

The Narrative Motif of the Ghost in Classical Chinese Literature

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Abstract:

The first part of this paper presents a brief history of the ghost narrative motif in classical Chinese literature, arguing that this motif first appears in Chinese culture during the Shang Dynasty (16 c. - 1066 BC), and it is a recurring concept defined in the *Book of Liezi* and it is also present in the Daoist principle yin - yang. Despite the Confucian tradition of rejecting the belief in ghosts and any other metaphysical elements, ever since the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907) the literary motif of the ghost appears in the so-called fantastic stories *chuanqi* which will later influence the strange stories *zhiguai* written by Pu Songling (1640 - 1715), and will serve as inspiration for Guan Hanqing (1225 - 1302) when he writes the famous *zaju* play *Snow in Midsummer*. This paper is an aesthetic, hermeneutic and anthropological analysis of the concept of the wandering ghost or spirit in classical Chinese literature, starting from the evolution of the character *gui* 鬼 which means ghost in Chinese. I will observe the narrative role of the ghost in classical Chinese literature, using as representative examples literary works such as the *chuanqi* play *The Peony Pavillion* written by Tang Xianzu (1550 – 1616), the strange story *zhiguai*, “Gongsun Jiuniang” by Pu Songling, and the *zaju* play, *Snow in Midsummer*, written by Guan Hanqing.

Key Words: Ghost, Narrative Motif, Classical, Chinese Literature.

Introduction

In the present paper, I analyze the narrative motif of the ghost found in classical Chinese literature, namely in the fantastic stories *chuanqi*, in the strange stories *zhiguai* and in the *zaju* plays and its role in the works in which the authors integrate them. I will focus on the social significance of ghosts starting with a brief presentation of the concept of ghosts and spirits in Chinese culture and how this concept translates into a literary motif that will be perpetuated throughout the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties.

The emergence and evolution of the concept of ghosts and wandering spirits in Chinese culture

In any culture, ghosts, spirits or supernatural appearances are based on myths, rites, folklore, religion and superstitions that are perpetuated over the years in the subconscious of the masses. Chinese culture is no exception to these beliefs about the supernatural, as the concept of the ghost appeared during the first dynasties in the history of ancient China. In his comparative study of ghosts in *zaju* plays and Japanese *noh* plays, Zhao (2015, p. 4-5) presents the evolution of the notion of spirits or ghosts in Chinese culture. Since the Shang dynasty (16 c. - 1066 BC) there is evidence to support the belief in the existence of ghosts, such as the character 𪚩 engraved on the oracular bones of that time. This character is made up of two pictograms, at the top is the pictogram *fu* that represents the ghost's head, and at the base is the pictogram *ren* that means person. Thus it can be deduced that this character designated a supernatural entity that took on the appearance of a person. The original form of the character *gui* 鬼, which is used nowadays for the word ghost, is found on inscriptions on bronze objects from the Zhou dynasty (1066 - 221 BC) and in manuscripts during the Warring States (475 - 221 BC). This character is used with the meaning of ghost more and more often in the first Confucian classics, and until the end of the Warring States period it denotes exclusively “ghost” or “soul of the dead”. Zhao (2015, p. 5) also claims that around the third century BC, the character *gui* 鬼 is defined in the context of earlier Confucian classics, in the section “Shixun” (“Explaining Instructions”) in *Erya* (*Approaching the Correct*), the oldest glossary dictionary, meaning “to return” or “that which returns”, and it is interpreted as “a dead person being a person who returns”, but it is not specified where this person returns.

