

Chang Tsai, a neo-Confucian in early Sung, defined *kuei* 鬼 (the ghost) and *shen* 神 (the god) as contraction and expansion, or as negative and positive spiritual forces, which set the tone of the ghost narration for the subsequent neo-Confucians. Never deviating from but developing *Chi* 氣 (the material force) doctrine to deal with the human affairs, Chu Hsi 朱熹 put forwards that Essence and material force consolidate to become man, and as they disintegrate, they become a spiritual being. Self-disintegration or self-dissipation is the negative process during which yin functions and is what *kuei* (the ghost) means instead of the dead quasi-men. As it's a name of a spiritual force or a process, it is impossible to combine it with the static material endowment that stands for female dispositions. So the *doubly-yin*, or the evil female ghost is a pseudo-proposition for neo-Confucians.

But it is really interesting that neo-Confucians never deny the possibility of *Li Kuei* 厲鬼 (the ghosts who can interfere with human affairs in an unfriendly way, and of

¹⁰ From the story of *She Je ku* 葉若谷, in *I Chien Chih*

course, female ghosts included in such a category). Cheng-I 程頤, Chu Hsi and his disciple Chen Chun 陳淳 all claimed that the disintegration of *Chi* (material force) in somebody could be stopped for some reason, so the lucky or unlucky dead man was able to continue getting involved in the community if he wanted. As for the female ghost, she kept the connection through the inappropriate intercourses as we mentioned above.

Neo-Confucians believed that the best way to conquer the fear or avoid the annoying interference is to place your heart plain, which means to calm down and keep your mind clear. Everything explainable had nothing to do with scare, if only you had a good idea of *Li* 理 (the Principle). Apart from the disintegration principle in the material force theory, another significant opinion was that *Li-Kuei* was brought about by human beings. In other words, the capacity of the ghostly interference was entitled by improper human lust or cognition. Obviously, it is a point from a moral perspective. Different from the severe Buddhism method, Neo-Confucians accepted the reality of *li-Kuei* and made it theoretically reasonable by developing both the material force theory and the moral philosophy.

4. The Resurrection of Female Ghosts

That is why they were able to respond to an uncanny question, namely the resurrection of female ghosts. Neo-Confucians talked little about resurrection as same as the Confucianism tradition and just said it is not the common principle, or, not the ultimate principle when they were asked. Even in *I Chien Chih*, a ghost legend in Sung Dynasty mentioned above, resurrection is infrequent. A typical resurrection story in *I Chien Chih* is the one we excerpted in the first Part, about the gorgeously dressed ghost who lived in a small hut at the corner of wall. We knew that she made the hero physically exhausted and inappetent in food, but at the end of the story, she was brought back to life and was named Ms. Hu.

It is so rare a plot that even Feng Meng-lung 馮夢龍 (1574- 1646), a popular novelist in Ming Dynasty 明代, was shocked. In his book *Ching Tien Pao Chien* 情天寶鑑 (Recordings of amour affaris), he told a story with a similar beginning but with a totally contrast ending that the ghost chased after the man and the man died. Of course, it is not a happy ending that Feng thought was the adversity of the hero, but not of the heroine, I mean, the female ghost.

Importantly, the resurrection was rather common in novels in Ming Dynasty, Ming Novelists and readers believed that it was the emotional feeling or love that brought life back in respond to the thriving emotionalism philosophy back then, while it was totally not the case in Sung Dynasty. So it is out of the question to interpret such an amazing resurrection story as well as a sad story from the view of love.

Another interpretation is definitely feminism and proposed by, for example, Zeitlin. Distinguished from the fragile and negative attributes, power and freedom characterize female ghosts. Thanks to the death, female ghosts are endowed with superhuman power, like teleport or invisibility. As Zeitlin (2007) says,

Despite the supposed fragility of such a disembodied soul, the impression is most often of her self-determination and initiative in contrast to living women and her dominance over her male partner. Death is what empowers her and frees her to act upon her own desires.¹¹

The mixture of these two understandings, interestingly, reflected itself in Fuhrmann's paper on Nang Nak, a famous ghost wife in a classical ghost story in Thailand. Fuhrmann believes that it is both love and power that give her a period of the posthumous life.

