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# THE PERTURBED SELF: GENDER AND HISTORY IN THE LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY GHOST LITERATURE IN CHINA AND BRITAIN

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# The Perturbed Self: Gender and History in the Late Nineteenth-Century Ghost Literature in China and Britain
# 焦慮的自我：十九世紀末期中英鬼怪文學中的性別與歷史

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# Abstract

In both Chinese and Western cultures, the figure of ghost captures an uneasy tension between the past and the present, and between the orthodox history and its other. Freud's notion of the uncanny — the returning of the repressed — helps to illuminate ghost's entangled relationship with the past: ghost refuses to stay buried in the past, thus making history — the sanctioned knowledge we produce about the past — a problematic entity that persistently returns and requires re-examination. This entanglement of the ghost with a restless past makes it a perfect metaphor for the other of History — the omissions and distortions of what is orthodoxly sanctioned as knowledge about the past. Stories of ghosts, therefore, can be conceptualized as a quasi-history or para-history: their persistent gesturing towards the past reveals a desire to rethink and rebuild the historical construction of the present, yet their illicit subject matter makes them remain forever in a struggle for legitimacy vis-à-vis history. Ghost at the same time is also a powerful metaphor for a malleable self. Returning as that which has been repressed, it reveals the other of the self: that which has been repressed within the self or rejected without so that against it the self can be established. Conversely, the liminality of ghost also makes it a powerful and empowering agent for subjectivities in transition, therefore are particularly attractive to people who feel an urgency to reaffirm or reconstruct their identity. The two potentials of stories of ghosts—to re-examine or rewrite history and to redefine the self — are inevitably intermingled with each other, and their connection in the late nineteenth-century ghost literature in China and Britain is the focus of my study. My aim is to explore how ghost story writers in China and Britain have negotiated with and reconstructed different models of masculinity and femininity by evoking and appropriating narrative patterns of history and myth through their ghost literature. I believe such a cross-cultural investigation will achieve two goals: first, it helps to illuminate mutually how gender is constructed in each culture and what cultural baggage and assets—as activated by the rich symbolism of ghost — are brought into this construction; second, a deeper and broader understanding of the ghost literature as a destabilizing as well as constructive "in-between" form, a mode of the fantastic.

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## Explanatory Notes on Romanization and Translation

The romanization for Chinese names and titles in this dissertation follows the *pinyin* system. However, if quoted materials use other romanization systems, their romanization is followed, with names of persons or titles rendered in *pinyin* in square brackets for disambiguation purpose.

If not otherwise indicated, all translations for Chinese texts are my own, reviewed by a professional translator. The titles for Chinese primary texts first appear in this order: the romanized title in *pinyin*, the original Chinese title, and the translated English title in parenthesis. For Chinese stories, after their first mention in the text, the translated English title is used. Alternatively, if a Chinese text is commonly known in the English world with a certain title (for instance the *Analects*, *The Great Learning* or *The Peony Pavilion*), the common title is used.

Quotations of Chinese primary texts are rendered into English, followed by the Chinese original.

Translations for titles of secondary texts can be found in the Works Cited list.

# Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this dissertation. Full bibliographical information for these works can be found in the Works Cited List.

| | |
|---|---|
| *The Classic* | *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*) |
| *Liaozhai* | Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 (*Strange Stories from the Studio of Leisure*) |
| *Ye lu* | Xuan Ding, *Yeyu qiudeng lu* 夜雨秋燈錄 (*Records of Rainy Nights under the Autumn Lamp*) |
| *DKLY* | Wang Tao, *Dunku lanyan* 遁窟讕言 (*Unverified Words from the Cave of Retreat*) |
| *SYML* | Wang Tao, *Songyin manlu* 淞隱漫錄 (*Random Words upon the Song River*) |
| *SBSH* | Wang Tao, *Songbin suohua* 淞濱瑣話 (*Trivial Words upon the Song River*) |
| *A Brief History* | Lu Xun, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* 中國小說史略 (*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*) |
| *Online SKQS* | *Online Siku quanshu* (Wenyuange Edition) 文淵閣四庫全書・電子版 |

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

"In times of peace, people and ghosts are kept apart; in times [of chaos] like ours, people and ghosts mingle together." 太平之世，人鬼相分；今日之世，人鬼相雜.

— Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646), *Yushi mingyan*[1]

In both Chinese and European cultures, the figure of the ghost captures inherently a tension between the past and the present, and between the orthodox history and its other. Freud makes an indelible contribution to the understanding of the cultural significance of the ghost when he categorises ghosts into what he calls the uncanny — the returning of that which has been repressed.[2] What this conceptualization exposes is not only the origin of the ghost in some obscure past but also its reluctance to stay buried in the past, thus making history — the sanctioned knowledge we produce about the past — a problematic entity that persistently returns and evokes re-examination. Interestingly, the earliest Chinese dictionary, *Erya*, also connects the concept of ghosts and returning in its explanation of the character *gui* 鬼 (ghost): "a ghost is that which returns" 鬼之為言歸也.[3] Although in *Erya*, the place that the ghost returns to is supposed to be its original home of the earth, in later folklore and literature the ghost is more often imagined as returning to the living, so death can no longer act as a safe barrier separating us and the past. At the same time, the ghost has been one of the subjects repressed by orthodox Confucian ideology, ever since Confucius famously admonished against dealings with the supernatural in the *Analects*: "The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were: extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings".[4] As implied wryly by Feng Menglong's ghost woman quoted above, the appearance of ghosts indicates an immanent problem with time: our time is not the right time not only because it is not peaceful, but also because it is plagued by ghosts, something that is impossible, anachronistic, and hostile to categorization. This entanglement between the ghost and a restless past makes it a perfect metaphor for the

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[1] From Feng, *Yushi mingyan* 喻世明言 (*Wise Words to Enlighten the World*, c.1621), "Yang Siwen yanshan feng guren", 2005, vol. 2, p. 73. The translation is my own. Unless otherwise indicated, all translation of Chinese texts is mine.

[2] Freud, "The Uncanny", in *The Uncanny*, 2003, pp. 123-62.

[3] *Erya zhushu* 爾雅註疏 (*Annotations to Erya*), 2004 rpt., vol. 4, "*Shixun*", p. 101. On the notion of ghosts in ancient Chinese philosophy, see Qian Mu, "Zhongguo sixiangshi zhong zhi guishenguan", 1995; Yu Yingshi, "Zhongguo gudai sihou shijieguan de yanbian", 1987.

[4] In James Legge trans., 1971, *Confucian Analects*, Book VII ("Shu'er"), Chapter XX, p. 201.

other of history — the omissions, distortions, and fissures of what is publicly sanctioned as the knowledge about the past. Stories about ghosts, therefore, can be conceptualized as a quasi-history or para-history; their persistent gesturing towards the past (whether collective or individual) reveals a desire to rethink and rebuild the historical construction of the present, yet their illicit subject matter means they will remain forever in a struggle for legitimacy vis-à-vis history. As I will show in the following sections, such an entangled relationship with history keeps surfacing in the genealogies of ghost literature in both China and Britain.

The ghost is also a powerful metaphor for a malleable self. Again, Freud's interpretation of the uncanny can shed some light on this issue. Returning as what was once repressed, it reveals the other of the self: that which has been repressed within the self or rejected without so that against it the self can be established. Conversely, the in-between-ness of the ghost also makes it a powerful and empowering agent for subjectivities in transition. The ghost in many cultures bears the stigma of something dangerous and polluting, yet the danger it poses also endows it with power, for in anthropologist Victor Turner's words, as liminal entities ghosts are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial";[5] thus they are "structurally invisible" in a certain social context as they are no longer classified or not yet classified.[6] The ability of the ghost to defy classification and to temporarily reside in different realms opens up the possibility of a new understanding of our reality and rules (or the denial of them), therefore is especially attractive to people who feel an urgent need to reaffirm or reconstruct their contestable identity. In the context of my study, ghosts appeal particularly to late nineteenth-century Chinese male writers and British female writers, as each were caught in a moment when they needed to redefine their respective gender identities. Since the malleable and unsettling character of the ghost allows it to serve both as a metaphor for the defining other and the self in the forging, the gender of the ghost and that of the ghost story writer come into an intricate play to form new constructs of masculinity and femininity in the ghost literature I will examine.

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[5] Turner, *Ritual Process*, p. 94, qtd. in Kang Xiaofei, 2006, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China*, p. 6.
[6] Turner, 1987, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage", p. 8.

The two potentials of stories of ghosts — to re-examine or rewrite history and to redefine the self — are inevitably intertwined with each other, for historicizing and mythologizing the past are important ways to establish a certain perception of the self. The connection of these two potentials in the ghost literature in the late nineteenth century is the focus of my study. My aim is to explore how male writers in China and female writers in Britain have negotiated with and reconstructed different models of masculinity and femininity by evoking and appropriating narratives of history or myth in their ghost literature. I believe a cross-cultural investigation of the ghost literature in this case can have two benefits. First, the cross-cultural perspective will help to illuminate mutually how gender is constructed in each culture and what cultural specific or similar baggage and assets — with the rich associations mobilized by the ghost — are brought into this construction.

While comparative literature has long been practised within European or postcolonial contexts, the commensurability between disparate cultures (especially in the case where there is not a common philosophical heritage) has also been questioned, whether it is argued from the perspective of cultural relativism to safeguard the uniqueness (or even an implied superiority) of a national culture, or is taken as a basis for imagining an ultimate "other" to affirm the self.[7] This is what Zhang Longxi repudiates as the "fallacy of cultural incommensurability",[8] and in his excellent demonstration of how ideas and images do travel between cultures East and West in *Unexpected Affinities*, he also draws our attention to the unique value of a comparative approach: "certain critical insights are available only from the cross-cultural perspective of East-West studies. Without going beyond the limited horizon of a single literary tradition, we cannot attain the broad vision of human creativity with all its diversities and endless possibilities."[9] Inspired by Zhang's approach, this study aims to explore the English and Chinese ghost story traditions from a cross-cultural perspective. In recent years, there has been a growing scholarship on the cultural and literary connectedness

[7] These two tendencies exist with both Chinese and Western scholars over time and are criticized by Zhang Longxi in *Unexpected Affinities* (2006), pp. 5-6, pp. 11-3 and *Zouchu wenhua de fengbiquan* (2004), pp. 3-8, pp. 12-4.
[8] Zhang, 2006, p. 3.
[9] Ibid., xii.

between China and Britain in especially the nineteenth-century.[10] China and Britain, the two imperial powers that had exerted a considerable regional or global political influence, were increasingly entwined in multiple ways ever since the first Opium War (1840-1842) brought China reluctantly into the map of nineteenth-century imperialism's global expansionism. Apart from the various military conflicts and political entanglement,[11] the two countries in the late nineteenth century were also closely connected in cultural and literary spheres. While the various British-run publishing houses in China (whether missionary or commercial) were pivotal in introducing Western science, religion, and ways of thinking to the Chinese and fostered the rationale needed for China's Self-Strengthening Movement (洋務運動) in the 1860s-1880s,[12] the gradual opening-up of China's treaty ports and colonial enclaves like Hong Kong ushered into China a wave of British merchants, adventurers and travellers whose energetic literary production about China captured the tantalizing possibilities that China promised to imperial Britain in the Victorian imagination. Moreover, as Ross Forman's study points out, China and its people not only featured as an exotic emblem on the peripheries of Britain's imperial influence, but Chinese immigrants in London had also formed a tangible presence in metropolitan life and figured largely in Victorian anxieties of reverse colonization.[13] Forman and others' studies show that China and Britain in the nineteenth century were entwined both physically on Chinese and British soils and in the various symbolic spaces within and in-between the two countries.

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[10] See for instance Susan Schoenbauer Thurin, *Victorian Travelers and the Opening of China: 1842-1907* (1999), Karen Fang, *Romantic Writing and the Empire of Signs: Periodical Culture and Post-Napoleonic Authorship* (2010); Elizabeth Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2010), Shih-Wen Chen, *Representations of China in British Children's Fiction, 1851-1911* (2013), and Ross G. Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (2013).

[11] For instance, the fact that the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service (IMCS) was founded in 1854 with the help of foreign consuls in Shanghai and had been predominately British-staffed at the senior level till the end of the Qing dynasty (its first two Inspector-General were both Englishmen) shows the extent of Britain's involvement in the Qing empire's economic, diplomatic, and even social and educational sectors. See Hans van de Ven, 2014, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origin of Modernity in China* for the IMCS's multiple roles in late Qing China.

[12] The prominent British-run publishing houses aiming at Chinese audience include for instance the London Missionary Press (墨海書館) and the *Shenbaoguan* (申報館 ) in Shanghai, and the missionary-based newspaper *Chinese Serial* (遐邇貫珍, 1853-1856)) in Hong Kong.

[13] Forman, 2013, pp. 27-9.

However, while these studies make a strong case for the connectedness of the two countries through an examination of how China is being perceived and represented in British literary and cultural production, the other end of the look — the Chinese perception of the British, is not reciprocated.[14] This study is not a counterpart research on Chinese imagination of Britain; instead, it proposes a third way of looking, the researcher's look implied in Zhang Longxi's argument which aims at situating literature from vastly different traditions on an equal footing.[15] Zhang's emphasis on the way we "look at" literature is also an important tenet of what David Damrosch defines as "world literature": "world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time."[16] This emphasis on reading, interpretation, and the reader's participation in the

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[14] The Chinese reaction to and assimilation of Western culture is often described under the all-embracing notion "Xixue Dongjian" 西學東漸 (the transmission of Western learning in China). Missionary activities as those represented by Matteo Ricci 利瑪竇 (1552-1610) during the late Ming and the early Qing marked the first wave of "Xixue Dongjian" in China, yet while the Jesuits fostered the early cultural exchange between China and Europe, their influence was limited to a small number of converted literati elites or interested emperors. A more intensive and far-reaching assimilation of Western culture began slowly around the mid-nineteenth century after the Opium Wars when Western missionary and commercial activities mingled with local life and scanty knowledge about Western countries gradually became accessible to the common people. On "Xixue Dongjian" in especially the late Qing, see Xiong Yuezhi, 1994, *Xixue dongjian yu wanqing shehui* and Zhong Shuhe, 2010, *Zouxiang shijie: Zhongguo ren kaocha xifang de lishi*. The accelerating civilizational crisis in the late Qing brought the interest in Western culture to a whole new level in the 1890s, as China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) shattered the possibility of adhering to an old sinocentric mentality (see Fairbank and Liu eds., 1985, *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 11, pp. 322-33), and China's modernization and enlightenment pursuits in the Republican era were marked with various versions of learning from the West — these, however, fall out of the scope of this study. My focus is on Chinese ghost literature during the 1870s to 1880s, the moment before the paradigm shift occurred when some Chinese intellectuals had only begun to think about the implication of the West and ghost stories were still a valid way for comprehending the strange and unfamiliar. Particularly, the various ghost narratives (fictional or journalistic) published in Shanghai at the time were one of the early channels through which Chinese writers responded to Western presence in China. On late-Qing ghost narratives in newspaper, see for instance, Rania Huntington, 2003, "Weird in the Newspaper", Nanny Kim, 2007, "New Wine in Old Bottles?: Making and Reading an Illustrated Magazine from Late Nineteenth-Century Shanghai."

[15] Emily Apter, starting from a reconsideration of postcolonial comparatism and the comparison among languages of a shared heritage, proposes another kind of comparatism that goes beyond these linguistic connectedness or sociohistorical trajectories: a comparison of literature from vastly different traditions based on a "universal poetics". See Apter, in Saussy ed., 2006. To pledge to a "universal poetics" certainly has its risks and I am not intended to do so, but I do agree with this comparison of literature of diverse traditions based on literariness itself.

[16] Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, 2003, p. 281. However, I am not totally in agreement with another dimension of Damrosch's three-fold definition of world literature: "World literature is writing that gains in translation" (281), for it overlooks the political and cultural imbalance that often exists in the issue of translation: literature of what language, and what types of literature from a culture get translated are often determined by existing political and cultural hegemonies. See also Marko Juvan, "World Literature(s) and Peripheries", 2011, for a more inclusive conceptualization of "world literature(s)" which acknowledges and emphasizes the concept's plurality.

circulation and meaning-making of literature, I believe, is a more fruitful path in comparative literary studies than a comparatism focusing solely on sociohistorical exchanges, and it is also the approach I would like to take in this dissertation. In the 2004 American Comparative Literature Association report on the state of the discipline, Haun Saussy charts the history of comparative literature's metatheories as a history searching for the appropriate object of study, i.e. the point of reference common to literature of different traditions, and at the end of the survey he admits that "it [comparative literature] needs, as its manual of procedure, not a theory (a philosophy or an ideology) but a poetics (an elucidation of the art of making, as applied to its own practices)", and in any way the "comparability" lies in specificity of each comparative project which no accumulated settled law could prescribe.[17] In departing from previous studies that explore the many cultural exchanges and perceptions of the other between China and Britain, this study takes the risk of deviating from trodden ground to find its own ground for comparison, which I locate in the ghost literature of the two countries. While the texts and writers I discuss in this dissertation may not necessarily travel across national or linguistic borders to meet each other, by looking at the ghost literature of the two countries side by side, we may find a common poetics of the ghost in this genre which enables a writing of history of various kinds for the marginalized male literati in China and women writers in Britain in their own specific cultural fields. I argue that specifically in the late nineteenth century, the ghost literature in China was fashioned by the marginalized male literati as a "his-story of ghosts" — a reconstruction of national history — to react to the contemporary national and masculinity crisis, whereas in Britain, the Gothic ghost stories by women writers were appropriated as a way to contest men's hegemony in history-writing and to write their own fragmentary, inexpressible, and inexplicable experiences into a women's private history.

The second benefit of a cross-cultural study of the ghost literature is to attain a deeper and broader understanding of the potentials of this amorphous genre. The ghost literature traditions in China and Britain, as I will demonstrate in the next section, showcase different views regarding normality and anomaly, yet a similar theme underlying both is perhaps a self-conscious departure from the mainstream discourses

[17] Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares, of Memes, Hives and Selfish Gene", in Saussy ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 2006, p. 23.

that purport to sanction what is the "real", and more importantly in an ethical sense, the "truth", manifesting respectively in China and Britain as the official state history and the aesthetics of literary realism. In China, the official state history was not only a record of past dynastic changes, but also a well of sources from which to extract political wisdom, ethical lessons, and ideals to follow in life. Likewise, in Britain the realist fiction that was gaining momentum in the nineteenth century was not only regarded as a "novel" genre but was also increasingly being recognized by its serious practitioners as an art form endowed with the capability and duty to represent reality and convey truth about humanity. George Henry Lewes (1817-1878) sets a very high goal for the realist art: "Art always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e. of Truth" and that "realism is basis of all art".[18] By "art", Lewes surely means all types of art, yet the novel certainly is the foremost one in his discussion. George Eliot (Mary Evans, 1819-1880), one of the leading realist writers of the Victorian period, shares with Lewes the high expectation for the moral function of the realist novel; for her to "represent the people as they are" is a serious duty of the novelist as an artist, for upon this truthful representation is not only based the ethical value of the art of the novel for the "awakening of social sympathies", but also its potential to "aid social and political reformer".[19] Later exponents of realist fiction include Henry James (1843-1916), who is also confident that fiction as an art "can compete with life" and that a novelist is seeking the truth in his art.[20] Writers may vary in their understanding of the extent to which realist fiction can and should represent life, but as Pam Morris summarises, underlying realist fiction is an implicit or explicit "communicative contract" between reader and writer that knowledge of an extra-linguistic reality can be made and presented in this art form.[21] The ghost literature, on the other hand, is never concerned with making itself closer to what is perceived as reality, but instead very often it aims at the opposite: to revel in the strange, the extraordinary, and the supernatural, and to pose a deliberate polemic on the mainstream episteme of the "real"— which, while winning it a large readership, also makes it seem suspicious and

[18] Lewes, "Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction" (1858), in Stephan Regan ed., 2001, p. 37.
[19] Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), 1903, p. 144 and p. 146.
[20] James, "The Art of Fiction" (1884), in Regan ed., 2001, p. 70.
[21] Morris, 2003, *Realism*, p. 132. A similar stance is taken by George Levine, who describes the realist writers as struggling in an impossible heroic quest: "to make literature to appear to be describing directly not some other language but reality itself", while knowing that an unmediated reality is perhaps unattainable. See Levin in Mckeon ed., 2000, p. 617.

less respectable. Its illicit subject matter simultaneously marks its lowly status and its rebellion against social and epistemological normalities. The tumultuous late nineteenth century, a transitional period marked by a sense of crisis and premonition for major social changes for both countries, brought about perhaps the best occasion for rethinking existing epistemological categories and re-examining concepts that constituted people's understanding of masculinity and femininity, therefore serving as a suitable context for a cross-cultural study on gender.

One of my major argument is that the ghost literature, especially during the period examined in my dissertation, constitutes a destabilizing as well as constructive "in-between" form — in-between different epistemological frameworks and in-between different genre conventions. This in-between-ness is also the defining feature of the fantastic literature. As defined by Tzvetan Todorov, fantastic literature is a narrative genre that maintains the reader's hesitation to choose between a supernatural interpretation and a natural one for what happens in the story. Adjoining fantasy on either side are the marvellous — where supernatural explanations are taken for granted as in fairytales, and the uncanny —where mysterious happenings can always find a natural explanation.[22] Rosemary Jackson appropriates the liminal feature of fantasy in Todorov's scheme and extends the notion of fantasy from a genre to a literary mode concerned with certain key themes: "an uncertainty as to the nature of the 'real', a problematization of categories of 'realism' and 'truth', of the 'seen' and 'known'…"[23] For Jackson, fantasy is a liminal literary mode foregrounding the social and epistemological limits of a time, "a spectral presence", and its subversive power lies precisely in its challenge to socially sanctioned conceptualizations of "truth" and the "real": "It subverts dominant philosophical assumptions which uphold as 'reality' a coherent, single-viewed entity, that narrow vision which Bakhtin termed 'monological'."[24] While both Todorov and Jackson have only European fantasy in mind, scholars have since then attempted fantasy's transcultural application. Robert

[22] Todorov, 1975, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Rosemary Jackson in her *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* replaces the "uncanny literature" in Todorov's three-part scheme with "the mimetic": "Between the marvellous and the mimetic, borrowing the extravagance of one and the ordinariness of the other, the fantastic belongs to neither and is without their assumptions of confidence or presentations of authoritative 'truths'" (1981, p. 30).
[23] Jackson, 1981, pp. 48-9.
[24] Ibid., p. 20, p. 48.

Ford Campany applies the mode of the fantastic to explain the defining properties of what he calls the Chinese anomaly accounts.[25] The defining feature of the fantastic, to him, is not the presence of the supernatural per se, but the contradiction between the events that happen in the text and the kind of worldview that the text presupposes; the fantastic is therefore fundamentally a "contra" literature, "an inherently contrastive mode of writing in which objects or events linked to distinct worldviews are juxtaposed".[26] Campany argues that Chinese anomaly accounts on the poetic level did precisely that. Sing-chen Lydia Francis (Chiang) continues the cross-cultural examination of Chinese strange tales and the fantastic; extending Campany's study, she proposes that the whole of the "literature of strange" in China — including the earliest Six Dynasties *zhiguai*, the more polished Tang *chuanqi*, and the high-Qing tales of the strange — constitute a mode of Chinese fantastic.[27] Continuing this cross-cultural investigation, I argue that ghost literature in the late nineteenth-century China and Britain prominently exhibits itself as a mode of fantastic and appropriates the power of fantasy to engage with the shifting ideological paradigms of the time. The subversive potential of the ghost literature is embedded in its haunting effects: its dissolution and redefinition of categorizing frameworks, its refusal to provide textual closures, and its constant invocation of ghosts in the present.

This dissertation will focus on four representative ghost literature writers from China and Britain: Chinese writers Xuan Ding 宣鼎 (1832-1880?) and Wang Tao 王韜 (1828-1897) and British writers Vernon Lee (1856-1935) and E. Nesbit (1858-1924). These writers are representative in that they all engaged closely with the radical social changes of their time and participated in the negotiation between the past and the present, the self and the other, and between tradition and modernity through their literary creation of a "ghost's history".[28] Lu Xun has categorized the ghost stories by Xuan Ding and Wang Tao as imitations of the great seventeenth-century fantastic fiction *Liaozhai zhiyi* (prefaced 1715).[29] Lu Xun's insight into these writers'

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[25] Campany, *Strange Writing*: *Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*, 1996.
[26] Ibid., p. 236, p. 235.
[27] Francis, "What Confucius Would Not Talk About: The Fantastic Mode of Chinese Classical Tale", PhD Diss., Stanford University, 1997.
[28] "Modernity" for me is a plural concept because it is fundamentally determined by a culture's perception of its own tradition, and the Chinese concept of modernity in the late-Qing was vastly different from the English one. As I will show in the following chapters, it is closely related with recognizing the West as a referential "other".
[29] Lu Xun, 1973, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* (*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*), p. 188.

continuity with *Liaozhai* is important, for as I will show later, *Liaozhai* is ostensibly the work that is self-stylized as a "history of the strange" and a mirror of the author's chosen identity. However, I will also emphasize how these two writers have departed from tradition and engaged with contemporary challenges in their writing, and it is their works' innovation on tradition that makes them representative of the transitional age. The British writers Vernon Lee and E. Nesbit were women writers whose lives transgressed a restrictive Victorian model of womanhood, and each writer experimented with new gender possibilities through their ghost literature. Their works too exemplify an engagement with as well as a break away from (though different) traditions.

## 1.1 The Ghost Literature in Britain and China

By ghost literature, I mean what in Britain is conventionally called the "ghost story" and in China the *zhiguai* ("the records of the strange"). Both genres have a long history dating further back than the period I focus on in this dissertation (the late nineteenth century), and both genres include as their subject supernatural entities and phenomena other than ghosts (animal spirits, lamia, succubus, reincarnations, metamorphosis, etc.), although stories about ghosts are the staple and the major focus of my study. To understand the ghost literature as an important dissenting discourse serving to consolidate or contest orthodox ideology and its special appeal to marginalized groups, it is necessary to understand the genre's uneasy relationship with the cultural mainstream in its genesis and the entangled relationship between the gender of the author and that of the ghost in the genre's development. In the following, I will give an overview of the genealogies of the English ghost story and the Chinese *zhiguai*.

### 1.1.1The English Ghost Story

As supernatural beliefs were a part of everyday reality in the early histories of many cultures and societies, it is quite true that "[g]host stories are as old and older than literature", as Julia Briggs remarks in her monograph on the English ghost story.[30] In Europe, ghosts appeared in texts as early as Homer's *Odysseus* and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. By the Elizabethan period, ghosts and other supernatural entities like

[30] Briggs, 1977, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*, p. 25.

witches or demons had become a regular feature of drama to arouse sentiments of fear, which was greatly admired by later Gothic pioneers like Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823). William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1602) presented us with perhaps the best-known ghost in English literature: the ghost of Hamlet's father serves as the vital catalyst of the tragedy as well as the central enigma of the play.

Daniel Defoe's (1660-1731) veridical ghost story "True Relation of the Apparition of One Mrs. Veal" (1706) has often been credited as the first modern ghost story. However, the difference between this tale and ghost stories in the nineteenth century is that Defoe's story, as with many anecdotal tales of ghosts in the Middle Ages, was written as factual instead of fictional.[31] The ghost literature as a distinct artistic creation had to wait till the nineteenth century to really take off,[32] but before that, the power of the supernatural had been tested in the Gothic. The spirit of the Enlightenment exalted rationality and ridiculed ghosts, yet the eighteenth century also witnessed the rise of the Gothic fiction which is singularly obsessed with the supernatural and frequently with the interventions and secrets of ghosts. However, while Gothic fictions are hospitable to hints of ghosts, not many identify the supernatural phenomena directly as ghosts, and fewer still have a true ghost character. Ann Radcliffe, in reference to another Gothic writer, Mathew G. Lewis (1775-1818), made a distinction between the sublime "terror" and the debased "horror" in Gothic and favoured the former for its obscurity and indeterminacy.[33] Subsequently, the explained or unexplained supernatural becomes for critics an important distinction between Gothic works by female and male writers.[34]

Despite Gothic writers like Radcliffe who used ghostly elements only as a device for creating suspense, the popularity of the Gothic indeed paved a way for the new mode: the short ghost story emerging in the nineteenth century and reaching its height from the 1850s to the 1930s.[35] Sir Walter Scott's "Wandering Willie's Tale" and "The Tapestried Chamber", inserted in his 1824 novel *Redgauntlet*, arguably presented the first instance of the ghost story in its modern form. Scott at the same time was one of

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[31] Defoe had been to Canterbury to interview the witness (see Briggs, 1977, p. 30).
[32] Briggs, 1977, p. 11.
[33] Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826), in David Sandner ed., 2004, pp. 41-50.
[34] See for instance Ann Williams, 1995, *Art of Darkness*, p. 103 and Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, Introduction, *Female Gothic: New Directions*, 2009, p. 3.
[35] Briggs, 1977, p. 14.

the first theorizers of ghost story as a distinctive artistic mode with its own rules and features. In his "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Compositions" (1824), he points out some basic principles for engaging with the supernatural in literature: the supernatural "is also of a character which it is extremely difficult to sustain, and of which a very small proportion may be said to be better than the whole", and that the marvellous, in order to really arouse fear, needed to be kept in obscurity. These precepts were duly observed in many ghost stories popular in the nineteenth century.[36]

The burgeoning periodical market in the nineteenth century soon offered a suitable arena for the short ghost story,[37] and with prominent practitioners like Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873) and especially Charles Dickens (1812-1870), the reading of ghost stories had been established as a Christmas tradition by the mid-nineteenth century.[38] The late nineteenth century to early twentieth century, according to Briggs, was the golden era for ghost stories. Informed by the general triumph of science and rationality, the nineteenth century nonetheless was caught in the tension between "the material and spiritual conceptions of life", a tension which the ambivalence of the ghost story is particularly suitable to accommodate.[39] Perhaps most exemplary of the ghost's polemical role in this ideological instability is Margaret Oliphant's (1828-1897) story "The Open Door" (1882), in which the presumably haunted frame of a door that can be accessed from either side becomes a testing field for the discursive powers of science and religion as respectively represented by a doctor and a priest.[40] The epistemological uncertainties of the age, manifesting in its desires for a scientific

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[36] Scott, in Sandner ed., 2004, pp. 51-5. Indeed, many early explorers of ghost stories or supernatural stories start with a premise like Scott's, so that they treat their topic as one of "the supernatural in literature" instead of "the supernatural literature" or as Briggs calls it, the English ghost story. See for instance Dorothy Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917), H. P. Lovecraft, *The Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1945) and Montague Summers' introduction to his *The Supernatural Omnibus* (1931). Peter Penzoldt's *The Supernatural in Fiction* (1952) is as far as I know the first scholarly attempt to theorize the English ghost story as a genre. As my cited titles show, these scholars favour the term "supernatural story" over "ghost story", whereas I follow Briggs' model in designating this type of short story the "ghost story" to emphasize the focus of my project, acknowledging that a discussion of ghost stories is inseparable with a discussion of the supernatural in general and that "ghost" can scarcely encompass all the supernatural happenings explored in this genre.

[37] On the Victorian periodical press, see Hilary Fraser, "Periodicals and Reviewing", in Kate Flint ed., 2012.

[38] Dickens was an important figure in establishing the ghost story reading tradition in the Christmas; he not only wrote many ghost stories himself, but also edited and solicited ghost story collections in his magazine *Household Words* (1850-1859) and later *All the Year Round* (1859-1895).

[39] Briggs, 1977, p. 16.

[40] In Oliphant, *Stories of the Seen and Unseen*, 1902. The story was originally published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1882.

explanation penetrating the known and unknown and a paradoxical clinging to the esoteric and archaic, perhaps best explain the great popularity of ghost stories. While realist fiction engages its reader with the presumption that there is a "reality out there" with which the realist art seeks to build connection, the ghost story, whether sincerely or perfunctorily, is singularly interested in confounding its reader as to what is real or whether real knowledge of the world is possible. The ghost story's direct confrontation with epistemological limits attracted writers of diverse fields, including those in the naturalistic camp like Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), Grant Allen (1848-1899) and H. G. Wells (1866-1946).

The above brief review of the historical development of the English ghost story is largely drawn from Brigg's 1977 monograph on the genre which draws the contour of the ghost story from its origin in the eighteenth century to its "fall" in the twentieth century. [41] While Briggs, probably influenced by the intellectual environment dominating the 1970s that saw the Gothic as distinctively an eighteenth-century phenomenon, posited in her book a clear differentiation between the Gothic novel and the nineteenth-century short ghost story,[42] the rapid expansion of the field of Gothic studies over the past few decades have made such a separation seem unadvisable.[43] In this project, I propose to discuss the ghost story as intrinsically a mode of the Gothic. Indeed Briggs later gives up the separation and proposes that ghost stories "constitute a special category of the Gothic", for one constituting element of ghost stories is "the challenge they offer to the rational order and the observed laws of nature… reintroducing what is perceived as fearful, alien, excluded, or dangerously

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[41] Briggs' book is shortly followed by Jack Sullivan's *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood* (1978). Like Briggs, Sullivan also regards the ghost story as primarily a nineteenth-century phenomenon, yet unlike Briggs' broader treatment of the subject, Sullivan defines the style and form of the ghost story more strictly and highlights only three English ghost story writers: Le Fanu, M. R. James and Algernon Blackwood. Since the 1970s, the only full-length study of the genre is Andrew Smith's *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920: a Cultural History* (2010), which discusses the ghost story's participation in various nineteenth-century social, political, and economic issues, and admirably focalizes the spectral image's relevance to conceptions of identity, which is also a central tenet of this study.

[42] Briggs, 1977, p. 13. Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert, in their 1991 anthology of Victorian ghost stories, also draw a distinction between the earlier Gothic tales and the Victorian ghost stories from the 1850s onward (x).

[43] David Punter, for example, expands his scope of the Gothic from a distinctively eighteenth-century mode in his *Literature of Terror* (1996) to include new mutations of the mode in a contemporary and globalized context in his introduction to *A Companion to the Gothic* (2000). Newer scholarship on the adaptability of the concept appears in Punter and Byron eds., *A New Companion to the Gothic*, 2012.

marginal".[44] Such is also the domain and defining character of the Gothic, for the Gothic, as stipulated by David Punter, is quintessentially a literary mode antagonistic to realist aesthetics and is concerned with taboos and what is inadmissible and unsayable under the dominant social mores in a certain culture.[45] Furthermore, to Punter, the Gothic's revolt against the goal of representing the "real" as stipulated in realist aesthetics also makes it a mode of history or, more precisely, what he terms as a mode of "unofficial history"; it keeps on record the inexplicable, inadmissible and even distortions of reality as a counterpart to realist fiction, which views the world and humanity as knowable, explicable, and representable.[46] In this sense, the ghost story that gained tremendous popularity in the latter half of the nineteenth century may also be a unique site for an unofficial history, dealing with new fears and aspirations permeating the age — as its eighteenth-century predecessor, the Gothic novel, had done.

Another important dimension from which to make sense of the ghost story is the gender of its author and its subject matter, and it is here that ghost stories' potential as a kind of unofficial history becomes especially important for women writers. The ghost story boasts many male masters, from Scott to Le Fanu to Henry James to M. R. James in the twentieth century, yet it is also a genre intimately associated with women writers.[47] Although overshadowed by a few canonical male writers, a vast number of Victorian women writers, especially in the latter half of the century, had participated in this highly marketable genre, some of whom enjoyed high popularity in their own time: Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865), Amelia B. Edward (1831-1892), Catherine Crowe (1803-1876), and Margarete Oliphant, to name just a few.[48] Women's affinity with ghost stories has been deservedly noted by critics, yet their explanation of this

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[44] Briggs, "The Ghost Story", in Punter and Byron eds., 2012, p. 177, p. 176.
[45] On the Gothic mode as anti-realism, see Punter, 1996, vol. 2, pp. 183-5.
[46] Ibid., pp. 185-8.
[47] In contesting the general description of the ghost story as a "male preserve", Nickianne Moody argues that the English ghost story has always been a gendered writing tradition for women. See Moody, "Visible Margins: Women Writers and the English Ghost Story", 1996. On critical reviews of Victorian women-authored ghost stories, see Clara Stewart, "Weird Fascination: The Response to Victorian Women's Ghost Stories", 2001.
[48] 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 were women's work. See Melissa Edmundson Makala, 2013, *Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 14.

phenomenon is not always satisfactory. Briggs attributes the large number of female writers simply to women's "taste for romance and sensitivity to mood and atmosphere", which risks essentializing women as emotional creatures.[49] A more fruitful approach is offered by the notion of the "Female Gothic". Female Gothic, as first coined by Ellen Moers to designate the unique branch of Gothic fiction penned by female writers, has proven itself to be a valuable tool for feminist criticism, although the term itself is as contentious as Gothic.[50] Critics aspiring to realise the full potential of this concept for gender criticism soon find Moers' definition too restrictive and offer alternative ways to re-conceptualize the category: Alison Milbank revises it to include male-authored works focusing on female experiences, and Suzanne Becker redefines a "Gothic form of feminine fiction" whose speaking subject is female, while Anne Williams proposes two contrasting paradigms for the Gothic: a Female Gothic mode and a Male Gothic mode, each relying on a distinctive set of narrative elements (for instance, female perspective versus multiple perspectives, explained supernatural versus real supernatural, happy ending versus tragic ending, terror versus horror).[51]

What I am interested in here is not defining exactly what "Female Gothic" is — both categories, gender and Gothic, are understood as discourses constantly in the making in our postmodern world — but what the concept can offer us in terms of thinking about the relationship between the Gothic and women, and more precisely in this study, about the affinity between ghost stories and women. Across the various definitions of the Female Gothic, the gender of the author and the distinctively gendered experience of being made into or perceived as spectral, as is often portrayed in the Gothic, draw out the similarity between a woman's existence and that of the ghost. Indeed, Vanessa Dickerson has pointed out the ghostly condition of Victorian women in her *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (1996). Her central argument that Victorian women were "ghosts" in the noontide — "ghosted", being regulated to the margins of social and political scenes, yet conspicuously noticeable

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[49] Briggs, 1977, p. 44.
[50] Moers, "Female Gothic" (1978), in Fred Botting and Dale Townshend eds., 2004.
[51] Milbank, 1992, *Daughters of the House: Modes of Gothic in Victorian Fiction*; Becker, 1999, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction*; Williams, 1995, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. For a review on Female Gothic criticism, see Wallace and Smith, 2009, "Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic" in *The Female Gothic: New Directions*, pp. 1-12.

through their energetic participation in spiritualism as well as supernatural literature writing — stresses the genre's dialectical position vis-à-vis the mainstream culture of the time and its potentially emancipating force for the "ghosted" groups.[52] Similarly, Dianna Wallace traces the "haunting idea" that women in the past had been a being "always and everywhere subject to male man or as a ghostly creature too shadowy to be even that real", as was seized by generations of women historians, thinkers, and writers to make sense of their condition and express their indignation.[53] It is in the Gothic that imageries of the spectre, of live burial, and of invisibility are most at home, and therefore, Wallace argues, it is in the Gothic that women writers find a way to reinstitute themselves into a history from which they had been systematically excluded.

All these conceptualizations of the Female Gothic illustrate the power of the spectral metaphor for marginalized and ghosted groups. To designate certain groups as ghostly draws out their invisibility, vulnerability, and ephemerality in the physical realm, but the metaphor can also endow the designated group with power, because first of all the ghost itself has an ambiguous relationship with power, as Esther Peeren points out: "it may appear as a dominant, even sovereign being, but can also manifest as a figure of compromised agency." [54] Here an example from Chinese culture may help to illuminate the dialectical role that illegitimate entities like ghosts play in the field of power negotiation. In a study on the cult of the fox as represented in traditional Chinese literature and folklore, historian of religion Kang Xiaofei comments on how the liminal figure of the fox can empower those marginalized social groups usually associated with this demonic being, and the insight is also applicable to its neighbour in the netherworld — the ghost:

> 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

[52] Dickerson, 1996, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*.
[53] Wallace, 2013, *Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic*, p. 2. See also Wallace, "Uncanny Stories: Ghost Story as Female Gothic", 2004.
[54] Peeren, 2014, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*, p. 3.

> process of negotiating, safeguarding, and challenging well-established social and cultural boundaries in late imperial and modern Chinese society.[55]

The British may not have a lively fox cult or customs of ancestral worship as the Chinese did which rendered liminal entities like foxes and ghosts a tangible presence in daily life, but the teeming literary ghosts in the Gothic and especially in ghost stories can be as powerful an agent, for such stories are metaphorically related to those who are perceived or perceive themselves as having a ghostly existence. A metaphor is a powerful ideological tool, argues Peeren: "[i]f repeated and conventionalized, metaphors can define certain individuals or groups as superior and dispossess others by establishing or reinforcing negative stereotypes."[56] However, to be figured as ghostly is not always a disadvantage for the marginalized group, as Peeren also reminds us: "All metaphors thus possess a certain potential for semantic flexibility, which is enhanced in the case of polysemic concepts like the ghost" and "[i]n theory,… subjects designated as ghostly in the dispossessing sense of being considered invisible and expendable … may also work with the metaphor, reshaping it to activate other, more empowering associations of the ghost in order to go from being overlooked to demanding attention by coming to haunt."[57] The Gothic mode so hospitable to ghosts (and especially ghosts that have been wronged, misunderstood, or forgotten) is thus a fertile testing field where the ambiguous and sometimes paradoxical potentials of the ghost can be teased out to mobilize new social roles and subjectivities. The Victorian women who felt themselves ghostly and excluded from the writing of history can thus appropriate a "spectral agency" in the literary field, just as their Chinese counterparts had wielded the power of the fox as described by Kang Xiaofei.[58]

David Punter has already designated the Gothic as an "unofficial history" vis-à-vis the realist mode for its exploration of the transgression of those borders sanctified by mainstream culture, and Diana Wallace further explicates the gendered dimension of this Gothic history. In both Chinese and European societies, women had been largely

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[55] Kang, 2006, *The Cult of the Fox*: *Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China*, p. 7. Fox and ghost are almost synonyms in Chinese folklore and *zhiguai* writing, as the variant title of *Liaozhai zhiyi* — *Stories of Ghosts and Foxes* — indicates.
[56] Peeren, 2014, p. 5.
[57] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[58] I borrow the word "spectral agency" from Peeren. See Peeren, 2014, pp. 16-24.

ousted from history until the last century: they had been excluded from professional historiography and never constituted a worthwhile subject of history, understood till recently as the history of the state and great men.[59] Thus, in *Female Gothic Histories* (2013), Wallace proposes seeing the Gothic as a mode of history by women and for women, for the narrative of spectrality — a prominent domain of the Gothic — "suggests the particular power of the Gothic to express the erasure of women in history, something which may not be expressible in other kinds of language or in the traditional forms of historiographic narratives".[60] Although Wallace's focus is Gothic forms of historical fiction written by women, her suggestion that the Gothic as a whole can be seen as a "history" for women is especially illuminating for understanding the dialectical relationship between the ghost story and history, even if not all ghost stories bear a recognizable resemblance to "histories". For one way of making a ghost is by erasing someone from history (understood as the collective memory of a community), as abundant cases in Chinese folklore can testify: the lack of a memorial, in verbal or physical form (a tombstone, a monument, or a record in official history books) will inevitably turn the deceased into a ghost.

Ghost stories as narratives about ghosts, therefore, can be conceptualized as a quasi-history or an anti-history: in the macro-scope, the ghost story, just like the Gothic, expresses in dreamlike language what is considered taboo, dangerous, or inadmissible in a certain period, constituting another form of recording history. In the micro-scope, each ghost story is about that which is restless in the past and returns to haunt the present so that a narration of the story of the ghost is an endeavour against that ordering and forgetting of the past which we call history. Writing the ghost story as a disruption of history, and more importantly as an alternative way to form women's own histories, gives women who were traditionally excluded from the position of the historian a sense of empowerment, for history is about power: it is an important discourse for creating order out of chaos and establishing authoritative positions. However, this "ghostly histories" of women realized through ghost story-writing are different from

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[59] On women's exclusion from professional historiography and their status as the other of history, see Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", 1986; Bonnie G. Smith, 1998, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*; Mary Spongberg, 2002, *Writing Women's History Since the Renaissance*; Christina Crosby, 1991, *The Ends of History: Victorians and "the Woman Question"*.
[60] Wallace, 2013, p. 2.

the male writers' "ghost history" in the Chinese *zhiguai* I am going to discuss below. While national history was traditionally considered as the domain of men either as official historians of state or unofficial historians of ghosts who nevertheless appropriated the ghost's story as a his-story, women writers' contestation of this kind of history-making and their creation of fictional and mythical forms of histories of women are another way to make ghost stories a "history of her own".

### 1.1.2 The Chinese *Zhiguai*

While *zhiguai*, the genre dedicated to "recording the strange" is the main terrain of Chinese ghost literature,[61] as Anthony Yu observes in an early study of the subject, the figure of the ghost pervades the whole of Chinese literature to such an extent that a study of this topic is no less than an engagement with the whole history of traditional Chinese fiction.[62] More importantly, *zhiguai* is not only an important mode of traditional Chinese fiction, but also the very early specimen of it.[63] The underlying tension between Chinese fiction and the orthodox discourse ever since fiction's inception provides an important backdrop for us to understand the similar entanglement between *zhiguai* and its other in the orthodox discourse: the official history. Therefore, before an examination of the genre *zhiguai*, it is worthwhile to first explicate the concept "the Chinese fiction" (or *xiaoshuo* 小說).

