Law of the Ghost: Late Nineteenth Century Ghost Stories in China and Britain

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Abstract
The law of the human world is often seen as inadequate in implementing justice, so that imaginations about an alternative law appear frequently in literature, and that is the law of the ghost. Cultural imaginations of the ghost in both East and West are closely related with ideas of justice. In traditional Chinese literature and folklore the ghost is often perceived as a force to rectify wrongs that cannot be satisfactorily redressed in the patriarchal patrilineal society, and a genre of supernatural short stories called *zhiguai* abounds with ghosts taking their just revenge. In English literature, the avenging ghost has featured prominently in Gothic fiction and ghost stories, its moral connotation sometimes ambiguous. This paper focuses on the revenging female ghost motif in stories by late nineteenth century Chinese writer Xuan Ding and British writer Vernon Lee and explores how justice is effected in a matrix of gender and power, and the difference in the conceptualization of justice of both cultures.

Keywords: justice, revenge, female ghosts, Vernon Lee, Xuan Ding

Ghost and Justice theorized

Every culture has its literature, religion and folklore concerning ghosts and the tremendously rich symbolism of the figure makes it a particularly suitable agent for exploring the cognitive limits of a culture. In this paper I discuss the implication for people's understanding of justice in some ghost narratives by late nineteenth century Chinese and English writers.

How is ghost related to the concept of justice? Modern theorization of the ghost inevitably begins with Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny". Freud found out in this work that the German antonyms "heimliche" and "unheimliche" actually merge in the meaning of something "hidden" and "secretive". Thus, Freud was able to arrive at the conclusion that the frightening effect of unheimliche actually lies in heimliche: "the term 'uncanny' [unheimliche in German] applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open" (1919/1955, p.132). This conceptualization of the uncanny is very pertinent to our understanding of the ghost. Ghost is a perfect example of the uncanny as it is and is not the long since deceased familiar one. Its returning signals what was once buried — whether past secrets, desires or crimes —is now disclosed and causes trouble in the present. In this sense, the appearance of the ghost is a sure sign of something having gone wrong, and the returning also provides an opportunity to set things back to order.

Then why would the ghost return, and what does it want from the present? Derrida's 1994 notion of the specter offered us another way to look at the question. There he used a central ghost metaphor to explain his ideas — the ghost of old King Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The ghost of the old king returns to haunt the prince, and it looks at Hamlet in what Derrida described as a "visor effect": he looks without being seen (p.7). In that sense the ghost is law personified to prince Hamlet: he demands an obligation from the descendant: that past wrongs must be redressed and what is unjust must be rectified. Derrida later returned to the story of Hamlet's father in an interview:

> The specter is not simply someone we see coming back, it is someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed, as if by the law: we are 'before the law', without any possible symmetry, without reciprocity, insofar as the other is watching only us, concerns only us, we who are observing it (in the same way that one observes and respects the law) without even being able to meet its gaze". (2013, p.40)

So ghost for Derrida embodies law, or a demand for justice. Whenever it returns, the living owes it a moral obligation to right past wrongs. This conceptualization of the ghost actually matches well with the context where ghost may appear in Chinese culture. In a society governed by Confucianism, the appearance of ghosts itself is an anomaly, as ghosts are outcasts of Confucian patrilineal patriarchal society, either created by a violent death or the death of young unmarried women who have not been properly integrated into either the father's or the husband's clan (Wolf, 1974; Yu, 1987; Feuchtwang, 2010). But at the same time, the return of the ghost is often the first step to mend this undesirable situation. Liu Yuan-ju in his study of Chinese Six Dynasties ghost stories termed the narrative model that informs the ghost's appearance and propitiation as "guiding the deviant towards the norm" (2009, p.269).

The appearance of the ghost presents a problem to be solved, but the narrative unfolds to channel the unnatural into the natural and the unorthodox into the orthodox, so that in the end the wrongs are redressed, the angry ghost appeased, and the moral order re-established.

Liu Yun-ju's conceptualization of these ghost narratives implies a deeply flawed world, where human foibles leave many people feel themselves deprived of justice. Ghost as a supernatural entity enjoys abnormal power denied of ordinary human beings, and its return may offer an opportunity for change. This is precisely the narrative motivation that underlines much Chinese ghost literature, as Paolo Santangelo observed of these ghost narratives:

> It is an established tradition that these stories —in the unfolding of the plot or in the conclusion — exhorted virtue and punished vice, warning readers to follow morals and to worry about their own futures: in the end good and evil actions were always punished or rewarded…. Destiny is moral and impartial (2013, p.68).