The motive of the wandering spirit in the *Book of Liezi* and the *yin-yang* principle

In the *Book of Liezi*, Liezi (ca. 5th c. BCE/1990, p. 23) stated that the spirit belongs to heaven and the bones belong to the earth. What belongs to heaven is pure and light, whereas what belongs to the earth is impure, dense. According to this classic, when the spirit leaves the body, it returns to its natural true state and that is why ghosts are called *gui* 鬼. *Gui* 鬼 means to return to one's true home, which means that the one who dies returns to their true spiritual origin, not their house in which they lived during their lifetime. The dualism between body and spirit is also found in the dualistic conception of the soul *hunpo* 魂魄, which is probably based on the influence of the ancient principle *yin - yang*. Zhao (2015, p. 5) describes this view in his article saying that the soul is composed of an ethereal part called *hun* 魂 and an earthly part called *po* 魄. *Hun* 魂 is attributed to the *yang* part of the soul, which is positive, spiritual, masculine, bright, active, heavenly light, while *po* 魄 is allocated to the *yin* part which is negative, material, feminine, dark, passive, earthly and heavy. *Hun* 魂 and *po* 魄 are opposite and complementary and they keep the harmony in the body throughout a person's

life, but at one's death the soul leaves the body and thus *hun* 魂 will separate from *po* 魄, the *yang* part of the soul rising to the sky and the *yin* part staying on earth. In Chinese ghost stories, the concept of *po* 魄 is rarely used, with ghosts being referred to as *hun* 魂 when they appear. And yet, as Zeitlin (2007, p. 5) argues in her book, *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature*, this dual notion persists in the literary imagination, given that in some works ghosts are represented as earthly and bound to their grave, and sometimes as weightless, wandering the world. The character *hun* 魂 appears in many terms that refer to ghosts: *youhun* 游魂 ghosts from beyond the grave, *youhun* 游魂 wandering ghosts, *yuanhun* 冤魂 wronged ghosts, *guhun* 孤魂 lonely ghosts, *huanhun* 还魂 ghosts who returned to avenge their death.

A ghost is thus defined as leaving the world of the living and never returning. At the heart of this definition are the superstitions of Chinese people who want to keep ghosts at bay, making sure that the souls of those who are no longer alive have a place to return to so that they do not become wandering spirits to haunt those left behind. As proof since ancient times, there are the rites of the ancestors to take care of the soul after death.

The narrative motif of the ghost in the fantastic stories *chuanqi*

The supernatural has been found in various forms in Chinese literature over the centuries. During the Tang (618 - 907) and Song (960 - 1127) Dynasties, the fantastic stories *chuanqi* were initially in the form of short prose transmitted orally, and later took on a dramatic form. In these stories, real, historical and fantastic facts intertwine, and the literary motives were limited to the motive of love and the motive of the miraculous. As Chiang (2005, p. 21) argues in her work, *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China*, the narrative structure of the short fantastic stories *chuanqi* consists of anecdotes, tales of the fantastic that have supernatural elements and fantastic characters, such as foxes, monkeys, spirits, gods, which offer alternatives for the personal fulfilment of the authors, thus being considered a fantastic discourse of the self in which desires and anxieties are projected onto a symbolic alter ego. Most *chuanqi* stories have complicated plots with complex descriptions and finish with a revealing moral.

Love stories in the form of *chuanqi* are usually based on the model of the girl with supernatural features and the rebellious, brave romantic man. Their biographical value consists in the fact that the authors project their own personalities, fantasies in the work. According to Confucian values, men play an important role in society, so the need for the fantastic could not be transposed into the male character. The men in these stories were consequently outlined in a social context. The theme of the dream is often encountered in these *chuanqi* fantastic stories, thus exposing the consequences of the dream on reality; the lack of a delimitation between dream and reality expresses the idea that the dream is not inferior to reality. *Chuanqi* authors shape their narrative discourse according to historical notes and biographies but give importance to the art of narration,

which is much more visible in their stories than in biographies.

As a dramatic literary genre *chuanqi* developed in the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644). It has strong narrative tendencies and the authors prefer love stories, miraculous and fantastic elements just like in *chuanqi* prose. In the introduction to the book *Censored by Confucius: Ghost Stories by Yuan Me, Kam & Edwards* (2015, p. xxiii) present the recurring themes of *chuanqi* plays as contradictions between individual and social constraints, public and private, reason *li* and love *qing*, the representation of love ties being based on individual choice despite social constraints.