While the "fictive" nature of fiction is self-evident in the English word, it is a different matter for the Chinese *xiaoshuo*, the term now used as equivalent for the English word fiction, for *xiaoshuo* in its origin had little to do with fictionality, yet much to do with

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[61] *Zhiguai*, literally meaning "records of the strange", is a type of short story involved with the supernatural. A similar type of story is called *chuanqi*, "tales of the marvellous", which has more elaborate plots. On the evolution from *zhiguai* to *chuanqi*, see Lu Xun, *A Brief History*, 1973, especially Chapter 8. Some scholars maintain that *chuanqi* and *zhiguai* have different origins. See Li Jianguo, 1998, "Tang bai sikao lu" for a fine differentiation between *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*; see also Zhan Xiaoyong, 2003, *Qingdai zhiguai chuanqi xiaoshuoji yanjiu*, pp.10-19 for another distinction. The hair-splitting differentiation between *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* is not particularly germane to this study, which takes a semantic angle instead of a formal one. I discuss both types of stories and for the sake of convenience would refer to them solely as *zhiguai*, as the term captures an important dimension of the genre: the fascination with the strange. Whatever contention there may be about their separate origins, it is indisputable that both types share similar narrative subjects: things of the supernatural. The Qing-dynasty writers often included both types of stories in a single collection (for instance *Liaozhai zhiyi*), a clear indication that writers of such stories did not bother to make the differentiation.

[62] Yu, "'Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit!': Ghosts in the Traditional Chinese Prose Fiction", 1987, p. 399.

[63] Kenneth J. Dewoskin sees the Six Dynasties *zhiguai* as marking the birth of Chinese fiction. See Dewoskin, "The Six Dynasties Chih-Kuai [*zhiguai*] and the Birth of Fiction", 1977, pp. 21-2.

didacticism. Literally, *xiaoshuo* means "minor or small talks".[64] The term first appeared in the philosophical text *Zhuangzi* (c. 3rd century BC): "Those who dress up their small tales to obtain favour with the magistrates are far from being men of great understanding." 飾小說以幹縣令，其于大達亦遠矣.[65] Here, *xiaoshuo* is used derogatively and is far from our contemporary understanding of fiction or the novel. Later, in *Hanshu* (The Book of Han), the Han-dynasty historian Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 A.D.) explains the origin of *xiaoshuo* as the works of *baiguan* 稗官 (petty officials) who went along the streets and collected the talk of the people, so that this trivial talk may occasionally serve as critiques or comments for the ruler and ministers. The trivial and petty nature of *xiaoshuo* as a discourse was still extant, yet different from Zhuangzi's condemnation, *xiaoshuo* had already gained some validity, as the same text also cites the *Analects* to speak for *xiaoshuo*: "Even in inferior studies and employments there is something worth being looked at; but if it be attempted to carry them out to what is remote, there is a danger of their proving inapplicable. Therefore, the superior man does not practice them" 雖小道, 必有可觀者焉; 致遠恐泥, 是以君子不為也.[66] Being thus fashioned as a petty official (*baiguan*), the *xiaoshuo* writer in the beginning was positioned against the superior man in the orthodox power centre. Assigned the job of collecting the trivial talk of the masses to serve the ruler, he was at once aware of the inherent didacticism in his task and its lowliness compared with the mission of the superior man.[67] Although the scene of *baiguan* collecting trivial street talk may be partly imagined by the *Hanshu* writer, and what was collected was far from our understanding of *xiaoshuo* as fictional narratives, the close connection between *xiaoshuo* and *baiguan* was firmly established, and the two terms were sometimes used interchangeably.

When *baiguan* was used as a substitute for *xiaoshuo*, it was often compounded with another word: "*yeshi*" 野史, which means literally the "unofficial or private histories"

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[64] Leo Tak-hung Chan in *Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts* (1998, p. 7) renders *xiaoshuo* into "inconsequential conversations" or "minor persuasions", which is vividly illustrative of the didactic nature of this Chinese concept.

[65] *Zhuangzi*, "Waiwu, or What comes from Without", in Legge trans., 1962, *Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism*, vol. 2, p. 134.

[66] *Confucian Analects*, Book XIX ("Zizhang"), Chapter IV, in Legge trans., 1971, pp. 340-1.

[67] It is mainly in this line that Leo Chan argues that *xiaoshuo*, or "minor persuasion" in his rendering, is didactic in nature. Although later *xiaoshuo* had evolved fully from historiography to fiction, its didacticism was still persistent and invariably influenced the motives of the *zhiguai* writer (1998, p. 7).

as opposed to the *zhengshi* 正史, official or proper histories. The compound word "*baiguan yeshi*", used to denote those texts that we would regard as fiction (or *xiaoshuo*) today, helps to elucidate the proximity of the two genres, fiction and historiography in traditional thinking and the two basic tenets in the concept of Chinese fiction: that it is meant to be didactic (in its status as minor persuasion by petty officials) and that it is supposed to be a kind of history, although an unofficial and unverifiable one. Conceptualized as such, *xiaoshuo* intrinsically exemplifies both a centripetal and a centrifugal force vis-à-vis the orthodox discourse in the power centre. On the one hand, it endeavours to be recognized by the orthodox as a useful minor discourse, while on the other hand, it is wild and riotous, an unofficial history likely to contradict and disrupt the coherent unity of official history.

This understanding of *xiaoshuo*'s proximity to historiography helps us to make sense of the didactic and historiographic features of *zhiguai*, which was the first specimen of *xiaoshuo* and for a long time its representative. The time of *zhiguai*'s birth, the Six Dynasties (3rd to 6th century A.D), was a period of political upheaval, warfare, and famine that also witnessed the rise of Taoism and Buddhism in fierce competition with Confucianism, the state ideology of the two Han dynasties. The subject matters of *zhiguai* are equally riotous and unorthodox — encounters with ghosts, metamorphosis of humans and beasts, carnivalesque sexual gratifications — all being matters officially silenced by Confucius.[68] The first *zhiguai* writers came from the displaced literati class, and many of them were court or private historians. They wrote tales of marvels and spirits alongside their task of writing official history and borrowed heavily from the style of historiography in creating this new genre.[69] Scholars may differ regarding how *zhiguai* had evolved from existing genres, but the genre's close relation with historiography is undisputed.[70] The earliest *zhiguai* was almost indistinguishable from historical and philosophical writings like *Zuo Zhuan*, and the

[68] See note 4.

[69] For instance, Gan Bao was the writer of *Sou shen ji* 搜神記 (In Search of Spirits), a prototypical *zhiguai* collection, while at the same time he was a historian of the Jin court and the writer of *Jinji* 晉記 (*History of Jin*).

[70] On the origin of *zhiguai*, see Dewoskin, 1977; Campany, 1996, pp.162-4; Sing-chen Lydia Chiang, *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China*, 2005, pp. 13-5. Dewoskin and Campany mainly differ as to whether the earliest writers created this genre with a self-awareness of its fictionality (Dewoskin) or regarded it as real (Campany).

word "*zhiguai*" actually first appeared in a philosophical text, the famous "Xiaoyao you" chapter of *Zhuangzi*.[71] Many Six Dynasties *zhiguai* works were only moved from the *shi* (history) category in the traditional bibliographical system to the *xiaoshuo* category after the Tang dynasty.[72] However, given the above conceptualization of the nature of Chinese *xiaoshuo*, it is little surprise that some later *zhiguai* works still maintained a trace of historiography and a lingering desire to relocate itself within the Confucian discourse, however unseemly and unorthodox its subject matter may be.[73]

Conceptualized in such an entangled relationship with historiography and philosophical writing, it is understandable that *zhiguai* embodies a force both dissenting from and conforming to the centre — the Confucian norm. *Xiaoshuo* was already deemed lowly and trivial in the beginning, and *zhiguai*, the genre dedicated to recording the supernatural, stood even further from the orthodox.

Another important dimension in the understanding of *zhiguai* as a dissenting as well as unifying discourse, is to look at the status and identity of its makers. The earliest *zhiguai* writers in the Six Dynasties were from the displaced literati class who lived in an age of great political instability when their privileged social status and cultural centrality were subject to challenge. In a sense, the jostling of various competing worldviews (the Confucian moral system, Buddhist karmic retribution, Taoist marvels) in *zhiguai* at this period was the perturbed literati's way of wrestling in a world where order had collapsed. The Tang-dynasty *chuanqi* represents a new phase in the development of supernatural literature. *Chuanqi*, literally "to transmit the marvellous", was a type of highly elaborate tale often involving supernatural encounters and metamorphosis, and again, its writers and intended readers were to be found in the newly emerging educated bureaucratic class, who wrote these tales either as a manifestation of their literary talents before their superiors or as products of literati

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[71] *Zhuangzi*, "Xiaoyao you": 齊諧者，志怪者也. See also Legge's translation: "There is the book called *Khi Hsieh* — records of marvels." (1962, vol. 1, p. 165).
[72] See Lu Xun, 1973, p. 4.
[73] For example, Pu Songling's *Liaozhai* ostensibly imitates the "Grand Historian" Sima Qian's 司馬遷 *Shiji*, while Ji Yun, also the chief compiler of the imperial bibliographic project *Siku quanshu*, makes it clear in his prefatory note to *Luanyang xiaoxia lu* that *xiaoshuo* would be trivial and worthless but for the moral lessons it can implement (Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji*, 2000 rpt., p.1). On *Liaozhai*'s imitation of Sima Qian's *Shiji*, see Allan Barr, "*Liaozhai zhiyi* and *Shiji*", 2007.

group creation where poems and tales on the same topic often fertilized each other.[74] The socializing and identity-affirmation functions of conversing about the supernatural were still extant in the Qing dynasty (another high point for this genre),[75] as manifested in works like Ji Yun's 紀昀 (1724-1805) *Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 (*Jottings from the Studio of Close Scrutiny*, 1789-1798) and Wang Shizhen's 王世禎 (1634-1711) *Chibei outan* 池北偶談 (*Random Talks on the North of the Pond*, 1701) in which many tales are recorded as originating in literati gatherings.[76] At the same time, another function — to carve out a niche in the literary world for the otherwise frustrated and marginalized author, was introduced by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) in his *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 (*Strange Stories from the Studio of Leisure*, prefaced 1715) and later imitated by many. Unlike Ji Yun and Wang Shizhen who had been government officials and imperial degree-holders, Pu was at the very margin of the elite literati class, as he never entered the bureaucracy and was only an "elite" for his education's sake. For such a marginalized literatus, to write in the *zhiguai* genre symbolically manifested the author's literati identity: the language of *zhiguai* is classical Chinese, a decidedly highbrow choice in an age when vernacular fiction had long been popular, and the function of these tales gestured towards the traditional duty of the *shi* 士 class: to regulate the world by morals. In Pu's work, the two dimensions of *zhiguai* as a regulating discourse and an identity-building discourse are intertwined. Apart from offering a space for recording and controlling the anomalies so that order can be established upon them, *zhiguai* for Pu is also a literary practice to adjust, reaffirm, and reconstruct his endangered cultural identity and masculinity with all the elasticity and richness that the supernatural can offer.

Thus, throughout its history, this literature of the supernatural was an important genre for and by the literati class and crucial to their cultural identity to various degrees. The subject matter of *zhiguai*, anomalies that have been regulated outside of the orthodox Confucian order of things, creates a dynamic zone where the narration and

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[74] On the socializing function of the Tang-dynasty *chuanqi*, see Li Zongwei, 1985, *Tangren chuanqi*, pp.134-7, p.50.
[75] Leo Chan, 1998, pp. 28-9.
[76] *Chibei outan* (prefaced 1691, finished 1701) was the title of Wang Shizhen's twenty-seven volumes of "records", divided into four sections, of which the section "On the Strange" is dedicated to recording the strange and comprises seven volumes.

reinterpretation of the supernatural provide new models of knowing and being. Lydia Chiang remarks that "the *zhiguai* is the discourse of the others."[77] Yet at the same time, it is also a discourse of the (male literati) self, helping to establish the self through imagining and controlling the other. Chiang also points out the double function of the anomaly for *zhiguai* writers: "the act of recording an anomaly accords it reality, significance, and power. Furthermore, to write about anomalies is not only to empower them but also to harness their potency. The formal framework of a story collection provides a prescribed context by which the unknown may be ascribed names and meanings and therefore become 'known', controlled, and used."[78] Among the legion of anomalies that are used for establishing the subjectivity of *zhiguai* writers, the ghost is the quintessential one. For the ghost, as an anomaly in Confucian discourse that only comes back when something goes wrong, both critiques the validity of the orthodox and is a production of it, therefore defining what the self is not and what it could (or ideally) be. A survey of the ghost figure in the supernatural literature will further illuminate how it embodies changing notions of self, normality, and the world order.

The Six Dynasties *zhiguai* witnessed a strong influence of Taoism and Buddhism, and stories about ghosts proved to be a potent field for these schools to implement their ideologies.[79] Consequently, ghost stories of this period were concerned largely with karmic retribution or, variously, how the Taoist priest is able to recognize a man afflicted by a ghostly lamia and help him to exorcise her.[80] The malignancy of ghosts is considerably subdued in the Tang-dynasty *chuanqi*, which often adds a romantic dimension to the encounters between human males and alien females.[81] The cunning, beautiful fox fairy in "Renshi zhuan" 任氏傳 ("Story of Miss Ren") and the determined ghost bride in "Lihun ji" 離魂記 ("Story of the Disembodied Soul") are all benevolent supernatural heroines, contrary to the often horrifying and heinous

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[77] Chiang, 2005, p. 16.
[78] Ibid., p. 12. Chiang's focus is the high-Qing *zhiguai* works that were often presented in collections which the author spent a life-time accumulating (as distinct from the Tang-dynasty *chuanqi*, many of which were single pieces). The emergence of modern periodicals in the late Qing somewhat modified the way that some *zhiguai* works reached their audience, but the *zhiguai* collection as representative of the author's lifework was still an important format in which *zhiguai* was being presented and appreciated. More on the issue of publication later.
[79] See Pu Muzhou, "The Culture of the Ghost in the Six Dynasties Period" and Liu Yuan-ju "Allegorical Narrative in Six Dynasties Anomaly Tales: Ghost Sightings and Afterlife Vengeance" in Pu ed., 2009.
[80] See Liu Yuan-ju, 2009, pp. 285-314.
[81] On Tang *chuanqi*, see Li Zongwei, 1985.

ghosts depicted in earlier *zhiguai*.[82] The Ming-dynasty dramatist Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖(1550-1616) masterpiece *The Peony Pavilion* (variously titled *The Return of the Soul*, 1598) crystallizes the quintessential "amorous ghost" — a young woman who pines away for love and is resurrected through a man's love.[83] Woman, otherworldly beauty, death, and sex constitute the formula. For advocates of the so-called "cult of *qing*" in the late Ming and the early Qing dynasties, *qing*, or more narrowly love, is the fundamental regulating moral principle in the universe and a death-defying force, of which the loving female revenant is the perfect embodiment.[84] The body of the female revenant, veiled with the extra allure of death, offers male connoisseurs of literature not only erotic pleasure but also a model for ideal authentic subjectivity.[85] By then, the ghost woman is no longer someone to be feared or exorcized (as with the "succubus" figure in early *zhiguai*), but rather an embodiment of positive qualities to be desired and even worshipped. The female ghost thus encompasses the whole spectrum of the male literati's imagination of the other.

The "cult of *qing*" had been substantially subdued by the mid-Qing dynasty, as the trauma of dynastical change subsided and the moral censorship tightened under the new Manchu regime. Yet by then, Pu Songling had canonized the hyper-feminine and amorous ghost figure in his *Liaozhai*.[86] *Liaozhai* is remembered today mostly for its exaltation of the various otherworldly female figures, either as fox spirits, revenants, or flower fairies. Pu's ghost woman was so popular that it immediately triggered a wave of contemporary imitative works, and the beautiful female ghost as either *femme*

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[82] "Renshi zhuan" was written by Shen Jiji 沈既濟 (c.750-800) and "Lihun ji" by Chen Xuanyou 陳玄佑 (fl. c.766-779).

[83] The term "amorous ghost" is borrowed from Yu, 1987, p.423, which again is a translation of the heading of volume XX of Feng Menglong's anthology *History of Love*, under which were listed thirty-eight stories on ghost love, all of them being female ghosts. Yu in his article offers a discussion of the amorous ghost figure in Chinese fiction throughout history. Plots may vary, yet the ghost is always female.

[84] On the "cult of *qing*", or "cult of love", see Paolo Santangelo, "The Cult of Love in Some Texts of Ming and Qing Literature", 2000, and Martin W. Huang, "The Cult of Qing in Ming-Qing Literature", 1998. In the context of this so-called cult, *qing* is a multifarious concept that at times can mean emotion, love, desire, or even lust. I will discuss further the relationship between this trend of thought and the female ghost in Chapter Two.

[85] On authenticity as an expression of the ideal self which is often gendered as female, see Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction*, 2001, pp. 303-6.

[86] On the transformation of the sexually predatory ghost to the super-feminine, eroticized ghost in late Imperial Chinese fiction, and especially Pu's eroticization of the female ghost, see Judith Zeitlin, 2007, *The Phantom Heroine*, pp. 16-27.

*fatale* or the victim of love had been deeply engrained in the Chinese imagination ever since. Vestiges of this ghost woman still remain in contemporary Chinese cinema and her various reincarnations were active in the late-Qing *zhiguai* works constituting this study.

However, a common misconception about the development of Chinese ghost literature is that it stopped with Pu's *Liaozhai*, the only and last gem of the *zhiguai* genre during the Qing dynasty. The fact is that imitations of and reactions to *Liaozhai* persisted throughout the Qing dynasty. Two reactive works, Ji Yun's *Yuewei caotang biji* and Yuan Mei's 袁枚 (1716-1797) *Zibuyu* 子不語 (c. 1788), were published during the High Qing (in the reign of the Qianlong Emperor), which reformulated the benevolent female ghost canonized by Pu.[87]A more prominent peak for *zhiguai* came in the late nineteenth century, coinciding with the heyday of the English ghost story. However, this late-Qing *zhiguai* boom was often neglected even by scholars of Chinese literature, on the assumption that *zhiguai* works in this period were mere imitations of their earlier-Qing models, or that these tales of superstition were the worst dregs of a backward China soon to be replaced by the enlightenment of science and democracy in the Republican era.[88] However, the late nineteenth century is an important period for *zhiguai* development, not only because of the unparalleled quantity of *zhiguai* works published,[89] but also for these works' intrinsic entanglement with the transitional age. With the imported printing facilities from Europe and emerging modern publishing houses like the Shanghai *Shenbaoguan* 申報館 run by the English Brothers Major, the late nineteenth century for the first time witnessed the

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[87] On the different approaches of Yuan and Pu in depicting the ghost, see Santangelo, 2013, "An Introduction of *Zibuyu*'s Concepts and Imagery" in *Zibuyu, or "What the Master Would Not Discuss", According to Yuan Mei (1716-1798): A Collection of Supernatural Stories*, pp.142-6; for a comparison of the three High Qing *zhiguai* works, see Chiang, 2005, and Leo Chan, 1998, pp. 188-9.

[88] The twentieth-century Chinese cultural scene was largely dominated by an "anti-ghost" discourse, often associated with various political interests. For progressive intellectuals like Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962) and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967), the anti-ghost campaign in the May Fourth Movement was associated with the Chinese Enlightenment, while in the Communist era it was associated with political movements (the ghost became a metaphor for any political dissenters who needed to be purged). The banning of a play about an avenging ghost in 1961 became a prelude to the Cultural Revolution. See David D. W. Wang, 2004, *The Monster That is History*, pp. 264-6 on the dramatic suppression of supernatural literature since the May Fourth Movement, and Luo Hui, "The Ghost of *Liaozhai*: Pu Songling's Ghostlore and Its History of Reception", PhD Diss., University of Toronto, 2009, pp. 204-49 on the rise and fall of Chinese ghost literature in the twentieth century.

[89] Zhang Zhenguo in *Wanqing minguo zhiguai chuanqi xiaoshuoji yanjiu*, 2011, estimates that around 200 *zhiguai* works had been published in the late Qing (p.120).

professionalization of authorship in China, as well as the dawn of Chinese journalism.[90] Early Chinese journalism saw much overlap with *zhiguai* writing, for the strangeness of the age (the radical social changes and Western influences) was a common site of interest for both newspaper and *zhiguai* writers.[91] On the other hand, periodicals became the channel by which some *zhiguai* stories first met their audience before the tales were presented in an authorial collection. The way that *zhiguai* stories reached their audience had imperceptibly changed how they were being written.[92]

Yet more important, perhaps, is how the records of the strange reacted to the ideological uncertainties of the age, as was the case with the Six Dynasties and the Tang dynasty, the two preceding high points for this genre.[93] To write about the strange is an attempt to control and make use of the strange, and this malleable genre has thus always helped writers to assuage their identity anxieties, to negotiate with the past, and to grasp the new and the unknown. Yet this time, the strange encounters with the West and the ensuing sense of emasculation were not to be easily assimilated into the known and the normal, engendering a greater masculinity crisis that called for new strategies in *zhiguai* to domesticate the strange and establish the self.

### 1.2 Transitional Age and Ideological Uncertainties

The late nineteenth century is a critical transitional period for both China and Britain, as both countries witnessed something of a "crisis in faith" of opposing natures: in Britain, the decline of religious faith beginning with the Enlightenment was further

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[90] The publishing of *Shenbaoguan* was "modern" primarily in that it commercialized "writing" as a profession. Before that, writers would not be paid by their publishers and would regard making money from writing a degradation. The *Shenbaoguan*'s publication of more than two hundred *biji* (notes) collections (many of which were *zhiguai*) and periodicals like *Shenbao* 申報 and *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 (1884-1898) introduced China's first generation of professional writers and journalists. See Zhan Xiaoyong, 2003, pp. 233-9; Zhang Zhenguo, 2011, pp. 145-8.

[91] On the mutual fertilization between late-Qing *zhiguai* and Shanghai periodicals like *Shenbao* and *Dianshizhai huabao*, see Huntington, 2003; Zhan, 2003, pp. 313-5.

[92] See Zhang Zhenguo, 2011, pp. 174-5. The efficient Shanghai publishing industry and the platform of periodicals also greatly shortened the time between *zhiguai*'s writing and their publication and enlarged the audience they could reach. Before this, a *zhiguai* work in the Qing dynasty very often had been in circulation before its finished state and its first publication. One example is *Liaozhai*, which had been widely circulated as handwritten copies in Pu's lifetime and the first printed version (青柯亭刻本) was published as late as 1766, fifty-one years after the author's death.

[93] On the correlation between ideological instability and *zhiguai*'s popularity, see Sing-chen Lydia Francis (Chiang), 1997, pp. 26-7.

exacerbated by Darwinism, which in turn spurred a revival of supernaturalism;[94] while in China, as a consequence of repeated defeats by Western powers in wars since the mid-nineteenth century, there arose among scholarly elites an increasing uncertainty regarding the superiority of Chinese culture and a questioning of the orthodox state ideology.[95] The *fin-de-siècle* in both countries was permeated with a sense of crisis, as established concepts ranging from the cosmic order and the unity of history to notions of gender and the self all underwent re-examination. In this ideological uncertainty, the ghost, an oxymoron and something intrinsically hostile to categorization, serves as the figure that best captures the anxieties of the time. In Dickerson's words, the ghost becomes "one of the 'signs of the times', a marker of social, historical, and philosophical positionality, an emblem of 'the perplexed scene where we stand'".[96] Consequently, narratives about ghosts in this transitional period also become a way to negotiate with the perplexed self in the forging, as Andrew Smith notes: "[d]uring the nineteenth century the ghost story became *the* form in which conventional cultural assumptions about identity politics were challenged… By transforming the self into the liminal form of the ghost the fragility of the self (as a social and cultural construct) is made apparent."[97]An important dimension of the perplexity that perturbed the self was the contestation of masculinity and femininity which, as I will show below, was a direct consequence of the ideological turbulence in each society.

### 1.2.1 Victorian Supernaturalism and Changing Roles for Women

The Victorian age was a noted haunted age, for although it was the age of disenchantment and secularisation, it was also an age that exhibited a strong fascination with supernatural phenomena, ghost stories, and esoteric knowledge.[98] The paradox of the age, as Dickerson notes, is that "the onslaught of science…shook the church but only stirred up ghosts".[99] In Geoffrey K. Nelson's words, "science has

[94] Dickerson, 1996, pp. 17-21.
[95] On late-Qing Chinese reaction and gradual acceptance of Western learning, see Xiong Yuezhi, 1994, *Xixue dongjian yu wanqing shehui*, pp. 6-12 and Fairbank and Liu eds., 1985, *The Cambridge History of China: Late Qing*, vol. 11, pp. 171-3, pp. 176-7, pp. 185-6.
[96] Dickerson, 1996, p. 13.
[97] Smith, 2010, p. 4.
[98] Ronald Pearsall, 1972, *The Table-Rappers: The Victorians and the Occult*, p. 139.
[99] Dickerson, 1996, p. 15.

become a faith for western man in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries", [100] the only respectable way to know the world. Yet people were not all satisfied with the spiritual desolation engendered by this new "faith".[101] Since religion was not to be relied on, a sense of spirituality had to be sought elsewhere. This spiritual uncertainty, according to Dickerson, contributed to the popularization of supernaturalism, evidenced first in the early half of the nineteenth century by phrenology, then mesmerism, and finally during the 1860s to 1880s by the advent of spiritualism, in which women figured prominently.[102]

While all three of these pseudo-sciences partook of esotericism and contradicted science's premise of empiricism, phrenology and mesmerism certainly looked more like science as they refrained from direct dealings with ghosts. They were sometimes welcomed, or at least sympathized with in British literary circles.[103] Both phrenology and mesmerism enlisted prominent men as practitioners, while with spiritualism, it was definitely women who owned the stage — a fact that may have both won the movement its charm and undermined its respectability.[104] As Alex Owen points out in *The Darkened Room*, although there were many male mediums and followers of spiritualism, when talking about the movement it seems women always received the most attention. This is not a surprise, perhaps, considering the overlap between some

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[100] Nelson, 1969, *Spiritualism and Society*, p. 140.

[101] Victorian Britain's Poet Laureate, Alfred Tennyson versed the famous distress over the irreconcilability between the capricious laws of nature and the benevolent God: "Are God and Nature then at strife, /That Nature lends such evil dreams? / So careful of the type she seems, / So careless of the single life" (*In Memoriam*, 1861, p.123; LIV: 5-8).

[102] Phrenology was a pseudo-science established by Franz Joseph Gall which maintains that the size of different organs of the brain is related to different personal abilities and characters; mesmerism was first invented by Dr Franz Anton Mesmer, a theory that proposes that by controlling a magnetic fluid surrounding all things the doctor can control and heal the patients, hence its other name "animal magnetism". See Dickerson, 1996, pp. 17-21 for phrenology and mesmerism's reception in Britain; Janet Oppenheim, 1985, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, pp. 207-17. On Victorian spiritualism, see Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Nelson, 1997; Pearsall, 1972, and Dickerson, 1996.

[103] For instance, Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) published her *Letters on Mesmerism* in 1844, in which she praised the therapeutic effects of mesmerism; Charles Dickens was a defender of Dr John Elliotson, who lost his professorship at University College Hospital for his practice of mesmerism; George Eliot had a phrenological cast made of her head, and Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) consented to a phrenological examination. See Dickerson, 1996, p. 19, pp. 36-8; Owen, 1989, p. 20 and Oppenheim, 1985, pp. 212-3. See also Roger Luckhurst, n. d. "The Victorian Supernatural".

[104] Spiritualism originated in New York in 1848 with two teenage girls claiming they could communicate with the spirits by reciprocal rapping. In its rapid spread over America and later in the UK, spiritualism enlisted many prominent female mediums (often young women) who became local or national celebrities. On women's participation in spiritualism, see Owen, 1989.

prevalent Victorian notions of femininity and the required qualities of a spiritual medium. The Victorians saw women as intrinsically closer to spirituality than men, and the "woman worship" gaining momentum in the 1860s enacted the ideal woman as the guardian of man's morality and the "angel in the house", as epitomized in Coventry Patmore's homonymous poem.[105] The prescriptive understanding of femininity, characterized by "innate female passivity", "female fragility", and "a moral and spiritual sensibility", corresponded well with the spiritualists' craving for spiritual sensitivity and moral purity.[106] For Victorian women who embraced spiritualism, mediumship provided them with a kind of authority and the freedom and attention they could seldom get at home, although it was freedom with a price.[107]

Moreover, spiritualism offered women mediums who spoke to a wider public a venue for directly addressing issues of gender inequality. American spiritualism in the beginning was bred in a radical context related with various social experiments.[108] Although not as politically radical as their American counterparts, British spiritualists did take up the agenda of women's equality, especially in questioning marriage as women's only destiny. Miss Emma Hardinge Britten, a British medium and writer who had had considerable exposure to American spiritualism, vehemently attacked the injustice of the contemporary marriage system that reduced women to appendages of men in her public lecture entitled *The Place and Mission of Woman* (1859):

> But one mission is laid open to woman — that of being laid on the counter for man to choose, as toy or ornament. Externalities — all externalities, for she cannot go forth to ask for herself that companion which her soul may yearn for, but she must be laid like the ware of the trader exposed to view, all those qualities sharpened, refined, brought to the external, which will fit her for the marriage market. (7)

The pitiable situation of women thus described, Britten told her audience, was caused by their lack of a mission in life. While she evaded the question of women's suffrage,

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[105] On the Victorian "woman worship", see Walter Edwards Houghton, 1957, *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870*, pp. 348-53.
[106] Owen, 1989, p. 7.
[107] As Owen (1989) notes, for the spiritualists, to become a medium was to become the "repositories", the "vessels" that need to willingly give up her "self". Therefore "passivity becomes, in the spiritualist vocabulary, synonymous with power" (p. 10), a power gained not without endorsing an essentialist feminine spirituality.
[108] Owen, 1989, pp. 30-1.

she did ask for equal opportunities for women to be educated and pursue the occupation they desired, instead of becoming the ornamental wife in some man's household: "Why should not woman be an astronomer? ...We can see no limits to the powers of woman to enter the chamber of knowledge". (8)

The fading of religious faith and women's taking over the stage in spiritualism provided one instance of how the ideological uncertainties of the age resulted in a re-evaluation of women's roles in home and society and, more crucially, notions of femininity. If the icon of the ideal woman in the Victorian age was Coventry Patmore's "angel in the house", the century had also witnessed increasing resistance to that image, manifesting in a series of debates on women's nature coordinated under the "Woman Question" and agitations for women's rights, culminating in the suffrage movement in the 1890s.[109] Thomas Carlyle's (1795-1881) repudiation of William Holman Hunt's (1827-1910) painting *The Light of the World* (1851-1853) probably best encapsulates how a questioning of God was intertwined with the questionable status of male supremacy, and consequently the indignation against women's oppression. The painting offered the most familiar image of Jesus Christ for the Victorians;[110] however, the models for the figure of Christ were two women: Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) and Elizabeth Siddal (1829-1862). It was this fact that infuriated Carlyle and made him denounce the work:

> "You call that thing a picture of Christ! … Don't you see that you're helping to make people believe what you know to be false, what you don't believe yourself?" The icon of the Victorian Christ — who was in fact a 'wronged woman' with a beard — represented that side of the Christian religion which was most under threat as the Sea of Faith ebbed away in the nineteenth century: namely a belief in the Divine Saviour, the Man-God.[111]

Just as Carlyle feared, the Victorians were increasingly feeling that the "Man-God" may be false, and that women may have been wronged. While the spiritualist Emma

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[109] The "woman question" or more precisely "woman questions" is a set of debates on women's proper roles and sexual difference in the political, literary and social fields. See Lucy Delap, "The 'Woman Question' and the Origins of Feminism", 2011.
[110] A copy of it toured the British colonies during 1905-1907 and therefore had probably been viewed by millions. See A. N. Wilson, 2003, *The Victorians,* p. 159.
[111] Ibid. p. 162.

Britten had asked for women's emancipation from the restraints of marriage in 1859, it was not until the 1882 Married Women's Property Act that women's legal independence within marriage became recognized and marriage ceased to be the legal death for women.[112] The last three decades of the century witnessed other social movements aiming at changing women's disadvantaged conditions in society: the Contagious Disease Acts which endorsed an apparent double standard for men and women were finally repealed in 1886,[113] and the spiritualist and activist Louisa Lowe founded the Lunacy Law Act Reform Association in 1873, as she believed women like her were particularly vulnerable to a mechanism that labelled deviant wives as insane and justified confining them in asylums.[114]

Accompanying all these agitations for women's rights in various social fields was the urgent issue of redefining femininity, and in this instance the burgeoning ghost story genre had much to offer. The experience of one spiritualist, Louisa Lowe, showcased how a "communication" with spirits through the spiritualist technique of "passive writing" provided the only language with which women could convey their repressed or even unconscious fears and indignations.[115] Mrs Lowe recorded in her spiritual writing her conversation with the Holy Spirit about her husband's strange behaviours at night; for a modern reader, the latent sexual undertone clearly reveals her dormant anger at her husband's suspected adultery, yet for her contemporaries and especially her clerical husband, the provocative language was only a sure sign of her insanity, which soon legitimated her husband's decision to put her in an asylum.[116] For Louisa Lowe and other women mediums, the opportunity to converse with "spirits" and to write in the "spirit's language" is immensely liberating, for as Owen notes, "[t]he profanities and obscenities of passive writing were expressions of the unknowable, unutterable, and forbidden. 'Mind passivity' operated as a mechanism of release, undermining the normative connotations of feminine passivity in its potential for

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[112] Owen, 1989, p. 3
[113] On the Act and the struggle for its repeal, see Wilson, 2003, pp. 308-11.
[114] Owen, 1989, p. 196.
[115] "Passive writing" is a technique through which spiritualist mediums sought communication with ghosts. In these practices, the medium tried to achieve a state of mental void which was regarded as a prerequisite for the reception of spiritual instruction, before she wrote down whatever involuntarily came into her mind (Owen, 1989, p. 205).
[116] Mrs Lowe practised passive writing in the 1870s and was committed to an asylum in 1870 by her husband. After much appeal to medical and legal authorities, she was finally released in 1872 and became an activist in the Lunacy Reform movement. She protested the injustices of lunacy laws in *The Bastilles of England* (1883). On the implications of Louisa Lowe's story, see Owen, 1989, Chapter 7.

expressive revelation" (205). If the spiritualist medium's role is to converse with the ghost and utter through the ghost what is inexpressible, the situation of female writers of ghost stories is not so different, for they too conversed with literary ghosts and brought to light through the ghost what was otherwise inexpressible. As Owen remarks, "utterance was central to the business of mediumship", and "giving voice to the unutterable" (213) was thus the valuable gift that the ghost bestows on both types of mediums.

### 1.2.2 Chinese Nationhood in Crisis and Masculinity Anxiety

Analogous to the crisis in faith and its ensuing ideological instabilities as experienced by the British, late nineteenth-century China also witnessed unprecedented social upheavals and a crisis of faith of another nature.[117] External and internal political crises worked together to shake the very foundations upon which the Chinese, literati and general public alike, relied for their conceptualization of the world and the self.[118] A very important aspect of the Chinese worldview had been based on the faith in the superiority and centrality of Chinese culture in the world,[119] which was not only reflected in the name that the Chinese gave to their country, "the middle kingdom", but was also anchored deeply in a national mentality ever since the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*) established the centre-periphery dichotomy underpinning Chinese perceptions of self and other.[120] Historically, the superiority of Chinese culture had been challenged, most noticeably during the dynastical transitions between the Song and the Yuan and between the Ming and the Qing. On both

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[117] On the late-Qing crisis, see Fairbank and Liu eds., 1985, *The Cambridge History of China: Late Qing 1800-1910*, vol. 10.

[118] The Qing dynasty in the second half of the nineteenth century was subject to constant military defeats and encroachment by Westerners and domestic riots, for instance the Nian Rebellion and the Taiping Rebellion in the1850s-1860s and the Boxer Rebellion around 1900.

[119] Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework", in *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*, 1968, pp. 1-13.

[120] *The Classic* is an early Chinese text of geography, fantastic creatures, mythology and magic. The Han-dynasty scholar Liu Xin 劉歆 recorded the legendary origin of *The Classic* as this: Great Yu, the founder of China's first dynasty Xia, commended his officer Bo Yi to record all the mountains and seas and creatures in the far corners of his land so that his people may know about them and would not feel afraid (See Ji Yun, et al, "*Shanhai jing* tiyao", 1987). However, modern scholars generally believe the book was written by different writers over time, probably during the Warring States period to the early Han dynasty. See Fang Tao, Preface, *Shanhai jing*, 2009. The various legendary creatures recorded in *The Classic* are a well of source material for later Chinese supernatural literature. I will explore further the significance of *The Classic* to Chinese *zhiguai* in Chapters Two and Three.

occasions, the fact that the native Han Chinese government was defeated by what were perceived as alien peoples generated tremendous anxiety among the Han literati under the new rule. The trauma of loss was great, yet to the Han people in the new regime, the subsequent assimilation of the alien rulers into the native Chinese culture could at least conversely testify to the superiority of Chinese culture.[121]

However, this was not to be the case for the late-Qing Chinese. The total defeat in the two Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) at the hands of the British and the subsequent forced opening-up of treaty ports for the first time put that cultural confidence into question. If literati in previous dynasties could still find consolation in their cultural superiority in the ruling aliens' active acculturation even after the defeat, that situation was to be reversed in the late Qing. The opening-up of treaty ports like Shanghai ushered in a wave of Western merchants and missionaries, and their command of marvellous industrial commodities and modern science shocked as well as allured the Shanghai inhabitants,[122] many of them being displaced literati migrating to this newly emerging city as their own hometowns were taken over by the Taiping rebels.[123] The decade-long war of the Taiping Rebellion was the other major (and in a sense more significant) blow to the already declining Qing dynasty apart from Western military intrusions. The war devastated the country's wealthiest Jiangnan area and rendered Nanjing, the traditional economic and cultural centre of the area, under Taiping control for ten years. It left a generation of Chinese people in trauma and, more importantly, aroused alarming doubts regarding the legitimacy of the current

[121] On Mongols and Manchus' acculturation in the Yuan and Qing dynasties respectively, see for instance Hsiao Chi-Ch'ing, 1992, "The Sinicization of the Mongols during the Yuan Dynasty: A Synthesis" and Yeh Kao-shu, 2010, "Several Questions on the Study of Manchu Sinicization"; for an introduction and critique of Karl A. Wittfogel's theory of "Dynasties of Conquest" that challenges the traditional view of Mongols' and Manchus' "sinicization" by the Han culture, see Xiong Mingqin, "Shui zhi zhengfu? Ruhe rentong?", 2012.

[122] On the hybridity of Shanghai urban life in the late Qing, see Catherine Vance Yeh, "The Life-Style of Four *Wenren* in Late Qing Shanghai", 1997; Xiong Yuezhi, 1994, pp. 10-4 and Chen Pingyuan and Xia Xiahong eds., 2014, *Tuxiang wanqing: Dianshizhai huabao*. The British-run newspaper *Shenbao* and the London Missionary Society Press in Shanghai became the hub for transmitting Western science and ways of thinking in late-Qing China, whose roles in changing Chinese intellectuals' orientation towards the West were epitomized in Wang Tao's case.

[123] The Taiping Rebellion started in 1850 in Guangxi province and swept many southern provinces, finally taking over Nanjing as its headquarter from 1853 to 1864. The war ranks as one of the bloodiest wars in human history, with an estimated figure of war deaths ranging from twenty to thirty million. See Li Xiaobing. "Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864)", 2012.

Qing rule.[124] On the other hand, the fall of Nanjing to the rebels indirectly helped Shanghai to become a new cultural centre in southern China, where the first generation of treaty-port merchants and literati came into direct contact with Western lifestyles and ways of thinking, which offered them an external frame of reference to re-evaluate their own culture.[125] In a sense, the Taiping Rebellion itself was partly a Western import, as the movement's leader, Hong Xiuquan created his so-called "God-Worshipping Society" with a strange brew of Christian messianism, traditional rebellious rhetoric, and early Confucian thinking.[126] The Taiping Rebellion was the apotheosis of the tumultuous condition of late-Qing China where external and internal crises fuelled each other to create a world of catastrophe.

Such alarming cultural and national crises generated a great anxiety over Chinese masculinity among the literati class. In many cultures nationhood and masculinity have been correlated, as the analogy between a nation and a male-dominated household mutually legitimizes and defines the function of the ruler in each case: the sovereign is to rule over his subjects and the male head of the family his women and children.[127] In reality, certainly not all men could adequately picture themselves in the sovereign's position, yet for traditional Chinese male literati, the orthodox Confucian ideology provided a very exact role model for everyone who was not in the emperor's position to follow, and that model is closely measured on man's relationship with his nation. The ideal Confucian scholar's life goals as summarized in *The Great Learning* are first "to cultivate one's person" (修身) so he can "regulate one's family" (齊家), then to "order well one's state" (治國), and finally to "keep the whole kingdom

[124] See Zhang Hao, 1988, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning (1890-1911)*, pp. 6-10.
[125] See Henry McAleavy, 1953, *Wang Tao, The Life and Writing of a Displaced Person*, p. 8; Paul Cohen, 1974, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang Tao and the late Qing Reform*, p. 34.
[126] The founder Hong Xiuquan got inspiration from Christian pamphlets distributed by Protestant missionaries when he declared himself the "younger brother of Jesus", and blended the Christian apocalyptic vision with traditional Chinese utopian thinking; Hong Rengan, the movement's later leader and chief reformer, had been formally educated in Christian doctrines in Hong Kong and Shanghai before joining the Taiping base in Nanjing in 1859. See Jen Yu-wen, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 1973, pp. 14-5, pp. 27-8, and pp. 381-6.
[127] On the connection of nationhood and masculinity, see Todd W. Reeser, 2010, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*, pp. 171-99.

tranquil" (平天下).[128] In this ideal model, the personal sphere of a man's life is so closely connected with the public sphere that failing one's nation would certainly endanger one's confidence in being a man. In times of peace, entering officialdom was the standard career path for the Confucian scholar, as it was the ideal way to manifest one's usefulness to his country. Those who failed in this path (and there was a large number of them since the population boom of the Ming dynasty) perceived themselves as social outcasts, and many of them poured their repressed energy and sense of frustration into fiction-writing — an alternative way to recuperate their injured masculinity in the symbolic realm.[129] However, in times of war and dynastical change, masculinity anxiety was greatly aggravated, as the Chinese equation of nationhood and manhood left the male literati in a desperately impotent situation to rescue both.[130] The resurgence of stories about ghosts during or after times of political and ideological turmoil, in a sense, is a reorientation process against such feelings of displacement and a further validation of the female ghost's observation mentioned before: "In times of chaos [like ours], people and ghosts mingle together".

Such a civilizational crisis had happened in the Ming-Qing transition, and one of the aftermaths of the fall of the Ming was the ensuing debate and anxiety among Han literati over their shattered masculinity, for not only had they failed to protect their country from the Manchu invasion, but many of them had also failed the loyalty test and bowed to the new ruler. The late Qing resembled the late Ming in many respects, and the late-Qing literati were themselves aware of these familiar omens which only aggravated their sense of crisis and anxiety.[131] However, the late Qing was also significantly different from the late Ming in that now the intruders were not some barbarians who could boast only of their military prowess, but Westerners whose

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[128] *The Great Learning* had been the standard primary reading for every Chinese intellectual since its canonisation by the Song-dynasty Confucian thinker Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200). The translation is Legge's, 1971, p. 357.

[129] The so-called "frustrated scholar" was a conventional image of the fiction writer, and many eminent writers of fiction, including Feng Menglong and Pu Songling, belonged to this group.

[130] On the equation of nationhood and manhood in China, see Martin W. Huang, 2006, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China*, especially Chapter 4. Zhong Xueping also offers a brilliant account of the correlation between Chinese masculinity and nationalist discourse in *Masculinity Besieged: Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of the Late Twentieth Century*, 2000.