Santangelo connects ghost stories with the author's view of destiny and cosmic order. For him, all the ghosts and spirits that populate these stories are allegories for human selves, and their fates act out human destiny. Therefore, the revenging ghosts and all the apparatus of the underworld judicial system are seen as a supplement to the law of the living world. Whether or not can the ghost obtain what it wants delivers a message about people's view of cosmic order: is the cosmos moral and impartial, or is it just indifferent to human sufferings?

Across East and West, some similar questions have been asked about ghost. As a social anomaly and an indicator of hidden injustice, ghost has always served as a challenger to established social and epistemological structures, yet it was especially so in the late nineteenth century UK and China when views of cosmic order, perceptions of self, gender and history were put under question. My own questions in this paper start from those left by Santangelo: if ghost narrative reveals the author's cosmic view, then what is that view on heaven and human destiny in the late 19th century? What are the other factors that impact on the efficacy of a revenge? What is the effect of the ghost's return, apart from revenge?

Ghost Narrative Traditions in UK and China

Both UK and China have a long literary tradition in ghost narratives, and my comparative reading of ghosts stories are conceptualized in such literary contexts. "Ghost stories are as old and older than literature", as Julia Briggs remarks (1977, p.25). In Europe, ghosts appeared in texts as early as Homer's *Odysseus* and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. By Elizabethan time, ghosts and other supernatural entities like witches and demons had become a regular feature of drama to arouse sentiments of fear, a technique greatly admired by later Gothic fiction pioneers like Ann Radcliffe. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* presented the audience with perhaps the most enduring ghost in English literature. The eighteenth century rationality denied and ridiculed ghosts, yet it also witnessed the rise of Gothic fiction which is singularly obsessed with horror and the supernatural, to which the modern ghost story is immensely indebted. Ghost elements are a stock feature of many Gothic novels. The

arguably first of this genre, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), begins with a supernatural incident — Manfred's son being crushed to death by a giant helmet, very likely a ghost's deed. The vogue of the Gothic fiction opened a vast arena for supernatural characters in literature, and it was in this background that ghost story of its own came along in the nineteenth century. Sir Walter Scott's "Wandering Willie's Tale" and "The Tapestried Chamber", inserted in his 1824 novel *Redgauntlet*, arguably presented the first ghost story in its modern form. Charles Dickens was another important Victorian man of letters in the evolution of the English ghost story. He not only wrote many himself, but also by editing and soliciting ghost story collections in his magazine *Household Words* (later *All the Year Round*) had helped to establish the reading of ghost stories as a Christmas tradition by the mid-century. Ghost stories enjoyed even more popularity towards the turn of the twentieth century. Unlikely writers in the naturalistic camp like Conon Doyle, Grant Allen and H. G. Wells all contributed to this genre.

This brief sketch of the English ghost story tradition however shadows a vast number of lesser known writers of the genre, and many of them were women. A group of female writers especially in the latter half of the century had participated in this highly marketable genre: Elizabeth Gaskell, Amelia B. Edward, Catherine Crowe, Mrs Oliphant, Mrs Riddell, and around the turn of the century, Vernon Lee (née Violet Paget) and E. Nesbit. Not only that some first-class ghost stories in English have been penned by women, but also there is this simple fact that women seem to have written more ghost stories, although an exact calculation and comparison of the figures by each sex is impossible.[1] The affinity between women and ghost stories are noted by many and are deservedly attracting more scholarly attention in recent years (Dickerson, 1996; Wallace, 2004; Makala, 2013). Not only was Victorian women's marginal social status comparable to that of the invisible ghost, the unique subversive potential of ghost and the supernatural narrative framework also proved a good vehicle for women writers to vent their fears and desires.

The corpus of ghost literature in China is a genre known as *zhiguai*. "*Zhi*" means records while "*guai*" means the strange or the anomaly, so *zhiguai* by definition is a genre about the anomaly. It is a kind of short story about the supernatural, dating back to the chaotic Six Dynasties period (A.D. 220-589) when Buddhism and Taoism were gaining momentum. The strange in this case includes not only ghosts but also immortals, devils, karmic retributions, etc., but stories about ghosts constitute a large proportion.