A representative work of a *chuanqi* play is *The Peony Pavillion* written by Tang Xianzu (1550 -1616). This play tells the story of a young girl, Bridal Du who makes love to a young scholar, Liu Mengmei in a dream and then falls sick because she longs for him. After her death, she returns as a ghost to find her lover. In the following fragment is presented the monologue of the girl who returns to the world of the living as a ghost hearing the call of her lover:

BRIDAL DU (*enters*):

(...) I am the ghost of Bridal Du, who died of pining after a garden dream. Before my death I painted my own portrait and buried it among the Taihu rocks. I inscribed the portrait with the lines,

“Union in some year to come
with the 'courtier of the moon'
will be beneath the branches
either of willow or apricot.”

After several nights of spirit roaming in the grounds of this shrine, I was surprised to hear a young scholar call out from the guest room, “Gracious mistress! Lovely lady!” So plaintive was the cry, it touched my heart. Secretly I slipped into the room, to find a painted scroll hung high on the wall. Looking more closely I recognized my own portrait, and a poem in matching meter had been added. It bore the signature “Liu Mengmei of Lingnan.” “Liu” for “willow,” “mei” for “apricot”—surely this was predestined! Now with the consent of my infernal judges I come on this fair night to fulfill the dream I once dreamed. Ah, bitter suffering! (Tang, 1598/1980, p. 159)

Finding him, she then convinces him to exhume her body to revive her. The two then run away together and after passing various attempts, Liu Mengmei manages to pass the imperial examination. In the end, Bridal Du's return to life and the union of the two lovers are legitimized even by the emperor himself. In this play the interaction between reason *li* and love *qing* challenges notions such as the dream, reality of dreams and supernatural events. In the play, love triumphs over reason, and the dream is presented as an inner reality and the supernatural is perceived as real. In the introduction of his Chinese to English translation of the play, translator Birch (1980, p. x) argues that this story lacks any refinement beyond the fantastic nature of the theme of a girl resurrected by her lover after whom she suffered, then dying for his sake. And yet Bridal Du becomes one of the most beloved heroines of Chinese literature. Birch (1980) also observes how throughout the play the reader is asked, usually by Bridal Du himself, to consider the dichotomy between what is real and what is unreal in the

light of Buddhist-Taoist concepts of the illusory nature of all phenomena.

The narrative motif of the ghost in the strange stories *zhiguai*

Chuanqi will influence the *caizijiaren* within the Ming (1368 - 1644) and Qing (1644 - 1911) Dynasties and the strange stories *zhiguai* written by Pu Songling (1640 –1715) who writes during the Qing Dynasty. The blooming period of these strange stories *zhiguai* is found during the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644), but their origin goes back to the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907) when the fantastic stories *chuanqi* were also popular. But Pu Songling emphasizes the fantastic element more in his stories. He collects stories from the countryside and gives them the shape of strange stories *zhiguai* in a collection called *Strange Tales from the Liao-zhai Studio*. The supernatural element in these strange stories *zhiguai* is always embodied by female characters. This can be explained by the desire of Pu Songling to try to create a counter-discourse to the rigidity of Confucianism, as he was marginalized in society because he did not pass the imperial examination, but at the same time, he could not escape the cultural paradigm of Confucianism. Thus, Pu Songling expresses his frustration of being marginalized through female characters, who are his alter egos. Also, the pattern of the ghosts in his stories that return to the world of mortals and marry ordinary people hoping that through them they can also be mortals again, can lead to a number of psychological and cultural speculations about the fear of being different, the superiority of the intelligence of everything that is different, but also the zeal for such a hypostasis rejected by the model of the Chinese sage, frustrated by the Confucian psychological schematism. The fear of otherness, but also the desire for liberation by projecting the self in an unconventional model, paradoxically coexist within the narrative structures of Pu Songling's strange stories *zhiguai*.