[131] On the similar ethos permeating the late Ming and the late Qing, see Chen Pingyuan, David D.W. Wang and Shang Wei, eds., *The Late Ming and the Late Qing: Historical Dynamics and Cultural Innovations*, 2002, and Qin Yanchun, 2008, *Qingmo minchu de wanming xiangxiang*.

culture, though so different from the Chinese culture, may not be inferior but possibly superior. Thus, adding to the masculinity crisis engendered by the national crisis was the fear of effemination in the face of Westerners. Scholars have noted the appropriation of gender categories in the construction of nations.[132] In this conceptualization, the confrontation of nations in war is inevitably envisioned as a clash of genders, and the result is the feminization of the defeated side, as the common Chinese idiom "to fight to see who the male is and who the female is" (一决雌雄) poignantly reveals. Wang Tao, one of the major late-Qing *zhiguai* writers and one of the first generation of traditionally-educated Chinese scholars who encountered and absorbed Western learning in the newly-opened treaty ports like Shanghai (they were what Cohen calls the "treaty-port intellectuals"),[133] records a telling anecdote in his travelogue. While he was working in Scotland with James Legge translating Chinese classics, one day a group of local children pointed at him and mistakenly called him a "Chinese lady", probably because of his traditional scholar's robe, a not-so-masculine attire in Western eyes.[134] Wang Tao records the incident in a light manner, yet immediately his tone turns self-pitying:

> The identities [of the female rabbit and the male rabbit] are all in irresolution.[135] Sailing alone across wide oceans and sojourning in this foreign land, I could not take off like a true male and have to couch like a female. Now listening to the children's talk, [I wonder] isn't it a prophecy of my destiny? 撲朔迷離，隻身滄波，托足異國，不為雄飛，甘為雌伏，聽此童言，詎非終身之讖語哉?[136]

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[132] On the intersection between imaginative constructions of gender and nations, see Ida Blom ed., *Gendered Nations: Nationalism and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 2000. The collection mainly draws upon European traditions and practices and admittedly nations can be imagined in different gendered rhetoric in other cultures. As both gender binary and national conflict (a conflict imagined as one between the self and the other) are informed by an inherent hierarchy, gender and nation as conceptual categories can reinforce each other in this hierarchizing process.

[133] See Cohen, 1974. Cohen studies Wang Tao as a representative of these reform-oriented Chinese intellectuals.

[134] Wang Tao, *Manyou suilu* 漫遊隨錄 (*Casual Records of My Travels*, 1890), 1982, p. 144; see also McAleavy, 1953, p. 24 for this incident.

[135] Here the phrase Wang uses is derived from two lines of verse about the difficulty of telling a male from a female: "[when holding them by the ears] the male rabbit kicks his hinder-legs while the female rabbit squints her eyes; yet when the male and the female are walking together on the ground, how can one tell who's the male and who's the female?" (雄兔腳撲朔，雌兔眼迷離；雙兔傍地走，安能辨我是雄雌?)

[136] Wang Tao, *Manyou suilu*, p. 144.

Wang Tao at that time indeed had much to lament for himself; being an ambitious scholar setting out to "rectify the world", he was not only alienated from the orthodox power centre, the officialdom, but moreover he was turned into a political exile stranded in an alien land far away from home.[137] Yet what is of significance here is that all these frustrations boil down to an eminent masculinity anxiety, and, worse still for Wang Tao, a fear of emasculation when being looked at as the "other" and having his body misinterpreted by Westerners.

Wang's experience in Scotland was unique in that he was among the first Chinese intellectuals of his generation to have lived among Westerners and looked back at himself and his culture from an outsider's perspective. However, his experience did play out the repressed yet frequently resurfacing fear of feminization in many Chinese male literati, caused by the late nineteenth-century national crisis and to varying degrees by the encounter with the West. This was the time when the Chinese male literati were forced to reconsider their identity, reorient their relationship to their country and adjust themselves to the changing demands of masculinity. In reaction, many turned to *zhiguai* writing, which traditionally had served as a means of alternative identity-building, and for the time being, provided the needed space to reconstruct their besieged masculinity and imagine a gendered encounter between China and the West revalorized through mythical motifs.

### 1.3 History and Myth

The ideological uncertainties in both Britain and China in the late nineteenth century had engendered tremendous anxieties and perturbation over notions of gender, and those who felt an urgent need to redefine or revalorize their gender identity — the marginalized literati class in China and women writers in Britain — had turned to the versatile ghost literature. The ghost literature in both countries, as my brief review of their genealogies shows, has been regarded as a not properly "legitimate" genre for its concentration on topics and phenomena that are removed from the site of reality and therefore from the legitimate and the respectable; however, it is also within this "illegitimate" zone where heterogeneous concepts regarding what is real and

[137] Before the journey to Europe, Wang was forced to escape to Hong Kong with the help of his British missionary friends in Shanghai for his alleged involvement in the Taiping Rebellion. More on this incident in Chapter Three.

acceptable are contested, that the otherwise marginalized authors can put into trial different versions of normality and forge new gender possibilities. Two major strategies for negotiating gender identities have been used by these writers in their ghost literature: a re-evaluation of the construction of (personal or collective) history and an appropriation of popular myths.

A close engagement with the processes of history-making and myth-making inform the four writers I examine in this dissertation. Xuan Ding, Wang Tao, Vernon Lee, and E. Nesbit were active in their respective cultural scenes during the 1870s to the 1890s, and many of their ghost stories were written over the last three decades of the nineteenth century. The *fin-de-siècle*, as introduced above, was a period of great ideological uncertainty, and these writers in varying degrees were all influenced by and participated in the formation of new social and gender roles. Wang Tao and Xuan Ding were typical of the first generation of Chinese intellectuals who were caught between tradition and new challenges: the Taiping Rebellion had a decisive impact on their life path, and both writers acutely felt the shock of encountering the West in their sojourn in and around Shanghai. Both writers, as mentioned earlier, paid a homage to *Liaozhai* and, as I will show in the following chapters, this homage marks both an interest in and a scepticism toward history and tradition. The British writers, on the other hand, were women who actively lived outside of contemporary restrictive notions of women's roles. Apart from her career in fiction writing, Vernon Lee was the author of more than forty books and numerous essays traversing across art history, philosophy, aesthetics, and travel writing — a female public intellectual perhaps would better fit her own understanding of her identity. E. Nesbit, apart from being a successful children's writer, was one of the founding members of the socialist Fabian Society (founded in 1884) and an advocate for social reforms. Whatever their positioning in the various political debates on the issue of the New Woman that characterized late nineteenth-century Britain, their lives and especially their ghost story writing already formed a part of the history that made for a new understanding of femininity and sexual differences.

### 1.3.1 History

Both types of ghost literature from China and Britain can be understood as a kind of quasi-history in some sense, although in China, ghost stories were used by the

marginalized literati as a "history of ghosts" to reaffirm or challenge the history of the state, while in Britain the women writers appropriated the fantastic space of ghost stories to reinstate women's distinctive voice and experience into a private history of their own. *Zhiguai* originated in historiography, and throughout its development as a kind of "wild history" (*yeshi*) by self-appointed "historians", it functioned as the undisciplined other of official state histories. The English ghost story, as a later development of the Gothic, is a similarly untamed genre dedicated to exploring the extraordinary, the supernatural, and the improbable. Its departure from the realist aim of representing reality perhaps won it a steady readership, yet it also undermined its respectability — that Margarete Oliphant found Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) especially praiseworthy for its effect of mystery realised without using the supernatural perhaps best illustrates the implicit contempt for fiction that deviates from the respectable goal of representing the real.[138] Henry James had also been an advocate and a model practitioner of the realist fiction, although his exploration of psychological complexities in ghost stories like "The Turn of the Screw" (1898) deeply destabilizes what is considered the real. In his "Art of Fiction" (1884) responding to Walter Besant's (1836-1901) article of the same title, James exalts the novel as an art form bearing a truth value no less than history: "as picture is reality, so the novel is history".[139] While James's title refers to "fiction", what he actually had in mind is not all fiction but more narrowly the realist novel for, as he admits, "the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel — the merit in which all its other merits…helplessly and submissively depend".[140] James certainly is not attempting a simple equation between the novel and history nor painting and reality, but he does invest much in the potential of the novel as a kind of history. In his understanding, the novelist is no less than a historian in rendering his work a bearer of the ultimate truth, the "human spectacle": "To represent and illustrate

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[138] Oliphant, "Sensation Novels" (1862), in Regan ed., 2001, pp. 41-2.
[139] James, in Regan ed., 2001, p. 70.
[140] Ibid., p. 76. Both Besant's and James' essays are concerned with establishing fiction as a new serious and ethical art form of the nineteenth century; yet in fact the "fiction" in their title refers only narrowly to the novel and would not include the short story. The short story, on the other hand, never gained an equal respectability in the nineteenth century, and the rise of the short story at the end of the century was very often associated with New Woman writers. Twentieth-century critic O'Conner remarks that the short story "has never had a hero", but on the other hand it appealed particularly to "submerged population": women, exiles, etc. See Emma Young and James Barley, Introduction, *British Women Short Story Writers*, 2015, p. 2.

the past, the actions of men, is the task of either writer"; yet moreover the novelist may even be closer to the reality of the human spectacle, as "he has at once so much in common with the philosopher and the painter".[141]

For the nineteenth-century proponents of realist fiction who often relied on the analogy between realist fiction and history, the truth-value of history is a priori. However, as interpreted by various postmodern philosophers of history like Hayden White, what grants history its status as a genre with truth-value comes not from itself, but its narrativity. History as most commonly appearing in the form of a narrative of past events is as emplotted as literature is into archetypal genres and governed by a set of rhetorical rules.[142] In other words, past things are given a meaning, a structure, and made accessible to our cognition only after they are given a plot with causes and effects. In this understanding of history, the seemingly inerasable barrier between history and fiction, one factual, the other imaginary, becomes subtly flexible.[143] Fiction thus becomes an alternative venue to write history as conceptualized as a construction of the past. In Diana Wallace's words, fiction has long been "one of the primary ways in which women writers have written history, and written themselves into 'History'", and more specifically, "Gothic works as a 'mode of history'…has had particular attractions and importance for women writers".[144] For if the realist novel in the nineteenth century can be regarded as an acceptable and respectable mode of literary history, then its opposite, the Gothic, functions as a kind of unofficial or private history. Removed from the expectation of rendering social realities faithfully and ethically, the Gothic gains in return more freedom to break away from social models of normality and to run riot with incidents and emotions that are regarded as excessive and regulated into the abnormal and unspeakable. This may explain the special affinity between Gothic fiction — especially its popular form in the nineteenth-century, the ghost story — and women writers. The Gothic mode provided women writers who were traditionally excluded from the field of professional history an arena in which to write their own distinctive experience as a private women's history. To be sure, the

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[141] James, 2001, p. 71.
[142] White, 1973, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe.*
[143] White in *The Content of the Form* argues that the very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which the true is identified with the real only in so far as it can be shown to possess the feature of narrativity (1987, p. 6).
[144] Wallace, 2013, pp. 2-3, p. 5.

fragmentary Gothic history brought forth by ghost stories is a strange and spectral one, yet it may be no more spectral than the real-life experiences of many Victorian women in a society where they were rendered legally non-existent and socially invisible. So if the Chinese male writers' histories of ghosts challenge the official state history which silences the non-orthodox, the British women writer's appropriation of ghost stories as a field for women to challenge men's hegemony in history-making and to build their own female histories exemplifies another way in which the ghost literature functions in the power play of history writing and gender construction.

To write history is to effect one's presence in history and to legitimize one's current being, for as "historical beings" we make sense of our current standing only when we put into sequence what happened before and what is to come.[145] Understandably, ghost literature writers turn to a reconsideration of history to help make sense of their identity. Gender identity perhaps is more conspicuously associated with national history in the Chinese case since, as I demonstrated above, the close correlation between nationhood and Chinese masculinity results in an anxious re-evaluation of both concepts when either is being challenged, and both were seriously challenged in late nineteenth-century China. In such times of uncertainty, ghost stories offer a perfect place to undertake a reconsideration of history, as David D. W. Wang remarks, "Across corporeal and temporal-spatial barriers, ghosts reappear like vanishing memories and perished relations, 'disembodying' the hiatus between the dead and the living, the unreal and the real, the unthinkable and the admissible. Thus, instead of serving merely as an index to ancient superstition, the ghost story brings itself directly to bear upon the contested issue of history and realism in pre-modern Chinese narrative."[146]

Thus, the late-Qing literati turned to *zhiguai* writing to reimagine a dynastical history in which their endangered masculinity can find new meanings or get reaffirmation. The late-Qing reformist thinker Wang Tao was one such writer. In his *zhiguai* writing,

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[145] Mircea Eliade calls the modern people "historical man", in contrast to what he calls the "archaic man" — people in primitive or traditional societies to whom history in itself has no value and is understood only as the repetition of archetypal models. The modern historical man makes his own history, and understands his life in relation to the history in which he participates. See Eliade, 1959, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 141-72. I borrow the notion of the "historical man" from Eliade, though unlike Eliade I believe the "historical man" does make his own history and is freer than the "archaic man".

[146] David D. W. Wang, 2004, p. 263.

Wang persistently invokes groups of people antithetical to orthodox state history: the remaining loyalists of a defeated dynasty during dynastical changes and the chaste female victims who died silently in trans-dynastical wars. The former group, according to the succeeding state history, are those who should not be, and the latter, who never were. They appear in Wang's stories as ghosts, encountered by a contemporary protagonist in various fantastic settings, but they are at the same time the ghosts of official history in a true sense. The encounter with these ghosts of history makes possible a critique and subsequently a departure from official state history, in which China is always perceived as the centre of the world and the dynastical transformation always justified. These reconsiderations of Chinese history bring forth a model masculinity that is more open to the outside world, and is therefore for Wang a more suitable type to face the imminent challenges from the West.

However, in this negotiation of masculinity and national identity through ghost stories, the male writer is constantly imagining a feminine other, against which his own masculinity is reaffirmed and through which his own words can be spoken. Just as women are excluded from the position of historians, the female ghost, too, is excluded from the position of making her own voice heard in this supposedly "her true history as a ghost".[147] The silenced female victims of war in Wang's stories will always be silent until they are conjured up in séances and have their personal stories transcribed and transmitted by the literati. In other instances, a historical figure appearing in a contemporary setting as an amorous female ghost becomes a metonym for the nation gendered as female, the mutually desired other through which a homosocial bonding can be established between heterosexual men of different historical epochs.[148] Throughout this process, women are still excluded from the construction of nation or history.

The ghost literature may serve as an instrument to critique homogenous ideological constructions, yet it can also function as a discourse to reinforce hegemonic gender relations if the legitimacy and validity of man-made history itself are presupposed to be self-evident and the male historian's subjective position made translucent. Women

[147] The Chinese *zhiguai*, as discussed above, is a genre by and for the male literati; therefore, the many female ghosts populating this genre are to varying degrees the projections of the male writers' fears and aspirations.
[148] On the homosociality involved in men's perception of their relationship with the nation, see Reeser, 2010, p. 214.

had never gained the authoritative position of the historian until the last century; however, in the realm of literature, the marginalized and "ghosted" position of women may help women writers to better understand the implicit gendered manipulation and shadowing in men's history-making as well as ghost-making. Wallace argues that women writers had appropriated Gothic as a kind of women's private history, yet in Vernon Lee's case, the ghost story is used as a way to re-evaluate and challenge men's history-writing. The nineteenth-century professionalization of historiography excluded women, yet a relativist view and a broadened understanding of the scope of history informing the latter half of the century also attracted many aspiring women writers to try their hands at this men's field, and Lee was one of them. Lee's experience in contesting for the role of a legitimate historian as a woman and her relativist view of history in turn informed her ghost story writing, in which men's construction and manipulation of the image of women (as the ghost of history) is taken to task. The male historian in Vernon Lee's stories is presented as a counterpart of the perturbed male literati in China; with a desire to revitalize his endangered masculinity, he wills out the female ghost to help substantiate his own version of history. The validity and supposed objectivity of man-made history is thus exposed as a gendered fiction. Freed from the yoke of historiographic authority, the female ghost can finally make her presence felt through haunting a space just between history and fancy.

### 1.3.2 Myth

Up to now I have conceptualized the ghost literature as a kind of quasi-history, or a fictionalized history that marginalized groups could use to resist the hegemony of orthodox discourse. Here I propose that in its fictionality, its active appropriation of existing mythic patterns and soliciting power from it, the ghost literature is also a kind of mythopoeia — that is, an artistic remaking of narrative patterns whose cultural veracity is already pertaining to myth. Mythopoeia, its Latin etymology meaning "myth-making", is a notion that J. R. R. Tolkien brought back to modern literature in his 1931 poem entitled "Mythopoeia", a direct rebuttal of C. S. Lewis's view that myths were "lies" and therefore "worthless".[149] In the poem Tolkien defends the value of creative myth-making for a secularized age, and he practised what he preached in

[149] J. R. R. Tolkien, "Mythopoeia", in *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia*, 2011, p. 85. On the poem's origin and various versions, see Christopher Tolkien's Preface to the same volume, vii-viii.

his voluminous fantasy works which by now have become the classics of a veritable literary genre called mythopoeia. In this study, I do not intend to use the term narrowly to refer only to literary genres in which complete artificial mythologies are involved as Tolkien's do, for myth itself has a much broader presence historically as well as in contemporary society. The early myth-and-ritual school literary critics like Jessie Weston and Northrop Frye have demonstrated the broader significance of myth by analysing the inherent mythical structures of various literary genres, and thinkers like Mircea Eliade have also exposed the mythical patterns underlying various religious and political ideologies.[150] With the insight of these critical precedents, I treat myth not as the set of mythologies concerning some sacred past or cosmic origin, but more broadly as the underlying patterns of some basic narrative plots which overtime have solidified into a self-fulfilling fiction, exerting a considerable ideological force in the cultural field they are active. In folklore, earlier mythical stories could be refurbished with culturally and historically specific details and occasionally underwent active artistic reinvention, and ghost stories abound with such traces of camouflaged mythical narratives. By understanding myth as encompassing all those recurrent and powerful cultural narratives, we could consider the ghost literature as mythopoeia because the genre is a melting pot of so many conventionalized plots, symbols, and archetypal figures, themselves the legacy of a long literary tradition and bearing the imprints of the dominant ideologies of the time. As my analysis in the following chapters will reveal, the construction of a glorified national history is very often inseparable from the creation of a national myth, crucial to the orientation of the individuals in the imagined community, and gender relationships and behavioural patterns are another field in which gendered myths exert a considerable and sometimes detrimental power on the individuals involved.

The ghost literature writers I am going to examine in the following chapters were writing for their contemporary audience, but at the same time they were writing in a highly conventionalized genre, constantly recycling a set of plots already pertaining to mythic status: the hero who sacrifices himself for his community and is resurrected as a god (especially in Xuan Ding's stories), the perilous amorous encounter with a mysterious female (a plot common to all), and the ghost lover returning from the dead

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[150] Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 1920; Frye, 1957, *Anatomy of Criticism*. On Christian and Marxist visions of history as myth, see Lawrence Coupe, *Myth* (2nd ed.), 2009, pp. 61-3.

(in Lee and Nesbit), etc. These are mythic not because people truly believed that such stories belonged to a once sacred history, but because of their repetition in all types of cultural narratives and their conformation with a certain preconditioned cultural veracity, so that the retelling of them gives them sanctity, and through this retelling people gain recognition for their own cultural identity. Eliade points out the importance of myth for the primitive people: by ritually reciting the myth, the sacred time when mythical deeds were first performed is re-actualized, and the religious people can thus reunite with their gods and cultural heroes.[151] Eliade also discusses the relevance of myth in our modern age, where the religious mind-set is significantly subdued but not fully extinct, and mythologies appear in camouflaged forms in plays, books, and cinema.[152] While I have reservations regarding the religious core of human beings suggested by Eliade, I agree with him on the ritualistic power of evoking myth. By reciting myth, the primitive man becomes closer to his gods; for a not necessarily religious man, to evoke myths of cultural and national heroes is certainly a way to reunite with these heroes and appropriate their potency. Such a strategy is used in Xuan Ding's stories. Faced with the imminent danger of dynastical collapse, Xuan, like Wang Tao, returned to Chinese history in his *zhiguai* stories. But instead of questioning the validity of historical narratives and examining those shadowed figures in history, Xuan turns to those who should have been glorified by national history. Moreover, he immortalizes his historical figures into veritable myths. This mythology about the integrity, nobility, and patriotism of various cultural heroes becomes a literary pantheon in which the contemporary perturbed literatus is not only able to reunite with his heroes and spiritual fathers, but in their presence, he also regains his standing vis-a-vis a threatening other: the intruding Westerners.

The recurrent narrative patterns in ghost literature can be evoked as a myth to vouch for a certain understanding of national identity, as in Xuan's case, but they can also be rewritten to form new myths and thus legitimize new modes of relationships and social roles, and the women writers in my examination all actively solicited existing cultural and literary myths in their exploration of and negotiation with new models of femininity. Myth, indeed, apart from being in Eliade's conceptualization the primitive

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[151] Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 1959, pp. 81-2, pp. 91-5.
[152] Ibid., pp. 204-5.

man's paradigmatic model through which he can escape from the burdens of history,[153] is at the same time an important ideological force in all ages and serves a very practical social function. In anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's concept, myth is a cultural force to sanctify certain rituals and modes of behaviours and to maintain and justify the existing social order. Meletinsky, recapitulating Malinowski's theory, summarises: "Myth codifies thought, reinforces mores, defines precise rules of behavior, sanctions rituals, and rationalizes and justifies the social order."[154] This sanctifying force of myth can render it both coercive and empowering. Counterpart to the myth of the cultural hero (usually a male), there is the myth of the fallen woman punished with death and regaining he ideal womanhood in the passivity of death. The former can find its traces in many religious texts and biographies of historical figures, yet the latter is a cautionary tale on model womanhood and can find many literary incarnations from fairy tales to Gothic romances.

Myths about stories of the model woman justify the restrictions imposed on women, yet they can also be rewritten to envisage new forms of femininity. E. Nesbit's ghost stories start from a legacy of recurrent gender myths inherited from the Female Gothic tradition as well as other contemporary cultural assets: the nocturnal encounter between the human male and the amorous female ghost, the haunted house permeated by an inexplicable sense of desire and guilt, and most importantly, the myth of the fallen woman. In contrast to Xuan's myth of the cultural hero, which charts the man's ascent from death to immortality, the popular Victorian myth about the fallen woman and the dead woman traces her downfall: the transgressive woman falls into death, and expurgated of her sins, she is resurrected by her male lover as a passive goddess. These tales about the model or punished womanhood are cautionary tales that patriarchy tells its women, and in Nesbit's stories such myths are taken up but turned back on themselves. Twisting and reverting the familiar narrative into a macabre Gothic nightmare, Nesbit not only exposes the hypocrisy embedded in the original patriarchal myth but also envisions new possibilities for women. Through manipulating old myths in her fragmentary histories of women, Nesbit's tales serve as a mythography, yet in

[153] Ibid., p. 95.
[154] Eleazar Meletinsky, *The Poetics of Myth,* 1998, p. 25. See also Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology", 2002, pp. 176-84.

creating new myths for women, they are also a lively mythopoeia. In relying on the creative force of literary mythmaking, Nesbit is as enthusiastic a "philomythus" (lover of myth) as Xuan Ding.[155]

Ghost literature writers under my examination have evoked history and myth as the two major strategies for their reconstruction of gender identity, but these certainly are not the only ones they have used; nor does my above discussion of the strategies used by specific authors cover the whole range of each author's works. History and myth are important analytical perspectives through which to consider the ghost literature's potential as a destabilizing as well as constructive genre, since to write stories of ghosts as (national or private) history or myth indicates the author's attitudes toward the relationship between the past and the present, and between the self and the alterity that is the ghost.

Chapter Two looks into Chinese *zhiguai* writer Xuan Ding and his two-volume *zhiguai* collection *Yeyu qiudeng lu* 夜雨秋燈錄 (*Records of Rainy Nights under the Autumn Lamp*, 1877, 1880) and his marvellous play *Fanhun xiang chuanqi* 返魂香傳奇 (*Incense of the Returning Soul*, 1877). The chapter begins with an introduction of the late-Ming cultural trend, the "cult of *qing*" which underlies Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*, the great tradition that the two *zhiguai* writers in my project both inherited and deviated from. This section also provides a background against which to contextualize the late-Qing *zhiguai*. I then proceed to examine the much troubled and less optimistic outlook on cosmic order and human destiny implied in a group of Xuan's revenging ghost stories as well as stories about cosmic calamity. I argue that when confronted by a seemingly arbitrary cosmos where order is either absent or collapsing, Xuan's ghost stories seek order by returning to Chinese history to excavate and mythologize a pantheon of fatherly ghosts; at the same time, they appropriate a set of conventional narrative patterns to tame the inevitable confrontation between China and the West.

As self-stylized "historians of ghosts", both Xuan Ding and Wang Tao return to national history in their ghost tales to cope with their contemporary disillusionment,

[155] Tolkien's "Mythopoeia" is addressed as "Philomythus to Misomythus": "To one who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though 'breathed through silver'/ Philomythus To Misomythus (2011, p. 85).

but Wang's treatment of national history is in stark contrast with Xuan's. Chapter Three first reviews Wang's prefaces to his three *zhiguai* collections *Dunku lanyan* 遁窟讕言 (*Unverified Words from the Cave of Retreat*, 1875), *Songyin manlu* 淞隱漫錄 (*Random Records upon the Song River*, prefaced 1884, published 1887) and *Songbin suohua* 淞濱瑣話 (*Trivial Words Upon the Song River*, prefaced 1887, published 1893) which evolve from an affirmation of traditional apologies for *zhiguai* to a downright denunciation of *zhiguai*'s moral legitimacy and an exaltation of Western empiricism. Such an exhibition of disparate worldviews in the *zhiguai*'s preface prepares its reader for a new type of strange tales which is a hybrid in itself: a mode of fantastic writing embodying the unresolvedness of an age troubled by conflicting epistemological frameworks. Unlike Xuan who turns historical figures into mythical deities, Wang revisits history through two types of spectres of history: the *yimin* and the victimized female revenants. Through fantastic settings that foreground these figures' alienation from orthodox history, Wang exposes the "grand" Chinese history as uncanny. His treatment of Sino-Western encounters, on the other hand, is a perilous journey seeking to revalorize Chinese masculinity, yet vacillating between different cultural and epistemological registers. The result is a new strange tale that epitomizes the paradoxes of his time and refuses its reader any assurance of reality.

Chapter Four turns to the English writer Vernon Lee and her engagement with the past and radical forms of femininity in her ghost stories "Amour Dure" (1887, 1890), "Oke of Okehurst" (originally titled "A Phantom Lover", 1886, 1890), "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" (1896), and the novel *Louis Norbert: A Two-fold Romance* (1914). As an esteemed cultural historian of Italian art, Lee was clearly aware of the blind spot in history-making: the implicit gendered script that the (often male) historian gives to his history. While the above-mentioned Chinese writers resurrect ghosts from the past to reimagine a national history, their identity as male scholarly elites — the legitimate writers of history — leads them to fail to examine the ghost historian's own position. Lee's ghost tales problematize the supposedly detached and objective position of the historian, whether as the historian of the nation or the ghost. In exposing the mechanism of man making his-story by making the story of the ghost woman, Lee frees the ghost woman from the role of a mere spectacle, scrutinized and moulded by male desires. I argue that instead of legitimizing the ghost's history, Lee's ghost tales propose haunting as a more efficient returning of ghosts.

Chapter Five examines another Victorian ghost story writer, E. Nesbit and her stories "The Ebony Frame" (1893), "The Shadow" (1905?), "From the Dead" (1893), and finally "The House of Silence" (1906). While Lee's stories are engaged with the mechanism of history-writing and ghost-making, Nesbit's stories of women ghosts, as a direct response to the Female Gothic tradition, turn the focus back on women's experiences: the sufferings and inexplicable experiences of "ghosted" women. Nesbit's tales also exhibit another dimension of texts that haunt: a refusal to interpretive closure and narrative resolution, which not only reflects the intrinsic paradoxes and complexities permeating Victorian women's lives in a drastically changing age, but is also a characteristic of fantastic literature, aptly termed by Jackson as a literature of subversion for its critique of notions of normality. Like Xuan's self-mythologizing tales of father gods/ghosts, Nesbit's stories of ghost women are also an active mythopoeia, appropriating patriarchal myths of the dead woman and rewriting them into a new empowering myth for the Gothic heroine.

The conclusion chapter draws together the threads running through the ghost literature in China and Britain that I have been tracing throughout this study: as a mode of the Gothic, a fantastic literature, and a literature of the anomaly. Finally, I emphasize the relevance of the ghost literature as a form of shadowed history in our contemporary society.

# *Part I  His Ghost, His-story*

# Chapter 2 "Among Dark Woods and Black Fortresses": Xuan Ding's Mythologization of National History

The seventeenth-century *zhiguai* writer Pu Songling made a touching yet ghostly call for comradeship at the end of his highly personal preface to *Liaozhai zhiyi*: "Aren't those who know me among dark woods and black fortresses!" 知我者, 其在青林黑塞間乎![156] While the sentence expresses a yearning for understanding between true friends, on the literal level, the phrase "among dark woods and black fortresses" is derived from a line of a Tang-dynasty poem expressing the foreboding of a dear friend's death.[157] The dear friend's disembodied soul, travelling across dark woods and black fortresses to meet the poet in his dream, seems to be an omen of the friend's death. Therefore, while Pu was crying out for true friendship, he was also bitterly aware that the truly knowing friend might only be found among ghosts.[158] The popularity of *Liaozhai* during the Qing dynasty led many admirers, sincerely or not, to respond positively to Pu's call for comradeship in the prefaces of their own *zhiguai* collections. Both Xuan Ding and Wang Tao, the two late-Qing *zhiguai* writers who were singled out by Lu Xun as "pure imitators of *Liaozhai*",[159] made overt or implicit references to *Liaozhai* in their prefaces. Were they truly identifying themselves as Pu's followers, himself now a dead soul "among dark woods and black fortresses", or were there other ghosts that they were responding to? The two late-Qing writers were faced with a totally changed world where phenomena stranger than the strange tales were becoming an everyday reality, and a mere endorsement of *Liaozhai*'s spirit — a voluntarism crystalizing in the transcendental ghost figure — proved insufficient to help the contemporary men cope with their current crises. Therefore, while ghosts and ghost literature continued to offer the late-Qing literati a space for alternative identity-

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[156] Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi huijiao huizhu huiping ben*, edited by Zhang Youhe (2nd ed.), p. 3. Citations of *Liaozhai zhiyi* in this dissertation all refer to this edition.

[157] The phrase is borrowed from Du Fu's 杜甫 (712-770) "Meng Li Bai; qiyi" 夢李白 ("Dreaming of Li Bai"): "the ghost came from the dark maple woods; the ghost returned to the black fortresses" (魂來楓林青，魂返關塞黑). Li Bai 李白 (701-762) was another famous poet and Du Fu's friend, who had lost contact with Du at the time and had been rumoured dead.

[158] See Zeitlin, 1993, p. 51.

[159] Lu Xun, 1973, *A Brief History*, p. 188. Scholars have found that the version Lu Xun read as Xuan Ding's *Yeyu qiudeng lu* were counterfeits, in which at least half of the stories were collated from other books; therefore, Lu's comment on Xuan was not wholly justified. See Song Xin's preface to *Ye lu*, 1987, pp. 15-6.

building, new strategies were moulded into this old genre to make sense and take control of the strangeness of the day.

An optimistic belief in the centrality of human will underlies the voluntaristic cosmos created in Pu's *Liaozhai*, yet such a reassuring cosmic order was visibly under attack by Xuan Ding's time when unprecedented disasters like the Taiping Rebellion made human will seem ignorable and cosmic order arbitrary. But *Liaozhai* did provide the besieged late-Qing literati an important spiritual resource — the writing of *zhiguai* as a process of self-mythification and identity-affirmation, which was the strategy that Xuan appropriated from *Liaozhai* to develop new literary myths in his *zhiguai* tales. Departing from the ideal ghosts in Pu's voluntaristic cosmos (in which human will is positioned in the centre of the cosmos), Xuan's ghost stories, as I will analyze below, excavate a legion of neglected heroes from Chinese national history and move them from the pathetic status of ghosts into a literary pantheon of patriotic fatherly gods. This literary god-making not only renders the national history into a mythical history in which the contemporary man can unite with and gain power from his spiritual ancestors and cultural heroes, but also endows him with a mythical identity. The mythologization of national history and the use of mythical plots, I argue, are not simply a nostalgia but serve a practical purpose for the besieged late-Qing writer in his contemporary confrontation with the threatening Westerners. It reinstates him onto the advantageous central position vis-à-vis the other and offers a familiar rhetoric to domesticate the strange in the conventional male-female encounter plot, at the end of which the Chinese man could reaffirm his masculinity and triumph over the aliens.

### 2.1 The Great Tradition*: Liaozhai zhiyi* and the Cult of *Qing*

As the homage to *Liaozhai* and a concern with the *zhiguai* tradition underlie both Xuan Ding's and Wang Tao's *zhiguai* writings and inform their appropriation of history, it is important to understand first what the heritage of *Liaozhai* is for the late-Qing writers. As an early-Qing *zhiguai*, *Liaozhai* distinguishes itself conspicuously from many other Qing-dynasty *zhiguai* collections in its celebration of the strong and subjective *qing*, or emotions, as part of a continuum from the late-Ming "cult of *qing*

(情)".[160] The cult of *qing* is not only the philosophical trend that *Liaozhai* participates in, but also to a large extent determines the features of the various remarkable ghost figures in it — the most indelible contribution that *Liaozhai* has made to Chinese literature. Moreover, the emphasis on individual freedom and subjectivity in the cult of *qing* also informs the ways that Pu positions his *zhigua*i writing and himself through it. The latter, to exalt the *zhiguai* genre as a serious art form for creating the author's ideal self and an alternative, better world, is *Liaozhai*'s other conspicuous departure from previous *zhiguai* works that often adopt a dismissive attitude to the genre.[161] This emphasis on literature's creative power, as mentioned above, is also the spiritual resource of *Liaozhai* that Xuan and Wang to various degrees benefited from.

Since the cult of *qing* stands at the thematic centre of *Liaozhai*, it merits a brief explanation to forward my following discussion of *Liaozhai*'s voluntaristic cosmos as exemplified by the ghost. Some scholars have variously termed the late-Ming phenomenon as the "cult of love" or "cult of sentiments"; however, "*qing*" is a very ambiguous and multifarious word which has no immediate equivalent in English. In different contexts and over time, it has encompassed meanings like "feeling", "sentiment", "love" or even "desire", as well as something more abstract like "nature" or "essence" in its earliest usage.[162] While *qing* for earlier Confucian scholars like Xunzi 荀子 (c. 313-230 BC) was similar to one's inborn nature *xing* 性, therefore considered a morally neutral term, by the Song dynasty, neo-Confucian scholars like Zhu Xi had polarized *qing* and *xing* and denigrated *qing* as something morally dangerous, likely to lead to unprohibited desires, and needed to be constantly curbed. It was in rebelling against Neo-Confucianism's emphasis on reason and moral puritanism that Ming-dynasty progressive thinkers like Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) and later Li Zhi 李贽 (1527-1602) promoted a new school of mind, which put more emphasis on authentic subjectivity and individual freedom. The mid-

[160] On the cult of *qing*, see Martin W. Huang, 1998 and *Desire and Fictional Narrative*, 2001, pp. 23-56, Santangelo, 2000, and Epstein, 2001, pp. 62-4. *Liaozhai* is distinctive from Ji Yun's *Yuewei caotang biji* and Yuan Mei's *Zibuyu* in its more romantic and idealistic treatment of the supernatural. For comparison of the three High Qing *zhiguai* writers, see Santangelo, 2013, and Leo Chan, 1998.
[161] I will explore more Pu's apology for the *zhiguai* genre in Chapter Three.
[162] On a re-evaluation of the concept of *qing* before Neo-Confucianism, see Zheng Zongyi, "Xingqing yu qingxing", 2004, pp. 23-32. On the ramification of *qing* in Chinese philosophy through Neo-Confucianism to the cult of *qing*, see Martin Huang, 1998, pp. 154-74, and Epstein, 2001, pp. 62-119.

Ming philosophical trend paved the way for the literary "cult of *qing*". Two prominent late-Ming writers, the fiction writer Feng Menglong and the dramatist Tang Xianzu were the chief advocates of *qing* and they each accorded *qing* a central position in their moral cosmos. The "cult of *qing*" partly got its name from Feng. In his preface to the voluminous story-anthology *Qingshi* 情史 (*History of Love*),[163] Feng elevates *qing* into a cosmic force that bears the very secret of the universe:

> Without *qing*, heaven and earth can create nothing, and nothing will give birth to anything. If heaven and earth do not have *qing*, nothing can be generated. Everything lacking in *qing*, is unable to initiate anything. Life forever renews life, for *qing* is a force never dying. […] I will establish the "cult of *qing*", to educate everyone in the world.
>
> 天地若無情, 不生一切物,一切物無情, 不能環相生, 生生而不滅, 由情不滅故, …我欲立情教,教誨諸眾生.[164]

Feng puns on the word "*jiao*", which can mean both a "cult" and a "cult-ivation". As the centre of this mysterious cult, *qing* is the fundamental cosmic power that regenerates everything in the world.[165] Yet Feng also envisages *qing* as pertaining to the cultivation of all kinds of model human relationships: it is the bond not only between lovers, but also between friends, brothers, fathers and sons, and emperor and subjects; in other words, it is fundamental to the very function of a hierarchical society. While Feng still contemplates *qing* as totally compatible with the existing social establishments, Tang goes further to make *qing* the antithesis of *li* (reason). In the preface to his play *The Peony Pavilion* (1598), Tang preaches on *qing*:

> We know not whence *qing* begins, but it goes deep once it begins. *Qing* can kill what is alive and relive what is dead. If it cannot make one willing to die, or to resurrect what is dead, then it is not supreme *qing*. Why would *qing* in a dream be considered not true *qing*?" 情不知所起，一往而深. 生者可以死，

[163] The anthology contains stories about love from the pre-Qin period till Feng's contemporary Ming dynasty, some gleaned from other sources and some written by Feng.
[164] Feng, *History of Love*, 1986, vol. 1, pp. 1-2.
[165] See Fu Chengzhou, "Qingjiao xinjie", 2003.

> 死可以生. 生而不可與死，死而不可複生者，皆非情之至也. 夢中之情，何必非真.[166]

and he concludes with a serious claim: "What must not exist in reason, must exist in *qing*!" 第雲理之所必無，安知情之所必有邪![167] *Qing* for Tang becomes a force that defies reason, thus opening to the world of the fantastic. In many ways, *The Peony Pavilion* is representative of the literary trend in the wake of the cult of *qing*,[168] and in a sense, its loving heroine capable of transcending death foreshadows the various remarkable female ghost figures in *Liaozhai*, who often tower over their less resolute male partners.

The emphasis on *qing* as a transcendental force presiding over human relationships, life and death, and even cosmic regeneration, is the cultural asset that Pu's *Liaozhai* partakes of, but in extending the realm of *qing* into the fantastic world inhabited by ghosts and foxes, *Liaozhai* makes new contributions to the idea of *qing* through its various supernatural characters, especially the ghost. The fantastic world for Pu is the privileged world that opens to people with abundant *qing*, and the eroticized and idealized female ghost becomes the apotheosis of desire and the perfect crystallization of *qing*.[169] Furthering Tang's antithesis of *qing* and reason, *Liaozhai* exalts the remarkable female ghost sometimes to a heroic figure brave and resourceful enough to go against normality — variously showcased in Pu's stories as the rule of life and death, socials rituals, or conventional moral proprieties.[170] Many of Pu's stories deal with strong *qing* that can motivate lovers to brave death, as in "Liancheng" 連城

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[166] Tang, "Preface to *Peony Pavilion*", in *Tang Xianzu shiwenji*, 1982, vol. 2, p. 1093.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Thematic features like predestination, dream, resurrection etc. recurred in late-Ming vernacular fiction, drama, and the "scholar-and-beauty" type of romance, and this type of romance in turn influenced the literary construction of the highly-famed love affairs between several prominent late-Ming intellectuals and talented courtesans in the Jiangnan area. See Santangelo, 2000, pp. 456-9, and Wai-yee Li, "The Late Imperial Courtesan: Invention of a Cultural Ideal", 1997, pp. 46-73.
[169] On the hyper-feminine and eroticized ghosts in *Liaozhai*, see Zeitlin, 2007, p. 24.
[170] Because of the rebelliousness exhibited by these supernatural heroines, for a period in the mainland China, Pu was hailed as a "progressive" proto-feminist writer ahead of his age. Later scholarship has revealed how much of this assumption may be a misunderstanding (see Luo Hui, 2009). Continuing the long literary tradition in which the male literati adopt a female subjective position, the idealized otherworldly women in *Liaozhai* are as much a projection of the male literati's ideal self as their idealized imagination of the other sex. On the remarkable woman representing an ideal subjectivity, see McMahon, 2010, *Polygamy and Sublime Passion: Sexuality in China on the Verge of Modernity*, pp. 16-7.

(3:363) and "Liansuo" 連瑣 (3:331); while in stories like "Lianxiang" 蓮香 (2:220) and "Zhang A-duan" 章阿端 (5:627), the female fox or ghost's love for her human lover is so profound that she either willingly induce her own death or evade reincarnation to continue the romance. All these are manifestations of Tang's claim that "If it cannot make one willing to die, or to resurrect what is dead, then it is not supreme *qing*."

But *Liaozhai* also in a sense inherited from Feng's strand of *qing*, for whom *qing* is imagined as a moral force that governs both human relations and the cosmos and is the vital connection between the two, thus the ultimate regulating force in the world.[171] In *Liaozhai*'s fantastic world, the ghost is not only represented as the beautiful phantom heroine, but is also closely associated with the maintaining of justice. The existence of ghosts itself is a sure sign of something having gone wrong, as ghosts are outcasts of the Confucian patrilineal patriarchal society, either created by a violent death or the death of a young unmarried woman who had not been properly integrated into either the father's or the husband's clan.[172] However, just as being a ghost marks the subjects' subaltern status, the underworld identity also gives him/her a subversive power to make trouble in the human world and the world beyond; therefore, as an indicator of hidden injustice, the ghost can also be a catalyst for the restoring of justice.[173] Apart from the many amorous female ghosts, *Liaozhai* also presents a group of ghosts who have suffered injustice, never ceased fighting even in the underworld, and are finally able to bring justice back. In this sense, ghosts become the agent of justice, the witness of a higher providence even though the corruptions in the human world and the underworld may contemporarily obscure it. One story about a frustrated scholar's posthumous career as an underworld judge brings home Pu's conviction in a ghostly justice. "Kao Chenghuang" 考城隍 ("The Examination of the City God", 1:1), the very first story of *Liaozhai*, relates how a frustrated yet righteous scholar passes the underworld examination to become a City God.[174] The scholar writes in the

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[171] On *Liaozhai*'s reconciliation between the fulfilment of desire and returning to order, see Wai-yee Li, "Desire and Order in *Liao-Chai Chih-I [Liaozhai zhiyi]*" in *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature*, 1993, pp. 89-151.
[172] See A. P. Wolf, "Ghosts, Gods and Ancestors", 1974.
[173] See Liu Yuan-ju, "Xingxian yu mingbao", 2006.
[174] The City God in Chinese folklore is imagined as a local judge in the underworld appointed from among the virtuous dead and serving as a counterpart to the secular city magistrate. On the City God worship, see Zheng Tuyou and Wang Xianmiao, *Zhongguo chenghuang xinyang*, 1994.

examination his understanding of morality as "doing good deeds with external purposes, even good deeds will not be rewarded; doing evil deeds without deliberate intention, even evil deeds will not be punished." 有心為善，雖善不賞；無心為惡，雖惡不罰 (1:1). The examining gods are very pleased with this answer and grant the scholar the position of the underworld judge. Both commentators Dan Minglun and He Shouqi point out the significance of this story in determining the moral tenor of *Liaozhai* at the very beginning (1: 3). It reveals how much Pu invests in human intention: human intention is at the centre of his moral system and plays a decisive role in retribution. Other stories of ghosts righting wrongs also confirm this attitude.[175] Such stories about ghostly justice actually share a similar spirit with Pu's stories of the amorous ghost: in the latter, the ghost is the crystallization of supreme *qing* which can go against reason (in Tang's phrasing), while in the former, the ghost is the crystallization of justice which may go against social establishments. In both cases, the ghost is the condensation of intense human will that can ultimately have an impact on the cosmic order.

All these various manifestations of the principle of *qing* in *Liaozhai* implie a correlative cosmology, in which a correspondence is believed to exist between human wills and actions and the cosmic order;[176] more specifically, it is the human will that sits at the centre of the myriad phenomena in the world. In other words, the cult of *qing* implies a voluntaristic worldview, where human beings reside at the centre and human will is perceived as the essential force behind every action in the cosmos.[177] No story perhaps is more exemplary of Pu's investment in the power of human will than "Huabi" 畫壁 ("The Painted Wall", 1:14), in which a man gazing enchantedly at the image of a beautiful girl in a mural suddenly finds himself inside the painting world and makes love with the girl. When he returns to the normal world outside, he finds that the girl's hairstyle on the painting has been altered to that of a married woman, a physical trace of their love-making in the painting world. A monk who obviously

[175] For instance, "Xi Fangping" 席方平 (10:1341) and "Cuzhi" 促織 (4: 484). It is interesting to note that when the issue at stake is justice instead of love, Pu seems to favour male ghosts over female ghosts.
[176] On the correlative cosmology in China, see John Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology*, 1984.
[177] The term voluntarism is used here slightly different from its associations in the Western context where the emphasis is on human will over rationality. See Richard Taylor, "Voluntarism", in Donald M. Borchert ed., *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2006, vol. 9, pp. 714-7.

knows more than he shows responds to the bewildered protagonist evasively: "Illusions are begotten by man, so how can I tell?" 幻由人生，貧道何能解? (1:14). Here, *qing*, or more narrowly desire, enables the man to transgress the wall between the real world and the desired painting world, and his "illusory" sexual adventure leaves physical traces even after the wall of reality seems to be reestablished. Is what happened inside the painting real or illusory? Pu is deliberately evasive about this, and instead, he presents the whole *Liaozhai* as a testament to the transcendental and uplifting force of artistic creation. The same investment on *qing* is voiced in Tang's *The Peony Pavilion*, and Tang further explicates his belief in the interdependence between human will and literary creation in one of his essays dedicated to the "God of Drama"; drama for him originates from human emotions, and in turn drama is capable of "endowing the emotionless with emotion, the soundless with sound, the silence with noise, the noisy with silence, feeding the starved, awakening the drunkard…"無情者可使有情，無聲者可使有聲, 寂可使喧，喧可使寂；饑可使飽，醉可使醒…[178] While Tang's essay is dedicated to the specific God of Drama, it can also be seen as a manifesto for the power of literary creation in human life and in the cosmos. For literary writers participating in the cult of *qing*, the voluntarism their literature inspires is inseparable from the central belief in the power of literature, for artistic utterance is after all for them the ultimate expression of human will.