Now back to the story of Ms. Hu, so what happened to her actually? What is special of her resurrection? My opinion is that the resurrection of Ms. Hu is a Confucian anti-fear mechanism, which means literati believe that female ghosts should be assimilated in the human relation instead of being alienated. In other words, the fear originates from the absence of the human relation, and from the incompatibility with the principle that have already reached the conclusions in human cognition.

In the story, the parents of Mr. Hu found that he was abnormal and asked him what happened. They doubted that the woman was a ghost, so they persuaded Mr. Hu to take a test that is to insist on the woman having some food. The woman hesitated for a while and then picked up the chopsticks. As soon as she chewed and swallowed, she lost the ability of teleport and invisibility. And as soon as these powers were deposed, she became a real woman, namely a female human person, and meanwhile, became the wife of Mr. Hu and the daughter-in-law of his parents. The story is well constructed, for his parents entered the room immediately she took the food and they witnessed her transform from the ghost to the human person. Shortly, Mr. Hu dug out the coffin to prove it empty and proposed to the woman. Since then, she was named Ms. Hu. And that's also the name of the story.

Ghosts who are unready or unwilling to die are believed to reside in a totally private sphere which seems invisible, or even nowhere for human beings, although they tried their best to stay in the human relation, only resulted in disturbing human daily life. Few of them were brought back to life in the end. To some extent, it reveals that a sort of exclusion is implied in the Confucianism human relations. That means, only those who obey the proper relations or values could be included or be connected. Instead of stealing the positive material force from living men through inappropriate intercourses, taking the earthly food was suggested as a prudential alternative, and also a metaphor of assimilation, entering human relation and of accepting its limitations and

¹¹ Zeitlin, *The phantom Heroine*, 11

restrictions. On the other hand, as long as she became the human person, or realized the resurrection, she entered the human relation, being the wife and the daughter-in-law. These two transformations are synchronical.

Distinguished from animals, ghosts have more similarities with human beings, for they less or more come from living men or women. Around 700 B.C., a Confucian named Mencius proposed a famous proposition that the difference between men and animals lie in the four good trends in the human dispositions, which animals are short of. Capacities of judgment, cognition and custom- practicing are guaranteed in the four trends. It is impossible for the animal to change itself to a man or woman, not to say to achieve Confucian fulfillment.

Neo-Confucians put forwards more interpretations for the difference. They said, the disposition or the endowed material force varies from person to person, while, the fulfillment, is possible for even *Tu jen* 涂人 (idlers on the road). But, for animals, the significant deficiency in their material force blocks them from complete self-achievement for good.

However, man possesses the principle that can penetrate this obstruction, whereas in birds and animals, though they also possess this nature, it is nevertheless restricted by their physical structure, which creates such a degree of obstruction as to be impenetrable. In the case of love, for example, in tigers and wolves, or in the sacrificial rites in the wolf and otter, or in the righteousness in bees and ants, only the obstruction to a particular part of their nature is penetrated, just as light penetrates only a crack¹².

So what about the difference between ghosts and human beings? Confucius told his disciple that you would never have a good idea of ghosts when you even do not have a good idea of human beings, and refused to provide more explanations. That was the tradition what neo-Confucians followed, although they developed the material force theory and suggested that ghosts embodied the dissipation of the material force in human beings. But is there any implication in such dissipation? It is obvious in ghostly stories and even in Neo-Confucian conversation that capacities remained, never missing in ghosts, and that was why they are a kind of quasi-men.

The ghost we talk about nowadays assembles the heaven for its invisibility, and assembles the human beings for its motions. Does it mean that the ghost who is named the dead person possesses the capacities of both the heaven and the human beings?¹³

*The ghost plays by the spirit and mind of human beings.*¹⁴

¹² A source book in Chinese Philosophy, translated and compiled by Chan Wing Tsit, 522

¹³ A source book in Chinese Philosophy, translated and compiled by Chan Wing Tsit, 67

¹⁴ Chen Chun, *Peichi Tzu-I* 北溪字□·鬼神, 78

Capacities remained, while, the community, or the sphere where they could put the capacity into practices was totally deprived after the death. If *Kuei* (the ghost) is a term that refers to the deficiency or the scarcity, that means, not only the disintegration in the material force interpreted by the neo-Confucians in Sung Dynasty, but also the absence in the community, or, the human relations maintained by almost all Confucians.