Since the day of its inception, there existed a tension between *zhiguai* writing and the Confucian orthodox, and it is the same case with narrative of and beliefs in ghosts. The ghost, an anomaly under Confucian conception of the cosmos which only comes back when something goes wrong, is both a critique of the validity of the orthodox and a production of it. It is a literal embodiment of the kind of discourse that *zhiguai* writing plays in: on the one hand, it is a supplement to the mainstream Confucian teaching (a didactic minor discourse), while on the other hand, a self-conscious departure from it, as evidenced in one *zhiguai* collection's title— *Zibuyu*, "what the master would not discuss".

[1] Richard Dalby, in his preface to *Victorian Ghost Stories by Noted Women*, claimed that at least half of the Victorian ghost stories were written by women, while Jessica Salmonson estimates that as much as seventy percent of the Victorian supernatural fiction was women's work. See M. E. Makala, 2013, p.14.

With this paradoxical tension with the orthodox, *zhiguai* writing resembles Gothic fiction, its counterpart genre in English literature which is equally obsessed with narratives of the uncanny and the supernatural. Like the Gothic, *zhiguai* is most conservative when it endorses the dominant gender and class structures, yet it is the most subversive when it gives a free rein to dark desires and supernatural realities, realities that critique and can potentially undermine the normal world we live in.

Another point worth mentioning is that *zhigua*i is a genre written in classical Chinese instead of vernacular Chinese, whose flowery syntax can be mastered only after years of classical training. As education in ancient China in most cases was an exclusive privilege of men, *zhiguai* was exclusively a genre written by men and for men, constituting an important attribute of the male literati collective identity (Chiang, 2005; Chan, 1998). Therefore, the gender of the writer of *zhiguai* and English ghost stories is an interesting differing point of the two genres, which may have influenced how gender relations are represented respectively in these stories.

Avenging Ghosts as an Agency of Justice?

While it is the male writers in China as opposed to female writers in Britain that have a closer bond to ghost narratives, one common feature can be found in their stories: the frequent appearance of the avenging female ghosts. Why are women more prone to return to haunt? One explanation might be the invisible yet powerful status of ghost. Ghosts indeed a powerful figure bordering on our world and the beyond. They are the liminal entities "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, p.94); thus they are "structurally invisible" in a certain social context as they are no longer classified or not yet classified. However, it is this liminality that makes them dangerous, polluting, and therefore powerful. As Cox and Gilbert remarked, "the ghost story…deals with power and thus might be expected to appeal to those who felt the absence of self-determination in their own lives" (1987, xiii). Historian Kang Xiaofei identified the official power in a society which is more often attributed to men and the unofficial power attributed to marginal groups and proposes that the latter can negotiate and resist the power hierarchy from down under (2006, p.7). She focused on how power is exercised and appropriated in the fox cult in China as shown in folklore and literature, yet the same power of the fox can be easily translated to that of ghost,[2] a close neighbour of fox in the nether world:

> Feared yet worshipped, the fox embodied popular perceptions of marginal groups, ranging from daughters and daughters-in-law in family life to courtesans, entertainers, spirit mediums, migrants, and outlaws in society at large. .... [W]ielding the power of the fox in everyday life involved a complex process of negotiating, safeguarding, and challenging well-established social and cultural boundaries in late imperial and modern Chinese society (2006, p.7).

[2] Foxes and ghosts are almost synonyms in Chinese folklore and *zhiguai* tales and in many cases are portrayed as interchangeably.

The social group that was often denied power and systematically advantaged in both nineteenth century China and UK was women. Women were alienated to the margins of patriarchal society and they often lacked the power to fight for their rights. The supernatural power of the ghost therefore is something that the disadvantaged group can utilize to obtain their goals. The otherworld identity of the ghost both marks the subject's subaltern status and gives her power to make trouble in the human world. Therefore in ghost stories, the returning haunting ghosts may function as an agency of justice, performing personal vendetta or repaying righteous people with reward.

In the following section I focus on several stories by Chinese late Qing dynasty writer Xuan Ding (1832-1880) and one story by English writer Vernon Lee (1856-1935). These writers are near contemporaries. Acknowledging that the late nineteenth century China differed vastly from the UK, one feature did underline both societies: it was an age of tremendous change when conventional gender and social norms were being seriously challenged. All these stories focus on the revenge of beautiful women, whose sexuality had made them victims of men's violence and treachery in their previous lives and they now return to have their vengeance. Can their revenge be successful? How is justice conceptualized and exercised through their revenge? The differing lots of the ghosts provided by Chinese and English writers offer different ways to conceptualize justice.