So far, I have outlined the literary cult of *qing* that Pu's *Liaozhai* participates in and helps to develop. The ghost is central in *Liaozhai*'s voluntaristic cosmos: the resolute and loving ghost woman embodies the radical *qing*, therefore is exalted to not only a site of eroticized femininity but also the icon of an ideal male self;[179] the unrelentingly revenging ghost, on the other hand, embodies the agent of justice and expresses the possibility of a morally comprehensible cosmos where the moral human intention profoundly determines man's relation with the world. The late Qing in many ways

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[178] Tang, "Yihuang xian xishen qingyuan shi miaoji" 宜黃縣戲神清源師廟記 ("A Dedication to the Temple of Master Qingyuan, the God of Drama in Yihuang County"), *Tang Xianzu shiwenji*, 1982, vol. 2, p. 1127.

[179] Contrary to Western notions of masculinity which relies on a clear distinction from femininity, scholars have observed the correlative yin-yang cosmology in China and in its implication, the fluid boundary between femininity and masculinity. See for instance Alison H. Black, 1986, "Gender and Cosmology in Chinese Correlative Thinking". This may explain the not infrequent phenomenon in literature where the male literatus chooses to speak through and identify with a woman figure. See also Martin Huang, 2006, pp. 1-4 and Louie Kam, 2002, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, pp. 9-10.

resembled the late Ming which cultivated the cult of *qing*; both were times of upheaval when the social and political orders were seriously threatened by alien military intrusions. Could Pu's cult of *qing* and his alternative fantastic land peopled by foxes and ghosts still help to reaffirm an otherwise besieged sense of self for the late-Qing literati? My next section will show how the old cosmos is severely under attack in Xuan Ding's stories, where a bleaker view of the world replaces the confident voluntarism and the traditional "centre-periphery" psychological framework underlining perceptions of China's positioning in the world risks collapsing. Following Pu's steps, both Xuan Ding and Wang Tao turned to ghosts — their true friends "among dark woods and black fortresses"— to cope with the imminent challenges to their masculinity and national identity, yet while Xuan turned his focus from the erotic female ghosts to those neglected father ghosts, Wang's historical ghosts, as I will discuss in the next chapter, are caught in a world with multilayered realities, some of which evidently informed by a materialistic view borrowed from the West while some still anchored in the fantastic world of *zhiguai*.

### 2.2 Heaven is Collapsing

A glance of Xuan Ding's preface to *Yeyu qiudeng lu* — which is a touching quasi-autobiography,[180] — will show that Xuan was at least similar with Pu in two important aspects. Both lived a typical "frustrated scholar's" life, though Xuan's circumstances may be aggravated by the unique phenomena of his age, the Taiping Rebellion and Western infiltration in China; and both relied heavily on the strategy of self-mythification in their *zhiguai* writing. Born in 1832 in a wealthy family in the Jiangnan town Tianchang, Xuan received a traditional scholar's education before his life took a downturn at the age of twenty, when his foster father died and the family finance quickly plunged. In the 1850s, the Taiping Rebellion swept the whole Jiangnan area including Xuan's hometown, smashing local economy and causing great civilian casualties. The riot shattered any possibility for Xuan to continue the traditional scholar's career path to officialdom. For around ten years he lived in dire destitution,

[180] Apart from a few details, this autobiographical preface contains basically all we know about the author's life by now. On biographical details of Xuan, see Yu Shihao, "Xuan Ding yu *Yeyu qiudeng lu* yanjiu", 2005 and "Xuan Ding jiashi ji shengping shiji xinzheng", 2012; Yue Chengcheng, "Xuan Ding wenxue chuangzuo yanjiu", 2010; Sheng Yang, "Xuan Ding jiapu", 2014.

sometimes fighting the Taiping troops in the Qing government's army and sometimes making a meager living by selling his paintings in Shanghai. Since his thirties, Xuan served as a secretary to several local government officials in Shandong and Jiangsu provinces for another wandering ten years.[181] Xuan's preface to *Ye lu* gives a dramatic account of how he had turned to a literary career: standing upon the ruins of a pavilion dedicated to the poet Du Fu, he looked at Confucius' hometown Qufu in the distance. Suddenly he realised that it was his fortieth birthday, and he immediately fell ill.[182] The evocation of Du Fu and Confucius in this episode — both names reminding one of the traditional scholar's duty to serve one's country — in contrast to his own frustrating life devoid of any nominal success must have taken its toll on Xuan's mind. This proved to be the epiphanic moment in the creation of an author. Fifteen days after falling ill, Xuan suddenly rose from bed to write *zhiguai* stories and gradually healed himself through writing.[183] Before long, he quit his secretary job and worked as an independent writer and painter. His first *zhiguai* collection, *Yeyu qiudeng lu* was published by the Shanghai publishing house *Shenbaoguan* in 1877; the second collection named *A Sequel to Yeyu qiudeng lu* 夜雨秋燈續錄 was published posthumously by *Shenbaoguan* in 1880.[184]

The above dramatic episode about Xuan's transformation into a *zhiguai* writer as described in his preface reads almost like fiction, yet it is deliberately rendered so, so that as what Pu did in his preface to *Liaozhai*, the self-image of a "frustrated talent" excluded from the traditional career of a Confucian scholar may be established. Pu has described *Liaozhai* as "a book of solitary indignation" 孤憤之書 (1:1), inviting his reader to situate the book and its author within the lineage of upright yet unrecognized

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[181] To serve as a secretary for local magistrates was an alternative career option for scholars who had not succeeded in civil exams but still had the ambition to join the bureaucracy. Wang Tao obviously had tried this alternative when he submitted proposals to Shanghai officials, yet this seemed to have only alienated him from those in power and may have finally led to his dramatic political exile in Hong Kong.

[182] *Ye lu*, Xuan Ding's preface, p. 13.

[183] Ibid., p. 14.

[184] Some scholars hypothesize that Xuan died shortly before the publication of the *Sequel*, probably at the end of the year 1879 (See Zhang Zhenguo, "Xuan Ding shengzu nian ji wenxian yicun lüekao", 2009). The two collections were later published as a whole under the title *Yeyu qiudeng lu*. For this dissertation, I mainly consulted the Huangshan shushe 1995 edition, in two books, each containing eight volumes, in accordance with the original *Shenbaoguan* edition. All quotations refer to this edition. *Ye lu* in this study refers to the two volumes as a whole.

social outcasts like Qu Yuan 屈原 (340-278? BC), Han Fei 韓非 (c. 281-233BC) and Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145BC-?). By emulating Pu, Xuan gains himself a place too in this veritable literary galaxy of unconforming writers. But more importantly, Xuan's autobiographical preface also appropriates Pu's strategy of self-mythification.[185] The touching story behind the creation of a writer mentioned above not only presents the writing of *zhiguai* as therapeutic and cathartic, but also elevates the act of writing to something mythical yet predestined. After narrating his mother's dream vision of a Taoist priest preceding his birth,[186] Xuan further confirms his mythical identity by accounting how his studio had been one day visited by a butterfly fairy. The fairy tells him: "you were a Taoist priest of the Chongxu Temple on the Luofu Mountain in your previous life, and you got punishment for playing with the pen; now you are playing with the pen again!" 子生前為羅浮沖虛觀道士，以弄筆頭獲過，今又弄筆耶! (bk.1, Preface, p.14) The butterfly episode seems crucial in Xuan's self-chosen literary persona, for he later named his studio "The Studio Visited by the Fairy Butterfly" (仙蝶來館).[187] The Chinese literati's studio, as John Minford notes, is more than just a physical space but also "a gestalt", and the literati often "encoded their own personal sense of identity into a 'studio name'".[188] Thus, by incorporating a fairy into his studio name, both the master of the studio of "Butterfly" and the stories produced therein gain a mythical status affirmed by a "fairy". This heavy reliance on artistic myth-making in the construction of personal and even, as I will show later, national history, will be an important strategy for re-establishing the self in Xuan Ding's ghost stories.

However, while Xuan's self-positioning and self-mythification in his preface show a clear continuation from *Liaozhai*, the optimism in Pu's work — the affirmation of a human-centred voluntarism and the celebration of *qing* as the embodiment of radical

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[185] On Pu's strategy of self-mythification in his preface titled "Self-Record of *Liaozhai*" (聊齋自志), see Zeitlin, 1993, p. 54.

[186] A similar "dream-vision" story is used in Pu's preface to allude to the author's mythical Buddhist identity (*Liaozhai*, 1:1).

[187] Xuan also asked one of his friends to write a story for this incident. See Yu Shihao, 2012, pp. 142-3.

[188] Minford, Preface, *Strange Tales of a Chinese Studio*, 2006, xix. Pu Songling's studio name "Liaozhai", his *zhiguai* collection named *Liaozhai zhiyi* (*Strange Stories from "Liaozhai"*), and his autobiographical preface "Self-record of *Liaozhai*" are a perfect example of how the studio, the ghost stories produced therein, and the author who creates them fuse into one indissoluble literary persona.

subjectivity and a universal moral force — is obviously running thin in *Ye lu*.[189] If ghosts as either the embodiment of supreme *qing* or an agent of justice help to establish a responsive and harmonious relationship between heaven and man in Pu's literary world, this reassuring world order is under attack in Xuan's stories. Stories of amorous female ghosts are rare in *Ye lu*,[190] and an examination of several stories on avenging ghosts will show the powerlessness of human intention in even ghosts' quest for justice. Women outnumber men as returning revenging ghosts in Xuan's collection,[191] and almost all the female revenants have been women suffering from the trickery, violence, or desertion of men in their previous lives.[192] Being structurally objectified in a patriarchal society, women were particularly vulnerable to men's desires and whims, which easily caused them to lose the respectable status as daughter/wife/mother and become a wandering ghost. Can justice be finally carried out for these women? Xuan's stories do not provide a positive answer. The only story in which the wronged woman's revenge is somewhat effective is "Jiang Xiaoyu", though in a gratuitous and indirect way, for the story is ambiguous as to whether the villains' ultimate downfall results from the intervention of the ghost or merely coincidences. In "Yuhong ce" 玉紅冊 ("The Book of Red Jade"), a prestigious man was taken to the court of the City God to face the accusation of a sister-in-law he had seduced and abandoned in his previous life. However, the City God, unlike the one in Pu's "Kao Chenghuang" that prioritized human intention in his verdict of good and evil, maneuvered the existing judicial system to absolve the man from punishment. Consulting the "Yuhong ce", a chronicle that recorded meticulously everyone's good deeds, the City God decided that the man's two good deeds were sufficient to compensate for his vice of seducing the widow, and the widow had only herself to blame for losing her chastity. The existence of this "Moral Balance Book", seemingly proving the overall cosmic justice,

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[189] Some scholars however see a continuity of the cult of *qing* in Xuan Ding. See Zhang Zhenguo, "Lun Xuan Ding *Yeyu qiudeng lu* dui *Qingshi* de chengxu he chuangxin", 2009.

[190] Only a few among more than one hundred stories of *Ye lu* involve a possible romance between men and ghosts, for instance, "Donglin mu" 東鄰墓 (bk.1, vol.1), "Yao Shisan lang" 晁十三郎 (bk. 2, vol.1), "Shi Qiaoqiao"石翹翹 (bk.2, vol.1), "Ye bushou"夜不收 (bk.2, vol.8), and "Youfang niangzi" 幽芳娘子 (bk.2, vol.2).

[191] Unlike other *zhiguai* works that are full of eroticized female ghosts, Xuan's work does not prominently favour female ghosts, but while the female ghosts are portrayed as wronged victims, male ghosts in Xuan's stories seldom return to revenge and have more important things to do. More on the male ghosts in the next section.

[192] For instance in these stories: "Jiang Xiaoyu" 姜小玉 (bk.2, vol.6), "Mizhu"宓珠 (bk.1, vol. 4), "Yuhong ce" 玉紅冊 (bk.1, vol.1), and "Lieshang Jinxiao" 烈殤盡孝 (bk.1, vol.3).

only exposes how easily that justice is distorted by the asymmetry of power between men and women.

These unsuccessful revenge stories expose Xuan's far bleaker view of the ghost as an agent of justice and his suspicions towards a coherent and morally comprehensible cosmic order on a larger scale. For try as he may to internalize the philosophy of the cult of *qing*, Xuan's own traumatic experience in late-Qing China must have forced him to doubt a unitary cosmic view which, as Santangelo states, "envisages continuous interaction and reciprocity between heaven and man, with a strong moral connotation".[193] In Xuan's stories, not only personal vendetta can be easily thwarted, but the whole notion of a responsive and morally comprehensible universe was under question. Two of Xuan's fantastic stories, "Zhong Xiaomei zhuan" 鐘小妹傳 ("The Story of Zhong Xiaomei", bk.2, vol.8) and "Beiji pilin dao" 北極毗鄰島 ("The Island of the Northern Extreme", bk.1, vol. 4), present serious forebodings that the old heaven is collapsing while a new order is yet to arise.

"The Story of Zhong Xiaomei" imagines a battle between a Chinese goddess Zhong Xiaomei and a league of ghosts.[194] While the imaginative description of the battle may offer the reader enough excitement, what is more significant is the story's implication of a cosmic evil totally out of the comprehension and control of man, and an allusion to the ghosts' foreign origin. What the story shows is a bleak new world replacing the optimistic voluntaristic cosmology and consequently, contemporary literati's fear for a threatening foreign other which no longer lies on China's peripheries but starts intruding into the centre. The goddess Zhong Xiaomei is the imagined younger sister of the legendary ghost-killer god Zhong Kui. In the popular imagination, Zhong Kui

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[193] Santangelo, 2013, p. 40. The damage caused by the Taiping wars deeply traumatized a generation of Chinese intellectuals. In the 1870s, a decade after the war, a surge of "trauma writing" that tried to recollect and reconstruct the calamites in war appeared, very often in *zhiguai* stories. Both Xuan's *Ye lu* and Wang Tao's *Dunku lanyan* (1875) belonged to this cycle of trauma writing. See Gao Guihui, 2010, "Taiping tianguo de jianying: yi Wang Tao *Dunku lanyan* weizhu de taolun".

[194] "The Story of Zhong Xiaomei" was originally published separately in *Shenbao*'s literary magazine *Huanyu suoji* 環宇瑣記 in around 1874-1876 (see Yu Shihao, 2012). One story in *Ye lu*, "Jiulianzhou gaohui" 九蓮洲高會 ("The Grand Banquet of Nine Immortals", bk.2, vol.8) is a sequel to this story, so the Huangshan shushe edition includes the earlier story as an appendix to "Jiulianzhou". "Jiulianzhou" recounts a goddess's visit after reading the author's "Zhong Xiaomei" story. It claims that the "Zhong Xiaomei" story was written by Xuan's friend Zong Haifan while the attached poems were his own. However, judging from the way the protagonist (this friend) is addressed in the story, its author is unlikely to be the friend. I agree with other critics and treat "Zhong Xiaomei" as Xuan's work.

was “the Great Ghost-Extinguisher” appointed by the Jade Emperor to extinguish all evils and vices marauding as ghosts in the human world.[195] Yet in Xuan’s story, the Ghost-Extinguisher has been neglecting his duty for long, and the human world is again plagued by ghosts. It is the goddess Zhong Xiaomei, dissatisfied with her brother’s negligence, who comes down from heaven to deliver the human world from evils. At the end of the battle, when the goddess is just about to pursue the escaped ghost, a letter from Zhong Kui promptly arrives and bids her return, explaining that “the time to vanquish the ghost lord has yet to come, and that’s why I had left him crawling” 特時未至，姑不與較耳 (bk.2, p.382). This message produces an immediate change in the fierce goddess, who quickly returns to heaven, leaving the human world still falling prey to the surviving ghost lord. It is here that the humorous story takes on an ominous tone. The narrator Xuan Ding, who by now is only alluded as a friend of the protagonist Zong Haifan, now comes to the fore of the stage and becomes a spokesman for the author to sing a poem celebrating the goddess’ heroic feat. Some of the lines describing the ghost army allude to a conflict between nations and may spell out the true intention of the author:

> The mountain devils and wood spirits are crawling,
>
> And myriad ghosts are howling in their caves,
>
> Snatching and gnawing people in broad daylight.
>
> [They] took our Rouge Mountain,
>
> So our women lost their rosy complexion.
>
> Silken banners and embroidered umbrellas are coming from the sea,
>
> Hidden among their tinkling bracelets are daggers and spears.
>
> 山魈木魅方綜橫，眾鬼啾啾啼鬼窟，白晝人寰攫人食. 奪我胭脂山，婦女無顏色.錦旗秀傘海上來，環佩珊珊雜戈戟. (bk.2, p.382)

The phrases used in connection with the ghost army, “Rouge Mountain” and “our women lost their rosy complexion” have a heavy connotation of foreign invasions in

[195] Legends about Zhong Kui the ghost killer had been in circulation since as early as the Tang dynasty. Two popular novels about Zhong Kui, of uncertain authorship, *Zhan’gui zhuan* (*Killing the Ghosts*) and *Pingyao zhuan* (*Quelling the Demons*) remain. See *Zhongkui zhuan*, 1980.

Chinese history. The northern nomadic people *Xiongnu* 匈奴 (the Huns) had been a formidable enemy to the Chinese Han Empire and had repeatedly raided south since the Qin dynasty. The Han Chinese had few victories against the Huns until the Western Han emperor Wudi's reign, when a decisive victory over the Huns resulted in the captivity of their chief and the loss of the Qilian Mountain and Yanzhi Mountain (alternatively named the "Rouge Mountain") to the Chinese.[196] The Tang-dynasty scholar Zhang Shoujie 張守節 records a sad ballad sung by the Huns as an appendix to *Shiji*'s description of the Huns' defeat: "Losing our Qilian Mountain, our herds have no place to breed; Losing our Rouge Mountain, our women lost their rosy complexion." 失我祁連山，使我六畜不蕃息. 失我焉支山，使我婦女無顏色.[197] The poem was widely anthologized in various poetry collections in later dynasties, and the phrases "Rouge Mountain" and "our women lost their rosy complexion" have over time crystallized into a default reference to invasion, defeat, and loss of sovereignty. Xuan's recycling of these set phrases here immediately delivers the battle against the ghost army into a contemporary context: the confrontation between nations and cultures where the loss is on *our* side.

As critics have noticed, Xuan's allusion to the "Rouge Mountain" in the story indicates that the goddess's battle against ghosts must be conceptualized in the late-Qing political scene, in which China was perceived as falling prey to a dangerous other "coming from the sea".[198] Yet apart from expressing an alarm to foreign invasion, the story also conveys forebodings for calamities on a cosmic scale. It is important to note the reversal in Xuan's appropriation of the Huns' song: the "Huns' Song" recorded by Zhang Shoujie is the winning side's testament to its own victory by vicariously imagining and adopting the voice of the defeated, while in Xuan's poem, it is *we Chinese* losing *our* Rouge Mountain to another group of invaders. The change of subjects over the claim of the imagined Rouge Mountain subtly reveals that depending on time and situation, the Huns, the Chinese and the Westerners can all be invaders

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[196] See Sima Qian, *Shiji*, vol. 110, "Xiongnu liezhuan" ("The History of Xiongnu"), pp. 651-9.

[197] In Zhang Shoujie, *Shiji zhengyi* 史記正義, vol. 110, p. 22, *Online SKQS*. The Yanzhi Mountain (homophone to "rouge mountain") is famous for a kind of flower used to make rouge, therefore "our women lost their rosy complexion".

[198] For instance, Xue Hongji reads the battle as a political allegory: the ghosts to him symbolize the Western force in China since the opening-up of the treaty ports after the Opium Wars, and the sudden halt of the goddess's campaign alludes to the inability of the Qing government to drive away foreigners. See Xue, "Cuotuo bushang lingyunzhi, qieyu baiguan jie huanyuan", 1988.

and the invaded. This perceptible situational fluidity may thus explain Zhong Xiaomei's sudden halt: everything in the universe ought to follow its destiny, and even someone as evil as the ghost lord will still wait for his time to be finally vanquished. Much as the narrator lament the goddess' missed victory, he has to recognize the unsatisfactory situation as part of a cosmos where unimaginable evils are unavoidable and even as necessary as the good.

A similar sense of doom and powerlessness can be felt through the cruel cosmic order imagined in the story "The Island of the Northern Extreme". In this story, a Chinese scholar was stranded on a fantastic overseas island after a shipwreck, where he was appointed by a local god to tutor a group of mysterious students hidden inside a cave. At the end of three years' tutoring, the god revealed the true identity of these pupils: they were the evilest spirits in the cosmic history and were destined to plague China every sixty years by the order of the Supreme God. The local god had hoped that the tutoring of these devils would at least alleviate their cruelty when their time came, and now it was time to send them to China. At the end of the story it is implied that these devils later incarnated into the Taiping leaders, thus the fantastic story turns seamlessly into a prelude for a contemporary calamity. Both this story and "Zhong Xiaomei" deliver the message that the disasters of China come from an imagined "overseas", and that these unthinkable calamities are somehow still fitting in a larger scheme of the universe, even though it may be beyond the comprehension of ordinary human beings. Moreover, while traditionally the Chinse could imagine themselves as situated in a central position vis-à-vis what were conceived as barbarians on the peripheries, this familiar world order is visibly collapsing in the stories discussed above, in which the peripheries no longer function as a flattering mirror but the source of threats to the Chinese centre.

Incorporated in such a cosmic view, the frequent frustrations encountered in a ghost's quest for justice can thus be comprehended. Not only the fate of individuals, but also that of nations is subject to inexplicable catastrophes, and all these are still part of the cosmic order. Here we see how far this outlook has departed from Pu's voluntarism: human intention no longer sits at the centre of the universe and the destiny of individuals and countries are largely beyond the subject's comprehension or control. It also shows what a different world Xuan was facing from that of Pu: the earlier writer could appeal to the host of ghosts to defend against the frustrations in a personal life,

whereas in Xuan's time the familiar world order had come under serious challenges: the traumas in the Taiping Rebellion, the unprecedented Western invasion, and the waning myth of China's superiority and centrality in this world all make the belief in the transcending force of fantastic figures less sustainable. An ecstatic romance with the phantom heroine was not enough to salvage the scholar's endangered sense of masculinity (thus the lack of amorous female ghosts in Xuan's stories) when men themselves were threatened to become ghosts, as the high casualties of the Taiping wars can easily testify: an age of upheaval was an age more crowded with ghosts. To mend the Chinese man's collapsing heaven, new strategies need to be devised. Like Pu Songling, Xuan Ding seeks to regain his standing in the current world with the help of ghostly friends "among dark woods and black fortress", but unlike Pu, Xuan's salvation project is anchored in mythologizing the past as well as the present: by excavating a group of neglected heroic ghosts, he turns the national and personal history into a myth; and by taming the Western threat with the mythical plot of a human-demon encounter, he revitalizes the Chinese self against a feminized and demonized other.

## 2.3 Mending the Heaven

What the late-Qing writer Xuan Ding faced was a world where orders were collapsing: not only the voluntaristic cosmic order where human intention is grounded at the centre, but also, as I will introduce later, the millennium-long centre-periphery world order perceived by the Chinese where China and its subjects dominate at the centre. To mend this collapsing heaven in the late Qing, the Chinese man needs to mobilize other cultural resources as powerful as those tried before, and the answer for Xuan Ding is to turn to a powerful sphere of human experience: myth. As I will show below, Xuan's mythologization project includes building a literary pantheon for the neglected fatherly ghosts in history as well as domesticating the intruding aliens into a mythical demon-encounter plot.

### 2.3.1 Building a Pantheon for Father Ghosts

As mentioned before, a ghost is what has gone wrong in the Confucian patrilineal patriarchal society, therefore it is an anomaly produced by the orthodox. The various female ghosts teeming in Chinese *zhiguai* are on the one hand a reflection of women's

outsider's position in the patrilineal clan, while on the other hand a result of male literati's fantasy and artistic self-expression. However, men, the centre of the patrilineal worshiping line as either authoritative ancestors or rightful heirs, may also occasionally become ghosts in the circumstances of bad deaths (murder, improper burial, death of social outcasts, etc.); but at the same time, they have the opportunity of being sanctified as gods.[199] Both anthropological studies of Chinese folk religion and elite Confucian discourse show that the seemingly rigid boundaries between entities of the otherworld — ghosts, gods, (dead) ancestors — are indeed fluid, and something as lowly as ghosts may also transform into its opposite: gods and ancestors, and vice versa.[200] This categorical fluidity of the hierarchy not only implies an inherent deconstructive potential in the orthodox structure (as displayed in the notion of orthodox history which risks its own undoing), but also indicates the possibility for ghosts to be re-assimilated into positions of authority as ancestors and gods. The latter informs Xuan Ding's project of constructing a mythical national history through its neglected ghosts.

In the anthropological researches conducted in twentieth-century Taiwan and Hong Kong, the boundaries separating gods, ghosts, and ancestors in Chinese folk religion are shown to be flexible. Stephan Feuchtwang summaries these three types of spiritual entities as "arranged in pairs of cross-cutting oppositions", each displaying the opposite traits of the other two categories.[201] Despite the strict hierarchy among them, they are also dialectically linked and can even be transformed into their opposites, as A. P. Wolf summaries: both ghosts and ancestors may appropriate the status of gods — ghosts of luminaries may somehow occasionally become gods and enjoy offerings, and ancestors to their own descendants are like domestic gods, offering protection and receiving due sacrifices; ghosts and ancestors, one despised and propitiated while the

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[199] One common instance is the position of the City God, who very often were promoted from the virtuous dead or luminary figures in the locale. See Steven Harrell, "When a Ghost Becomes a God", in Wolf ed., 1974. In rare occasions victimized women after death may also obtain godhood, referred to as "*yinshen*" 陰神, a lower ranking local god. On the mechanism of female ghosts becoming god, see Liu Yuan-ju, "Liuchao *zhiguai* zhong de nüxing yinshen chongbai zhi zhengchanghua celüe chutan", 1997.

[200] On the interstices of gods, ghosts and ancestors, see A. P. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors", Stephan Feuchtwang, "Domestic and Communal Worship in a Taiwan Town", and Harrell "When a Ghost Becomes a God" in Wolf ed., 1974.

[201] Feuchtwang, 1974, p. 106.

other carefully worshipped, are only relative categories based on the worshiper's perception of them as insiders or outsiders, so that "one man's ancestor is another man's ghost".[202]

While the anthropologists limit their observation to the lower ranks of society, the ideology of the elite Confucian scholars does not differ too much from the villagers' syncretic understanding of ghosts, gods, and ancestors. Confucius is alleged to have advised against talking about ghosts, but Confucianism has also established the worshipping of ancestors and sanctified natural gods (such as the god of Mount Taishan) as an indispensable part of its social hierarchy. The Southern-Song Neo-Confucian scholar Chen Chun 陳淳 (1159-1223) attempted to reconcile the disparate meanings associated with the term "ghosts and gods" in his Neo-Confucianism textbook *Beixi ziyi* 北溪字義 (*Explanation of Words by Beixi*). In the entry "ghosts and gods", he categorized four different meanings of the term in usage: 1) ghosts and gods as an alternative terminology for yin and yang in Confucian sages' yin-yang metaphysics, which are universal material forces instead of supernatural entities; 2) ghosts and gods as referring to religious sacrifices for one's ancestors or other sanctified deities; 3) ghosts and gods as used in the wanton sacrifices for someone else's ancestors or improper deities ; 4) ghosts and gods as referring to evil spirits and monsters.[203]

It is not difficult to detect a similarity between Neo-Confucianism's definition of ghosts and gods and the observations of the anthropologists discussed above. What differentiates Chen Chun's category two from categories three and four is whether the sacrifice is sanctified and proper, and what distinguishes an ancestor from a ghost for the village worshippers is whether the spirit is taken as an insider or a stranger.[204] The implication is that ghosts and ancestors, and even ghosts and gods, are just relative categories; they are separated from each other only by such categories as

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[202] Wolf, 1974, p. 146. On dead human beings acquiring the status of City God, see also Zheng Tuyou and Wang Xianmiao, 1994, pp. 51-65.

[203] Chen Chun, *Beixi ziyi*, 1983, entry "Ghosts and Gods", pp. 55-66. I consulted Wing-tsit Chan's English translation for my wording. See Wing-tsit Chan, *The Neo-Confucian Terms Explained*: *The Pei-Hsi Tzu-I [Beixi ziyi]*, 1986, pp. 156-63.

[204] Confucian classics emphasize too the distinction between the inside and the outside in dealings with ghosts and gods. Confucius said in *Analects* that "For a man to sacrifice to a spirit which does not belong to him is flattery." 非其鬼而祭之，諂也. See *Confucian Analects*, Book II ("Weizheng"), Chapter XXIV, in Legge trans., 1971, p. 154.

inside/outside or orthodox/unorthodox. These are referential terms instead of absolute ones; under certain circumstances, ancestors and sanctified gods can become despised ghosts, and ghosts may also acquire the status of gods.

The elites' and the commoners' discourses on ghosts and gods coincide in the emphasis on a strict hierarchy as indicated by the dichotomies of inside/outside and orthodox/unorthodox. But this rigid separation also contains its own undoing, as when the regulatory criteria of the orthodox changes, so changes the status of ghosts or gods. If the authoritative history can be represented by and imagined in the familial level as the peaceful transmission from ancestors to descendants, the differing posthumous fates of the ancestor as either turning into a god or a ghost imply that history itself is liable to transformation in two directions: either being consecrated to a mythology of gods, or despised and ousted as non-history — the unofficial history of ghosts. In times of great social upheaval and warfare, many people are liable to die a bad death and turn into ghosts; even the dead heroes and luminaries of a community may suffer the fate of oblivion or suppression of their memory in the contingencies of dynastical transformation. The late Qing was precisely such a time of upheaval, a time when "people and ghosts mingle freely" and the glorious Chinese history was at the risk of turning spectral, as the notion of China's centrality was constantly challenged in the encounter with and defeats by foreigners. This threat to national history prompts Xuan Ding to turn particularly to historical figures in his *zhiguai* stories, and through a series of artistic myth-making, he endeavours not only to salvage history, but also to turn the national history into a glorious myth.

#### 2.3.1.1 Mythologization of History

In times of crisis, history, the community's public memory of its past, offers people in crisis not only past examples of triumph and solution, but also a conceptual model to make sense of and even reshape their contemporary problem. Appropriating stories of the past to solve problems of the present, as historian Paul Cohen observes, is a strategy not unique to Chinese culture, as one can also find various such examples worldwide.[205] Cohen attributes this phenomenon to the power of story; more particularly, it must be a story that can claim some historicity (not entirely made-up)

[205] Cohen, 2014, *History and Popular Memory: The Power of Story in Moments of Crisis*.

and also a story substantially modified from its "true" version with the historians to match the historical present, so that it is better called a "mythologization" or "fictionalization" of the past rather than an evocation of history.[206] Cohen's insight is certainly illuminating in understanding both Chinese *zhiguai* writers' evocation of national history, especially the part about dynastical changes in their ghost stories, for the catastrophic ending of a dynasty speaks to the late-Qing writers' perception of their current crisis. While Cohen emphasizes the evoked story's fictionality and its being accepted unquestioningly by the common people as "history", I argue that the distinction between history and mythology, in Xuan Ding's case, is not deliberately evaded but deliberately made to collapse. Instead of making a myth of the past that passes as history, Xuan elevates the national history itself into a myth. In this process, the national history, its heroes, and their protected contemporary descendants are all consecrated to part of a glorious national myth, but at the same time, it also inadvertently reveals the inherent mythical nature of official history in its original construction.

Two stories in Xuan Ding's *Ye lu* are direct derivatives of various official versions of local history in the tumultuous late Ming and late Song: "Shendeng" 神燈 ("The Spirit Lantern", bk. 1, vol. 4) and "Ji Song mo wei wenxinguo gong mingmu" 稽聳歿為文信國公冥幕 ("Ji Song after His Death Became the Secretary of Minister Wen Tianxiang", bk.1, vol. 5). The main story in "The Spirit Lantern" — how a Ming-dynasty military leader Wo Tian died in a battle with Japanese invaders east of Xuan's hometown Tianchang — is firmly grounded in the historical background of the Japanese invasions in the Jiajing era (under the Shizong Emperor's reign). Japanese maritime invaders, or more commonly known as the *wokou* (a disparaging term meaning "shorty bandits", "short" being a recognizable ethnic trait of the Japanese in Chinse imagination), were a constant nuisance to the Chinese coastal inhabitants throughout the Ming dynasty.[207] They occasionally landed on China's south-eastern

[206] Ibid., p. 194.

[207] Records of the *wokou* can be found in numerous Ming-dynasty historiographies. Whether the invasions of *wokou* were truly Japanese invasions or Chinese domestic riots is a contestable issue among historians. On representation of the Japanese in Chinese literature, especially since the Ming dynasty onwards, see Zhang Zhejun, 2004, *Zhongguo gudai wenxue zhong de riben xingxiang yanjiu*, pp. 215-8, and pp. 258-72. One thing needs to be clarified: the Ming-dynasty historians did recognize the fact

coast and raided north-and-westwards inland to as far as Shandong or Zhili (approximately the area directly surrounding Beijing) provinces. By the reign of the Shizong Emperor, the Ming rule had already been in obvious decline and the *wokou* invasions reached a height. Ming histories on the Jiajing era had copious sections on Japanese invasions in coastal towns. In the spring of the thirty-sixth year of Jiajing (1557 AD), large troops of Japanese landed on several spots along the coastal line of Jiangsu province and within a month they had marched eastwards to the wealthy Jiangnan city Yangzhou. The Ming armies proved useless in their defence against the Japanese. When the Japanese were just about to move further eastwards to the neighbouring town Tianchang, Yangzhou Captain Wo Tian led an army to strike the Japanese on the east of Tianchang and died in the battle. The Japanese consequently occupied Tianchang, but they soon moved northwards.[208] A major battle was won by the Ming army in July that year, in which an Anhui general drove the fleeing Japanese back to the sea.

Wo Tian's name appears in several Ming histories which record this Japanese invasion in 1557, but the description is scanty, usually one-sentence long recording the names of Wo Tian amid a series of defeats met by the Ming army.[209] As a relatively low-ranking military officer, Wo Tian's death was insignificant to the overall Ming history and his reputation was ignorable compared with other highly famed military leaders like Qi Jiguang. But as a part of the Ming official apparatus who died in a battle against foreign enemies, as a rule, his death still deserved a mention in official Ming historiography. Local histories gave Wo Tian a more reverent representation. In *Jiangnan tongzhi* 江南通志 (*General Records of the Jiangnan Area*, a Qing-dynasty compilation of local histories), the reader is informed that a temple dedicated to Wo Tian was built in Tianchang by the municipal government, and a Ming magistrate

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that among those being called "wokou" there were actually many disguised Chinese merchants and pirates, but in common imagination *wokou* was still used exclusively as a reference to Japanese invaders. On the Ming-dynasty Japanese invasions, especially in the Jiajing era, see Fan Zhongyi and Tong Xigang, *Mingdai wokou shilüe*, 2004.

[208] See Huang Fengxiang 黃鳳翔, *Jiajing dazheng leibian* 嘉靖大政類編 (*Major Political Events in the Jiajing Years*, 1597), "Nanwo" 南倭 (*Wokou* in the South), 1995 rpt., p. 757, and Fan and Tong, 2004, p. 125.

[209] Records of Wo Tian's death can be found in the above mentioned *Jiajing dazheng leibian* and Tu Shan 塗山 comp., *Mingzheng tong zong* 明政統宗 (*Ming Dynasty Political History*, 1615), vol. 27, 2000 rpt., pp. 33-4.

named Sun Yiren wrote an article to commemorate the occasion.[210] The article first gives a biography of Wo Tian and then portrays his death in a tragic colour: Captain Wo had seriously thwarted the advancement of the Japanese troops and were just about to make a vital victory, when the weather suddenly turned against him and the Ming army was trapped in a black fog, and subsequently Wo Tian was killed in ambush. Nevertheless, the Tianchang citizens still considered Wo Tian as their saviour, for having been greatly frustrated by Wo Tian, the Japanese dared not stay long in Tianchang and quickly fled northwards, thus saving the town from a massacre for which the Japanese were reputed. The article ends by arguing for the legitimacy of building a temple for Wo Tian:

> According to the sacrificial rites of past emperors, a person is eligible to receive public worship [in the following circumstances]: if he brought rites and law to the people, if he died in defending the emperor, if he made major contributions to the country, and if he saved the people from great disasters or dangers. Wo Tian not only died in saving us from great catastrophe, but his loyal spirit will also stand intact for thousands of years, and he deserves non-stop sacrifice in a temple for thousands of years.
>
> 夫先王之制祀, 禮法施於民則祀之，以死勤事則祀之，以勞定國則祀之，以能禦大災捍大患則祀之. 公之死豈惟禦災捍患而已哉，耿耿忠義垂之千古而不磨，廟貌血食當歷千古而弗諼也.[211]

This memorial successfully individuated the deceased Wo from the legion of unrecorded deaths in war: he was no longer a faceless name in the section on Japanese invasion in Ming histories, but had had a secure place in local history and a temple dedicated to him. Both the verbal records in historiography and the physical temple built in his name constitute an "archive" for this honourable deceased; archive, in Feuchtwang's words, "is whatever can be called upon for a narrative, a commemoration, or a new myth or legend".[212] Thus Wo Tian's memory lived on through these verbal and physical archives, and his sanction by such government

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[210] See Huang zhijuan 黃之雋 and Zhao Hong'en 趙弘恩, comp., *Jiangnan tongzhi*, vol. 42, 1987 rpt., p. 370.
[211] Ibid., p. 371.
[212] Feuchtwang, 2010, *The Anthropology of Religion, Charisma and Ghosts: Chinese Lessons for Adequate Theory*, p. 129.

representatives as Sun Yiren directly elevated him to godhood from what could have been a bad death. Sun Yiren's commemoration also shows the official history-building of the state in the beginning involves a process of myth-making: Wo Tian can qualify as a local god worshipped in a temple because "past emperors" had done so and sanctioned the practice, and he certainly would not be the last hero thus being made into a god.[213] Represented by such heroic figures as Wo Tian, official state history is no less than an official state myth.

However, once a myth is made, it obtains a life of its own and can in turn fertilize history and folklore. Xuan's "The Spirit Lantern" evidences a new phase of Wo Tian's myth. The first part of the story is a retelling of Wo Tian's heroic deeds which corresponds to Sun's article as well as the records in a Qing-dynasty compilation of Tianchang county history which Xuan probably had read,[214] yet the ending departs from historical records into a new myth embedded in contemporary history. The narrator Xuan Ding tells us that Wo's story has by his time become part of the local lore: the spirit of Wo would appear annually in the wild as numerous spirit lanterns, and they were seen by local peasants as a harbinger of coming harvest. Moreover, the narrator himself bears witness to the protective power of Wo as a god: when he returned home after the Taiping troops had left, he found every household in town had been damaged except Wo's tomb, a miracle only accountable by the god's protection. Here we see the mutual fertilization between myth, folklore, and history: the mythical traces of Wo Tian as "spirit lanterns" in Xuan's story (real or imaginary) become a new archive for the deceased hero and prevent him from being forgotten, and the mythologized dead himself turns into an icon of patriotism and loyalty, an auspicious protector of the version of history he stands for when social and cultural stability was shaken by disasters like the Taiping Rebellion. In this collaboration of official and individual myth-making, whether the narrative is fictional or historical becomes unimportant, since all these narratives lend legitimacy to the kind of ideology promoted by Wo's story: the hero dies defending his country from foreigners, and such

[213] Shelly Chang notes that the deification of historical heroes was a distinctive feature of Chinese mind-set and an effective way of political and social control by authoritarian Confucianism. See Chang, *History and Legend: Ideas and Images in the Ming Historical Novels*, 1990, pp. 191-5.

[214] The Qing compilation *Jiaqing beixiu Tianchang xianzhi gao* 嘉慶備修天長縣志稿 (Draft for A Full History of the Tianchang County in Jiaqing Years) was first complied by Zhang Zongtai 張宗泰 in 1819.

a heroic death not only elevates the deceased to godhood, but also protects the community he dies for.

However, not all dead heroes can fit in both history and myth as smoothly as Wo did, and it is here that we witness the orthodox ideology's suppression of its other through "history" — the official act of regulating and forgetting of the past. While Wo Tian's status as a national hero is unquestionable as he died in a battle against foreigners, the other story about dead heroes, "Ji Song after His Death Became the Secretary of Minister Wen Tianxiang", foregrounds three virtuous deceased whose orthodoxy as national heroes can be contentious. The story allows three historical figures — two being patriotic heroes during the fall of the Southern Song and the third a Ming-dynasty local magistrate who survived the Ming-Qing transition — to meet anachronistically in Tianchang. The pivotal hero of the story Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236-1283) was a high-ranking minister in the last years of the Southern Song and an important figure in the Song's defence against Mongol armies. Wen and two other officials, Lu Xiufu 陸秀夫 and Zhang Shijie 張世傑, were ranked as the famous "*Songmo sanjie*" (The Three Heroes of the Late Song). Wen was also a renowned poet, and his famous verses "Whoever can evade death in eternity? But my loyal heart will light up successive histories" (人生自古誰無死，留取丹心照汗青) written after his captivity by the Mongols have since then become the crystallization of patriotism and loyalty.[215]

Such a renowned cultural icon certainly needs no more glorification. What Xuan Ding does in this story is to excavate the lesser-known local heroes Ji Song and Luo Wanxiang by connecting them with Wen Tianxiang, taking a similar "history-to-myth" trajectory as "The Spirit Lantern". The story begins with the narrator recounting in quick pace from what he read of the Song history the last years of the Southern Song and then digresses to introduce a little-known figure: Ji Song. Ji Song was the head of the Ji village outside of the Tianchang township. When a team of the Song delegates was carrying the emperor's document of surrender to the Mongol headquarter in Beijing, — an act viewed as blatant treason by loyalists such as Wen Tianxiang — Ji

[215] Wen, "Guo lingding yang" 過零丁洋 (1279), in *Wenshan ji* (The Works of Wen Tianxiang), vol. 19, p.1, *Online SKQS*. Wen was captivated by the Mongols in 1278, refused surrender several times and was finally executed in 1283. Memorials and buildings dedicated to Wen can still be found throughout China today, some of them newly-built.

Song, out of the indignation of a loyal subject, attacked the delegates when they passed his village. Later, Ji helped to protect Wen from the Mongols' pursuit as the latter was on his way south to organize another defensive attack. Wen described his dangerous situation at the time and his gratitude to Ji in a poem:

> I temporarily anchored my boat by the Ji village under an arched moon,
>
> When a villager, shocked, asked who I was.
>
> [Suspicions cleared, he told me] the Mongol horses had just been seen this morning,
>
> By the main road along the green hills.
>
> 小泊稽莊月正弦，莊官驚問是何船，今朝哨馬灣頭出，正在青山大路邊.[216]

Wen's appended notes reveal that this "villager" was Ji Song and that after knowing his identity, the latter had made great efforts in escorting him safely to sea. Thus far, Xuan's story just refers his reader back to this thrilling moment of Wen's life and introduces Ji Song. However, the rest of the story crosses with the life of the Ming local magistrate Luo Wanxiang, and the narrative then takes off from history into the realm of myth.

Through the narrator's introduction, we learn that Luo Wanxiang had been a Tianchang magistrate well-respected by his citizens during the last years of the Ming dynasty. After the Ming-Qing dynastical change, Luo retreated anonymously to the Ji village outside of Tianchang in the style of a *yimin* (loyalist recluse).[217] One day in a dream, he was invited to a grand temple, where a god of regal countenance asked him to write a few couplets. The same dream repeated, until one day Luo accidentally found out that the City God of Tianchang looked exactly the same as the god in his dream. After a while, he dreamed of the City God again, but this time the City God was irritated by his reluctance to write the couplets and was only appeased by his

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[216] Wen, *Wenshan ji*, vol. 18, p. 61, *Online SKQS*. Xuan Ding also quotes this poem in the narrator's comment section at the end of the story (*Ye lu*, bk.1, p. 261).

[217] Records of Luo can also be found in *Jiangnan tongzhi*, vol. 118, pp. 55-6, and *Jiaqing beixiu Tianchang xianzhi gao*, vol. 6, p. 111; Xuan's narrative so far corresponds with these historical records. *Yimin* refers to the loyalists to a fallen dynasty who lived on in the new dynasty in recluse. More on *yimin* in Chapter Three.

secretary, who at this point revealed himself to be Ji Song, and the City God no other but Wen Tianxiang (bk. 1, pp. 259-60).