It is obvious that ghostly interference with human affairs was an illusion of staying in the human relations, which only brought about the resolute alienation; actually they were already excluded from the clans from the beginning. *Wu-Kuei* 無歸 (no dependence, no home to return), for a ghost – whether a male ghost or a female one – is a term that means intentionally deviating or being excluded from the clan and the method to comfort or come down the ghosts is that a material or an immaterial dependence should be provided.

The next month, Tzu Chan 子□ entitled Kung-sun Hsieh 公孫洩 and the son of Pa Yu 伯有 with Tafu 大夫 (the senior official) to comfort the ghost of Pa Yu, and the haunted events called an end. Tzu Tai-shu 子大叔 asked the reason, and Tzu Chan answered, the ghost will not haunt if he has a dependency, so I find a dependency for him.¹⁵

Interestingly, for a woman – I mean a human woman – *Wu-Kuei* is also a term that means not getting married and consequently being excluded from the clan. The clan is what the community, or the human relation mean to a dead person, and is the only proper way to preserve the link with his/ her descendants and relatives. It is the same opinion held by Neo-Confucians, and they added that the material force of the same origin is what connects people in the one clan and makes the sacrifice rituals reasonable. So, the two definitions of *Wu-Kuei* before and after the death are very similar for a woman. And it to some extent changed the non-dependence status from the intentional endeavors for continuous life to the passive exclusion, reluctant.

The answer to the question why Ms. Hu was connected with the community by a new relation (getting married to a man who was a total stranger to her in her first life) instead of the previous one (returning to her own family) also lies in the clan system. Only through the husband- wife formation could Ms. Hu completely get rid of the both two conditions of *Wu-Kuei* status and came back to the human community, but the parents- daughter formation.

¹⁵ *Tso Chuan* 左□·昭公七年

Conclusion

As the conclusion, Confucians and Neo-Confucians believe that, if you understand the principle in a proper way, or in their term, if you place your heart plain, and find a proper place in the human relation for ghosts instead of alienating, then there is no need to fear. Maybe, “fear not” was the mantra that Ms. Hu suggested to Mr. Hu at their first meeting. The human relation is more than significant, but necessary for self-fulfillment, which is the opinion shared with Communitarians. The material force theory proposed by Neo-Confucians in Sung Dynasty don’t stop us but help us reach the principle through obtaining a better knowledge of the ghost.

Furthermore, regarding to the deficient vitality in the definition of yin, and the clan system, the development of the material forces theory in Sung Dynasty tried to erase the horror brought by the death, but support the opinion that yin is a kind of deficiency less or more. And so is the woman.

If we compare the narration of excessive femininity with that of the female disposition, the similarity will never be neglected.

If a person is endowed with moderate yin, then the person will appear as positively gentle, in another word, kindly; but if endowed with excessive yin, then the person will appear as negatively gentle, in another word, coward.¹⁶

Question: Women always fear when anything crops up. Is it also because their material endowment unbalanced?

Answer: Female jen (humanity) is only limited to love.¹⁷

Though Chu Hsi tried to talk about the gender problem in a cautious way, the treatise still implies that the degree of yin in women is not moderate but excessive so that the yin-yang is unbalanced and the disposition is one-sided. Consequently, they have much more difficulties in achieving the Confucian fulfillment. So the complete assimilation will never happen since the sexual division is impossible to break.

I believe that the feminists will never buy such a Confucian opinion. And it suggests that more close studies on the specific content of the human relations, or the specific values in the community should be conducted in Confucianism.

¹⁶ *Hsing li chun shu kou Chieh* 性理群書句解. 理性命第二十二篇

¹⁷ Chu Hsi, *Chu Tzu Yulei* 朱子語類, 57

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