Different Versions of Justice

Chinese Text

As discussed above, *zhiguai* stories, which often stage the characters' lives in a bizarre supernatural world, offers a good arena to test ideas on justice and destiny. In these stories the wronged ones, now returning as ghosts, seek to rectify the unjust law of the human world so that in the end destiny is shown to be moral and impartial. Does this view of a moral cosmos still hold true in the late nineteenth century? An analysis of Xuan Ding's stories will show the complexity of the issue. The stories I discuss are from Xuan Ding's *zhiguai* collection *Yeyu qiudeng lu* (Records in a Rainy Night by an Autumn Lamp) originally published as two books in 1877 and 1880 respectively (two volumes in the 1995 edition I consult in this paper). Xuan Ding's volumes present many examples of ghost revenge. Not only human ghosts can return to revenge, a sense of justice seems also to instruct the spirits of animals. Three stories of avenging animal spirits, "The Bull Head" (vol.2, *juan.*4), "The Snow White Cat" (vol.2, *juan.*2) and "The Stubborn Turtle"（vol.2, *juan.*6) all have their avengers not animal fairies but ordinary animals which were wrongly abused and slaughtered by humans. The sheer resentment of being wronged enables these otherwise lesser spirits to effectively realize their revenge on the human wrong doer, seemingly to admonish the reader that even injustice done on animals will not be tolerated.

However, when it comes to the human world, things become complex and the scale of justice can be easily tilted by people's maneuvering of power. Xuan Ding offers his sympathy for the wronged female ghosts in several stories: "Jiang Xiaoyu" (vol. 2, *juan.*6), "Mizhu" (vol. 1, *juan.* 4), "Yuhong ce" (vol. 1, *juan.* 1) and "Lieshang Jinxiao" (vol. 1, *juan.*3). Can justice be finally carried out for these women? The author's answer however is not positive. The only story in which the wronged woman's revenge is effective is "Jiang Xiaoyu", yet in a gratuitous and indirect way.

The girl named Jiang Xiaoyu was cheated into marriage by a powerful man who took his brother's name as a coil, and easily abandoned when she was deemed inconvenient. The shame drove the whole desperate Jiang family to suicide. Many years later, the avenging ghost of Xiaoyu, with the help of a Taoist, was finally able to return to the powerful family which ruined her. Her revenge took years to accomplish: the cheater brothers of the household feigned each other's name separately in more shameful deeds and gradually the vice was exposed and the family fell in several law suits.

This seems to be an effective revenge; however, there is the question of the ghost's real agency. Is the cheater family's fall really caused by the ghost's revenge, or is it just the result of mere coincidence? To interpret the sequences in this story as the just revenge of a wronged ghost will confirm the reassuring message that ultimate justice can finally be effected by ghosts, but actually the story suppresses any mention of the ghost after the episode of the Taoist, therefore the agency of the ghost is questionable.

In another story "Yuhong ce" (The Book of Red Jade), Xuan Ding exposes the difficulty of a female ghost's revenge more explicitly. A prestigious man was one day suddenly taken to the underground court of the City God to face the accusation of a sister-in-law he had wronged in his previous life. Seducing and then abandoning the widowed sister-in-law, he caused the woman's suicide and now after thirty years' imprisonment sentenced to those who committed suicide, the wronged ghost was finally allowed to plead her case. However, from the beginning the City God and the lower officials of the underground court were aligned on the man's side. They spared no efforts in maneuvering for his benefits within the limit of underworld judicial system. Consulting the "Yuhong ce", a chronicle that records meticulously everyone's good deeds, the City God decided that the man's two good deeds (rejecting a girl's sexual advance and patronizing a beggar) is enough to compensate for his vice of seducing the widow, and the widow had only herself to blame for losing her chastity. In the end, the man was spared and the wronged widow's grievance was simply ignored. The existence of this "Yuhong ce" as a moral balance book seems to be evidence of overall cosmic justice, yet upon second look it only exposes how easily that justice is distorted by the imbalance of power between men and women. Men and women are bound by different moral standards: women are more vulnerable in adultery and also shoulder more blame. Just like the law of this world, the law of the underworld is represented by men and favors men.

All in all, we can see in these stories, the ghost's revenge is not easy, for even in the supernatural sphere, gender, social and economic status of the ghost largely determines whether justice can be realized or not. Ghosts can exercise certain powers, but it is still a power deeply inscribed by prejudices of the law of this world.