The three historical figures evoked here are of varying standings: while Wen is a high-ranking minister and an icon of patriotism, Ji is just a civilian anonymous in official histories, and Luo a little-known local magistrate whose position as a loyalist Ming *yimin* is at best viewed with suspicion by the succeeding Qing regime; yet in this mythic dream, all three are synthesized into the same rhetoric of loyalty and patriotism. Despite his incredibility of the City God episode, the narrator further consolidates the three heroes' equal divine standing towards the end of the story, where after a description of the current negligence of Magistrate Luo's tomb, he laments: "I have always intended to restore Magistrate Luo's tomb, plant trees and erect a tablet on it and record his deeds in writing, and build a statue of him just opposite that of Ji Song and by the side of Wen Tianxiang, so that all three of them can enjoy sacrifices in the temple till eternity!" 余時擬出資，為公加封植，立崇碑，敘其事，且肖其像于信國右，宛于稽公對峙，血食千秋 (bk. 1, p. 261). The last appeal to eternal sacrifice is reminiscent of magistrate Sun Yiren's commemoration of Wo Tian quoted above, yet it was exactly the lack of official commemoration that led to the heroes' current pitiable status.

The repeated confirmation of the three heroes' equal standing as gods in this story also evidences the difficulty of doing so outside the realm of literature. The fact is, the deceased can often suffer from negligence and suppression, and even those who have been sanctioned by official history can easily pass into oblivion, let alone those who have had a troubled relation with it. Ji's name appeared only sparsely in a few local histories (*Jiangnan tongzhi* for instance), and a Ming literatus had already lamented how utterly he was forgotten even in his own hometown.[218] Luo's career as a Tianchang magistrate appeared in a short paragraph in a local history, yet his loyalty as a *yimin* was not officially recognized, and his tomb now stood in swamp by Xuan Ding's time.[219] Xuan's story, by imagining the three heroes' compatibility in a

[218] Cheng Minzheng 程敏政, "Diao Jizhuang ci"弔稽莊詞 ("A Eulogy to the Ji Village"), in *Huangdun wenji* 篁敦文集 (Works of Huangdun), vol. 60, p. 16, *Online SKQS*.
[219] According to the *Jiaqing beixiu Tianchang xianzhi gao*, 1998 rpt., vol. 6, p.111, a temple dedicated to Luo and another local personage had been built, yet Luo's tomb was uncared for, and the temple could not compare with Wo Tian's in grandeur.

synchronized mythical temporality, rescues Ji out of oblivion and recognizes Lu as another figure of loyalty just as the Song heroes were. The differing posthumous fates of Wo Tian and Luo Wanxiang, one sanctified by government representatives while the other being forgotten by his countrymen, show how precarious the notion of loyalty and patriotism can be. While it is easy to recognize a hero who died in a battle against foreigners, it is more difficult to recognize someone who died as a loyalist to a previous dynasty that the current one has overthrown. Indeed, the lament for the contingencies involved in heroic figures' historical visibility has been famously voiced by the Grand Historian Sima Qian in his "Boyi liezhuan" 伯夷列傳 ("Biography of Boyi"):

> Although Boyi and Shuqi were virtuous, their names got transmitted far and wide only after Confucius' praise; although Yan Yuan was a dedicated scholar, his virtuous deeds were only made known when he followed Confucius. For those recluses, their conducts and behaviours were so governed by moral principles, yet their names all passed into oblivion: it is indeed lamentable. For the ordinary people who want to build a reputation in the world with their good conduct, if they are not helped by those who are of great prestige, how can their deeds be still remembered by posterity!
>
> 伯夷、叔齊雖賢，得夫子而名益彰; 顏淵雖篤學，附驥尾而行益顯. 岩穴之士，趨舍有時，若此類名湮滅而不稱，悲夫. 閭巷之人，欲砥行立名者，非附青雲之士，惡能施於後世哉![220]

As a historian, Sima is aware that although many people may be virtuous and deserving commemoration, only a few are lucky enough to be praised by "those who are of great prestige". Confucius certainly is one such person "of great prestige" pivotal in canonizing the cultural status of Boyi, Shuqi, and Yan Yuan. Using the story of Boyi as a declaration of his own principle of historiography, Sima also implicitly affirms the historian's role in maintaining and distributing historical justice; in other

[220] Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 2003 rpt., vol. 61, "Boyi liezhuan", p. 401.

words, the historian is to substitute the sage as one "of great prestige" and should shoulder the responsibility of saving those virtuous heroes from oblivion.[221]

However, in reality, the conditions of those nameless heroes may be more complex than the Grand Historian acknowledges. The contingencies of history mean that even an official historian may not be able to ensure the heroes their due remembrance, and the vicissitudes of a changing world may easily dismantle the hero's temple. Without a physical or verbal "archive" of the dead, in Feuchtwang's words, these grievous deceased are in danger of becoming ghosts; hence there is the need of "historians of ghosts" like Xuan Ding, whose mythmaking attempts to amend the fissures of official history. Xuan's fantastic stories discussed so far mythologize the ghosts of the cultural heroes into protective and authoritative fatherly gods. The mythologized heroes are at the same time elevated to the mythical ancestors of the nation, their deaths embodying and reinforcing the orthodox values promoted by official history: loyalty to one's people, nation, and emperor. In this sense, Xuan's mythologization of national history not only supplements official history with what it may have missed, but also consecrates its values.

However, the paradox of Xuan's project of consecrating official history is that the mythologization of history through ghosts may also inadvertently expose the precariousness of official history. Stories of ghost always already contain the danger of undoing history, for they inhabit a space diagonally opposite to historical narratives. Historical narratives, in Feuchtwang's words, may be called a "bidden past", whereas stories of ghost are an "unbidden return" pointing to double tragedies: "the tragedy of being utterly forgotten", and "the tragedy of *not* being confined to the setting of a past".[222] "Ji Song after His Death Became the Secretary of Minister Wen Tianxiang" exposes how unstable the orthodox heroes' status can be when the "enemy" that the hero opposes to is not the easily condemnable foreigners. But if Ji and Luo can still be recuperated as protective semi-gods, other stories expose the worst fate awaiting the deceased: once the memory of the heroic deed is suppressed and becomes inaccessible to the descendants, heroes can easily turn into ghosts. Here Xuan Ding must dive

[221] On an analysis of "Biography of Boyi" and history as a unique tenet in Chinese philosophy to ensure justice and immortality, see Shan Shaojie, "The Principles of Justice and Immortality in Biography of Bo Yi", 2005.
[222] Feuchtwang, 2010, p. 128, pp. 129-30.

totally into the realm of myth, for these deceased have no archives whatsoever to witness their once existence, therefore they cannot find a place in history. “Zhonghun rumeng” 忠魂入夢 (“Visited by a Loyal Spirit in a Dream”, bk. 1, vol. 1) can be seen as such an archaeological excavation of the ghost’s history.

In this story, the narrator Xuan Ding is also its central character,[223] who encountered the ghost when he was working as the magistrate’s secretary in Ziyang county, Shandong province. In a banquet hosted in the magistrate’s residence, Xuan noticed a big mound outside of the garden and thought to himself that it could be pruned to a rockery. That night, he was visited in his dream by a man dressed in the garb of government officers, and he told Xuan that his remains were buried under that very mould and requested him to abandon the thought of making it a place of entertainment. He then revealed himself to be a loyalist who died for his emperor and begged Xuan to write him into a book: “I have not a single tombstone inscribed with my deeds, nor a temple in my name; while I wither here in decay, the history books have no place for me. How utterly lonely I am!” 既無碑志，又無祠宇，老成凋謝，史冊不書，殊寂寞耳 (bk. 1, p. 42). The man then composed five poems on site, all loaded with allusions to imageries of death, sacrifice, and loyalty. But Xuan was suddenly woken before he had the chance to ask for the man’s name.

Through this dream episode, the unnamed mound is now marked as an archive relating to some death of loyalty. But still, the deceased has no name yet. The next day Xuan asked around his colleagues about the mound, and a further layer of the deceased’s identity was revealed: in the year 1644 that marked the fall of the Ming dynasty, a Ming government officer named Cao Tingzhen passed the county office of Ziyang on his way to relieve the Beijing siege, when the news came that the capital had been taken by the rebels and the Chongzhen Emperor (1611-1644) had committed suicide.[224] To vindicate his loyalty, Cao drowned himself in a well beside the county office. Local people built a mound above the well out of sympathy, but as the well was

[223] Actually it is difficult to tell from the narration whether the story comes from the author’s real experience or imagination.

[224] In 1644, when the rebellion army led by Li Zicheng occupied Beijing, the Emperor hung himself in the royal garden. A month later the Manchu army took Beijing from Li Zicheng and began the rule of the Qing dynasty, while resistance by some Ming royal members and loyalists persisted in the southern provinces till 1662.

by the site of the county office, a symbol of government authority of the succeeding Qing regime, no tomb could be built, and the mound remained unmarked.

The ghost in this incident, the loyal former Ming officer Cao Tingzhen, did a same act of loyalty as that of Ji Song and Luo Wanxiang, yet since the regime to which he pledged his loyalty was unable to commemorate his death, and his physical remains came in the way of the authority of the succeeding government, all traces of the deceased were repressed and the deceased himself was banished to the lot of ghosts. At this stage, Xuan's informant brought up another story about Cao's unbidden return as an angry ghost. It was said that in the reign of the Qing emperor Daoguang (1821-1850), a concubine of a local magistrate was suddenly possessed by a male ghost after she entertained herself frivolously on the mound. The ghost scolded the woman for her imprudence to his tomb and revealed himself to be the Ming officer Cao Tingzhen. Only after the magistrate's repeated plea did the ghost let go of his victim. The magistrate later made great efforts to verify Cao's identity, yet to no avail.[225] For unarchived deaths like that of Cao Tingzhen, the deceased have nothing to verify their identity apart from that nameless mould, therefore the unbidden return can only be initiated when the mould occasionally enters the life of the living in some way — through haunting or possession, or in a milder form, a dream visit as recorded by the narrator Xuan Ding. The spirit's identity thus surfaces piece by piece like a jigsaw puzzle through his occasional haunting, but such fragmented information is not sufficient to revive his memory, and his possession of the living further marks him irretrievably as a ghost. As mentioned earlier, in the Confucian order of things, both ancestors and gods can offer protection, while ghosts only cause troubles. A ghost is only to be feared and propitiated, and at best sympathized. Until his name and deeds can be verified by other physical or verbal archives (a tombstone, a temple, or a record in official history as the ghost suggests), the ghost remains a ghost and cannot enter the pantheon of sanctified protective gods like Wo Tian, Ji Song, or even Luo Wanxiang.[226]

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[225] I have also searched for traces of this Cao Tingzhen in various ancient books databases and have found nothing.

[226] In another story "Guilin gaoshu sanyi" 桂林皋署三異 ("Three Strange Cases in the Guilin County Office", bk. 1, vol. 1), Xuan records his informant's sighting of a headless ghost. Although the ghost is rumoured to be a nameless Ming loyalist, for the lack of actual evidence, even the narrator Xuan Ding is suspicious of this claim and lumps the spirit in the group of demons.

When all traces of the deceased are either erased or repressed, the memory can only be retrieved through ghost narratives as Xuan Ding's. Ghost narratives, as Feuchtwang suggests, "are as myth to history": "Myths constitute a metaphorical past, in which the present participates by analogy, whereas history is what the historian thinks happened in the past and is constructed from a present knowledge, giving the present significance."[227] Xuan's stories of these male ghosts turn the national history into a national myth and the cultural heroes into semi-gods. If, as Eliade maintains, the religious man through reciting myths relives the sacred time and reunites with his heroes and gods,[228] then Xuan's myth of these neglected fatherly ghosts, apart from a resistance to history's forgetting, is also a re-actualization of the national heroes' courage and nobility. Through making and retelling these myths, the contemporary perturbed man can unite with these spiritual ancestors and appropriate their strength. However, ghost narratives, as a "myth to history", also embody a troubled relation with history: on the one hand, they participate in the same orthodox discourse on patriotism, loyalty, and nobility — staunch values upheld by official history, while on the other hand, they are concerned with the omissions, deficiencies, and distortions of history which ironically expose the precarious nature of that history.

#### 2.3.1.2 Self-mythologization

As a historian of ghosts, Xuan Ding takes over from Sima Qian the duty to do historical justice to those unrecognized national heroes who had by his time risked turning into ghosts. Yet while a ghost may ask a fiction writer to commemorate him in a book as Xuan's story illustrates, the unrecognized writer without any nominal success in the world, as Pu's preface to *Liaozhai* prophetically implies, is not very different from a wandering ghost "among dark woods and black fortresses". The project of excavating ghosts through *zhiguai* writing, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, is inherently a project of self-affirmation and alternative identity-building; more particularly for Xuan, it is inseparable from the project of self-mythologization. In this section, my focus turns from gods to ancestors, and finally to the living man who identifies with an unrecognized ghost, for the mythologization of various local heroes is also a way to identify one's real or spiritual ancestors through which the self gains

[227] Feuchtwang, 2010, p.142, p. 128, n. 51.
[228] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 1959.

protection and a sense of belonging. If history is after all an inscription of the past on the mind of the public, literary myth offers the private, and final inscription against the regulation and forgetting of history.

"The Spirit Lantern" commemorates the heroic deeds of Caption Wo Tian, yet sandwiched between the narration of Wo's tragic death and the final reference to his "spirit lantern" is a comic anecdote about a great great grandfather of the author at the same time of the Japanese invasion. Grudging all the good food, the ancestor calmly stayed behind to cook himself a meal while everyone else had fled. But just as he was about to raise his chopsticks, the Japanese came at door. They found the cooked meal, took it as a gesture of hospitality, and left some coins for the fleeing host. The ancestor later kept the presents without hesitation, yet the next sentence tells us that the same ancestor organized a group of villagers to bury the remains of Wo Tian and proposed to local authority to build a temple for him (bk.1, p. 216). The tragic and the comic, the high and the low are juxtaposed side by side in this strange brew. The family anecdote seems incompatible with the grand narrative of the national hero and to some extent even undoes the graveness of the hero's tragic death, for it seems that the enmity between the Japanese other and the Chinese self can be easily melted by gestures of hospitality and a present.

Why, we must ask, would Xuan Ding insert such an anecdote in the story of Wo Tian even at the expense of the overall narrative effect? Wo's story itself does not allow for comical rendering, but if we shift the focus from the hero to the author himself, the answer is clear: for an author seeking to redefine his identity through writing, stories about local gods are as much a mythmaking of the self as a commemoration of the heroes. Wo Tian, Wen Tianxiang, and Ji Song are excavated from history because of their connection with Tianchang, the author's hometown. The same locale connects the national with the personal, the historical with the anecdotal; thus, the diversion to the grandfather's story is not irrelevant but even central. One is a local patron god while the other is an ancestor; to commemorate and archive their deeds into the symbolic realm of fiction and myth creates for the contemporary author a lineage that he as a descendant can claim and feel secure in.

Xuan Ding's obsession with Wo Tian's story extends beyond *zhiguai* writing. In 1872, five years prior to his preface to *Ye lu*, he had used the same material in a marvellous

play *Fanhun xiang chuanqi* 返魂香傳奇 (*The Incense of the Returning Soul*, published by *Shenbaoguan* in 1877). The author introduces the original story behind the play in his preface: when he was working as a secretary in Yancheng county, Xuan befriended a local village head named Wang, and the latter told him the story of a respected priest Wang of the local Buddhist temple who used to be a friend of the informant's ancestor Wang Xueli. Priest Wang was well loved for his moral integrity, yet ironically, bandits took advantage of his kindness and killed him cruelly. Priest Wang's tragic death reminded the author of the deceased's contemporary, Captain Wo who also died a brave death and was honoured and worshipped by Tianchang citizens till this day. Deeply touched by priest Wang's tragic fate, the author voices his indignation:

> Priest Wang witnessed the same chaos of the Japanese invasion in Shenzong's reign as Captain Wo Tian and was a soul of great integrity.[229] But now he is buried in a forlorn place among overgrown weeds. How come there is [such difference between] fortune and misfortune for the dead?" 而道人亦生於神宗倭亂時，錚錚佼佼一抔雖在，卒埋沒于荒煙蔓草間，何有幸又不幸與?[230]

Like Sima Qian who laments the oblivion of those virtuous yet nameless recluses in his "Biography of Boyi", Xuan Ding too protests the differing fates for the deceased. However, towards the end of his preface, Xuan's focus changes from the subject of his play to the writer who writes the play:

> I wrote frenziedly by the lamp throughout the night. I heard cries sounding out of my verses, and saw tears welling up from my pen. The servant was alarmed and cried I was mad, to which I paid no heed. 挑燈疾書，竟夕不寐，聲震震出金石，淚琅琅溢筆端. 館撲驚且詈以為癲，不顧也.[231]

Here again, we are presented with a description of writing as both addictive and cathartic as in Xuan's preface to *Ye lu* five years later, and implied in it is the author's strong identification with the subject of his writing: the forgotten ghost. As a historian of ghosts, Xuan feels the responsibility to excavate and sanctify the ghosts of national

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[229] Xuan Ding here made a mistake: Wo Tian's death happened in the Shizong (世宗) Emperor's reign, not Shenzong's (神宗).
[230] Xuan Ding, *Fanhun xiang*, vol. 1, p. 2.
[231] Ibid.

heroes like Wo Tian, Ji Song, and Luo Wanxiang, yet faced with the ghost of priest Wang, the author finds himself looking directly into the misfortunes of an unrecognized self. If Ji and Luo are the neglected heroes that deserve a place in the same pantheon with the famous Wen Tianxiang, then what is the proper place for priest Wang, whose death merits no place in local or national history? Virtuous but insignificant commoners like priest Wang occupy the same social position as his author, and many connections can be found between Xuan and the ghost his play commemorates. Born in a declining scholarly family, priest Wang received a traditional Confucian education but had to make a living as a merchant and later became a refugee fleeing from flood. While all the other male characters in the play were either government officials, imperial degree-holders or military leaders, priest Wang had no nominal success of any kind and had only his virtue as his possession. Starting as a Confucian scholar, he turned to Buddhism half by chance, and as a temple priest, he lived a life hardly above beggary. Xuan's own circumstances were similar: he had an affinity with Buddhism since childhood and led a wandering life during the Taiping war years which he referred to as "close to beggary" ("jinyu tuobo"近於托钵).[232] In many ways, the virtuous but unfortunate priest Wang is an incarnation of the author himself, and the "cries" and "tears" that emanated from Xuan's pen are for himself as well as for the deceased.

If in *Ye lu* the stories of historical heroes are a literary myth to establish the deceased as gods and ancestors, *Fanhun xiang* is the writer's effort to redeem the lost memory of wandering ghosts like himself, and the way to salvage the ghost is to bid its return, thus the title "the returning soul". Literally, "fanhun xiang" means the fragrance of the returning soul, but it is also a poetic name for the plum flower, which in literary imagination is often used as a symbol for moral integrity and perseverance.[233] Plum blossom is a central motif in the play: it sometimes incarnated as Plum Blossom Fairy, the guardian and companion of the priest, sometimes embodied the plum tree planted by the priest whose life and death corresponded to that of its planter, and its fragrance was an enduring indicator of the nobility of humanity that outshined death. When the

[232] *Ye lu*, bk. 1, p.13.
[233] On the symbolism of "fanhun xiang" in classical Chinese literature, see Yu Shihao and Zhang Yili, 2008, pp. 74-6.

priest's corpse was found inside the temple five days after his death by his friend Wang Xueli and other villagers, its putrefaction made it a site of horror; but after being washed for a while, the dead body started to emanate fragrance.[234] In the glaring reality of death and decay, neither fame, virtue, nor wealth can elevate the dead above the pathetic state of horror, but the mysterious fragrance persevered as a mark of the deceased's dignity as an individual.

Yet merely the magic element of the fragrance is not enough to save the dead from oblivion. As in stories of unarchived ghosts discussed above, Xuan Ding is well aware of the pitiful fate awaiting the soul if the death is not properly commemorated. A dead unmarked hero may become a ghost, let alone a nameless commoner who is not recognized by the world. The only remaining way against forgetting is another kind of inscription—the private one. Various inscriptions in the play gathered around priest Wang and formed a linguistic aura to illuminate his noble character. Priest Wang's two acts of kindness concerning money and sex were respectively inscribed by his beneficiaries out of gratitude on the wall beside his plum tree. The chain of inscriptions contracted and finally consolidated on the dead body of the priest, which eventually put the dead on equal footing with the gods. Out of indignation of the violent death met by his virtuous friend, Wang Xueli wrote on the arm of the corpse: "Alas! Wang kept his integrity in the temptation of wealth and sex. I shall see whether the Bodhisattva is wise or *not*." 嗚呼王郎見財不取見色不淫，我看菩薩靈*不*靈 (my italics).[235] The inscription mocks the inefficient divine powers, which are supposed to reward the good and punish the evil. This inscription caused trouble when priest Wang's soul came before the underworld judges as it could not be erased. Now a commoner's lament was finally producing an effect that was even beyond the control of the gods, and we are confronted again with the issue of justice and cosmic order as discussed in previous sections. The judges could not allow priest Wang to reincarnate with the inscription for it would become a physical evidence of their inefficiency, but neither were they able to erase it. After consulting Monk Huineng the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism,[236] the underworld judges came up with an expedient solution: they

[234] *Fanhun xiang*, vol. 4, pp. 21-3.
[235] Ibid., p. 24.
[236] Huineng is a pivotal figure in Zen Buddhism in China. In this play he is mythologized into a supernatural god figure.

added a stroke to the character "not" in the inscription, so that the inscription became "I see that the Buddha is *wiser* than wise" 我看菩薩靈*还*靈 (my italic).[237] With the altered inscription, the priest was sent to a fortunate reincarnation and returned to his old friend Wang Xueli eighteen years later. At this stage, the various inscriptions had securely individuated the deceased from wandering nameless ghosts, and the miraculous return of the reincarnated soul became a legend that was to pass down within the Wang family over the centuries. By Xuan Ding's time, the dead received a final inscription as Xuan made the whole story into a literary myth, so that this wronged soul is immortalized equally with an officially sanctified hero like Wo Tian.

While in the previous section I show how the voluntaristic worldview was severely under attack in Xuan Ding's stories, in this section I explore the writer's grand project of mending that collapsing heaven with stories of ghosts. By excavating and consecrating the neglected heroic ghosts into gods, Xuan mythologizes the national history and reinforces the ideologies represented by these fatherly ghosts: the nobility of sacrificing for one's country, and the perseverance and immortality of the virtuous souls which protect China from invasion and defeat. Accompanying this mythologization of national history, there is also the project of mythologization of the self — the self not only unites with his heroes and gods through his artistic myth-making, but also identifies them as his spiritual ancestors and eventually becomes one of them. This impulse to reaffirm and consecrate one's history reveals a contemporary need, for an age obsessed with rarefying its past is an age uncertain of its present. The reconstructed past gives the Chinese descendant a confidence in his cultural centrality, and this is precisely what he feared most in losing in the late Qing, as a vital blow to the Chinese worldview of the time was the collapse of the centre-periphery mental structure which affirms China's centrality and superiority vis-à-vis what were perceived as China's barbarian others. As I will show in the next section, applying a similarly mythic strategy as used in his project of salvaging history, Xuan tames the inevitable encounter between the Chinese self and the threatening foreign others into the familiar narrative pattern of masculine/norm versus feminine/demon.

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[237] *Fanhuan xiang*, vol. 4, p. 44. With the added stroke the "not" 不 becomes "more" 还. Xuan uses in this play the common version of "more", which is written as 还 as in simplified Chinese instead of the traditional Chinese 還.

### 2.3.2 Taming the Strange Aliens at Home: Foxes and Snakes

I have discussed above the evocation of an arbitrary and potentially menacing cosmos in the two stories "The Island of Northern Extreme" and "Zhong Xiaomei". A prominent feature of these two stories about impending calamities is that the devils or ghosts plaguing China are imagined to come from an unknown foreign space harbouring infinite threats to the Central Kingdom. This fear and hostility towards a potentially threatening other outside of China, to be sure, is a reflection of the sentiments of many late-Qing Chinese who had experienced China's defeats in the Opium Wars and witnessed the intrusion of Westerners in treaty ports.[238] At the same time, this psychological framework regarding the self-in-the-centre and the other-of-the-outside in Xuan's stories has greatly departed from the "centre-periphery" pattern established in *zhiguai* writing about the overseas. This mental structure regarding the imagination of alien peoples, as I will show below, had a remote origin in the *Shanhai jing* (*The Classics of Mountains and Seas*) and recurred frequently in Chinese literature and travel writing about foreign others which often display a cyclical pattern. However, when the comfortable distance between the centre and the imaged periphery is collapsed and the aliens have come at home, as witnessed in late-Qing China, new methods are needed to tame the strange; Xuan's solution, as I will show later, is to subjugate the strange through a newly defined model between the anomaly and the norm in which masculinity becomes a transcending regulatory force.

As a genre about the anomalies and the knowing and regulating of the anomalies, *zhiguai* is greatly influenced by a so-called *Shanhaijing*-pattern, a conceptual framework influenced by the narration of the strange creatures in *The Classics*.[239] In this narrative model, the knowing and collecting self is firmly established in a central position vis-à-vis the strange creatures and peoples on the peripheries who are made known, and more importantly, the act of knowing and narrating the strange becomes

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[238] Xuan Ding had lived temporarily in Shanghai during the 1850s, the first decade after Shanghai became a treaty port, but little is known of his life there. The sentiment of fear and distrust towards the "overseas peoples" present in Xuan's stories contrast with Wang Tao's overseas stories, where the overseas countries fascinate the protagonist to explore their wonders. More on overseas travels in Chapter Three.

[239] On the "Shanhaijing-pattern" in *zhiguai*, see Liu Yongqiang, "Mingqing xiaoshuo zhong de shewai miaoxie yu yiguo xiangxiang", 2006.

an act of regulation and subjugation, lending legitimacy to the power centre and hierarchizing the relation between the self and the others.[240] Such a "centre/norm versus periphery/strange" conceptualization has had profound influence on Chinese literature and travel writing involving an imagination of foreigners and foreign lands. The superiority of the Chinese centre is repeatedly confirmed and consolidated in the Chinese subject's outgoing journeys, and the lands and peoples he encounters on the peripheries are all reminiscent of the specimens recorded in *The Classic*, once again offering the Chinese subject the mental satisfaction of prior knowledge.[241] A prominent example is the Qing-dynasty novel *Jinghua yuan* 鏡花緣 (*Flowers in a Mirror*, 1819), in which the wondrous foreign lands that the Chinese protagonists encounters are all prefigured by *The Classic*. *Liaozhai* also contains a few stories of Chinese men's overseas adventures, in which the alien peoples are described as heinous savages, rendered strange and monstrous from the point of view of the "civilized" Chinese centre.[242]

Accompanying this "centre-periphery" pattern in Chinese literary imagination of foreigners is a gendered discourse that tends to feminize the encountered other in contrast to a masculine Chinese self. Eric J. Leed considers travel a "gendering activity", and he aptly terms the travels of European colonizers a "spermatic journey", "stimulated by a male reproductive motive, […] through the agency of women".[243] Similar gender tropes are found informing much Chinese travel writing and fantastic fiction.[244] Just as the ancient Greeks projected their fear of women on the imagined Amazons, Chinese culture had an equivalent legend about the "Kingdom of Women" which features disproportionately high in literature about the overseas.[245] Even when the "Kingdom of Women" does not appear in recognizable forms, the overseas is still

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[240] On the collecting of the strange in *The Classic* as a "cosmic collecting", see Campany, 1996, pp. 103-8.
[241] On a critique of the Sinocentric conceit in Chinese literary imagination of foreign lands, see Liu Yongqiang, 2006.
[242] One example is "Yecha guo" 夜叉國 ("The Yaksha Kingdom", 3:348).
[243] Leed, *The Mind of the Traveller: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*, 1991, p. 217, p. 114.
[244] See Emma Jinghua Teng, 2004, *Taiwan's Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Practices, 1638-1895*, pp. 173-5 on the similarities and differences of the gender discourse in Chinese ethnography and travel writing and Western colonial discourse; see also Teng, "The West as a 'Kingdom of Women': Woman and Occidentalism in Wang Tao's Tales of Travel", 2006, pp. 70-96.
[245] "The Kingdom of Women" features in *The Journey to the West*, the Ming-dynasty novel *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji* (*Zheng He's Expedition in the Western Seas*), *The Flowers in the Mirror*, as well as the two stories of Xuan Ding to be discussed below.

imagined as a land of sexual promiscuity where the Chinese man can have easy access to native women's bodies.

The centre/periphery dichotomy inherited from *The Classic* and the gendered pattern of travel writing have become two distinct features of the literary imagination of the overseas by the Qing dynasty. The two tropes go hand in hand and re-enforce each other: the foreign lands are imagined as the strange lands on the peripheries of the Central Kingdom as described in *The Classic*, where strange creatures are waiting to be found by the Chinese traveller to make him rich, and hypersexualized foreign women are ready to reward him with sexual gratification. Informed by these conceptual patterns, Qing-dynasty *zhiguai* stories involving the overseas often display a cyclical pattern: the Chinese protagonist goes overseas, finds fortune or/and sexual awards in a fantastic foreign land, and returns to China as a rich man with overseas treasures. In this cyclical pattern, China is the starting and ending point of the traveller's journey, the eternal mental centre however far away he travels from home, and the alien lands and peoples he encounters are only curiosities he collects on the way to prove the central and superior state of the self. Such gendered and hierarchized representation of aliens do find examples in Xuan Ding's collection. In "Mohe gaoyi nüzhen fopusa" 摩訶縞衣女真佛菩薩 ("The Great Buddha in White", bk. 2, vol. 6), a Chinese scholar lands on an island of intelligent parrots, where the only citizen having a human body is a lady who had visited the Tang-dynasty China. In the story "Situ ruyi langjun"司徒如意郎君 ("Mr Situ", bk. 2, vol. 4), a beggaring son of a Chinese magistrate easily charms the daughter of a high minister of the Kingdom of Women and wins fortune and sex solely for his identity as a Chinese male. Sinocentric conceit cannot be more blatant. The images of the aliens in these stories are conventional in their superficiality — they are a flattering mirror to reflect the aggrandized image of the Chinese self.

However, despite such familiar portrayals of the overseas, there are also glaring departures from this image, as already evidenced in "The Island of the Northern Extreme" and "Zhong Xiaomei", where the overseas subtly shift into a source of fear and threat. "The Island" reveals the familiar cyclical pattern summarized above, yet at the end of the Chinese man's journey he brought home no beauty or fortune, but fears

about impending dangers from the peripheries.[246] In "Zhong Xiaomei", the fear of aliens is dramatized into a new level that the "centre-periphery" model is no longer able to contain: without going overseas to encounter the aliens, the Chinese have been plagued by evil ghosts coming from overseas for years and even the goddess Zhong Xiaomei could not vanquish them.

When the aliens have already transgressed the established border between the centre and periphery and appeared in the domestic, as was what happened in late-Qing China, the comfortable distance between the aggrandized self and the subjugated other is removed, therefore the traditional model to narrate and regulate the strange inherited from *The Classic* proves no longer sufficient. A whole new set of strategies are needed to regulate and tame the strange, and Xuan's solution is to fit the encounter with the West into another familiar mythic structure in *zhiguai*: the gendered encounter between a human male and a supernatural female (often a ghost or a fox).[247] More particularly in this model, gender category, instead of authority or modes of normality, becomes the final regulating force that can defeat and subjugate the threatening other. This gendered structure not only leads the Chinese self to victory, but also doubly affirms what he fears most in losing when confronted with a rival other — his masculinity.

The story "Bai Laochang" 白老長 ("The Old White Snake", bk. 1, vol. 4) epitomizes how an encounter with Westerners is imagined as a gendered encounter with a demonic other. It begins with a formulaic setting in *zhiguai*: a lone scholar approached by a beautiful woman at night. This beautiful woman dressed in Western attire tries to seduce the scholar Fan Xiyan, and the latter, although knowing her to be a fox intuitively, could not resist her charms and soon becomes emaciated through having sex with her. Fan's whole family are alarmed, yet they can do nothing to drive away the fox.

Such a human-male versus fox-female plot, as many critics remarked, has become "formulaic and predictable".[248] In Patrick Hanan's apt summary, this type of "demon

[246] The Taiping Rebellion, as mentioned in the Introduction, indeed had something to do with "aliens": its leaders preached a localized version of imported Christianity.
[247] On this narrative pattern, see also the Introduction, note 73.
[248] Kang, 2006, p. 74.

story" is composed of three actors — man, demon, and exorcist, and four actions — meeting, lovemaking, intimation of danger, and intercession by the exorcist.[249] The fox woman and the ghost woman occupy readily the "demon" position in this formula and share many similarities: both are decidedly in the realm of yin in contrast with the realm of yang as inhabited by the human male, and both are often imagined as female sexual vampires adapt in the art of "*caibu*" (采補), i.e. to copulate with human males to rob them of their *yang* essence (semen).[250] This convergence of foxiness and femininity in the image of the fox woman certainly is the worst projection of men's fear of female sexuality — female sexual appetite is demonized as the bestial fox, bewitching on the surface yet corrupting in essence; yet at the same time, to merge the demonic with the feminine also helps men to contain the threats of what is alien and unknown, because it now has the familiar name and form of a woman, the lower end of the gender hierarchy.

Xuan Ding's fox woman is built on this familiar formulation of the female demon, but his fox demon also has a new attribute: she is a Western woman. Foreignness translates well into foxiness in this tale: the exotic Western dress of the woman strengthens her charm as a vixen, and her promise to make Fan rich by conversion to Christianity reminds the reader of the old belief that a fox demon may bring wealth to a family.[251] Although aliens are shown in this story as alarmingly close as intruding into Chinese studios at night, they still wear the familiar garb of the vixens. By imposing on the Western threat the contour of the mythical fox story, Xuan has considerably subdued and contained the danger of the aliens, for myth provides paradigms. The Westerners are demonized and feminized in familiar terms, and with familiarity comes a solution.

The narrative convention of the demon-encounter story provides a ready frame to conquer the foreign fox. After the intimation of danger, an exorcist will usually appear to help save the man and destroy the demon. An exorcist promptly appears to the Fans

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[249] Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 1981, p. 44. Hanan's book deals with vernacular story in particular but his formula applies readily to many *zhiguai* stories.
[250] On the close link between fox and sex, see Kang, 2006, and Huntington, *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative*, 2003, pp. 177-89. The imagination of women's vampirism in sexual intercourse may originate with the Taoist concept that sexual intercourse is a transmission of yin and yang life energies between woman and man. See Robert Van Gulik, 1951, *Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period, with an Essay on Chinese Sex Life from the Han to the Ch'ing [Qing] Dynasty, B.C.206-A.D.1644*.
[251] On fox that brings wealth, see Kang, 2006, pp. 83-7.

in Xuan's story, but instead of a usual Taoist priest, the exorcist is an old white snake demon disguised as an old man named Bai Laochang. Bai easily drives away the fox, but the fox would not admit defeat and comes back with a group of demon helpers. Each time they are defeated by Bai's tong-sword, and each time they come back with a larger army, until in the end the fox even coaxes a county magistrate on her side. By this stage, the battle is significantly upgraded: it is no longer between the fox and the Fan family, but between the county magistrate, a pillar of governmental authority on one side, and Bai the snake demon on the other.

This unusual alignment blurs the usual distinction between order and disorder, normality and anomaly, for the county magistrate, the representative of orthodoxy and political order, sides with the demonic fox, while Bai, the snake-demon, becomes the protector of justice.[252] What is more unique is the hyper-phallic weapon through which Bai repeatedly defeats his enemies: his tongue turns into a giant sword that drives away the fox's army; the physical tongue-sword later becomes a symbolic one that renders the magistrate speechless with an eloquent reprimand; and in the final battle, the tongue-sword turns into a sword of flames and consumes all the demon followers (bk.1, p.177). After Bai's spectacular display of triumphant masculinity, the story ends with a conventional conjugal bliss: scholar Fan marries Bai's daughter, and the repentant fox is mercifully accepted as Fan's concubine. However, romance seems to be not the focus of the story, as the narrator's comment at the end emphatically endows the snake's triumph with a historical significance by connecting the snake's flames with the fires of E-pang Palace and the Red Cliff, two significant events in China's dynastic history that signalled the defeat of one political regime by another (bk.1, p.178). Moreover, a subtle evocation of the dragon also indicates that the snake demon's victory is viewed symbolically as a victory of the Chinese nation, and the snake man is exalted into an icon of national backbone.[253]

Equally important with the imagined national confrontation in "Bai Laochang" is the gendered pattern that Xuan gives to this confrontation and his modification of conventional gender stereotypes, which reveal another important dimension in

[252] Xue Hongji interprets the battle as an allegory for the confrontation between Chinese commoners and Western colonizers, with the county magistrate representing the Qing government manipulated by Westerners. See Xue, 1988, p. 253.

[253] On the significance of the dragon (龍) in Chinese culture, see He Liangxing, *Tuteng yu zhongguo wenhua*, 2008.

contemporary Chinese men's confrontation with Western challenges: their masculinity anxiety. While the Western threat is sexualized as a female seducer, the protector of the Chinese family is valorised as a powerful and hyper-masculine male demon. It is worth noting that Bai himself is a snake demon and shares a similar status with the vixen in the hierarchy of demon (or ghost), man, and god. Like the fox, the familiar image of the snake demon in folklore and literature is a seducing woman, and the most famous of them is the White Snake Lady.[254] The early specimens of the White Snake legend fit well into the demon story formula summarized above.[255] Xuan's white snake Bai Laochang may well have been influenced by the legend of the White Snake Lady, and Bai's daughter occupies precisely the position of the snake seducer in the original tale. But turning on the tradition, it is the masculine and warrior-like father that is foregrounded in Xuan's story instead of the daughter, and it is the snake warrior's hyper-masculinity (exhibited in the phallic tongue-sword) that transforms the abnormal into the orthodox. Masculinity is not only the trait that the story celebrates, but itself has become a transcending signifier that redefines the norm and the anomaly. By transforming the snake's sexuality from female to male, the once anomalous snake now stands in a position of orthodoxy as opposed to the feminized and demonized Westerners. So far, the anxiety caused by the intruding aliens is successfully domesticated into a battle between familiar tropes: masculinity/orthodoxy versus femininity/anomaly, and the story can be read as a besieged Chinese man's salvation of his masculinity and culture identity, in which gender tropes and anomaly tropes fertilize each other to re-establish the advantageous position of the Chinese male self.

Xuan Ding's white snake story also shows the snake as a liminal and multifaceted figure. The snake motif has many variations across cultures. While the Chinese culture has the legend of the seducing White Snake, Western literary imagination has the lamia myth which too portrays the snake as a stealth *femme fatale*. However, the snake is a figure encompassing both the feminine and the phallic, suggesting a sexual fluidity which may well melt into its other. Xuan's "Bai Laochang" capitalizes on the phallic

[254] On the evolution of the White Snake motif, see Fan Jinlan, "Baishezhuan gushi xingbian yanjiu", 1991.

[255] See, for instance, in Li Fang 李昉 comp., *Taiping guangji* (978AD), vol. 458 ("Snake III"), "Li Huang", pp. 10-3, *Online SKQS*.

aggressiveness of the snake and turns it into a symbol of masculinity; in Chapter Four I will examine Vernon Lee's fantastic story "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady", which also builds on the motif of the seducing snake but turns the snake lady into an icon of idealized maternal abundance featuring a sexual fluidity. The liminality of the anomaly makes it good material for imagining alternative gender models.

Is Xuan Ding a genuine friend of Pu Songling "among the dark woods and black fortress"? My answer is a partial yes. Xuan is a sincere admirer of Pu, and his works do show numerous traces of continuity from the *Liaozhai* tradition — the tradition that fashions *zhiguai* writing as the frustrated literatus' self-chosen identity as well as his solitary yet heroic battle with a collapsing world. Yet, if Pu stages his battle through the amorous ghost, the embodiment of *qing*, Xuan's project of reconstructing the self is based on a revisiting of national history. History becomes vital to one's understanding of the present especially when the current version of seeing the world proves insufficient and familiar conceptions of the self are challenged. Xuan's approach to revalorize his besieged masculinity and Chinese cultural identity in a chaotic age is a myth-making of the national and personal history through excavating and consecrating a group of fatherly ghosts. Through mythologizing these ghosts, the Chinese man reunites with his gods and heroes, and through mythical narratives of the encounter with a demonic female, he tames the threatening other and revalorizes the Chinese self. Such an approach, while successful in Xuan's case, will prove less sustainable for Wang Tao, who had stepped outside of the comfortable position of the Chinese centre and embraced open-mindedly the aliens on the "peripheries". Wang's reformation of *zhiguai* stories shows a greater departure from tradition and a less confident defence of his cultural identity, as the moral legitimacy of *zhiguai* itself is questioned in his *zhiguai* collections, as well as the coherence of official versions of Chinese history.

# Chapter 3 Tales of the New Strange: Wang Tao's Uncanny History

Wang Tao was an important late-Qing reformist political thinker, and one of the first Chinese intellectuals who knew considerably well about the Western culture and advocated learning from the West.[256] In his biographer Paul Cohen's words, Wang was a man caught between "tradition and modernity";[257] conceptualizing tradition and modernity in the late-Qing context, it is also apt to say that Wang was a man caught between Chinese and Western cultures. Working with British missionaries in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Scotland, Wang had helped in the translation of the Bible into Chinese and Confucian classics into English. This unique immersion in both Chinese and Western cultures gave Wang a valuable opportunity to step out of a Sinocentric mentality and to re-evaluate his own culture from an outsider's perspective; yet at the same time, it could also be a source of perturbation and disorientation.[258] Wang's understanding of and fascination with Western culture made it more difficult for him to affirm his own cultural standing through simply demonizing the Western other as Xuan does, and it also prompted him to adopt a more critical attitude towards Chinese history and tradition, as evident in his *zhiguai* writing I am going to discuss in this chapter. Instead of glorifying a mythical national history, Wang casts doubts on official history and its inherent moral values through his stories of ghosts. If the mythical history reconstructed in Xuan's *zhiguai* stories can be said to belong to what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) calls a "monumental history"— looking back for monumental moments in the past to offer paradigms for the historical present, then Wang's history of ghosts fits more in Nietzsche's "critical history": the present man feels oppressed by the immortality of past traditions and customs, and through a

[256] While earlier "transmitters" of Western learning like Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794-1857) tended to focus on the practical side of Western culture: science and technology, Wang was among the first to introduce to China the political institutions and history of Europe. See Pan Kuang-Che, 2011, "Knowledge of the Different Types of Western Political Regimes in Late Qing China: Jiang Dunfu and Wang Tao".

[257] Cohen, 1974. Cohen regards Wang as a pivotal transitional figure in the late-Qing political transformation, paving ways for the next generation of revolutionaries like Sun Yet-san (1866-1925) who were to totally transform China's imperial history (p. 6).

[258] For this reason, Wang's earlier biographer, Henry McAleavy, aptly calls him "a displaced person": Wang could not fit among the traditional Confucian scholars in bureaucracy, nor could he found his place among Westerners whom he acutely sensed as his "others". See McAleavy, 1953, *Wang Tao: The Life and Writing of a Displaced Person*.

criticism of history he seeks to break away from the past and embark on a new journey.[259]

More particularly in Wang Tao's *zhiguai*, this critique of Chinese history is realised through portraying the ghosts of two groups of people who have had a troubled relationship with history: the *yimin* (loyalists) during dynastical changes and the chaste women who became victims of dynastical wars. The former group express a yearning to escape from historical succession into a temporal stasis, while the silent sufferings of the latter expose the futility and cruelty of the *yimin* discourse, whose essence is a clinging to the past. By exposing the uncanny side of official history and of the loyalty discourse upheld in this history, the contemporary Chinese man breaks away from his tradition and begins an outgoing journey to confront his Western rivals.

Critical history as well as monumental history, Nietzsche admits, are practical ways to let history serve the living, yet both approaches have their limits: monumental history is no less than a myth-making of the past whose reconstruction of the past is prone to beautification and distortion, while the severance with one's root and tradition in critical history can be dangerous to one's current sense of being. Particularly for Wang, breaking away from tradition has its cost, as it offers one no reassuring central position when the subject leaves behind his tradition to confront a powerfully rivalling other. Caught between Chinese and Western epistemologies, Wang's *zhiguai* writing showcases the perilous mental journey that late-Qing Chinese intellectuals undertook to re-evaluate and reform the self. This is a deeply troubled journey, departing from *zhiguai* tradition, yet never landing in the imagined Western land; instead, it witnesses a constant oscillation between different interpretative frameworks and the result is an unsettling fantastic literature embedded in layers and layers of *zhiguai* intertextuality, offering no definite claim of reality for its author or reader.