Stories of spirits, ghosts, fairies, women foxes and wandering spirits returning for revenge represent the most popular stories written by Pu Songling. However, some of his stories address extremely realistic topics, which explore with humor and a serious moralizing dose, the corruption of the imperial courts, the dirty world of governors, with interesting intrigues and abuses of power. These types of stories often have a moralizing ending that concretely marks the violated ethical principles and corrects them. One such work is “Gongsun Jiuniang” in which Pu Songling tells the tragic story of a woman, conveying the idea that individual suffering must never be forgotten. The protagonist arrives in the underworld where his encounter with the ghosts does not have a cathartic function but instead constitutes a reliving of their traumas. From the beginning, the narrator presents the tragic historical context of the story: the mass execution ordered by the Qing government (1636-1911) to punish those involved in the Yu Qi uprising in 1662 that resulted in the massacre of hundreds of people who were later buried together on the outskirts of Ji'nan city. The main character who visits Ji'nan arrives accompanied by the ghost of his friend killed in this massacre, on the other side which is represented by a village full of the wandering spirits of those killed in the same massacre. Here he sees his niece, who was also a ghost. The episode of their reunion is an emotional one:

He saw a desolate courtyard half a mou wide, with two small rooms set side by side. In tears, his niece came to the door to greet him, and he too wept. A lamp glimmered in the room. The girl's face was as lovely and fresh as during her lifetime. Staring at him and blinking back the tears, she asked him about each of her aunts and cousins in turn. "They're all in fine health," he said, "except for my wife, who has passed away." The girl then sobbed again. "Aunt brought me up as child, and I have still never repaid her one bit. I never expected I'd be buried first. I feel such pangs of regret and remorse. Last year, my cousin took my father away, leaving me without a thought.¹³¹ Hundreds of miles away from home, I'm lonely as a swallow in autumn. You, uncle, have not forsaken me even though I'm a dead soul. I have already received the gifts of money you sent." (Pu, 1740/2007, p. 123)

In this realm, the main character falls in love with Gongsun Jiuniang, a young woman who was also a ghost in this village of the underworld. The two get married and on the night of their wedding, Jiuniang tells him the tragedy of her death. She and her mother had been arrested after the Yu Qi uprising, and when her mother died of grief, the girl committed suicide as could not bear the burden of losing her mother. Before returning to the world of the living, the protagonist is asked by his wife to dig up her remains on the outskirts of Ji'nan and bury them near the cemetery of his family so that she can find peace and not be forgotten. When he returns to the world of the living the husband realizes too late that he forgot to ask her what was written on her tombstone. Arriving at the cemetery on the outskirts of Ji'nan, he discovers thousands of tombstones and realizes that it is impossible to find his wife's remains. He returns home, but he cannot forget Jiuniang, and after half a year he returns to the Ji'nan cemetery where he sees her again, but she does not seem to recognize him.

The moral of the story could be to not forget the sufferings of those who have left the world of the living and to always keep their memory alive. The only thing people can do to honour the death of those who have crossed the threshold in the afterlife is to not forget their existence and what they have endured during their lives. This morality is, moreover, a deeply Confucian one based on the rites that imposed on the living the duty to take care of the spirits of their relatives who died. Thus appears a paradox between the presence of ghosts as a symbol of revolt against Confucian strictness and the strong moralizing message of ghost stories, which nevertheless perpetuates ideas typical of this doctrine, deeply rooted in cynical social structures.

The narrative motif of the ghost in the *zaju* theatre

The tradition of the ghost motif in Chinese literary works is also found during the Yuan Dynasty (1279 - 1368) when the Yuan theatre reached its peak. One of the reasons for the development of the dramatic genre during this period could be the elimination of the imperial examination during the Mongol governance that led to ignoring the scholars and consequently, literary constraints were loosened.