On the English side, I focus on one story by Vernon Lee. Lee was a troublesome figure both as a woman and as a writer, as in both spheres she traversed the fields that were previously reserved only for men.[3] Her fantastic story collection, *Hauntings* (1890), offers exquisite exploration of queer figures from the past that return to upset

[3] Lee was allegedly a lesbian, remained single all her life and had several women partners. Her expertise in aestheticism and Italian art history exhibited her ambition in intellectualism which was in most case a men's privilege. See Zorn, 2003.

the present. The story “Amour Dure” plays on the trope of the femme fatale and offers us a different female ghost.

The story is related in the form of a diary by Spiridion Trepka, a contemporary young historian sent to an old Italian town Urbania to research on its local history. Gradually Spiridion was fascinated by a sixteenth century noble woman named Medea da Carpi, a femme fatale who literally stepped on men’s corpses on her way to power. No man could escape her fatal charm, and every man fell at her feet once they saw her and was willing to die for her. Medea was finally put to death by Duke Robert, her brother-in-law, just as she was about to make herself the regent of Urbania. After seeing her portrait, the historian fell in love with Medea too and followed her instructions to free her from the Duke’s curse so that she can be resurrected. He was finally able to do so, and of course, he paid by his life, just like so many of Medea’s lovers before him.

The story forms a stark contrast with the Chinese ones just examined. This Medea was as beautiful as her Chinese counterparts, but was she really a victim, or did she actually deserve her violent death? The official historiographies that endured and came to Spiridion’s hands all favour the Duke and portray Medea as a witch and a murderess, living up to the reputation of her Greek namesake. But Spiridion had his own interpretation of this woman’s history. For him, Medea was a victim suffering from the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of men’s history. The more he was haunted by Medea’s story, the more he was determined to revive Medea’s history. He contemplated Medea’s circumstances from the woman’s perspective:

> Yes; I can understand Medea. … A marriage, let it be noted, between an old soldier of fifty and a girl of sixteen. Reflect what that means: it means that this imperious woman is soon treated like a chattel, made roughly to understand that her business is to give the Duke an heir, not advice; that she must never ask "wherefore this or that?" that she must courtesy before the Duke's counselors, his captains, his mistresses; that, at the least suspicion of rebelliousness, she is subject to his foul words and blows; at the least suspicion of infidelity, to be strangled or starved to death, or thrown down an oubliette. …. Suppose she know that she must strike or be struck? Why, she strikes, or gets someone to strike for her. (Lee, 2004, p.101).

Spiridion’s re-enactment of Medea’s story certainly reminds one of Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess”. The pathetic situation of Medea is laid bare: even a noble woman in the sixteenth century patriarchal Italy had actually no power of her own, apart from her sexual appeal to men. So instead of being stricken like Browning’s duchess, Medea struck first and used her sexual power to her own advantage. Admittedly, Spiridion’s re-interpretation may not be the true version of Medea’s history either, as he in his frenzy to revive Medea is nothing more than a jealousy lover trying to prove himself better than Medea’s other lovers. But nevertheless, the haunting of the ghost at least makes it possible to imagine an alternative version of history, and for women long suppressed and demonized in hi-story, that is justice finally realized. In this sense, the importance of the ghost’s return is not to revenge per se, as the story actually stops at the moment of Medea’s resurrection before she takes any action against her enemies. What is significant is the ghost’s coming-back itself. The unsettling woman ghost reminds one of the existence of a suppressed version of women’s history, and through the re-telling of her story,

this version is revealed to the daylight. This is the truly uncanny in Freud's sense, and offers a new way to conceptualize justice.

Conclusion

In both Chinese and English literature, the powerful yet powerless figure of the ghost has been appropriated by writers to conceptualize an alternative way to gain justice for socially and economically disadvantaged groups. A recurrent motif in these ghost narratives is the revenging female ghost, reflecting the marginalized status of women in both societies while at the same it conjures up ways to negotiate power for the disadvantaged. A comparative study of several stories on the revenging ghost by Chinese and English writers in the late nineteenth century shows how writers in each society conceptualized justice as represented by the law of the ghost, as well as how gender discourse is integrated in the exercise of power through the supernatural. The Chinese writer Xuan Ding imagined the supplementary judicial system of the ghosts as mirroring that of our world; justice in both worlds is a game of power where the subject's gender, social and economic status to some extent influences the outcome of the revenge. The English writer Vernon Lee offers another way to view justice: justice may be a conditional concept as different parties have their own interpretation of justice and how we conceptualize the world is largely determined by the version of history we inherit. Therefore, justice may also be realized by reviving a suppressed version of history.

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