Wang Tao's unconventional attitude towards the *zhiguai* tradition was closely connected with the author's irregular life path deviating from that of a traditional Confucian scholar's. Born in a scholarly family in the Fuli county near Suzhou, Wang's earlier life, like most scholars', was engaged mainly in preparing for the civil exams. In 1848, Wang went to visit his father then working in Shanghai, and the newly

[259] Nietzsche, "On the Use and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), in *Untimely Meditations*, 1997, pp. 67-9, pp. 75-7.

opened treaty port offered him the first window into a larger world. The twenty-year-old Wang was immediately fascinated with the vitality of this rapidly urbanizing port city, and the advanced printing facilities of London Missionary Press left an indelible impression on him.[260] One year later, his father's death prompted him to seek a job in Shanghai, and he soon became an employee of the London Missionary Press, helping Dr W. H. Medhurst 麥都思 (1796-1857) translate the Bible into Chinese. From 1849 to 1862, Wang witnessed Shanghai being quickly transformed into the new commercial and cultural centre of southern China with its fashionable urban and Westernized style of life, as he himself turning gradually into the first generation of "treaty-port intellectuals".[261] To work for foreigners was Wang's first deviation from the traditional scholar's path, as it was then considered a self-degrading act, yet a greater crisis was yet to come. In 1862, when Shanghai was still under threat of the nearby Taiping army based in Nanjing, the Qing government confiscated in a raid a letter written in the name of Huang Wan (黃畹) to one of the Taiping leaders in Suzhou that offered strategies for defeating the Qing army. The Qing authority believed Wang to be the author of this letter, although the latter denied it for all his life. This was the incident that exiled Wang Tao from China proper for more than twenty years. With the help of the British Consul in Shanghai, Sir Walter Henry Medhurst 麥華陀 (son of the missionary Medhurst), Wang was able to narrowly escape to Hong Kong.[262] For the next twenty years, he mainly stayed in Hong Kong, but he had the opportunity to travel to Europe in 1867 by James Legge's invitation and stayed in Scotland for two years helping Legge translate Chinese classics into English.[263] Upon returning to Hong Kong, Wang established *Xunhuan ribao* 循環日報 (1874-1947), the first Chinese-language newspaper run by Chinese, and in the following ten years he published numerous articles introducing Western science, history, and political systems as well

[260] Wang recorded his excitement of first seeing Shanghai in *Manyou suilu tuji*, 2004, pp. 23-5.
[261] On Wang's life in Shanghai, see Catherine Vance Yeh, 1997.
[262] On this episode in Wang's life, see Cohen, 1974, pp. 39-56 and McAleavy, 1953, pp. 14-5. Both Cohen and McAleavy believe that Wang did write this letter.
[263] For this reason, I use Legge's translation of Confucian classics for my quotations in this dissertation, as the wording and interpretation may to some extent reflect Wang Tao's understanding of these Confucian texts.

as advocating for China's reform.[264] By the time he returned to Shanghai in 1884, Wang had been widely recognized as an expert on "Western Learning" (西學).[265]

Living such an unconventional life for a late-Qing Chinese, Wang's importance in China's ideological transformation is unquestionable, and indeed many studies have been done on his achievements in these fields. However, never holding any official position and exiled from China proper by political authorities most of his life, Wang's life-long self-identified persona was still that of "*wenren*"— man of letters, and he did write quite many literary pieces, mainly *zhiguai* stories and travel writing. Wang published three *zhiguai* collections in his life — *Dunku lanyan* 遁窟讕言 (*Unverified Words from the Cave of Retreat,* 1875), *Songyin manlu* 淞隱漫錄 (*Random Records upon the Song River*, 1887), and *Songbin suohua* 淞濱瑣話 (*Trivial Words upon the Song River*, 1893) and two travel writing collections *Manyou suilu* (1890) and *Fusang youji* 扶桑遊記 (*Records of My Travels in Japan*, 1880).[266] Compared with his highly famed political treatises and European histories, Wang's literary output, especially his *zhiguai* writing, received much lesser academic attention until the last two decades.[267]

This dearth of study was possibly a result of the general contempt towards late-Qing *zhiguai* which had dominated academia for a long time as mentioned in the Introduction; more problematic in Wang Tao's case is that this old genre dedicated to "ghosts and foxes" seems to be especially backward and incompatible with its supposedly progressive author, who spent most of his life advocating to the world practical learnings. However, an important goal of the current study is to explore the

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[264] Wang's essays on reform were mainly collected in his *Taoyuan wenlu waibian* 弢園文錄外編 (1883). His other writings on European history and politics include *Faguo zhilüe* 法國志略 (prefaced 1870), *Pufa zhanji* 普法戰紀 (1886), *Taoyuan chidu* 弢園尺牘 (1880), *Xixue jicun liuzhong* 西學輯存六種 (1890), etc. For a list of Wang's writings, see Xin Ping, *Wang Tao pingzhuan*, 1990, pp. 241-50.
[265] See Pan Kuang-Che, 2011. For biographical sources on Wang in Chinese, see Zhang Zhichun, *Wang Tao nianpu*, 1994 and Xin Ping, 1990.
[266] Hereafter the three *zhiguai* collections are abbreviated as *DKLY*, *SYML* and *SBSH* in footnotes and in-text citations.
[267] You Xiuyun's *Wang Tao xiaoshuo sanshu yanjiu* (2006) remains till now the only full-length study on Wang's fiction. The recent decade saw a few articles on Wang's fiction: Sheldon Lu, 2003, "Waking to Modernity: The Classical Tale in Late Qing", and Zheng Huili, 2014, "Enchanted Encounter: Gender Politics, Cultural Identity, and Wang Tao's (1828-97) Fictional Sino-Western Romance" explore the gendered representation of transnational romance in Wang's *zhiguai* writing; Emma Jinghua Teng, 2006, discusses what she terms as Wang's "Occidentalism" in his short stories and travel writing; Wang Yichuan, 2003, "Xiangxiang de 'dong xi'" and Dang Yueyi, 2004, "Quanqiu guannian xia de wenhua shiye — lun Wang Tao de wenyan xiaoshuo" trace a "globalization" orientation in prototype in some of Wang's short stories.

multilayered functions of *zhiguai*, and I argue that it is precisely the anomalousness of *zhiguai* that can better encapsulate the complexities and strangeness of the encounter between tradition and modernity as experienced and made sense of by Wang Tao's generation of transitional intellectuals. In Wang's hands, the traditional genre to "record the strange" is moulded to negotiate between China's past and present, to envisage China's inevitable conflict with the West, and finally to serve as the last shelter for the besieged Chinese man's masculinity and cultural identity. This embracing of diverse discourses in Wang's *zhiguai* writing, as I will show in the following sections, creates textual conflicts in which one way of understanding the world is constantly in danger of being supplanted by another. The result is a disconcerting mode of fantasy in Todorov's sense that constantly invites its reader to question his or her own epistemological premises.

### 3.1 The Battling Worldviews: The Supernatural Besieged

At the end of Wang's preface to *Songbin suohua*, the last of his three *zhiguai* collections, Wang imagines a meeting with the great *zhiguai* master Pu Songling, who takes him into the woods and praises: "You have exceeded me; now perhaps I've finally found a successor to *Liaozhai*?" 子突過我矣，《聊齋》之後有替人哉? (*SBSH*, p.2) However, this seemingly proud identification with *Liaozhai* is immediately dismissed in the following sentence, where the author begs his reader to regard his writing merely as the "playful words of a dying man" 將死遊戲之言 (*SBSH*, p. 2). This contradictory view regarding the *zhiguai* heritage and one's own relation with it underlies the prefaces of Wang Tao's three *zhiguai* collections, and such a paradoxical framework, I argue, ushers the reader into a very different *zhiguai* world which, instead of providing a reassuring alternative fantastic cosmos, foregrounds the irresolution between competing worldviews.

All three of Wang's *zhiguai* collections were published by the Shanghai publishing house *Shenbaoguan*, yet there is a perceptible difference between the first work and the two later ones. Almost a decade separated *Dunku lanyan* from *Songyin manlu* and *Songbin suohua*. Most of the stories in *Dunku lanyan* were written during Wang's exile in Hong Kong, and an uncertain portion of it may have been written even before

his Hong Kong years.[268] Both in style and subject, *Dunku lanyan* is closer to *Liaozhai*, consisting of longer polished pieces as well as shorter sketches; and like *Liaozhai*, stories in *Dunku lanyan* were first presented to their reader in the form of a *zhiguai* collection, which as an accumulative whole of heterogeneous materials becomes a repository of the author's chosen identity.[269] However, most stories in *Songyin manlu* and *Songbin suohua*, for the first time in the history of Chinese literature, reached their readers through periodicals: they were first serialized in the pictorial *Dianshizhai huabao* from 1884 to 1887, and later published as *zhiguai* collections in 1887 and 1893 respectively.[270] The initial publication media may have influenced the author's writing strategy, for *Songyin manlu* and *Songbin suohua* stories are more even in length and many of them are about romantic love. But apart from these formal and thematic differences, what truly sets the first book apart from the two later ones is their different attitudes towards talking about the supernatural, in other words, the different perceptions of *zhiguai*'s own standing. If the former is the apprentice work of a disciple of Pu Songling, who was not yet fully disillusioned with his ability to "rectify the world", the latter two were the works of a worldly old man who had seen as much as any Chinese at that time had chance to see (Europe and Japan). This chapter mainly focuses on Wang's *zhiguai* stories in the two later works, but first an investigation of the author's *zhiguai* prefaces over time will help illuminate his gradual change of position towards *zhiguai* as a genre, and by extension his changing perception of his Chinese cultural heritage: while *Dunku lanyan* endorses the moralizing force of ghosts and foxes and adheres to the *zhiguai* lineage, the later works explicitly evoke Westerners' knowledge to debunk these traditions.

In his *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gérard Genette defines paratext as all those verbal and non-verbal signs surrounding the text and used to present the text to

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[268] See *DKLY*, authorial preface I, p.1 and authorial preface II, p. 3.

[269] Lyndia Chiang (Francis) in *Collecting the Self* comments on the identity-building function of *zhiguai* collections: "Given that the act of collecting enables the collecting self to create the self, a *zhiguai* compilation thus individualizes its author while reaffirming his status as a member of the *shi* class, whose ideology and discourse are in turn broadened and diversified (2005, p. 16).

[270] See You Xiuyun, 2006, pp. 129-30. Fifty-one stories of *Songbin suohua* were published by *Dianshizhai huabao* in 1887 as a collection titled *Songyin xulu* 松隱續錄 (*A Sequel to Songyin*), probably in a rush to beat the prevailing pirate editions of Wang's *zhiguai* work at the time, and an enlarged edition including seventeen new stories was published in 1893 as *Songbin suohua*, the edition that I use in this study. On the different existing editions of Wang's *zhiguai*, see Zhang Zhenguo, 2011, pp. 176-8.

its reader. They are the mediators between the reader and the text proper, bearing authorial intention and authorial responsibility.[271] The original authorial preface of a book is an important paratext for Genette, as it functions to serve two important authorial intentions: to instruct the reader why to read the text and how to read it properly.[272] While both functions are more or less present in most Chinese writers' *zhiguai* prefaces, *zhiguai* preface very often serves another authorial intention: to explain from the author's perspective why "I" have written the book — in other words, before putting expectations on the reader, a *zhiguai* work is expected to justify its own existence. It is not difficult to understand this phenomenon considering the embarrassing position of the genre. As *zhiguai* was traditionally regarded as a marginal genre unbefitting a serious scholar, the *zhiguai* writer needs to use various legitimization strategies in the preface to justify his writing this very book.[273] An exemplary case of an apologetic *zhiguai* preface is Pu Songling's preface to *Liaozhai* entitled "Self-Record of *Liaozhai*". In this preface, Pu evokes a long tradition of ghost story-collecting starting from luminary figures like Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (c.154-93 BC) and Gan Bao, thus making the talking of supernatural an established act instead of an isolated one. More ingeniously, he blends his apology for *zhiguai* with a touching account of his own life, — it is a frustrating life permeated with ghostliness through and through, therefore justifying the author's natural affinity with things supernatural. Zeitlin argues that Pu's preface to *Liaozhai* is no less than the "Historian of the Strange's self-introduction" by fashioning the writer himself "into a lens through which the book would be refracted to for his readers."[274] Building on this insight and Genette's, I would further argue that Pu's preface to *Liaozhai* emphatically starts the tradition of identity-building through *zhiguai* writing, where the autobiographical preface serves not only as an apology for *zhiguai* but also as a self-expression which invites the reader to identify the author with his *zhiguai* texts and vice versa.[275] This

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[271] Genette, 1997, pp. 1-2.
[272] Ibid., p. 179. Genette makes a distinction between the authorial preface and the allographic preface. Here he is talking about the first type of preface, and unless otherwise indicated, by preface I also mean the authorial preface. (In the Chinese case, it is a common practice that an author may ask his friends, teachers or students to write prefaces for his work aside of his own prefaces, so very often a book may carry quite many prefaces.)
[273] On an analysis of *zhiguai* writers' motives as revealed in their prefaces, see Leo Chan, 1998, pp. 19-24.
[274] Zeitlin, 1993, p. 53.
[275] On *Liaozhai* as identity-building, and its influence by the cult of *qing*, see Chapter Two.

model is diligently observed in Xuan Ding's preface to *Ye lu* as discussed previously, and as I will show below, is still a central tenet in Wang Tao's prefaces to *Dunku lanyan*.

A slightly different legitimization act is to argue from the didacticism of ghost stories. This is a position more akin to the Confucian tradition of "moralizing by poetry" (詩教) and the one held by another Qing-dynasty *zhiguai* writer, Ji Yun, in his *Yuewei caotang biji*.[276] A less confrontational yet not infrequent justification is to trivialize the act of *zhiguai* writing or to overtly term it simply as amusement. Both Ji Yun and Yuan Mei adopted this approach. While Yuan Mei admits in his preface to *Zibuyu* his obsession of "collecting stories pleasing to the heart and shocking to the ear" 乃廣采遊心駭耳之事,[277] Ji Yun seems to consider it unbefitting to even write a preface for *Yuewei*, leaving only a few lines of notes before each of its volumes.[278]

A close adherence to such traditional legitimization acts can be traced in Wang Tao's two prefaces to *Dunku lanyan*. Preface I, a piece in verse composed mainly of couplets with dense allusions, is clearly modelled on Pu's "Self-record of *Liaozhai*". Wang begins this preface by reviewing the tradition of Chinese supernatural literature and then proceeds to describe his bleak studio "Dunku" 遁窟 (The Cave of Retreat) in Hong Kong. The scholar's studio, as mentioned earlier, is a defining element of the scholar's self-chosen identity, and it is particularly prominent in the strand of *zhiguai* writing influenced by Pu.[279] In Preface II, Wang connects his somehow passive "retreating from the world" 遁世 (gesturing to the "Dunku"— the cave of retreat — in the book title) to the traditional Confucian scholar's active mission of "rectifying the world" 用世 (*DKLY*, Preface II, p. 3), and his claim lies in his faith in the moralizing force of supernatural stories:

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[276] Ji Yun, *Yuewei caotang biji*, "[While] knowing that *xiaoshuo baiguan* is not accounted as one's proper writing, the 'street talks', however, may help to teach a lesson of persuasion and admonishment." 小說稗官，知無關於著述; 街談巷議，或有益與勸懲. (2010 rpt., p. 1)

[277] Yuan Mei, 2010 rpt., *Zibuyu*, p. 1.

[278] *Yuewei caotang biji* contains five original separate *zhiguai* collections written by Ji Yun during 1789-1798: *Luanyang xiaoxia lu*, *Rushi wowen*, *Huaixi zazhi*, *Guwang tingzhi*, and *Luanyang xulu*, with no authorial prefaces but just a prefatory note before each collection. In 1800 Ji Yun's student Sheng Shiyan complied the five books under the title *Yuewei caotang biji* and wrote a preface for it.

[279] The title "Dunku lanyan" comes from Wang's studio "Dunku" in Hong Kong; it alludes to Wang's persecution by the Qing government in the Taiping episode mentioned earlier, and the name also reveals Wang's sense of shame and frustration.

> The reason that [works on ghosts and spirits] were not dispelled, is that they aim at persuasion and admonishment and connect with customs and rituals; they praise the good and punish the evil, exalt the chaste and degrade the licentious, enlighten the foolish and the stubborn and excite women and children, so that the ghost chronicler's work is not so different from the wooden bells of the moralizing officers — what I record in this book is just like this.
>
> 而所以不遭摒斥者，亦緣旨寓勸懲，意關風化，以善惡為褒貶，以貞淫為黜陟，俾愚頑易于觀感，婦稚得以奮興，則南董之槧鉛，何異於遒人之木鐸？斯編所寄，亦猶是耳. (*DKLY*, Preface II, pp. 3-4)

If the author of *Dunku lanyan* is still a loyal disciple of Pu Songling and to some extent of Ji Yun, both of whom believe in the virtue of talking about the supernatural, Wang's preface to *Songyin manlu* is a defiant assault on such traditions. As discussed in the previous chapter, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* has set up the prototype for "collecting the strange" and provided a well of sources for *zhiguai* imagination, yet in the beginning of the preface to *Songyin manlu*, Wang sets to dismantle the aura of *The Classic*, and he did so by using Westerners and their knowledge as a reference:[280]

> Today the Westerners have set foot on the extremes of the world, but they have not found fantastic creatures with round head and square feet, stretching to the heaven and to the earth as described by *The Classic*. Therefore, what *The Classic* says is not believable. *Qilin*, phoenix, turtle, and dragon, these are the four holy creatures talked about by the Chinese, but the Westerners say there is no *qilin* among furred animals, no phoenix among feathered animals, and no dragon among scaled animals.
>
> 然今西人足跡，遍及窮荒，凡屬圓顱方足、戴天而履地者，無所謂奇形怪狀如彼所云也. 斯其說不足信也. 麟鳳龜龍，中國謂之四靈. 而自西人言之，毛族中無所謂麟，羽族中無所謂鳳，鱗族中無所謂龍. (*SYML*, p.1)

[280] Zheng Huili, 2014, pp. 280-1, asserts that Wang was the first Chinese writer to use the West as a frame of cultural reference. Gao Guihui, 2010, p.25 and Liu Yongqiang, 1992, p. 23, both note the singularity of this blatant denial of the existence of the supernatural in a *zhiguai* preface. In my knowledge, Wang Tao probably is the only *zhiguai* writer to do so.

The author then continues the polemic and extends it to a comparison of Western and Chinese beliefs and behaviours. According to Wang, the Westerners are good at practical knowledge, scientific investigation, accurate observation, and machine-making, all of which can benefit the people and strengthen the country, while the Chinese "do not do this, but seek such ends in fractured, illusory, and unverifiable lands — this is not merely the folly of curiosity, but pertaining to absurdity!" 不此之務，而反索之於支離虛誕、杳渺不可究詰之境，豈獨好奇之過哉，其志亦荒矣. (*SYML*, p. 2)

Wang Tao's exaltation of Western practical learning and denigration of Chinese supernatural beliefs are unequivocal.[281] By now, Wang has positioned himself on the opposite of the traditional apology for talking about ghosts endorsed by both Xuan Ding and the great master Pu Songling. The last redeeming virtue of supernatural stories that he had clung to in his previous work — *zhiguai*'s didacticism,[282] is also dismissed as expedient and impractical:

> The sage used the supernatural as a moral lesson, but this is only a lesson for the foolish ones — in the human world there is the law of the emperor, while in the netherworld there is the law of ghosts and spirits, so the foolish ones are intimidated to follow proper conducts by the just punishments and awards of the supernatural. […] The self-deluded create all kinds of strange stories, so that the cave of the fox is made to look like an alternative world. All these are what the Westerners resolutely refuse to believe, for they hold that illusory words are not as good as practical deeds.
>
> 聖人以神道設教，不過為下愚人說法：明則有王法，幽則有鬼神，蓋惕之以善惡賞罰之權，以寄其懲勸而已…自妄者造作怪異，狐狸窟中，幾若別有一世界. 斯皆西人所悍然不信者，誠以虛言不如實踐也. (*SYML*, p.1)

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[281] While it is true that many *zhiguai* writers invent their own ghosts and spirits, the existence (or non-existence) of ghosts and spirits, or at least the verifiability of ghost stories, is still an important issue for them, for the moralizing force of these stories hinges on it. This is the major dissatisfaction that Ji Yun has towards *Liaozhai* — Pu's ghosts and foxes are invented by the author, therefore cannot serve as good moral lessons. Ji Yun himself leads the "veridical school" of *zhiguai* and proposes didacticism as a major justification for *zhiguai*.

[282] On *zhiguai*'s didacticism, see Leo Chan, 1998, pp. 149-86.

By now, Wang Tao has nullified every merit of talking about the supernatural: they are not real, they do not serve as good moral lessons, and they do not do the country good. It seems that he is not writing a preface to a *zhiguai* collection but a polemic on it. One may ask, what kind of a framework is the author setting for understanding his *zhiguai* stories? The answer, as I will show below, is precisely a paradoxical one (that the author probably could not resolve), which constantly requests the reader to replace one way of contemplating the world with another, yet no single way of knowing is to have the final claim to superiority, and by extension, to reality.

Wang Tao's next move is somewhat surprising, for without resolving the fissure between Western practicality and Chinese supernaturalism in his re-staging of *zhiguai*, he begins a sketch of his life foregrounding the injustices he has suffered. This is a relatively conventional move following what Pu does in his preface: appropriating the tradition of the outcast talent who channels his pent-up emotion into literary writing, the *zhiguai* writer fashions himself as an upright genius, who with no solace in the human world has to seek friendship among ghosts and foxes.[283] Wang portrays a similar image of himself: once an ambitious man eager to serve his country with practical knowledge, his candour and unconventionality only caused him enemies and slanders (*SYML*, p. 2).[284] What can one do with such a frustrating life? Wang's solution is familiar but not so compatible with the worldview he has set up in the previous part — he resorts to literature writing:

> When [one is] direly trapped, one must find a way out; when [one is] desperately depressed, one has to command his energy [to some channel]. When one ends up being unrecognized by the world, one has to go to the deepest of the mountains and the heart of the forests, and his sorrows, agonies, melancholia, and delicate sentiments have to be commanded to a book. If [I] cannot find this end in China, I seek it in the extremes of the world and the strange lands; if I cannot find it in my contemporaries, I look at the origins of history and towards the far ends of future; if I cannot find it among creatures

[283] On the relation between the author's anguish and literary creation in Chinese literary discourse starting from Han Fei through Sima Qian to Pu Songling, see Zeitlin, 1993, pp. 50-1.
[284]Here Wang is referring to the incident mentioned earlier: his alleged letter to the Taiping leader that led to his exile in Hong Kong.

like me, I seek it among ghosts and foxes, immortals and Buddha, grasses, trees, birds, and beasts.

困極則思通，鬱極則思奮，終於不遇，則惟有入山必深，入林必密而已，誠壹哀痛憔悴婉篤芬芳悱惻之懷，一寓之於書而已. 求之於中國不得，則求之於遐陬絕嶠，異域荒裔；求之於並世之人而不得，則上溯之亙古以前，下極之千載以後；求之於同類同體之人而不得，則求之於鬼狐仙佛、草木鳥獸. (*SYML*, p. 2)

After deciding that the fantastic world of the foxes and ghosts is illusory and non-beneficial in the first part, Wang now appeals to the traditional apology of *zhiguai* writing and stages the fantastic world as the last resort for a frustrated man. For this frustrated being, the ordinary world as it is offers him no comfort, and his true solace, once again as Wang admits, must be found among the "dark woods and black fortresses".

Certainly, beliefs in the supernatural and fictional narrations of the supernatural are different things;[285] while Wang certainly is not a supporter of the former, his act in writing fictitious supernatural stories still seems not well justified, as he has just dismissed the invention of strange stories as "self-deluded" and non-beneficial. Wang's exaltation of what he believes to be a Western practicality in the first part of his preface has refuted every conventionally-evoked merit of recording the strange, accomplishing ironically an opposite of the traditional authorial task in *zhiguai* prefaces — explaining why "I" should not write this book. The final resort to *zhiguai* writing as the last shelter for a frustrated scholar, however, is a returning to tradition —the long literary tradition of situating writing as the author's "solitary indignation" emphatically promoted in Pu's *Liaozhai*, — yet it is also part of the tradition that Wang has just broken away from. This partial retreat to tradition exposes the inherent perils of Wang's outbound mental journey troubled by the incompatibilities of the Western culture and traditional Chinese culture.

[285] While the "fictitious" quality of literature or fiction is self-evident in the term itself in Western literary discourse (cf. Starr, 2007, p.17 for the transmission of the word "literature" in English), it is a contested issue in traditional Chinese literature. In the Chinese context, beliefs in the supernatural and the narration of the supernatural as fictitious are not so clear-cut in *zhiguai* writing. See the Introduction on the historiographic features of *zhiguai*.

Indeed, throughout the preface, two incompatible cosmoses can be seen wrestling with each other: on one side, there is the rational world navigated by Westerners where no supernatural creatures exist and only practical knowledge does anyone good — this is the world that Wang, as a man admiring the Western efficiencies, lived and believed in; on the other side, there is the cosmos backed-up with an entire genealogy of supernatural writing and a tradition of fashioning alternative identities and enclaves through writing the supernatural — this is the world that a disillusioned and displaced Chinese literatus can resort to, and to it Wang returns in the end. Symbolically, Wang's polemic on *zhiguai* in this preface is a circular movement that returns to its starting point: *zhiguai*'s function in alternative identity-building, and in a sense it also mirrors the author's life journey implicated in the text: starting as an ambitious man going out to rectify the world, and ending as a frustrated man retreating in the "mountains" and "forests".[286] Wang's circular polemic on *zhiguai* is one example of Zhang Longxi's insight that spiritual pilgrim is often conceptualized as a homecoming, but the return to home is also a reversal and a renewal, for the ending point is already subtly changed from the starting point.[287] Indeed, Wang's retreat to the *zhiguai* world in the end is not a return to pure tradition. It is worth noting that in the above quotation, the places Wang envisions where he can seek his peace of mind include not only China but also a larger outside: "If I cannot find it in China, I seek it in the extremes of the world and strange lands." Indeed, the wonderlands in Wang's writing stretch far beyond the traditional peripheries of Chinese culture to include Western countries like Italy, France, the UK, and Switzerland. The West may not offer the Chinese intellectual his badly-needed sense of security, but it does offer him a reference to reorient his own identity.

Wang Tao's preface to *Songyin manlu* sets up for us a heterogeneous world where competing discourses co-exist, and this is the world that Wang, as a liminal figure caught between China's tradition and modernity, and between Chinese culture and Western culture, lived in. More importantly, prefaces as a threshold leading to the text proper, also affect how meaning is made and understood in the stories they lead to. As

[286] Wang Tao's life path also mirrors this cyclical journey: starting his career to "rectify the world" in Shanghai, going out to Hong Kong, Europe and Japan to encounter a larger world, and finally, at the time he wrote this preface in 1884, returning to Shanghai as an old man with no nominal success.
[287] Zhang, *Unexpected Affinities*, 2007, pp. 114-6.

I will show in the following sections, Wang's *zhiguai* stories expectedly also bear that mark of hesitation between disparate discourses as exhibited in the prefaces. This tension between different worldviews sets up a potential space for the fantastic per Todorov's definition: when different interpretative frameworks haphazardly exist side by side in the narrative, we enter the realm of the fantastic.[288] In Wang's stories, we will see time and again the traces of conflicting interpretations, a true reflection of the anxiety and displacement felt by the first generation of Chinese who were forced to re-examine China and their own position in a global context. Here, the old potent genre *zhiguai*, when meeting the new challenges of the age, becomes a fertile land to explore the complexities of self, reality, and national history.

## 3.2 The Uncanny Spectres of History: Remains and Revenants

Ghost narratives, as discussed earlier, are essentially narratives about the past and about making peace or trouble with the past. Writing stories of ghost, ghost chroniclers make history serve the living by either looking in history for past greatness which the present can emulate, or critiquing history so that the present can escape from the burdens of it. But if Xuan Ding is interested in excavating neglected ghosts and repositioning them into a mythical history, Wang Tao's ghost stories turn to those people who have had a troubled relation with the official version of history. By observing these people's alienation from official history, Wang casts questions on the process of official history-making. Two types of marginalized ghosts, the *yimin* and the female revenant, become the focus of Wang's ghost narratives.

### 3.2.1 The Male Loyalists (*yimin*)

In Wang Tao's *zhiguai*, an explicit or covert reference to China's dynastical history is realised through alluding to some characters' (often immortals) *yimin* 遗民 identity.[289] By placing these *yimin* in some overseas Utopian settings, these stories reveal the yearning to escape from history to a temporal stasis implied in the noble *yimin* discourse, yet the stories' final abrupt return to mundane reality also exposes the inherent impossibility in this discourse: history is inescapable and a clinging to the

[288] On the notion of the fantastic, see Todorov, 1975, and Jackson, 1981.
[289] 遺民 sometimes is used interchangeably with its homonym 逸民. Here I adopt the former as the unifying term.

past in an imagined vacuum space out of history is no longer valid in the contemporary changing world.

To understand the embedded critique of history in these stories, it is necessary to first put *yimin* into its historical and political context. *Yimin* is a somewhat unique cultural concept in China. *Yi* means to leave behind, to be lost, and remaining, so *yimin* literally means "the remaining people". A polysemic word, it most often refers to the group of people "left behind history" in dramatic dynastical changes. Sometimes, the "leaving behind" is a self-willed, strongly-posed political gesture: living in recluse and refusing participation in the new political regime testify to the subject's loyalty to the previous dynasty and rejection of the new one.[290] *Yimin* carved out for themselves a metaphorical vacuum space in history by sheer will: they absented themselves from the contemporary political and social scenes and observed the customs of the previous dynasty, so that while they actually lived simultaneously with the changed world, they had made themselves the living remains of what was already dead. David D. W. Wang aptly summarizes *yimin*'s antithetical status to history: "*yimin* points to a political subjectivity dislocated from time."[291]

The first and most famous *yimin* in Chinese history were Boyi and Shuqi (c. 12th century BC), Shang-dynasty loyalists who would rather starve to death than to eat the crops grown in the new Zhou regime. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Confucius' praise of Boyi and Shuqi was pivotal in the establishment of their canonical status as well as the incorporation of their loyalism in Confucian moral system.[292] In theory, each dynastic change would produce its own *yimin*, but in reality, the most conspicuous *yimin* groups emerged during the dynastic transition between the Song and Yuan (Mongols) and between the Ming and Qing (Manchus): both were occasions when what were perceived as an "alien" people replaced the Han Chinese as the new

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[290] On ramifications of the concept of *yimin* in Chinese history, see Zhang Bing, "*Yimin* yu *yimin* shi zhi liubian", 1998; Fang Yong, *Nansong yimin shiren qunti yanjiu*, 2000. Recently, David D. W. Wang explores the concept's resurgence in modern Chinese literature, especially its manifestation in the context of Taiwan after its colonialization by Japan in 1895. See Wang, "Hou yimin xiezuo", *Fo Guang University World Chinese Literature Research Centre*, n. d. Web and *Post-loyalist Writing*, 2007.

[291] Wang, "Hou yimin xiezuo": "遺民指向一個與時間脫節的政治主體". The translation is mine.

[292] Confucius categorized seven luminaries as *yimin* 逸民, among whom Boyi and Shuqi have the highest esteem: "The Master said, 'Refusing to surrender their wills, or to submit to any taint in their persons;— such, I think, were Boyi and Shuqi!" 不降其志，不辱其身，伯夷、叔齊與! (Legge, trans., 1971, *Confucian Analects*, Book XVIII, Chapter VIII, p. 336). On Sima Qian's alternative evaluation of Boyi and Shuqi and of Confucius's role, see Chapter Two.

ruler. For the Han Chinese *yimin* of the Song and Ming dynasties living under a foreign rule, they regarded their loss as not only that of their nation, but of the whole Chinese civilization.

*Yimin* is a term with strong moral and political connotations, and it actually affords limited accessibility to the common people — for the refusal to participate in the new regime implies that the subject at least has had the right to participate in the first place: namely one has to be a male, scholarly elite or a man of prestige. But here I use the term in a broad sense to denote the group of people who deliberately or unconsciously leave themselves behind history; while they preserve the practices and cultures of a past time and keep a moment of Chinese history alive, they themselves become the living dead — the remains of history. If we adopt this concept of *yimin*, we will find that such figures appear frequently in Wang Tao's three *zhiguai* collections.[293] The immediacy of the particular political struggle of *yimin* softened, the *yimin* characters in Wang's stories fade into the fantastic and even merge with another literary motif: the *Taohuayuan* 桃花源 (Peach Blossom Spring) utopia.

Indeed, if we examine the original "Taohuayuan ji" 桃花源記 ("The Story of the Peach Blossom Spring", 421) written by Tao Qian 陶潛 (365-427), we will find it to be yet another *yimin* story. The story is set in the Taiyuan era (376-397) in Tao Qian's contemporary Eastern Jin: one day a fisherman from Wuling found a cave at the origin of a spring with blossoming peach trees on each side of the stream. He went inside the cave, and at the end of a long tunnel suddenly found himself in front of a peaceful village. The hospitable villagers treated the stranger with feasts for several days. They were curious about the news from the outside and told the fisherman that they had been refugees fleeing from the turmoil of the Qin era. Actually the villagers "knew nothing even of the existence of the Han dynasty, let alone Wei and Jin" (乃不知有漢，無論魏晉).[294] Returning from the cave, the fisherman broke his promise to keep the place a secret and reported to a local magistrate. Yet although he had marked his way out, no one was able to trace the Peach Blossom Spring ever again.

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[293] Ni Nongshui, "Wang Tao shehai xiaoshuo de xushi tezheng", 2008, also notices the appearance of *yimin* in some of Wang Tao's tales about the overseas, yet he does not go further on the subject.
[294] Tao Qian, "Taohuayuan ji", in *Tao Yuanming ji*, vol. 5, pp. 1-2, *Online SKQS*.

In Tao Qian's time, dynastical changes and *coup d'état* were frequent and violent, and the villagers' blissful ignorance of dynastical succession was something to be envied by the fisherman. Indeed, a significant appeal of the story for its contemporaries must be to envision the possibility of living in a temporality forgotten by history and unperturbed by political struggles. In Mircea Eliade's fashioning of myth, myth is opposed to history and helps people to return to the original "sacred time" by either nullifying the normal history as false or imbuing it with a sacred meaning.[295] Thus, "The Peach Blossom Spring" would be a perfect example of those mythical narratives that express the yearning to escape from the terrors of history. Although the villagers in the cave were descended from the Qin era, they preserved no loyalty to any political regime and their living outside of the normal procession of dynastical history points to a Utopian space that is isolated from and unperturbed by the worries of our profane time. The fascination with an ultra-historical limbo is indeed enduring, so that in later appropriations of the Peach Blossom Spring motif, the Utopian myth was dressed in a marvellous garb removed further away from reality: the village was portrayed as a wonderland and the villagers as immortals, so that the Peach Blossom Spring became a marvellous realm totally heterogeneous to our normal existence.[296] However, while Tao Qian's tale expresses the desire to escape from the violence of contemporary history, it is at the same time still firmly rooted in history: the existence of the Peach Blossom Spring does not instantly nullify the historical procession outside of the cave as is in Eliade's conceptualization, but only acts as a reference to it by bringing into focus the dissatisfaction with the contemporary political environment and the possibility to build a better society. As Zhang Longxi stresses, the Utopian vision is fundamentally a secular vision, it must be about a better society that can be realised through human efforts instead of miracles, "therefore the utopian vision invariably presents itself as a social commentary" to convey some political message.[297]

Wang Tao's *yimin* stories in a sense are influenced by the later appropriations of Peach Blossom Spring motif, for his *yimin* are indeed immortals living in fantastic wonderlands, but at the same time, the *yimin*'s involvement with dynastical changes

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[295] See Eliade, 1959, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, especially Chapter 4 and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, pp. 70-2.
[296] See Zhang Longxi, "Utopian Vision, East and West", 2000, pp. 15-6.
[297] Ibid., p. 1.

and contemporary history also endows the stories with a serious secular concern with contemporary politics as evidenced in Tao Qian's original tale. The cyclical *Shanhaijing*-pattern that informs Chinese travel writing as discussed in Chapter Two can still be found in these stories, yet just like Wang's own fascination with the West as traced in his preface to *Songyin manlu*, the protagonists in these stories sincerely admire the wonders that their overseas travels could offer rather than show contempt for alien cultures. The typical protagonist would be a contemporary young man as ambitious and practical-minded as Wang Tao himself; he decides to see the wonders of the world, takes a modern steamship, and sets out. He suffers a shipwreck, lands on an apparently uninhabited island, and then meets some benevolent immortals, who prove to have been Chinese *yimin* of the Ming or Song dynasty or even earlier times. The utopian island is such a perfect limbo outside of history that both the immortals and the protagonist find their previous engagements with worldly affairs so shallow and repulsive; but unlike the immortals, the protagonist has to return to the human world in the end, just as the Wuling fisherman did in the "Peach Blossom Spring".

Such a formula can be traced in Wang Tao's "Xianren dao" 仙人島 ("The Immortals' Island", *SYML*, 1:13), "Min Yushu" 閔玉叔 ("Scholar Min", *SYML*, 3:113), and "Xiaoxia wan"銷夏灣 ("A Summer Resort", *SYML*, 12:566). "A Summer Resort" is an exhibition of fossilized Chinese history: the protagonist Ji Zhongxian first meets on the island two old men in attires so antique as if transported from the ancient origins of Chinese history (implied to be the legendary "flood period"); both their speech and writing are incomprehensible to Ji (*SYML*, p. 568). Unable to communicate with Ji, they invite another islander over, a recluse also in antique attire but speaking a language that Ji can at least understand. He tells Ji that he had been a follower of the Southern Song loyalist Wen Tianxiang and how he had been drifted to this island after the critical Yashan maritime battle with the Mongols. The chaotic history of the collapse of the Southern Song is lightly evoked in the recluse's recollection, and the narrative then swiftly turns to an indulgent description of the island's wonders as the recluse shows Ji around. In this fantastic island forgotten by emperors and historians, the remaining people of different historical moments live peacefully together, each preserving the relics of their own era. The long Chinese history seems to be reincarnated in these human bodies and kept intact, while reminiscences of remote floods and wars are overshadowed by the fantastic wonders that the island can offer.

In these stories, *yimin*, or the remaining people left behind time, become a perfect fossil of Chinese history, showcasing its longevity and perseverance for the contemporary Chinese man. Moreover, to see a familiar Chinese face and costume in a strange land offers an urgently-needed reassurance for a late-Qing Chinese travelling overseas, as it is a testimony of China's political and cultural influence while the actual political climate at the time clearly indicated its opposite.[298] Yet Wang's evocation of Chinese history does not stop at self-aggrandizement. The romanticization of the remaining people, while reinforcing the reassuring superiority of Chinese culture, also haunts as an uncanny spectre. If, as Jacques Derrida says, the spectre is "a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance",[299] we could also say the opposite, that something is constantly lived through on the spectre albeit its absence, namely the cruelty of history that makes the spectre in the first place. Here, Wang Tao's fantastic *yimin* stories further expose the inescapability of history that is already existent but sometimes suppressed in the Peach Blossom Spring myth: *yimin* seek to deny and eliminate the succession of history, yet their very existence presupposes the materiality of history and its violence. The *yimin* as spectral remains, therefore, embody the impossible desire of escaping from history and at the same time being predicated on it.

In these *yimin* stories, the impulse to glorify history into myth is evidenced in the *yimin*'s current status as immortals, but at the same time this impulse is thwarted by the memory of national humiliation inherent in *yimin*'s paradoxical status, for it was a dynastical fall that had made these *yimin* in the first place. To encounter a Chinese *yimin*, therefore, is to remind the protagonist that a similar fate may befall China again. As a man fully exposed to Western culture, Wang Tao was aware of the looming civilizational crisis confronting late-Qing China which, in a sense, was even more disastrous than the loss of one empire and one dynasty faced by the previous *yimin*. The Utopian island resided by *yimin*, therefore, offers only an illusory comfort for the

[298] The late Qing witnessed the drastic decline of China's political influence in East Asia. China's influence upon its once subordinate neighbouring countries (Vietnam for instance) was waning while Western forces were alarmingly intruding in. Wang Tao had already sensed the danger of Western insinuation during his 1867 voyage to Europe via Southeast Asia. See Wang Tao, *Manyou suilu tuji*, p. 43, p. 46. On China's border crises in the late nineteenth century, see Mary Rankin, 2008, "Alarming Crises and Enticing Possibilities".

[299] Derrida and Stigler, 2013, p. 39. On a broader discussion of the concept of spectrality, see Blanco and Peeren, 2013, pp. 1-29.

protagonist, and the narrative in the end will deviate from it, admitting that history is inescapable and the myth of *yimin* could not deliver the contemporary man from his troubled situation. The ambiguous ending of "The Immortals' Island" exemplifies this conflict between a mythologized version of history and the recognition of mundane reality. The story itself is a relay of competing discourses. After twenty years' happy abode on the immortal's island with an immortal wife, the protagonist Xu Mengtu is urged by his wife and parents-in-law to return to the human world as predestined.[300] Reluctantly, Xu obeys. Thirty years later, a message from the wife asking him to return to the island rekindles his desire to travel overseas, but this time he is ridiculed by a sailor: "Nowadays the sea ships are all steered by Westerners and sea voyages are all scheduled; all the overseas islands they reach are already inhabited. Wide as the oceans are, how can there be any deserted islands for the immortals to live on? Stop your daydreaming!" 今時海舶，皆用西人駕駛，往還皆有定期，所止海島皆有居人，海外雖汪洋無涯，安有一片棄土為仙人所駐足哉？子休矣! (*SYLM*, p.16) But Xu is resolute. He books a voyage to America, yet before he departs, a Taiping troop raids his village, and Xu is killed by Taiping soldiers when he leaps from his hiding place to protect his travel fund.

Different narrative conventions jar disconcertingly in this strange brew of wine old and new. Traditional plot conventions like predestination are flagged up repeatedly in the tale: the marriage between Xu and the immortal wife is ordained by the wife's father as fulfilling her predestined "mundane destiny" (塵緣); Xu's unwilling departure from the immortal's island is explained as his "destiny" (天數); and the promised return to the immortal's island and the wife's message again remind Xu of the possibility of divine intervention in human lives (*SYML* p.15). However, although such formulas are partly enacted in "The Immortal's Island", a full realisation of the genre expectation is always delayed and finally denied, as if Wang Tao deliberately lures his reader into a familiar world, only to expose the unstable foundations of it. If to portray *yimin* as immortals exhibits a desire to turn history into myth and a hope of divine intervention in human lives, the thwarting of this hope exposes the impotence of such a history-turned myth. Moreover, the futility of Xu's effort is further

[300] The wife's immortal parents are alluded to be followers of Zhang Shijie (*SYML*, p.14) — who, as mentioned before, was one of "The Three Heroes of the Late Song".

strengthened by the incongruity between the fantastic logic that governs the immortals' island and the contemporary human world he is stranded in. For Xu lives in a world not only inhabited by immortals, but also an industrialized one where voyages to the other side of the globe are operated by shipping companies and sailing schedules, and real political upheavals like the Taiping Rebellion can easily disrupt a man's predestined journey. This new world is no longer regulated by the correlation between heaven and man (as implied in the cult of *qing*), but physical forces powered by engines. However much the protagonist may long for the immortals' island, the Westerners' mastery of the sea is a sad truth that he must acknowledge and put up with.

The sudden and brutal ending of Xu's fantastic adventure fully exposes the incongruity of competing worldviews in the chaotic late Qing. The fantastic world of the immortals pales against the bloody and ruthless contemporary atrocity, as Xu's efforts to fulfil his destiny are first hindered by Western navigation of the sea and then cut short by the Taiping raid. Xu's ending of being killed in the act of protecting gold is doubly ironic: since he is a recluse supposedly contemptuous of money, to guard money as to pay by his life is a considerable shame; and the fact that his possessiveness of gold is caused by his eagerness to rejoin his beloved wife only strengthens the irony — the immortal wife's message for reunion does not miraculously bring about reunion as expected, but indirectly kills the husband. Is the man who longs today for an immortal's island really a fool? Were Xu given the opportunity to begin his journey, would he be able to find the way back to the immortal's island? Or rather, is Xu really killed by the bandits? Can it be a disguise staged by the immortal wife to help achieve the reunion, so that while we are reading Xu's death, we are reading his re-entering the immortal's land?[301] The narrative of the story and the paradoxical interpretative frameworks set in the preface as discussed above may suggest a yes to all these questions, yet guarantee none. The reader is left in a truly fantastic realm in Todorov's sense and titillated to choose between a naturalistic interpretation as favoured by the sailor and a marvellous one as believed by the protagonist. Whatever the choice, the

[301] The Taoist concept of *shijie* 屍解— one way of becoming an immortal through abandoning the useless body — may serve as a possible interpretation here. Such a process appears as a brutal death to the mortal eyes. Stories on mysterious Taoists and their sometimes "faked-death" abound in Wang Tao's collections, making a similar interpretation in this story not totally unlikely. Cf., *Dunku lanyan*, "Shijie", vol. 8, p. 174.

reluctance of a *zhiguai* story to let the marvellous worldview prevail indicates at least its author's suspicion of a reassuring and coherent cosmology guided by the harmonious relationship between heaven and man. It lets out the bleak message that while *yimin* as a spectre of history can offer comfort and happiness for twenty years in a limbo, now we are in a world too different to return to it.