Another cultural factor, (n. which led to the development of the Yuan theatre) (...), is the fact that during the Yuan Dynasty its rulers overthrew the

“scholars” of the Han people. In the Yuan bureaucracy, the Han people were classified as inferior to the Mongols, the Semu caste, and other ethnic groups, so “the injustice done to scholars during the Yuan dynasty” emerged, and the result was a shift to mainstream theatre based on the scholars' feelings. This is the main reason for the popularity of Yuan theatre. (Chen, 2016, p. 94) (n. personal translation from Chinese)

另一种文化因素(...), 元统治者对汉人的”士”很是排挤, 元代官僚中汉人一直被排在蒙古人、色目人等民族之后, 于是产生了”元代士人不平之气”, 其结果是转向民间戏剧以寄托自己的情志, 这是元曲流行的主要原因(...).

Also, the frustration of the scholars who lose their importance in the empire may have led to the birth of Yuan theatre. Thus, in most *zaju* plays, the action takes place during the previous dynasties, the authors projecting deficiencies of the judicial and political system of the Yuan Dynasty in other dynasties. Many of the stories in these plays have their origins in the *chuanqi* stories of the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907). Ghosts appear in these plays to expose an injustice or an error of justice, the law is presented as a form of natural order according to Confucian doctrine, identical with the idea of morality. Often, in these works, appearances before magistrates sometimes lead to unexpected and unjust outcomes, false confessions and torture are preferred by writers to enhance the dramatic effect of the play.

The ghosts in *zaju* plays are divided by Zhao (2015, p. 17) in his comparative study between the ghosts in *zaju* plays and Japanese *noh*, in four general categories: vengeful ghosts, love-seeking ghosts, undead and spirits. Ghosts that return to avenge their death are most common in *zaju* plays. They have either suffered an unjust death or a violent death and are appearing in the dreams of a living person or making their presence felt in the world of the living in search of revenge and justice. In most *zaju* plays the ending is a positive one, the ghosts revealing the crimes committed and obtaining justice even beyond the grave. An example of such a play is *Snow in Midsummer*, written by Guan Hanqing (1225 - 1302), in which the spirit of a girl is shown to her father to reveal to him the injustice that was committed at her death. The girl, Dou'E, was falsely accused of poisoning a man. The accuser was the man's son who wanted to marry Dou'E but she refused him so he threatened her that if she does not marry him he will accuse her of killing his father. Dou'E still refused him and firmly believed that the court will prove her innocence. However, the court did not bring her any justice and instead she was found guilty for a crime she did not commit. She was sentenced to death and later she comes back as a ghost to ask her father to bring her justice. At the end of the play, all the guilty are punished and justice brings peace to the girl's spirit. Guan Hanqing is thus inspired by *zhiguai*, borrowing the motive of the ghost who returns to the world of the living to avenge her unjust death.

Conclusion

This paper showed the origin of the cultural concept of the ghost and how it was transposed throughout the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties into a literary narrative motif, taking various forms and indirectly presenting various social, political or moral problems. Despite the fact that the Confucian tradition rejects the belief in ghosts because they are considered metaphysical elements, Chinese authors such as Tang Xianzu, Pu Songling, Guan Hanqing intentionally choose this controversial subject to create a speech against the rigidity of Confucian concepts that were based only on tangible things such as social hierarchy or the real world of the living. Ghosts thus become a symbol of the revolt against social constructs and thus, from one dynasty to another, from one literary species to another, they have “haunted” for thousands of years both Chinese culture and classical Chinese literature, further influencing even contemporary literature, Mo Yan, and Yu Hua giving new connotations to ghosts in their works. And yet, it can be seen that despite the symbolism of ghosts in the literary genres discussed in this paper, *chuanqi*, *zhiguai* and *zaju*, the moralizing note behind literary works persists, with the authors still seeing literature as a moralizing tool, an idea typical of Confucian doctrine against which they paradoxically tried to rebel. “Ghost literature” thus creates a complex literary paradox from which Chinese authors seem unable to escape.

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