### 3.2.2 The Female Revenants

The tragic death of Xu pulls the reader away from the Utopian island right to the centre of a contemporary trauma: deaths caused by the Taiping Rebellion. While a few *yimin* could survive domestic wars by retreating to a faraway island, more people, especially women, died as silent victims and became revenants. Female revenants, as discussed earlier, are a staple figure of *zhiguai*: like the foxes, they are astonishingly beautiful and come willingly to comfort the lonely craving male scholars at night.[302] Wang Tao adopts this human-male and supernatural-female romantic paradigm too, but his female revenants are distinct in that they often appear as a group of victims of some particular historical calamities, be it the tumultuous trans-dynastical wars or the contemporary Taiping Rebellion.[303] Very often, they are indicated to be wives or daughters of loyalist government officials or military leaders and have virtuously committed suicide while their male relatives vindicated their loyalty in wars.[304] Staged as thus, these "chaste women" revenants become a female version of *yimin* with the same nobility yet fewer choices. If *yimin* have made themselves the self-willed ghosts of history, then the female revenants are the "ghosts" of those ghosts. For, on the one hand, stories of female revenants expose the darker side of the *yimin* discourse: the suffering and suppression of the silenced many who had no choice in dynastical changes, whose virtuous death could not bring them glory, and moreover were used

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[302] On the eroticization of the female ghost, see Anthony Yu, 1987, p. 429; Zeitlin, 2007, pp. 16-28 and Huntington, 2003, p.189.

[303] Although I mainly focus on stories in *Songbin suohua* and *Songyin manlu*, the trauma of the Taiping war is a recurrent theme throughout Wang Tao's three *zhiguai* books. *Dunku lanyan* was written immediately after the Taiping war and contains more than twenty stories related to it. But those stories are slightly different from the ones discussed here, as there the war most often happens in a present tense while here, the memories of war have become a buried past that can only return through ghosts. On *Dunku lanyan* as a traumatic response to the Taiping Rebellion, see Gao Guihui, 2010.

[304] For example, in "Li Yangeng" (*SBSH*, 1: 8) and "Bai Qiongxian" (*SBSH*, 2:29), they are wives and concubines committing suicide (willingly or coerced) to honour their husbands who died (or anticipating death) in wars; in "Feng Peibo" (*SYML*, 5:232), they are the chaste women refusing the lustful Taiping leaders.

by writers of history to prove their pre-set values. On the other hand, revenants as anachronic entities travelling freely across history become the antithesis of *yimin* who try to escape from history to a static temporality. Revenants return to remind one of the repetitiveness of dynastical history, and onto their eternally suffering bodies is projected the contemporary Chinese man's urgent masculinity anxiety engendered by the impending dynastical crisis.

Female revenants who died in dynastical or contemporary wars can be found in stories like "Li Yan'geng" 李延庚 (*SBSH*, 1: 8), "Bai Qiongxian" 白瓊仙 (*SBSH*, 2:29), "Liu Qing" 柳青 (*SBSH*, 3:51), and "Feng Peibo" 馮佩伯 (*SYML*, 5:232). The typical plot of the revenant story goes like this: a man sojourning alone in a forlorn place accidentally overhears the feast of a group of women in a nearby garden at night, and the women's merry chatter turns gradually into a bitter recollection of their tragic death in a past (usually trans-dynastical) war. When the man returns to the same spot the next day, he finds nothing but some weathered tombstones, indicating that the liveliness he overheard the previous night is but the re-animated shadows of history long past. In these tales, the traumas of war and the unreasonable human sufferings within it are re-enacted again and again through the ghosts' nocturnal parties. However merry their feast and however beautiful their clothing, it still saddens them that they are victims of war and are made into ghosts by some brutal historical events in which they have no say.

Dynastical wars were a great trauma for everyone, but more particularly it was often women who suffered the most in these wars, as the dominance or intactness of their bodies became the site of contest between males of various sides. Rape was prevalent, and in order to preserve the women's chastity therefore loyalty to their male relatives, suicide became an active self-vindication that virtuous women were encouraged to take in wars. However, a cruel fact accompanying chaste women's heroic suicide is that while some chose death out of self-will, some deaths were coerced and even forced by the women's male relatives to accomplish a loyalty ideal.[305] Wang Tao's "Bai Qiongxian" contains a subtext of virtuous women being "betrayed" by the loyalty discourse that coerced their death, for the ghost women in this story are indicated to be the seven concubines of a late Yuan-dynasty general Pan Yuanshao. On the eve of

[305] See Qin Yanchun, 2008, pp. 280-2.

going to war, Pan encouraged his concubines to commit suicide to ensure their chastity and later found famous contemporary literati to inscribe the women's death on a memorial tablet,[306] yet afterward, he himself surrendered to the enemy. Despite such tragedies and betrayals, chaste women who died tragically in war were a favourite topic for literati during or after dynastical changes, who would meticulously record these deaths in their books as a sacrificial offering to the loyalty discourse that they themselves may not be able to participate yet are determined to promote.[307] In a sense, the deaths of the virtuous women became a celebration by the women's male relatives and male historians who fed on these deaths their own ideal of loyalty.

Wang Tao's stories of the mourning revenants discussed above, however, pass subtly a critique on the chastity discourse by turning the focus from the heroism of the women's death to their subsequent eternal sorrow as ghosts: heroic death may bring the ghosts a sense of glory, but such glory pales against a mirthless existence after death. In "Liu Qing", two ghosts engage in a discussion of the merits and defects of ghost-hood and human-hood, with one lamenting: "I'd rather become a human again than a *jian.*" 與其為蹩，不如仍復為人 (*SBSH*, p. 52).[308] And in stories without such a polemic, the merriment of the women's party always sinks into melancholy once they start retelling their death. The agonies of dynastical change and especially the irretrievable personal losses within it become a trauma they cannot work through, however well the orthodox loyalty discourse may rationalize such an impotent act as suicide. Thus, the revenants' nocturnal parties turn into a never-ending mourning for their traumatic past, and the revenants themselves become the Freudian melancholic who is forced to re-open the wounds of history again and again and who ritually performs a silenced critique of it: however glorious the *yimin*'s loyalist discourse,

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[306] See Ni Tao 倪濤, "Song Ke shu Qiji quancuo zhi" 宋克書七姬權厝志 ("Song Ke's Calligraphy of 'The Burial of the Seven Virtuous Women'"), in *Liuyi zhiyi lu* 六藝之一錄 (*Records of One of the "Six Skills"*), vol. 100, p. 14, *Online SKQS*.

[307] Qin Yanchun points out that an obsession with narratives about dynastical change, and especially about the "chaste women" in these occasions, were especially prominent in the late Qing, when the literati themselves sensed that a similar dynastical collapse may be impending (2008, pp. 222-3). One example is the late-Qing writer Ding Chuanjing's 丁傳靖 *Jiayi zhiji gongwei lu* 甲乙之際宮闈錄 (*Records of Virtuous Women in the Years 1664-65*), a history solely dedicated to women's chaste deaths in the tumultuous late Ming, some of which were forced-deaths by the women's male relatives. On Qing literati's construction of women in dynastical fall, see also Wai-yee Li, 2005, "Women as Emblems of Dynastic Fall in Qing Literature".

[308] In ghost lore, a ghost is supposed to become a *jian* when it "dies".

suicidal acts cannot be rationalized and dynastical wars bring only suffering, not glory.[309]

Literati are obsessed with "chaste women" stories in dynastical wars because based on the traditional equation between female chastity and male loyalism in elite discourses,[310] to exalt the chaste women is vicariously promoting a loyalism that they themselves aspire. However, as Martin Huang notes, this equation, together with the equation between manhood and nationhood, also generated tremendous anxiety over masculinity in times of dynastical transition, especially during the violent Ming-Qing dynastical change.[311] Failing to protect their country from alien invasion already proved men's impotence, yet what was worse was that many women passed the loyalty test by committing suicide while their men surrendered to the new regime, which made all the defeated Han males seem emasculated.[312] The frequent appearance of female revenants as "chaste victims of war" in Wang Tao's stories may also be another expression of the masculinity anxiety acutely felt by late-Qing literati*:* the revenants appear to re-enact the Chinese male's past guilt of failing to save his country, and at the same time it reminds him of a current danger that just like the forced repetition of the ghosts' feast, history may repeat itself too.

China's dynastical history means that while time is perceived as progressing linearly, history is also constructed as cyclical and the demise of one dynasty always reminds one of the numerous similar crises preceding it — by inference, the ghost made during the fall of one dynasty is similar with the ghost of another, and they may even be the

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[309] The psychoanalytic concepts mourning and melancholia are used advisedly here to help illuminate the condition of the female revenants. In Freud's original working of this pair of concepts, mourning is a normal and healthy process of grief at the end of which the subject is able to reinvest its attachment from the lost loved object to some other object, while melancholia is mourning that never ends, as the subject has internalized part of the lost object into its ego; therefore, while the grieving melancholic blames and laments his own deficiencies, he is criticising the internalized loved object in himself. Similarly here, while the ghosts are articulating their sorrows again and again, they are symbolically performing a criticism of the violent force that renders them ghosts. See Freud, 1953, "Mourning and Melancholia".

[310] See Martin Huang, 2006, pp. 72-86.

[311] Ibid.

[312] Compared with those who surrendered, the male loyalists who committed suicide or went exile did not fare much better in the masculinity test, for it is an as impotent, or as Huang remarks, "feminized" act as the women's suicide, betraying utter helplessness in the face of uncontrollable circumstances. It should be noted that while female chastity and women's supposedly moral superiority are being exalted in such discourse as well as implied in Wang Tao's tales, the body of women is always used as the defining other.

same ghost.[313] It is here that stories of female ghosts of past dynastical wars merge seamlessly with the equally calamitous historical present. Modern scholars have long recognized the similar ethos during the late Ming and the late Qing. Both were times when the Chinese civilization was under siege by an alien intruder, and what often interests scholars is the conscious or unconscious imitation or re-appropriation by the late-Qing intellectuals of the late-Ming loyalist ideals.[314] In his stories of female revenants, Wang Tao too enacts a straightforward parallel between the late Ming and his contemporary late Qing, but his focus is not on a nostalgic longing for the romanticized past but rather, the violence of history past and present to which the ghost's body bears eternal witness. "Jixian yishi"乩仙軼事 ("The Lost Stories of the Planchette Spirits", *SYML*, 4:198) and "Yan E-xian" 嚴萼仙 (*SYML*, 8:370), two stories with a similar symmetrical pattern, illustrate two ways to reconstruct and critique Chinese history. In both stories, the chaotic late-Ming wars are juxtaposed with the recent Taiping Rebellion through the bodies of two victimized women. "Stories of the Planchette Spirits" is composed of two women's biographies: a late-Ming palace lady who was constantly kidnapped by lustful males after the fall of the Ming court before she could finally commit suicide, and a parallel story of a contemporary girl who narrowly escaped from the Taiping troop yet soon died as a rape victim of a Qing soldier. The repetitiveness of the women's suffering is spelt out by the narrator's remark conjoining their biographies: "although two hundred years stand between them, the happenings are similar and the sorrows the same." 前後二百年，事若相類，有同悲焉. (*SYML*, p.200)

Up to this point, there is nothing supernatural in the women's biographies. Indeed, the narrative is fashioned in the matter-of-fact style of historiography instead of the usual more polished style of Wang's other tales. However, the "historiographic" quality of

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[313] On the perceived cyclic construction of Chinese history, see Zeitlin, 2007, pp. 87-8; Cohen, 1974, p. 119.

[314] On the late-Qing re-appropriation of the idealized scholar-courtesan romances in the late Ming, see Catherine Vance Yeh, "Wenhua jiyi de fudan — wanqing Shanghai wenren dui wanming lixiang de jian'gou", in Chen Pingyuan, David D.W. Wang, and Shang Wei, eds., 2002; Wai-yee Li, 1997 and Qin Yanchun, 2008, pp. 222-88. As a self-stylized "protector of flowers" (i.e. patron of courtesans), Wang Tao himself participated actively in the re-appropriation of narratives of courtesans in the late-Qing, devoting *zhiguai* stories and whole books to Shanghai courtesans. On Wang and Shanghai courtesan culture, see Catherine Vance Yeh, 2006, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850-1910*, pp. 185-90, and Ni Huiying, 2012, "Lun qingdai wenren dui qinglou mingji de wenhua shuxie ji yanbian".

the tale is confirmed with a final seal which paradoxically evokes the supernatural: we are told that the women's stories were revealed when their spirits possessed the planchette during local literati's gatherings (some elegant poems supposedly composed by the ghosts are also recorded). Sympathizing with the women's misfortunes, the literati recorded and disseminated their stories and then Wang Tao is able to honour them in his collection. The literati (both inside the story and outside of it) attempt to commemorate the victims of history by vindicating their narration as a self-narration by the female revenants themselves. This validation of the ghost women's narrative as genuine history helps to effect the male literati's critique of the unscrupulousness of dynastical history, yet ironically, the "factual" status of this history can only be established through affirming its supernatural origin, which at once dissolves any historicity of such a narrative. More ironically, the act to vindicate these stories as the ghost woman's self-narrative also exposes the ghost's absolute silence in the construction of her own history — for it is clear that the revenants' voice can only be heard through the busybody literati who seek ghostly message through their planchette.[315] History makes women into silent victims, then the sympathetic literati dig them up as ghosts — the double irony of this ghost's history exposes perfectly women's antithetical status to history: no history can be written for them but a spectral one.

As if the attempt to battle with history's violence and suppression is too frustrating in "Planchette Spirits", "Yan E-xian" provides a fantastic solution for the same paralleled tragedies. Set twenty years after the Taiping Rebellion, the protagonist Qian Pinhou is one day invited by his deceased cousin to a feast with two beautiful female ghosts, one a former late-Ming palace girl and the other a new ghost made during the Taiping Rebellion named E-xian. As pre-destined, Qian spends a romantic night with E-xian and the cousin with the palace girl. The tone of this tale is decidedly more cheerful and optimistic than "Planchette Spirits"; at one point E-xian remarks: "I feel that my happiness in the netherworld surpasses even that in an immortal's land; the troubles,

[315] Wang Tao did experiment with other ways to validate the female victim's narrative through planchette without the mediation of the literati. "Li zhengu xiatan zishu shimo ji"李貞姑下壇自述始末記 ("Story of Li the Chaste Girl as Told by Herself through Planchette", *SBSH*, 12:307) is a first person narrative of the woman's tragedy. On the planchette motif of Wang's stories, see Zhang Yuanyue, 2013, "Lun Wang Tao dui *Liaozhai zhiyi* fuji gushi de jicheng yu bianyi." Contrastingly, the contingencies and manipulations involved in a ghost woman's history re-appropriated by the male historian are also explored in Vernon Lee's ghost stories; see Chapter Four for more discussion.

fears, and sorrows of separation with beloved ones in the human world seem to me utterly unbearable!" 奴以為夜臺之樂，勝於仙響，視人間膠擾驚恐，別離悲苦，相去奚啻天淵哉! (*SYML*, p. 371) As if to counter-balance the implicit nihilism in the ghost's favouring death over life, the story ends more conventionally with E-Xian resurrected by her lover. Which one is more desirable, ghost-hood or human-hood? As is the usual case with Wang's stories, this one does not provide a definite answer. The fantastic narrative of ghosts, like the utopian motif inscribed on *yimin*, softens the edge of historical violence yet never fully dissipates it.

The tales of female revenant expose the injustices suffered by women in wars and reveal poignantly that in such chaos, emperors and soldiers are not different from servants and bandits — while the interpretation of official history is legitimized by those in power, the individual sufferings indicate the opposite. By foregrounding the female revenants who have no influence in history yet suffer passively in dynastical transformations, Wang levels his criticism on the brutality of dynastical change and political struggle. Moreover, the impossibility to enter the ghost's story into history also exposes the sinister side of the noble *yimin* discourse that makes many into ghosts: the *yimin* discourse, together with the discourses on patriotism and loyalism promoted in official history and consecrated in Xuan Ding's mythic history, establishes a glorious notion of China's history which demands sacrifice and the continuity of tradition, but in many cases that ideal notion is unobtainable and can be a burden to many, even males. In this sense, ghost women as victims of dynastical change can serve another purpose for the male scholar who conjures them up: they bear metonymically the man's sense of impotence.

"Yaoniang zaishi" 窅娘再世 ("Yaoniang Reincarnated", *SYML*, 7:300) is a vivid example in which the anachronic female ghost substantiates the contemporary Chinese males' anxiety over their masculinity and national identity. The marvellous woman Yaoniang foregrounded in the story title serves to connect the contemporary story with the historical figure Li Yu 李煜 (937-978), the last emperor of the Southern Tang and the accompanying motif of male impotence and the collapse of a nation. The story is set in the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion in Nanjing.[316] Living in a haunted house,

[316] Nanjing was also the capital of the Southern Tang court.

the protagonist Zhou Weihuang is one day visited by a beautiful woman named Xianglin, and they soon fall in love. While the two lovers are sailing down the Yangtze River, Zhou is befriended by a charismatic man, who invites him to a feast with a group of beautiful ladies. The man reveals himself to be the Southern Tang Emperor Li Yu, and the accompanying women all his favourite royal consorts. What's more, Zhou's mysterious mistress Xianglin is none other but Li Yu's consort Yaoniang. Zhou is embarrassed to face his "cuckolded" host, yet it is the "cuckolded" ex-emperor who finds words to comfort him: "A man [like me] cannot keep intact his state, let alone his concubines! Yaoniang is only yours temporarily, but not for long." 江山尚不能保，况乎妾媵之流哉？屬君不過一時暫耳，非常也. (*SYML*, p.303) Several years later Yaoniang disappears without a trace.

Identified as Li Yu's favourite concubine and implied as a new ghost made during the Taiping Rebellion, Yaoniang's body bears a double inscription of history; and as the shared object of desire between two men, Yaoniang becomes the defining other through which a homosociality is realised between men of two falling dynasties.[317] Li Yu's explicit equalization between his failure to protect his throne and his women makes it clear that masculinity again is enacted by objectifying women: one loses control of the nation and one loses control of his women and vice versa. By exchanging concubines with Li Yu, the humiliated emperor and cuckolded husband, the protagonist shares vicariously with Li Yu his impotence and his fear of losing his state.

As shown repeatedly, the traumas of history old and new are juxtaposed through the spectres of history in Wang Tao's tales, with a looming sense that history might be relived, that the Qing dynasty was coming to an end, and that China might again fall to an alien people. This return to *yimin* and the chaste female revenants, on the one hand, is a reliving of that part of dynastical transformation with all its heroism and nobility, yet on the other hand is a problematization of the seemingly coherent and self-justified notion of historical progression. Indeed, for both the chaste women who choose suicide, and *yimin* who make themselves into the living dead of the past dynasty, their heroic act of death vindicates the loyalty discourse but also exposes the irrationality and brutality of it. For Wang Tao's generation of Chinese intellectuals,

[317] On homosociality between men through their heterosexual desire of the same woman, see Reeser, 2010, Chapter 9.

the need to narrate and construct China's past was especially urgent as its current standing in the world was being undermined by the threatening Western forces on all sides. The history thus recuperated through Wang's ghost stories is conspicuously less glorious and self-certain than Xuan Ding's version examined before, but as Nietzsche affirms, a critical attitude towards history can serve the living by freeing them from the burdens of history. By critiquing the cultural values represented by *yimin* — which is a clinging towards tradition and the past, Wang also effects a critique of the model masculinity surrounding the *shi* (士) ideal, thus making it possible to envisage other, more open-minded masculinity models which no longer rely on perceiving the self as the eternal centre of the world and are willing to go out and learn from others. Therefore, for Wang Tao, to question Chinese history and its accompanying Sinocentrism, though agonizing enough, helps the contemporary Chinese man to step outside of his familiar zone when he sets out to confront the challenges of his age — the vital competition with the West.

### 3.3 Journey to the West and Journey to the Heart

While a distorted imagination of the overseas inherited from the *Shanhaijing*-pattern and a demonic representation of the West inform Xuan Ding's overseas stories, this blatant conceit vis-à-vis a foreign culture is rare in Wang Tao's stories on overseas travels. Wang's first-hand experience of travelling in Europe simply makes it impossible for him to paint the foreign lands of his overseas stories in vague and fabulous brushes. The West, for him, is not an undifferentiated idea, but is composed of distinct countries like Prussia, France, and Britain, each with their own distinct cultures and customs.[318] The traditional psychological framework "centre/periphery" seldom leaves traces in Wang's stories, and the West is portrayed to be a land as civilized as China.

However, even if Wang's stories of foreigners and foreign countries escape the above relation of domination, they are still informed by a stereotyped gendered imagination

[318] It does not mean that Wang would not romanticize or fantasize about the West, but his description of the Western countries bears more resemblance to real countries in the world. For example, in "Haiwai zhuangyou" 海外壯游("A Grand Tour Overseas"), the portrayal of the protagonist's fantastic journey to Europe includes a very minute description of men and women dancing in Edinburgh (*SYML*, pp. 357-8), which was collated almost verbatim from the chapter "Wudao shengji" 舞蹈勝集 ("On Dancing") of the author's travelogue *Manyou Suilu* (in *Manyou suilu tuji*, pp. 144-6).

of alien cultures which is always represented as an encounter between a masculine self and a feminized other. Four of Wang's strange tales, "Haiwai meiren"海外美人 ("Overseas Beauties", *SYML*, 4:193), "Haiwai zhuangyou" 海外壯遊("A Grand Tour Overseas", *SYML*, 8:355), "Haidi qijing" 海底奇境 ("Wonderland at the Sea Bottom", *SYML*, 8:350) and "Meili xiaozhuan"媚黎小傳 ("A Biography of Mary", *SYML*, 7:305) focus on the romantic encounter between a Chinese man and a foreign woman.[319] While Sheldon Lu reads such tales of transnational encounter as a "wish fulfilment about the status of the Chinese citizens in a global arena",[320] Zheng Huili regards these same tales as implicating the anxieties of male impotence and a civilizational crisis of Wang's generation.[321] The "Chinese-man-versus-foreign-woman" plot in Wang Tao's encounter tales indeed is full of paradoxes, and I will demonstrate below that its author is trying to negotiate with a Sino-Western relationship far more complex than one of domination and submission. In this section, I focus on the story "Overseas Beauties", for it not only envisages a potential encounter between China and the West but also enacts a symbolic encounter between China's past and present. The latter is an important undercurrent in both Wang Tao's and Xuan Ding's *zhiguai* writings, for it is where a new cultural identity may be forged to answer the contemporary challenges. Combining an outgoing journey to explore the West and an inward journey through which the Chinese man re-examines his own cultural and historical inheritances, "Overseas Beauties" in a sense dramatizes the circular textual move in its author's preface to *Songyin manlu* examined above. As mentioned before, the outward journey to explore the world is one deeply troubled by the spectres of one's own national history, and its final landing is not in the dreamed West, but a return to a Chinese home anchored in the fantastic in-between space in *zhiguai*, where multilayers of realities exist and no single worldview is to dominate.

As the epitome of contemporary Chinese intellectuals' mental journey to the West, "Overseas Beauties" presents at the beginning an unconventionally open-minded couple as its protagonists: the husband Lu Meifang is heir to a prosperous shipping business and has aspired to sail across the world since young; his wife, contrary to the modest and gentle type of Chinese wives, is a martial-arts master and shares her

[319] An English translation of "A Biography of Mary" is attached in McAleavy, 1957.
[320] Sheldon Lu, 2003, p. 757.
[321] Zheng, 2014, p. 297.

husband's aspirations. After the death of Lu's parents, the young couple is finally free to realise their ambitions. Declining the suggestion to take a modern Western ship, Lu builds a ship of his own design according to traditional Chinese astrology — a triumphant realisation of Chinese science and technology instead of the Western one. Yet the ship is lighted with electronic bulbs, another Western invention (*SYML*, p. 193). The unconventional formation of this Chinese couple (not many Chinese men at the time aspired for an overseas expedition and rarer still for a wife to be portrayed as a kung-fu master) and their bizarre invention of the ship make it clear that this is no ordinary journey; in the beginning, it is staged as a competition between Chinese civilization and its Western rival. As a projection of the author's ideal self, the open-minded and outward-looking Lu couple represent the hope of the late-Qing China.[322]

The first stop of the couple's overseas journey is a certain island off the coast of Japan. Wang Tao's visit to Japan in 1879 made him realise on the one hand how this neighbour of China had kept intact much of traditional Chinese culture,[323] while on the other hand that this familiar neighbour had been quickly westernizing itself since the Meiji reform. Therefore, Japan becomes the ideal place where a Chinese man may encounter the spectres of Chinese history as well as envisage his future confrontation with the West. The Japanese host tells the Lus that the island has been honoured by the remains of three Chinese Ming-dynasty loyalists, who came here after the Ming army's defeat by the Manchus.[324] Legend has it that these three officers had vowed to take back the lands lost to the Manchus, yet failing that, they committed suicide and their bodies immediately turned into giant corpses, miraculously kept intact over the centuries and receiving due respect from the Japanese islanders. If the *yimin* previously

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[322] The protagonist Lu Meifang in many aspects resembles Wang Tao himself. The Lus' journey to Europe via Japan corresponds to Wang's own 1867 journey to Europe and the later 1879 journey to Japan, recorded in his two travel writing collections *Manyou suilu* and *Fusang youji*.

[323] Not knowing Japanese, Wang Tao was able to communicate with his Japanese hosts by written Chinese throughout his stay, as classical Chinese literature was also standard training for Japanese literati. On this journey, see Wang's *Fusang youji*.

[324] Zheng Huili (2014, p. 299) maintains that the three officers are reminiscent of the famous three Song loyalists mentioned above: Wen Tianxiang, Lu Xiufu and Zhang Shijie; yet considering that Wang had no need to disguise the Song as Ming as the latter might be a more sensitive topic for a Qing-dynasty writer, I would regard the "Three" here as not identifiable with specific historical figures but serving symbolically as a crystallization of *yimin*. Wang paid particular attention to traces of Chinese Ming-dynasty *yimin* and their descendants in Japan in his *Fusang youji*. He spent some efforts introducing Ming loyalists like Zhu Shunshui 朱舜水 and Nan Zhengcheng 楠正成, whose temples had been honoured by local Japanese and these may have served as an inspiration for this *zhiguai* story (see *Manyou suilu; Fusang youji*, p. 206, p. 183).

discussed are only fossilized in a metaphorical sense, here the undecomposed corpses of these Ming *yimin* are clearly presented as corporeal spectres of that part of Chinese history. Expectedly, Lu is greatly moved by the nobility and loyalism of his compatriots and asks his host to let him pay a homage to the remains in person. As Lu gets close to the remains, one of the corpses stirs up and makes a gesture of courtesy to Lu just as they vowed to do upon their death — yet Lu flees, the uncanniest of this uncanny encounter with *yimin*.

Lu's unheroic retreat is a cynical attack on all the illusions of patriotism, loyalty, and splendid Chinese history. The Ming *yimin*'s undecomposed corpses bear witness to their loyalty to a by-gone dynasty and gesture to future sympathetic Chinese descendants, who may take over their duty of reclaiming Chinese glory. Whereas Lu, representing the essence of Chinese culture with an outward-looking orientation, proves to be just that ideal descendant. To Lu, the visit to the heroic remains of his own culture honoured on a foreign island not only testifies to the superiority of Chinese culture among its neighbours but also its perseverance over vicissitudes. However, such a perfect reunion of China's past and present ends in Lu's shameful retreat, as if the remains of history is too horrible a sight to bear. Is Lu a coward, or is the loyalty and patriotism discourses inscribed in orthodox history really an uncanny burden, so that no matter what rationalization of its arbitrariness and cruelty has been made, it scares instead of empowers the descendants? As with the fantastic *yimin* stories discussed above, here again Wang Tao problematizes the validity of the *yimin* discourse. If, as Qin Yanchun remarks, the *yimin* identity during dynastical changes is a crystallization of the traditional *shi* ideal,[325] then Lu's inability to stare at *yimin* in the face puts into question the very essence of *shi* and its associated ideal construction of masculinity, moral perfection, and loyalty to the state. To say that Wang Tao totally denies the Confucian ideal of *shi* may be exaggerating the case, yet his own unconventional life path forever exiled from the orthodox centre did enable him to imagine and live out masculinity models deviating from the *shi* ideal, yet beneficial to his country too.[326]

[325] Qin, 2008, p. 127.
[326] His letter to the Taiping leaders and his close interaction with Westerners are all behaviours deviating from the expected loyalty of *shi* to his nation and his emperor.

The Lu couple's encounter with the uncanny remains of Chinese history on the Japanese island speaks of a painful break with their ancestors, a further departure from tradition compared with their bold decision to sail across the world. Could this break from tradition offer the Lus a firmer control of their present when confronting their Western rivals? The story offers a bleak answer. Promptly, it presents an allegorical battle between China and the West in the Lus' next stop, where the Chinese man loses his military power (represented by the Kung-fu master wife) and his future (a son). On a certain Southeast Asian island on the edge of China's cultural influence, the Lu couple runs into a martial arts contest probably run by Westerners.[327] Over-confidently, Lu's wife jumps into the ring to avenge her Eastern comrade, a Japanese guy just defeated by the host, yet both she and the host die in strangling each other. A baby son is delivered prematurely during this process, and a mysterious Taoist priest promptly appears and requests to adopt Lu's son, promising a reunion twenty years later in the Luofu Mountain. Without remonstrance, the traumatized Lu lets the Taoist takes away his son.[328]

Half-way through his westward journey, Lu has lost both his wife and a premature son. If the ambitious Lu couple had started out symbolizing the hope of an open-minded China to confront its Western rivals, the lonely husband by now has lost his initial optimism in seeking rewarding adventures in the dreamed-of Western land. It is here that the Chinese man's agonizing inward journey gradually emerges and replaces his initial confident outbound journey to the West. Lu continues his journey to Europe, yet the closer he gets to the West, the closer his mentality journeys homeward to tradition, so that when he finally arrives in Italy, what he sees around is no longer a real West but an uncanny West blending together unfamiliarity with familiar *zhiguai* motifs. Surrounded by foreign music in the Italian seaport Messina, Lu feels lonely and could not work out the sorrow of losing his wife. But soon he is befriended by a generous Chinese expatriate anchoring nearby, who tries to cheer him up by offering him two astonishingly beautiful maidens as a gift. What he says about the maidens immediately places the story unto a familiar fantastic terrain established through heavy

[327] The contest is probably organized by Westerners as indicated by the notice in Sanskrit and English above the ring (*SYML*, p. 195).
[328] This allegorical episode reads almost like an uncanny prophecy of the disastrous Sino-Japan war (1894-1895) which announces the total failure of China's "Self-Strengthening Movement", although then the enemy was not a Western country but a Westernized Japan.

intertextuality to earlier classical *zhiguai* stories. The beauty of the two maidens, the expatriate tells Lu, is only an illusion, for they are actually horrible Yaksha (*yecha* 夜叉) who have paid to have their ugly bodies covered by painted skins. This description of the Yaksha is derived from two familiar *Liaozhai* stories: "The Yaksha Kingdom" and "The Painted Skin" 畫皮 (1:119). "The Yaksha Kingdom", as mentioned before, is about how a Chinese merchant marries a savage female Yaksha (portrayed as an ugly, semi-human creature) in an overseas island, while "The Painted Skin" tells a cautionary tale about delusive female appearance: a man is seduced and killed by a heinous devil who covers herself with a painted human skin.

With these allusions to *Liaozhai* stories, the practical-minded Lu's journey to the West, reflecting the author's exaltation of Western practicality in his preface to *Songyin manlu*, has by now turned almost into a journey back into classic *zhiguai* tropes and a retreat to tradition. The story's ambiguous yet deeply unsettling ending, however, problematizes this return and leads the journey further into the undefined realm between illusion and reality. Hearing of the horrible secret of the maidens, Lu refuses the present, yet the expatriate replies: "What a fool you are! What is real and what is illusion in this world? Beauties can turn into skeletons and a Yaksha with painted skin can be a Bodhisattva." 君真愚矣！世間一切事，孰是真者？紅粉變相，即是骷髏，夜叉畫皮，遂成菩薩. (*SYML*, p. 197) The expatriate's words here actually echo with yet another *Liaozhai* story, "The Painted Wall" (1:14) mentioned earlier and a common Buddhist rhetoric on the illusoriness of life. The narrator Historian of the Strange in "The Painted Wall" concludes: "All the illusions are initiated by people's heart — this seems to be a reasonable saying. A lewd heart begets an obscene world; an indecent heart begets a macabre world. The Bodhisattva enlightens the fool with a thousand kinds of illusions" 幻由人作，此言类有道者. 人有淫心，是生亵境；人有亵心，是生怖境.菩萨点化愚蒙，千幻并作 (1:17).

Indeed, the loss of the ability to tell illusion from reality seems to be the final reward that Lu obtains from his journey to the West. Dispirited to make any further exploration in Europe, Lu consents to the proposal of the expatriate and promptly takes the two "Yaksha" women back to China. He has gazed at the women naked in bath many times and has never found a sign of painted skin, therefore he begins to doubt the words of the expatriate. The last sentence tells us that Lu has never been to the

Luofu Mountain, seemingly suggesting that the promised reunion with the son is never realised (*SYML*, p.197). The reader is left as confused as the disillusioned Lu: are the expatriate's words just a joke, or is Lu really deceived by the illusion of beauty? What about the Taoist's promised reunion? What is illusion and what is reality?

This last question, the deliberate effacing of illusion and reality, and an insistence on doubts and uncertainty at the end of the story, may indicate the only way of salvation that the author suggests a disillusioned Chinese intellectual could seek. Zheng Huili identifies the two beauties Lu acquires in Messina as Western women, so that their sexual possession by Lu serves as a "domesticating strategy" against the potentially dangerous West, and the illusoriness of their beauty a "rhetoric of negation" about the beauty of the West.[329] However, what I want to emphasize here is the episode's surprisingly dense intertextuality to familiar *Liaozhai* stories and the Yaksha's "traditional" instead of Western origin. The Chinese word *yecha* is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word "yakṣa", which refers to a kind of half-human demon in Hinduism and the demon follower of Vaisravana in Buddhism. Yaksha has appeared in Chinese literature since the Tang dynasty, and gradually it became a derogative term used on China's barbaric neighbours in literary imagination, sometimes residing beyond the northeast border and sometimes in the South Seas, depending on the author's imagination.[330] The encounter with the Yaksha women at the end of Lu's journey, therefore, is a return to *zhiguai* tradition instead of something truly Western. By connecting these Yaksha women with a Chinese compatriot and using dense allusions to famous *Liaozhai* stories, the author is deliberately pulling the protagonist, and the reader too, out of the real Western presence that surrounds him into a linguistic web constructed by layers and layers of old *zhiguai* rhetoric. In this symbolic zone constructed through *zhiguai* motifs, what is real and what is illusion, what is inside and what is outside of fiction is deliberately effaced. The journey to the West ends not in the real West but the heart of darkness of Chinese supernatural tales.[331] In this sense, Lu's fictional expedition to the West is reflective of Wang's circular argumentative

[329] Zheng, 2014, p. 301.
[330] On the origin of Yaksha in Chinese literature, see Wang Li and Hu Yu, 2010, "*Liaozhai zhiyi* 'Yecha guo' de fojing yuanyuan ji zhongwai minzu ronghe neihan".
[331] Messina was Wang Tao's first stop as he embarked on Europe in 1867, as recorded in his *Manyou suilu*, whereas ironically in fiction it becomes the ending stop of Lu's journey to the West. Perhaps Wang was reconsidering the effect that his European journey had had on himself two decades later when he was composing this story around 1884.

moves in his preface to *Songyin manlu* discussed above, as well as his own life path: the subject first favours a Western, materialistic perception of the world, but when two incompatible worldviews come into fierce competition and drive him to a corner, the only way out is to resort to the traditional *zhiguai* discourse. However, this return to *zhiguai* rhetoric, as prefigured in Wang's preface, is not a return to the same starting point but a renewal, for the traditional supernatural cosmos promoted by *zhiguai* is again doubted and deferred, as the unresolved question of reality and illusion and unrealised reunion with the son at the end of the story insistently point to a realm of uncertainty. The final home for a perturbed and disillusioned Chinese intellectual is therefore a linguistically constructed fantastic zone, where identities and realities are in fluidity so the bitter question facing the besieged Chinese can be deferred. What Wang faced agonizingly in Edinburgh in real life — to be mistaken for a woman by Westerners,[332] —is thus evaded in this fantastic tale. In other stories when a final encounter does happen, as in "A Grand Tour Overseas", "A Biography of Mary", and "Wonderland at the Bottom of Sea", the Chinese man occupies firmly the position of the male and is always able to win the love of a Western woman.[333]

Lu's allegorical outward journey into the West echoes the upsetting internal journey that late-Qing intellectuals like Wang Tao had to make to re-position themselves in the new world order dominated by Western forces. Using the mode of the fantastic—that is, juxtaposing incompatible discourses in his stories, Wang offers a disturbing re-examination of the spectres of Chinese history and China's pathetic position in the contemporary globe with a complexity that reaches beyond a simple relation of domination and submission. If the "reality" of the glorious Chinese history and the essence of Chinese culture can be questioned, what firm ground do we have other than the fantastic and illusory one that Wang's open-ended stories offer?

### 3.4 Conclusion: The Fantastic Departure

Fantastic literature in Tzvetan Todorov's definition is literature where a hesitation is maintained between two interpretive frameworks: a naturalistic interpretation and a supernatural one. An oscillation between different worldviews and interpretive models,

[332] On this episode of Wang's life, see the Introduction.
[333] On the sexualized encounter, see Zheng, 2014; Teng, 2006.

as I mentioned in the beginning, is precisely the paradoxical framework that Wang's *zhiguai* preface provides for its reader as well as the recurrent feature of his *zhiguai* stories discussed so far. Moreover, borrowing Campany's insight on Chinese Six Dynasties anomaly accounts, I argue that Wang's fantastic *zhiguai* writing is also a "contra" literature,[334] which while starting from the premises of a familiar world order, digresses into an alternative world contra-or-countering the known. Traditionally, the anomaly accounts and stories of ghosts offer such a contra-diction to Confucian orthodoxy as embodied in official state histories, yet by the late Qing, the Chinese culture as a whole, whether the disenchanted Confucian ideology or the enchanted world of foxes and ghosts, was confronted and challenged by a new reality as represented by Westerners and their culture. Wang Tao's fantastic *zhiguai* writing therefore exhibits a departure not only from Confucian orthodoxy (as evidenced in his critique of history and loyalty discourse in the spectre stories), but also a subtle departure from the *zhiguai* tradition and its exalted world of ghosts and foxes. The result of this departure is a circular movement as evidenced in both Wang's paradoxical *zhiguai* preface and his tales of new strange framed by that preface: a journey of the Chinese man moving away from his tradition towards a Western view of world, yet ending in a partial return to tradition. This is a deeply troubled journey traversing disparate terrains yet landing in none, and in the process, established concepts like history, cultural identity, and masculinity are contested and remoulded.

More importantly, perhaps, is that the notion of reality is made contingent in these tales. To some degree, this is a true reflection of the chaotic and sometimes dreamlike experiences of Wang Tao and his generation of late-Qing intellectuals. In an age of unprecedented ideological instability, they witnessed the melting of traditional boundaries and categories, which generated in them a tremendous identity anxiety, especially the masculinity anxiety. Wang's fantastic *zhiguai* situated halfway between a Western and a Chinese conceptualization of the world is reflective of this identity crisis, and in a sense suggests a possible strategy to cope with it. Through these tales, the Chinese man's masculinity anxiety can be figured, curbed, and possibly solved, — although eventually it is an ineffective solution, for the final confrontation between

[334] See Campany, 1996, pp. 235-6; see also the Introduction.

the Chinese subject and his Western rival is deferred in a fantastic limbo where no definite reality can be acclaimed.

Although the revalorization of Chinese masculinity in Wang Tao's stories may be not as effective as Xuan Ding's self-mythologization, it is certainly a more informed one. By exposing the limits of contemporary epistemology, these tales of new strange epitomize the fantastic literature. They are unsettling and beneficial for their contemporary as well as modern readers, as they have already touched on one of the fundamental problems of human experience: the relativeness of the "reality" we live in.

# *Part II Her Story as the Ghost*

# Chapter 4 Two Ways to Conjure up a Ghost: Vernon Lee's History versus Fiction

As I have shown in the previous chapters, the ghost literature in China is a genre germane to male literati identity-building. The untold-story in the literati's appropriation of the ghost's history, however, is the implicit objectification and silencing of the woman ghost. In this chapter I explore Vernon Lee's (Violet Paget, 1856-1935) fantastic ghost stories as precisely a reaction towards this gender blindness: they expose and problematize the implicit gendered manipulation in man's history-writing and ghost-making. Furthermore, through juxtaposing fantastic and historical narratives, Lee envisions an ideal femininity characterised by its gender fluidity. To discriminate between different ways of conjuring up a ghost — in other words, different ways to reach the past, — has a practical significance, as how to tell the ghost's story inevitably informs how one sees the world and perceives the self. This final concern with the ghost's history is dramatized in Lee's last novel as a competition between man's history and woman's fiction. This is a competition with no single winner but rather, I argue, it gestures towards an in-between zone lying just between history and romance and facts and fancy, a fantastic space where the ghost can most effectively haunt the text, the reader and claim its justice.

## 4.1 History and the Historian

As "chroniclers of ghosts", writers of *zhiguai* are always in one way or another conjurers of the past, and their evocation of the ghost stands diametrically opposed to histories of the state as recorded by official historians. Pu Songling's ingenious adaptation of Sima Qian's title "The Grand Historian" to "Historian of the Strange" in his *Liaozhai* exemplifies *zhiguai* writer's distancing from as well as adherence to historiography. Following Pu's example, the Chinese male writers examined in the previous chapters have all self-consciously claimed themselves "historians" — historians of the ghost's history. While this adopted "ghost historian" persona allowed the male writers to enact their revival or critique of Chinese history in what Nietzsche calls either a "monumental" or "critical" fashion,[335] there is a limitation in this type of

[335] Nietzsche, 1997, pp. 67-7.

history-making: theirs is a past reconstructed from a male perspective and the male narrator/historian's subjective position in the making of the ghost's history is assumed to be transparent. However, the male literati's history of ghosts is as much a history of its male makers as it is the history of the romanticized women ghosts, for the process of appropriating or critiquing history is inevitably a play of power through imagining the (very often female) ghosts as the other of history. Wang Tao's evocation of women victims in dynastical wars examined earlier lays bare the paradox involved in the assumed objectivity of the ghost conjurer: while the authenticity of the women ghosts' narratives relies on the fact that they were conveyed by the ghosts themselves through planchette, the planchette message was yet to be transcribed by male literati who organized these séances.[336] In other words, there is always a well-educated male historian standing behind every female phantom conjured up, and the version of the ghost's history thus obtained is always already mediated through their gendered lens.

The concern with the gendered blind spot involved in the process of history-making is an important issue underlying Vernon Lee's career as both art historian and writer of ghost stories. Just as writers in the late-Qing China were urged by the contemporary national crisis to re-examine the basic ideologies in their national history, the nineteenth-century Britain was also an age preoccupied with a zeal for history. The underlying motive for this enthusiasm was the belief that history is the totality of all experience and therefore all knowledge, as Thomas Carlyle asserted confidently in his "On History" (1830): "For, strictly considered, what is all Knowledge too but recorded Experience, and a product of History; of which, therefore, Reasoning and Belief, no less than Action and Passion, are essential materials?"[337] For Victorians like Carlyle, history was the sum of the biographies of those "great men", and what he didn't state explicitly but was generally accepted by most of his contemporaries, was that history was conceptualized as the truth of man and therefore also rightfully and exclusively

[336] Even in "Story of Li the Chaste Girl as Told by Herself through Planchette" (*SBSH*, 12: 307), a first-person narrative of the ghost herself, it is revealed in the end as a re-rendering of the ghost's message obtained through the planchette. These planchette stories promise an authenticity or truthfulness as "the ghost's story as told by herself", yet the roles of the male literati as organizers of the séance and transcribers of the tales are downplayed, and their role as the controller of the ghost's discourse is covered up.
[337] Carlyle, 1984, p. 56.

the profession of men.[338] Nietzsche also inadvertently reveals this bias in his crudely sexed comparison between the despised "objective" historians treating history and "eunuchs" treating women: "this is a race of eunuchs, and to a eunuch one woman is like another, simply a woman, woman in herself, the eternally unapproachable…. and since the eternally womanly will never draw you upward, you draw it down to you and, being neuters, take history too for a neuter."[339] In this conceptualization, history is a privileged masculine cause above the "race of eunuchs", let alone women.

It is perhaps this unchallenged notion that history writing was the rightful responsibility and rights of men, extant in both Chinese and British cultures that had led the two Chinese writers I have examined to presume a (deceivingly) transparent position as ghost chroniclers.[340] The nineteenth century in Europe witnessed the rapid institutionalization and professionalization of history.[341] Apart from the traditional history of the state, historians now turned their eyes to social, cultural and aesthetical realms of human experience. It was within this trend aspiring for more inclusiveness that some Victorian women hesitantly dabbed their hands in art history — for instance Anna Jameson's study of the female mythology in Christianity, Julia Cartwright's study of the Renaissance which centred on Beatrice d'Este and Isabella d'Este, Margarete Oliphant's study of Florentine craftsmanship among many others,[342] — hesitantly because, as Christa Zorn observes, they were well aware that they were treading on men's territory and therefore "offered their work hesitantly and merely as supplements to historical master narratives."[343]

Vernon Lee was among these aspiring female intellectuals excluded from a college education and an institutional affiliation. Educated by an unconventional mother who

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[338] Christina Crosby argues that "In the nineteenth century 'history' is produced as man's truth, the truth of a necessarily historical Humanity, which in turn requires that 'women' be outside history". See Crosby, 1991, *The Ends of History: Victorians and "the Woman Question"*, p.10, passim.
[339] Nietzsche, 1997, p. 86. Nietzsche of cause immediately warns that he actually regards history as the "eternally manly" rather than the "eternally womanly" (p. 87), but the sexed metaphor nevertheless indicates the assumed important correlation between history and the historian's sex.
[340] See Joan W. Scott, 1986, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis"; Scott argues that history has been gendered as a masculinist discourse, and the masculine subject it evokes is disguised as neutral and universal.
[341] On the institutionalization of history as a discipline, see Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, 1998.
[342] Hilary Fraser, "Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse", 1998, pp. 90-3.
[343] Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*, 2003, p. 27.

never intended her daughter for marriage but to become at the very least another "Madame de Staël",[344] Lee spent her youth in intensive reading. Indeed, the young Violet Paget decided early on to become "Vernon Lee" when she published her first book *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880) at the age of twenty-four, and as the masculine pen name suggests, her chosen lifestyle was one devoted to intellectual pursuits instead of marriage. Her career as an author spanned from the 1880s to the 1930s and produced more than forty monographs, ranging over topics as varied as art history, aesthetic philosophy, travel writing, fantastic literature, and politics, although today she was mainly remembered as a writer of ghost stories. It is in emphasizing the scope of Lee's career and intellectual influence that Zorn proposes we regard Lee primarily as a public intellectual as she herself probably had done.[345] As a Victorian female intellectual, Lee's life embraced all the admiration and hostility that may be met by an unconventional Victorian woman aspiring a role outside of the family. Lee's lifestyle was ostensibly that of the New Woman: economically independent, travelling across the Continent, and participating energetically in all the intellectual issues of the day. Never a good-looking woman herself, Lee nonetheless maintained long and passionate friendship with two women during her life and in later days always attracted around her a circle of intelligent and admiring younger women.[346] The latter, probably as much as her competition with male intellectuals, often made her the target of men's contempt which easily slid from an assessment of her intellectual rigour to a caricature of her sexuality. A few male contemporaries' hostile remarks are revealing in this case. Max Beerbohm noted down in his copy of Lee's *Gospels of Anarchy* (1908) his opinion of the author: "Poor dear dreadful little lady! Always having a crow to pick, ever so coyly, with Nietzsche, or a wee lance to break with Mr. Carlyle, or a sweet but sharp little warning to whisper in the ear of Mr. H.G. Wells, or Strindberg or Darwin or D'Annunzio! What a dreadful little bore and

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[344] Vineta Colby, *Victorian Literature and Culture: Vernon Lee, a Literary Biography*, 2003, p.6.
[345] See Zorn, 2003, Introduction, xv.
[346] Lee had enjoyed intimate relationships with Mary Robinson (Mary Duclaux) and later Clementina Ansthuther-Thompson, two women who have been recognized by Lee's biographers as her lovers. Lee is termed by her biographer Burdett Gardner as a "failed lesbian" for her contemporaries seemed to agree that none of her relations actually came to a physical level. On Lee's sexuality, see Sally Newman, "Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee's Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History", 2005.

busybody".[347] John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), the renowned expert on Italian Renaissance, regarded Lee as a rival not only in the field of Renaissance art history but also for the admiration of the poet Mary Robinson (1857-1944).[348] Partly out of jealousy, Symonds advised Robinson to keep away from clever women like Lee and consulted the sexologist Havelock Ellis who suggested that Lee and Robinson may serve as a case of lesbianism in his *Sexual Inversion*.[349]

Never hesitating to flaunt her erudition and insight in conversation or writing, Lee did know early on in her career the contempt and suspicion awaiting women pursuing a "masculine" intellectual life. Her first book *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* at once announced her ambition and her tactful concerns. Despite the tone of authority she professed in it, the young author was aware that as a woman she was poaching on men's field, as she explained in a letter her choice of the masculine pseudonym "Vernon Lee": "I am sure that no one reads a woman's writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but unmitigated contempt".[350] Her subject matter, Italian art (mainly music) in the eighteenth century, was overshadowed by the Renaissance. As Colby notes, it was "an age of little apparent historical or cultural distinction",[351] but for this same reason it was also relatively neglected by prominent male scholars like Symonds and Walter Pater (1839-1894), therefore left Lee fresh on the field.

Both instances indicate Lee's understanding of the difficulties facing a woman eager to establish herself as a qualified speaker in the field of history. Like her contemporaries, she had to manoeuver between gaining visibility and respectability as a woman historian and maintaining her uniqueness as a woman writer, two goals contradicting each other in a society suspicious of women professing an authoritative voice. The masculine pseudonym, at least at first, indicates that she compromised by using a "borrowed" position — a man's position.[352] But at the same time, Lee was

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[347] Qtd. in Colby, 2003, p. 270.
[348] The two women were close friends from 1880 to 1884, while before that Robinson was an admirer of Symonds and the latter's jealously guarded protégée. See Colby, 2003, pp. 49-52.
[349] Colby, 2003, p. 51.
[350] Ibid., p. 2.
[351] Ibid., p. 30.
[352] Shortly after her first book, the real gender of the author was no longer a secret, yet Vernon Lee kept the masculine pen name all her life and used it in most of her private correspondences, showing that "Vernon Lee" by this stage was no longer a borrowed man's position but a re-invented identity for a woman conscious of her unconventional gender-positioning. See also Zorn, 2003, Chapter 4 on the alternative androgynous subjectivity adopted in Lee's philosophical writings.

also equally eager to defend her own way of doing history. While *Studies of the Eighteenth Century* only initiated Lee in the field of Italian art, her next book on art history *Euphorion* (1884) launched her directly in the crowded scene of Italian Renaissance, a field already claimed by famous men like Symonds and Pater. In the lengthy introduction to *Euphorion*, Lee only nods perfunctorily to preceding male masters in the field (or colleagues, as Lee probably preferred to regard them) before dethroning the master's methods and arguing for her own unique brand of historiography. Having Symonds' voluminous *Renaissance in Italy* (1877-97) in mind, she asserts:

> But besides such marvels of historic mapping as I have described, […] there are yet other kinds of work which may be done. For a period in history is like a more or less extended real landscape […], it may also be seen from different points of view, and under different lights; then, according as you stand, the features of the scene will group themselves …the scene will possess one or two predominant effects, it will produce also one or, at most, two or three (in which case co-ordinated) impressions. The art which deals with impressions, …is what you call new-fangled … Yet it is the only truly realistic art, and it only, by giving you a thing as it appears at a given moment, gives it you as it really ever is; all the rest is the result of cunning abstraction, and representing the scene as it is always, represents it (by striking an average) as it never is at all.[353]

History, like a landscape, therefore is essentially a perspectival thing to those who had experienced it in different valleys and those who now research it upon different heights. Thus the "marvels of historic mapping", which the author obligingly gives a salute in the beginning of the paragraph, is dethroned as merely "result of cunning abstraction" and only deceivingly realistic. The past is not an abstract totality, but a scene that can yield "one, two, or three" impressions. History viewed as a plurality therefore accords legitimacy to alternative histories such as hers, and moreover, as she has already demonstrated the impossibility of a "scientific representation" (*Euphorion I,* 11) of history, her subjective, fragmentary, and impressionistic approach may be the more

[353] Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediæval in the Renaissance*, vol. 1, 1884, pp. 9-10.

fruitful one. Lee is aware of the impressionistic feature of her Renaissance studies ("They are mere impressions"… "not so much a series of study as a series of impressions", *Euphorion I*, 16), yet she defends this "deficiency" rather as her strength, as her understanding of her subject is initiated not from some "abstract and exact" knowledge, but from first-hand life experiences: "I have seen the concrete things, and what I might call the concrete realities of thought and feelings left behind by the Renaissance" (*Euphorion I*, 16).

The disowning of a miraculous historic mapping in favour of one emanated from individual interest and temper may be Lee's tactic to carve out a niche in a field already dominated by Symonds who treated history in exactly a comprehensive and schematic fashion.[354] Yet the above quotation from *Euphorion* already contains traces of Lee's insistence on the relativism and perspective-ness of history and a valorization of the kind of historical understanding gained solely from the "standpoints of personal interest and in the light of personal temper" (*Euphorion I*, 8). In other words, what interests her the most is not the "real" past, which is already irretrievable and never existed as a single unity, but rather the individuals who write history — historians haunted by imaginary ghosts of the past. This same relativism regarding history has an indelible impact on Lee's ghost story writing. Stories of ghosts as stories of past are a reconstruction of the past, and the ghost conjurer, like the historian, moulds the ghost according to his/her own personal interest or temperament. Lee's own experience in contending for the position of a historian tips her well on the power manipulation in history-writing and ghost-making. Unlike other women ghost story writers who tend to locate their ghosts in the domestic sphere, Lee's ghost seers are almost always a contemporary male historian or artist thrown in an environment vibrant with the Past, and it is their hitherto unquestioned authority to write the women ghosts' history that her stories make problematic. In this sense, Lee was different from

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[354] See Hilary Fraser, 1992, *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy*, pp. 217-20 for a comparison of the historical methods of Symonds, Pater, and Lee; see also Fraser, 1998, pp. 90-1 on Symonds and Lee. Fraser argues that in methodology, Lee is more a disciple of Pater and situates herself as the opposite of comprehensive "historical mappers" like Symonds. In fact Lee admits in the bibliography of *Euphorion II* that she had deliberately avoided reading the parts of Symonds' *Renaissance In Italy* that deal with Renaissance literature, "from fear that finding myself doubtless forestalled by him in various appreciations, I might deprive my essays of what I feel to be their principal merit, namely, the spontaneity and wholeness of personal impression" (qtd. in Colby, 2003, p. 67). This deliberate distancing of her work from Symonds' certainly was felt (and perhaps meant) less as a compliment than a disavowal.

many of her contemporary women writers who wrote directly about women's experiences, but it was probably her position from "without" that better enables her to critique the ideological constructions of women in her time. In her history writing she had to appropriate a man's position largely due to the disciplinary conventions of the day, but in her fantastic literature, she dismantled that position.

In this chapter, I first examine Vernon Lee's ghost stories "Amour Dure" (1887, 1890) and "Oke of Okehurst" (1886, 1890) and how she problematizes the gendered, perspectival, and sometimes biased position of the male historian/narrator of the ghost. The contest between history and fiction, facts and fancy, or more narrowly the question who has access to and control of the past, is another frequent theme of her stories. In "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" (1896), Lee juxtaposes a sterile patriarchal court and its "dry historical facts" with a fecund feminine wonderland embedded in a luxuriant fairytale.[355] Through the revalorization of a fluid and unsettling femininity represented by the snake lady, she celebrates the pleasures of an alternative sexuality. Finally, I return to the issue of how to write the story of the ghost, which is also the central quest in *Louis Norbert: A Two-fold Romance* (1914). The novel stages an escalating contest between history and fiction as two ways to arrive at the secret of the past, enacted as a romance surrounding a "ghosted" figure whose existence can only be located just between facts and fancy and history and fiction, i.e., in the liminal realm of fantasy.

## 4.2 The Injustices of Man-made History

Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert in their 1991 anthology of Victorian ghost stories state that one of the great unasked critical questions about ghost stories is why so many women writers took to this genre.[356] Their answer that women were drawn to ghost stories simply because of the salability of the genre proves hardly satisfactory, but through the efforts of scholars in feminist and Gothic studies in the recent decades, the interrelatedness between the spectral image and Victorian women's articulation of their own condition and their critique of social establishments gradually emerges.[357]

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[355] Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, 2006, p. 183, edited by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham. If not otherwise indicated, quotations of Lee's ghost stories refer to this edition.
[356] Cox and Gilbert, *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories*, 1991, xiv.
[357] For studies on women writers and ghost literature, see Dickerson, 1996; Makala, 2013, and Wallace, 2013.

By the late nineteenth century, increasing awareness of women's inequality and stronger momentum to struggle for women's rights as well as the popularity of spiritualism all indicated that the time had come for greater changes, and the powerful ghost figure became a suitable metaphor not only to express the sense of marginalization and injustice felt by Victorian women but also to embody the radical reconceptualization of femininity.

Vernon Lee's stories somehow stand distinctively from this tradition of woman-authored ghost stories in that they often are not specifically concerned with female experiences. A close friend of Pater and an important figure in aestheticism, Lee's supernatural stories bear distinctively the colour of the time. Like her contemporary male Aesthetes, her stories show an obsession with erotic *femme fatale* figures. Diane Wallace admits that Lee is a figure that scholars find difficult to place in relation to other women writers, as most of her literary influences were from male authors.[358] Indeed as I noted before, Lee's tales more often focus on the male historian/artist's experience in perceiving and constructing the ghost woman, but it is precisely the focus on the making and maker of the (usually female) ghost instead of the woman ghost and her secrets that allows Lee a position to deconstruct men's construction of women. Lee's exploration of the psychological uncertainties in ghost-seeing also gives her stories a distinctive modernist flavour, which probably explains how the single collection *Hauntings* (1890) secures her a respectable place in supernatural literature.[359]

*Hauntings* (1890) offers four tales on contemporary figures haunted by sinister traces from the past.[360] Interestingly, two of the male narrators are occupied with some type of historical research: Spiridion Trepka in "Amour Dure" is a young historian sent to an Italian town to write a book on its local history, while Dr Alessandro de Rosis in "Dionea", the aged reporter of Dionea's story, is researching for a book on pagan gods in exile. A third narrator, the unnamed painter in "Oke of Okehurst", is an artist versed in contemporary aestheticist philosophy and therefore takes as objects of art not only paintings but also intriguing or perverse personalities. While the position of the

[358] Wallace, 2013, p. 131.
[359] Montague Summers singles out Lee's *Hauntings* for praise in his Introduction to *The Supernatural Omnibus*, 1931, p. 35.
[360] Three of the four tales, "Amour Dure" (1887), "Oke of Okehurst" (originally published as "A Phantom Lover" in 1886) and "A Wicked Voice" (1887) were originally published in periodicals.

historians in the two former cases is presumably one of objectivity and indifference, the position of the artist is one inevitably tinted with personal taste and temperament. But the male artist in "Oke of Okehurst", as I will show below, is also engaged in the project of constructing a woman's history, now dead at the time of his narrative. "Amour Dure" and "Oke of Okehurst", when viewed side by side, show poignantly that both the historian and the artist become a kind of male voyeur in their study of their respective subjects: history and art, for it is through fixing or controlling a ghost woman's image in their discourse that their masculinity (exemplified as a triumph over competing males) can be confirmed. The construction of the ghost woman's history in these tales is revealed inherently as a gendered project manipulated by male fancy and possessive desire. However, despite the men's constant endeavour to possess the ghost woman, spectrality in these stories also offers the ghost woman the power to revolt against that fixing, so that in the end she is able to effect her powerful presence out of men's history and in the liminal realm of haunting.

"Amour Dure" is related in the form of a diary by the historian Spiridion Trepka, detailing his stay in the Italian town Urbania where he was sent to research local history. In a sense, the portrait of Trepka the young historian resembles that of the young Vernon Lee herself: both felt a genuine love for the Past, both won acclaim at the young age of twenty-four with their first book on Italian history, and self-conscious of the high expectation from others on their intellectual ability, both felt poignantly the anxiety of influence, for their next research project entered a field crowded with the achievements of previous historians. When Trepka arrived at Urbania, he soon found that past histories about the place, written by preceding historians Gualterio, Padre de Sanctis, and Don Arcangelo Zappi (Lee's imaginary historians) provided not only a guiding map for him to extract clues for his new history, but also proved to be obstacles that he, if he was to convince the world of his worthiness as a historian, must seek to surmount by his own history.

Like what Lee did in her self-affirming introduction of *Euphorion* discussed above, "Amour Dure" in a sense traces the psychological journey that a late-comer in the field of Urbanian history went through in dethroning former historians. However, Trepka's resemblance with Lee stops here, for while Lee establishes her unique brand of historiography through a new approach, the crux of Trepka's competition with former historians soon revealed to be riveting around a woman — the sixteenth-century

*femme fatale* Medea da Carpi, or more precisely, around excavating and controlling different versions of the ghosted woman's history. While no existing history was dedicated to this notorious woman, Trepka still tried to put together a sketch of Medea's history from fragmentary mentions in previous histories on Duke Robert of Urbania. Medea, as depicted by these historians, was men's worst nightmares incarnated: she first stabbed to death her young suitor to enter a more prestigious marriage with the Orsini family; two years later she had her husband murdered by his groom, and quickly did away with the groom too. Then the widowed Medea trapped Duke Guidafonso with her charms, and the Duke not only shielded her from the revenge of the Orsini family, but also after the strange death of his wife, made Medea the new Duchess. Medea became the de facto ruler of Urbania after Guidafonso's untimely death, until Cardinal Robert, the younger brother of the late Duke and rightful heir of the duchy, broke his vow and took Urbania back from Medea and her lovers by force. For the clemency of Duke Robert, the villainous Medea was not immediately put to death but only confined; it was only after surviving an assassination schemed by Medea that Robert commanded the woman to be strangled by two murderesses, thus avoiding seeing the face of Medea throughout his life.

Trepka's major dispute with former historians was in the interpretation of Medea's history. While the preceding histories all exalted Robert as a man of clemency and denounced Medea as an unscrupulous murderess, seducing every man she met with her venomous charm, Trepka was determined to see Medea in the position of the victim. Determined to find romance in Italy, the male historian was contemptuous of contemporary Italian women around but was immediately fascinated by the portraits of the woman of his study. The more he contemplated over the portraits of Medea, the more Trepka sympathized with the woman, thus even before he found any historical evidence to redraw the above sketch of Medea, he could already picture in his mind a revisionist history of the woman:

> 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 some one to strike for her. (56-7)

The potential violence that Medea was likely to suffer from her husband described here is reminiscent of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess". The pathetic situation of the woman is laid bare: in a patriarchal society, even a noble woman had virtually no power of her own apart from her sexual appeal to men, which can easily backfire. So instead of being stricken like Browning's duchess, Medea struck first and used her sexual power to her own advantage. This rehabilitative rendering of Medea's history removes her from the role of the *femme fatale* to that of the victim, and connects her to the victimized female ghosts in Xuan Ding's and Wang Tao's tales who return to articulate their grievance or have their vengeance. Indeed, Trepka the revisionist historian is just like a counterpart to Wang Tao's narrator persona "The Historian of the Lost" (逸史氏), who sympathizes with the victimized and silenced women and purports to bring into light their true history; and just like the ghost-conjuring literati in Wang's stories, Trepka was soon rewarded by visits of the ghost woman herself.

However, Lee's story about ghost-seeing also offers a gendered critique of the male historian's ghost-making which Wang's tales lack. While in Wang's tales the male narrator is presented in a position detached and above his historical subjects, a position suitable to pass authoritative judgements, the legitimacy of Trepka as an objective historian to distribute historical justice is made increasingly problematic in "Amour Dure". Whether the ghost of Medea is real or a product of Trepka's imagination is kept in ambivalence throughout the story, but the female ghost's connection with the male historian's sexual desire is unequivocal, as Trepka himself justifies the reality of Medea by the sheer strength of his desire: "Why should there not be ghosts to such as can see them? Why should she not return to the earth, if she knows that it contains a man who thinks only of, desires, only her?" (69) Lee in her preface to *Hauntings* defines her "genuine ghost" as "things of the imagination, born there, bred there" (39), and the victimized Medea as imagined by the historian certainly is clearly one such "genuine ghost" created by the haunted. However, if the haunted happens to be a historian, this production of "imagination" ceases to be something innocent; as revealed poignantly in Trepka's case, the desired female ghost subtly becomes

indistinguishable from the desired history that the male historian intends to master and possess. Trepka's diary therefore illustrates the mechanism of male historian's (or ghost story writer's) making of history by making the story of a ghost woman. It is first the historian's desire to write a history superior to both his predecessors and contemporaries that motivated him to conjure up this Medea from scraps, and then he fleshed the ghost up with a consumptive passion that he deemed only he deserved. Sprinkled in Trepka's musings over Medea's history were his occasional ridicule to previous historical portrayals of Duke Robert, revealing that all the time while he was infatuated with Medea, his real targets were the rival historians. The more he believed in his version of Medea, the more glorious a light he saw himself in, as he wrote later, "I see it all so well — that crafty, cowardly Duke Robert; that melancholy Duchess Maddalena; that weak, showy, would-be chivalrous Duke Guidafonso; and above all, the splendid figure of Medea. I feel as if I were the *greatest historian* of the age; and, at the same time, as if I were a boy of twelve." (63, italics mine)

While Duke Robert's life is one motived by power and those histories in favour of him are but in service of power, Trepka's revisionist history of Medea is one no less fuelled by desire — the desire to possess the woman and her (and in the sense of it being a creation of the historian, it is also his) history, the two becoming interchangeable with each other as the story unfolds. The feminist potential of Trepka's sympathetic rewriting of Medea's history has been duly noted by critics,[361] but as Zorn rightly points out, Trepka's sexual obsession distorted his representation of Medea and rendered his reconstruction of Medea's history a perpetuation rather than a revision of the *femme fatale* cliché: "He claims to assign to Medea a new historical importance, but unable to think outside conventional gender images, he gives her, first and foremost, a sexual identity".[362] During his increasing immersion into the fantasy of Medea, Trepka's role was gradually transformed from historian to lover, as is made clear on his ultimate mission to destroy Medea's archenemy, Duke Robert as

[361] See for instance Patricia Kane, *Spurious Ghosts: The Fantastic Tales of Vernon Lee*, 2004, pp. 28-9, in which Kane contrasts Medea's portrait and Robert's statue as respectively representing an alternative version of history and the authoritative one; see also Catherine Maxwell, "From Dionysus to Dionea: Vernon Lee's Portraits", 1997, p. 267.

[362] Zorn, 2003, p. 163. Elsewhere in her book (pp. 149-50) Zorn points out the unconscious sexual desire that tints the narrator's portrayal of his protégée Dionea in "Dionea", which makes the male reporter an unreliable narrator. The same can be said to apply to Trepka, an unreliable narrator/historian whose gendered manipulation is invisible to himself yet obvious to the reader.

represented by his statue. The legion of Medea's former lovers met on his way only strengthened the historian's determination to carry out his mistress's command, for what could better prove him as the most deserving lover of Medea than his overriding his rivals? The historian died, as expected, of Medea's hands, but this only proved his correct interpretation of Medea's love motto: "amour dure — dure amour" — "The love of Medea da Carpi cannot fade, but the lover can die" (57). In death Trepka's ambition to become the greatest historian and the best of Medea's lovers coalesce and consummate each other.

While Trepka's history-making of the ghost woman is represented to be one tinted with his sexual desire and fantasy, it is also revealed as one resulting from his competition with rivalling males, thus further exposing the masculinity anxiety underlying man's history-making. More precisely, Trepka's masculinity anxiety is engendered by an anxiety with his national identity as a German-born Pole.[363] Throughout his diary, the historian emphasized his Polish origin, which he saw as elevating him above a prosaic German identity of his colleagues. But, as Peter Christenson points out, the Polish past that he reminisced about was only a blank "place holder" which "has no content at all".[364] Because as a colonized "Pole" he was devoid of a genuine Polish past, he had to invent a grandiose past in his study of history, which may vicariously endow him with a past. Thus situated, the historian's yearning for the Italian Past gains a new resonance: to encounter the Italian Past is not only a professional ambition but also a personal necessity that deals with a deeply felt identity crisis. The same identity crisis — a paradoxical faith in and suspicion of one's national pride and history, —surfaces in both Wang Tao's and Xuan Ding's history-making and ghost-making discussed previously. But Lee's intricate scrutiny of the male historian's ghost-conjuring exposes precisely the exclusion and manipulation of women involved in man's project of salvaging his masculinity: perturbed by an uncertainty with his national identity, the historian seeks to reaffirm his masculinity vicariously by having the final control of another Past, which boils down to the writing

[363] On discussions of Trepka's Polish identity, see Peter Christensen, "The Burden of History in Vernon Lee's Ghost Story 'Amour Dure'", 1989; and Kandola Sondeep, *Vernon Lee*, 2010, pp. 43-5.
[364] Christensen, 1989, p. 39. Trepka was said to come from Posen, a province of Poland which was taken over by Prussia in 1793 (See *Hauntings*, 2006, p. 42 editors' note). While Trepka died in the year 1885 at the age of twenty-four, it is clear that he must have been brought up as a German and the memory of a Polish past was largely constructed from imagination.

of a woman's history and substantiating that history with a ghost. The female ghost, bearing man's double desire to possess the woman and history, thus helps the historian to become the man that he believes he is: the best historian, the supreme lover, and wedded to the past/ghost.

But if Trepka's reconstruction of Medea's history is only a male fancy in service of man's self-aggrandisement, how is the real Medea's history to be written? Or is it even possible to write a woman's history immune from men's manipulation? Lee's relativist view of history explicated in her introduction to *Euphorion* may suggest a negative answer. As history is like a landscape that yields different impressions to people viewing it from different heights, the universal truth of history can never exist and what purports to be the truth is often but cunning abstractions; moreover, as dramatized in Trepka's case, such a history is mediated by the historian's personal obsessions. A more fruitful historical approach, as proposed in Lee's introduction, is to resort to the currents of thoughts and feelings in one's mind. This can be mistaken as an opportune apology to legitimize a historical reading energized purely by personal interest, and fits well with what Trepka did with Medea: writing a history of Medea tailored to his own desire and ambition. However, this is not Lee's true intention. Trepka's fault is that he tried to combat the biases of one version of history (Duke Robert's) by another equally biased one while claiming historical objectivity for his own version. As Nietzsche argues, real justice in historical study is a rare quality and too often what purports to be objectivity has nothing to do with justice, but merely with vanity and possessiveness of the historian. The truly just historian, accordingly, contemplates history in the same way as an artist in his "strongest and most spontaneous moment of creation", "the outcome of which may be an artistically true painting but cannot be a historically true one".[365]

And that artistic justice of the past, in Vernon Lee's model, is to write a fantasy of the past which dwells between facts and fancy instead of a history of the past which purports to be pure facts but can only be otherwise. Lee's historian Trepka is torn between two compelling forces — the historical method required by his profession and his fantasy of Medea fuelled by his passion. Through his passion and desire for

[365] Nietzsche, 1997, p. 91.

the woman he can sympathize with Medea, and yet in attempting to substantiate his desire through a historical discourse, he ends up as Zorn remarks "repeating precisely the patriarchal tradition".[366] Reviewing Lee's career as both art historian and fiction writer, Zorn comments that for Lee, "art can create a more immediate contact with the past than can historical scholarship."[367] Therefore to give justice to Medea, a melody, a drama, a fantasy — in essence, a fiction — may better serve its purpose than Trepka's history, and that is just what Lee did in writing the story "Amour Dure". It is true that no definite version of Medea's history is ascertained in the story, and even the existence of the ghost is questionable, but through a narrative permeated by the woman's haunting, a due amount of justice is already accorded to this ephemeral phantom. For instead of putting to rest the woman's memory by establishing an authoritative history of her, the interpretational gap opened up by Medea's haunting is always there, constantly casting doubts on structures of power and assurances that what is seen and recorded is really there. In the sense of haunting as a ceaseless retelling of the ghost's story, it proves a better way to empower those marginalized figures in society than history does.

While "Amour Dure" dramatizes the passion-bond Trepka as a blinded historian, "Oke of Okehurst" presents another story about man's construction of woman — the contemporary portraitist's efforts in controlling his sitter Mrs Alice Oke's image first through painting, and when that fails, through the narration of the woman's story three years after her death. As with the case of the passion-bound historian, the male artist's regulation of the woman's story is also exposed to be vital to the man's self-perception. On the one hand, the artist's impulse to regulate the woman's story betrays his unconscious desire to absolve himself from the Oke couple's tragic death for which he was partly responsible, thus effecting Lee's subtle critique of the morals of the contemporary Aesthetic philosophy. On the other hand, to possess the woman's narrative for the male artist also means the denial of the ghost woman's haunting and a reaffirmation of his own authoritative position as the creator of the woman's image. But at the same time, this masculinist regulation of a woman's image also meets with constant revolts from the aesthetic object, the eccentric Alice Oke, who effectively enlists on her side the power of ghosts when alive and after death. In this sense, Lee's

[366] Zorn, 2003, p. 163.
[367] Ibid., p. 147.

story provides an instance of a narration of the ghost woman's story which fails to fix the woman, but instead becomes a testament to the spectral power that a ghostly position can afford women.

Many critics have observed the story's heavy allusion to the contemporary Aesthetic Movement. The aesthetic critic in Walter Pater's model is a connoisseur of beauty; he takes as subjects of his artistic analysis not only beautiful objects of arts like music, painting or statue, but also "artistic accomplished forms of human life", and the "engaging personality in life or in a book."[368] The unnamed male portraitist in Lee's story is described as an incarnation of Pater's ideal aesthetic critic,[369] who is not only confident in his ability to grasp the essence of human personalities (a prerequisite of the portraitist's special art) but also takes great pleasure in doing so. Moreover, the portraitist aspires to instil into the portrait what he believes to be the true character of his sitter, the depth and truth of which may even elude the sitter's own knowledge. Such a purely aesthetic attitude towards life and art frees the avant-garde artist from any moral responsibility, but the implicit gender bias against women in this aesthetic ideology (as Pater's mystifying of the *femme fatale* in his interpretation of the "Mona Lisa" shows) also risks "killing" the woman under the male artist's gaze. In a sense, "Oke of Okehurst" dramatizes this process of artistic "killing" as a critique of the Aesthetic philosophy, as the male artist's unreliable narration subtly exposes his inclination to numb his own moral judgement and blind himself about his desire of the woman. But apart from this response to contemporary Aestheticism, I argue that the story also reveals the artist as somehow analogous to the historian in his search for "truth" and depth in his aesthetic object and in rendering it into an artistic form that can reveal this "truth" to posterity. Both are meaning makers and seek to impose their interpretation onto their subjects — one making history, the other making personality. If the artist as a Paterian aesthetic critic is confident in his ability and responsibility to "penetrate" into the object of his study, his analogous situation with the historian also foretells the perils in the process of regulating his artistic object.

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[368] Qtd. in Stefano Evangelista, "Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism", in Maxwell and Pulham eds., 2006, p. 95.
[369] On "Oke of Okehurst" as Lee's response to Pater's aestheticism, see for instance Sondeep, 2003, pp. 25-6.

Indeed, once the exquisite aesthetic object, Alice Oke appears in the story, the artist immediately begins to lose control of his narrative. While he can summarize effortlessly and contemptuously the character of the husband William Oke the moment the latter comes to his studio for a commission, the verbal net he casts on Alice Oke extends a whole page yet still fails to grasp her exquisiteness, and he has to admits the futility of his efforts: "But where is the use of talking about her? ... Something — and that the very essence — always escapes…" (114-5). The painter has trouble unifying his narrative about Alice Oke: admitting she is "an enigma", he nonetheless affirms "I doubt whether any one ever understood Alice Oke besides myself" (107); promising to give the interlocutor "the absolute reality of her as I gradually learned to see it" (113), he instead begins the abovementioned brambling which ends in a frustration with language. This inconsistency of the painter's narrative is soon revealed to be connected with his unconscious desire towards his aesthetic object. After knowing Alice's tremendous interest in the scandalous love affair and murder performed by her and her husband's sixteenth-century ancestors, the painter soon engages in encouraging Alice in this obsession which her husband shuns from, thus effectively estranging husband and wife and positioning himself favourably as a rival to the husband. Although the painter claims his irreproachable motive in doing so — all in the service of art, his active denial "I became interested in Mrs. Oke as if I had been in love with her; and I was not the least in love" (117) only ironically reveals his insincerity.

Just as the inconsistencies of the painter's narrative fissure his authorial control of Alice's story and betray his disguised sexual interests, his motivation for painting the portrait of the woman is also gradually exposed as questionable, as what he is fascinated by seems to be not the real Alice but a desired eccentric image of the woman he tries to impose on her. In encouraging Alice in her morbid craze over her ancestor Alice Oke's lover, the murdered poet Christopher Lovelock, the painter rejoices that the morbidity "completed her personality so perfectly" (129), and he is already picturing in his mind such a personality instilled into the portrait which is even larger than the real sitter: "Mrs. Oke even might resent it […] No matter. That picture should be painted, if merely for the sake of having painted it; for I felt … that it would be far away my best work" (129). The artist's ambition to create the best portrait regardless of the subject of the portrait resembles the historian Trepka's zeal to write the best

history even at the expense of arousing the ghost. In both cases, the male historian/artist see their success relying on the making of a dangerous woman, as if by successfully taming that woman that no other man has succeeded in taming, their authority as the creator is securely enshrined.

However, the dangerous woman Alice Oke reveals to be untameable, and she actively evokes spectrality as a way to resist men's defining of her which alienates her husband and later exasperates the seemingly open-minded artist. Although the avant-garde artist contrasts himself with Alice's uptight husband and prides himself in his ability to appreciate personalities as eccentric as Alice's, his narrative of the woman's story is no less prescribed by conventional models of femininity as the husband's is. He first attributes Alice's self-absorption to her childlessness and the frivolity common to idle women of her class, extraordinary in her case yet still comprehensive in a common model of femininity,[370] but soon the woman outstrips even that image by her escalating "unwomanly" activities. She first takes the painter to the very spot where her ancestors murdered Lovelock, and then dressed herself as a groom with the very clothes the sixteenth-century Alice wore in her act of murder in a masquerade party. This aggressive masquerading of murderous masculinity by the woman not only shocks her husband but also totally puts off the artist, who now has to fix the woman through other conventional regulations of femininity — a clichéd reference to madness: "It seemed to me horrible, vulgar, abominable, as if I had got inside a madhouse" (139).

Cross-dressing is a recurrent trope in Lee's fiction and androgyny a conspicuous public persona she adopted in life, as Lee was known by her contemporaries in her "mannish attire — dark, severely tailored dresses, high starched collars, stiff bowler or boater hats" — a gender irresoluteness captured vividly in John Singer Sargent's 1881 portrait of her.[371] If Lee's severely tailored clothes, as Colby comments, were only mannish but not masculine and passed as fashionable attire for the thriving New Women of the age, they at least indicated a gender image monitored by the subject

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[370] Lee is especially sympathetic for the plight of upper-class women constrained to a life of compulsory idleness and frivolity. She explores this subject in her short story collection *Vanitas* (1892), in which "A Worldly Woman" portrays sympathetically the awakening of such a "worldly" woman and an unsympathetic male artist who fails to free her from this condition. Lee's sympathy for women's forced idleness was later transformed into a more systematic feminism in her "The Economic Parasitism of Women" in *Gospels of Anarchy*.

[371] Colby, 2003, p. 52, p. 81.

that did not seamlessly accord with one's biological sex, just as the literary persona "Vernon Lee" shows. In her study on cross-dressing, Marjorie Garber makes the bold arguments that "clothes make the man" and that cross-dressing engenders a "category crisis" more than just a crisis of gender.[372] Cross-dressing thus is a bold revolt against conventional regulations on the body for it is the body, the last but most powerful resource of the subject that revolts. In Lee's fiction, cross-dressing for women sometimes is an expedient strategy to conceal their true identity so as to gain more mobility,[373] but it can also be an act of revealing. In Alice Oke's case, it is a conspicuous bodily revolt against the linguistic net that her husband and the artist cast on her.[374] For although the men control the language about the woman, the woman remains the sovereign of her body and confounds their defining categories through a performance of her body. Whether the secret that this coded performance reveals is a lesbian energy or a revolt against a conventional domestic wife's role,[375] the result is a divorce between appearance and essence, the signified constantly slipping under the deceiving garments the woman chooses to wear at the moment, so her real personality "would slip through my fingers like a snake" (149) as the artist later is to admit.

Cross-dressing provides Alice with the opportunity to confound gender categories, but by dressing in her ancestor Alice Oke's clothes, the nineteenth-century Alice even baffles the category between life and death and effectively makes herself into a ghost. Indeed, a ghostly existence is the woman's self-chosen existence in the story which enables her to revolt against and slip out from men's various controlling discourses on her. Taking up the role of the dead Alice and absorbing herself in the contented love with the ghost of Lovelock, Alice in the nineteenth century in effect frees herself from the loveless arranged marriage by remaining childless and denying the maternal role. The existence of ghosts completes the woman, and a ghostly position offers her the only position from which she can resist men's definition of her. Ghosts haunt the Okes'

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[372] Garber, 1992, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, pp. 16-7.
[373] In Lee's *Ariadne in Mantua: A Romance in Five Acts* (1906), the heroine Magdalen is disguised as a youth to serve as her lover's musician. In *Louis Norbert: A Two-fold Romance*, the romance in the seventeenth century also involves a woman dressed as a male singer.
[374] As Sondeep, 2010, points out, the husband and the artist in the story continuously try to fix Alice in a list of "contemporary categories of aberrant female behaviour (the hysteric, the flirt, the barren woman and the *femme fatale*)" (p. 27).
[375] For instance, Pulham reads in Alice's cross-dressing a lesbian sexuality, and the coded language surrounding Lovelock implies that he is a substitute for a woman. See Pulham, *Art and Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales*, 2008, pp. 128-32.

marriage but emancipate the otherwise invisible and immobile wife. Therefore in the end when the passive and largely impotent husband finally rises to eliminate the danger that Alice poses to categories of gender, ironically he is also helping the woman to fulfil her own wish of becoming a ghost: believing he is shooting Alice's lover, he shoots Alice instead, and he soon commits suicide afterwards.

However, what the husband fails to do in Alice's life, the painter tries to do after her death with his narrative of her story: to assign the unconforming woman to a conventional and deprecating woman's role. Establishing himself as a qualified historian of the Okes' tragic history, the painter summarizes up to the interlocutor what he claims to be the true nature of Mrs Oke: "the mixture of self-engrossed vanity, of shallowness, of poetic vision, of love of morbid excitement, that walked this earth under the name of Alice Oke" (140). Yet as I have shown above, the painter's narration constantly revolts against its narrator, as if the ghost of Alice haunts his words still, and the narration fails again in assigning a stable meaning on the woman. Ruth Robbins in discussing the Gothic themes in Lee's stories, emphasizes the kind of freedom created by Gothic's opacity of vision, "the Gothic depends on not being able to see things clearly and whole".[376] This difficulty with seeing makes it difficult to fix meanings thus allows the spectral woman a haunting presence outside of the conventional women's roles allocated to them — as in "Amour Dure", haunting creates a liminal zone in which spectral women can play with their own fragmented images and take on various identities.

The theme of the aesthetic artist's failed Pygmalion project of creating his desired woman in "Oke of Okehurst" also underlies Lee's first full-length novel *Miss Brown* (1884). *Miss Brown* is set in the centre of the contemporary London aesthetic circle and is directly levelled on what Lee perceives to be the gender politics in male-dominated Aestheticism.[377] The novel's eponymous heroine Anne Brown is a model beauty by the aesthetics' standard, discovered by the movement's leading artist Walter Hamlin in his friend's house as a maidservant. Enthralled by the prospect that he can make Anne into his ideal muse, the artist offers the girl an education befitting a lady and a promise of marriage in the future. However, once the hollow Anne is filled with

[376] Robins, "Apparitions Can Be Deceptive: Vernon Lee's Androgynous Spectres", 2000, p. 186.
[377] On this respect, see Evangelista, 2006.

the essence Hamlin tailors for her, the Galatea rebels. Anne is repulsed by the form that male aesthetes impose on her, and like Alice Oke, she is not contented to be just an artefact in men's design. She sees clearly her role in an ideal androgyny different from either women or men:

> Some few women seem to be born to have been men, or at least not to have been women. … As with their lovers and husbands, so also with their children: they cannot blissfully concentrate all their passion upon them; such love will soon become narrow and bitter for them. They are indeed sent into the world (if any of us is ever sent for any purpose) to be its Joans of Arc—to kindle from their pure passion a fire of enthusiasm as passionate, but purer than it is given to men to kindle: they are not intended to be, …either wives or mothers. Masculine women, mere men in disguise, they are not …they are, and can only be, true women; but women without woman's instincts and wants, sexless — women made not for man but for humankind. Anne Brown was one of these.[378]

*Miss Brown*, as "Oke of Okehurst", focuses on aestheticist artists' objectification of women, but many critics have also read the novel as containing a coded subtext about the lesbian desire between the chaste Anne and her opposite, the sensual Sacha Eulaguine.[379] Certainly in the above emphasis on Anne's "sexlessness" which amounts to an ideal "third sex", there might be a coded revelation of a sexuality that is not explicable in a heterosexual economy, i.e. her homosexuality. Lee's fiction may not all have a lesbian subtext simply because of the author's sexual orientation,[380] but the sense of her gender difference as already evidenced in the masculine literary persona "Vernon Lee" certainly prompts her fiction to experiment with ambiguous sexualities and unconventional gender models as *Miss Brown* and "Oke of Okehurst" have done. If homosexuality or "sexlessness" is a form of the anomaly in a heterosexual economy, then ghosts and demons in a fantastic setting certainly provide

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[378] *Miss Brown*, 1884, vol. 2, pp. 307-9.

[379] See for instance Pulham, 2008, pp. 81-4, Kathy Psomidades, 1999, "'Still Burning from This Strangling Embrace': Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics", pp. 21-42 and Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928*, 2004, pp.154-6 for a decoding of the lesbian subtext in the novel.

[380] Newman, 2005, warns that lesbian historians must be alert to the "theoretical and definitional uncertainty" in lesbian identity and be careful what counts as "evidence" or trace of lesbian desire when they are bent to find that trace (p. 53). I agree and believe it is also applicable to literary interpretation of works by alleged lesbian writers.

a better way to express these illicit modes of desire and subjectivity, as the following discussion of Lee's "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" will show.

### 4.3 Fantasy Usurping History: An Initiation into the Cult of Sexual Fluidity

"Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" was first published in July 1896 in *The Yellow Book*, the only one of Lee's stories published in the periodical closely associated with Aestheticism; and befitting the taste of *The Yellow Book*, the tale is full of sensual imageries surrounding a woman of abnormal sexuality: the snake lady Oriana. Particularly, the story overwrites a popular contemporary misogynist motif, the serpentine *femme fatale*, into an icon of ideal femininity combining both maternal and phallic traits. Like Lee's earlier heroine Miss Brown, the snake lady represents Lee's ideal of the remarkable woman who presides over a fecund feminine utopia and is sent to cleanse the corrupt patriarchal world, and her tutoring of the young Prince Alberic envisions the possibility for the young generation's successful initiation into her cult of sexual fluidity. The form of the story, a lush fairy tale embedded in a dry historical frame, is also one example of Lee's usual trick of blurring genre categories, but in this story, the form also serves a thematic purpose. Two narrative modes about the past are juxtaposed in the story in a competition over the control of the snake woman's story: the dry historical narrative regulated by a patriarchal court and the church orthodoxy which seeks to exorcise the snake woman, and the oral and folk narratives in which the snake woman thrives. Although the snake lady's final decapitation may show that Lee was less confident of society's tolerance for remarkable yet sexually "abnormal" women like Oriana, the story's juxtaposition of different narrative modes does witness the woman's perseverance in the fantastic realm, just like Medea's haunting presence evidenced in "Amour Dure".

In the beginning, the snake lady's identity was closely associated with her snake tail which marks her sexuality abnormality and had led to her condemnation, yet surprisingly it turns out to be a trait that fascinates the young Prince Alberic. Alberic was the grandson and the only heir of the "ever-young" Duke Balthasar Maria of the House of Luna, who in avoidance to be associated with ageing had been neglecting the boy for years. Isolated in his grandfather's barren Red Palace, the boy had made an old tapestry depicting the snake lady and a knight his best friend, as the border of the tapestry richly embroidered with all kinds of animals and plants offered him the

only channel to know about nature. In this sense, the snake lady in the tapestry had begun her tutoring of the prince even before he knew of her true identity, as at that time the lower part of the tapestry was covered by a crucifix so the vital snake tail was blocked from view. It was when the boy was nearing puberty that his nurse removed the crucifix and revealed for the first time the lady's snake tail.

Alberic's discovery of the snake tail was his first lesson on sexuality from the snake lady, for on that snake tail hung the whole weight of her sexual anomaly — in what was normally the place of the female genitalia, there was not to be found a hole but a protruding snake's tail, a strange blend of gentle femininity and phallic aggressiveness. It was no wonder, therefore, that previously the lower part of her body should have been covered by the crucifix, a token of orthodox Christianity, for it was precisely the woman's troublesome sexuality that had excluded her from a society regulated by a patriarchal heterosexual normality, and the crucifix offered a proper suppression for that part which it deemed dangerous. As the boy was later to know of the snake lady's tragic story, Oriana was a fairy condemned to a snake body "for no faults", yet it was precisely her snake tail that was viewed by social establishments as "her sins" (210) and led to her tragic betrayal and persecution by previous patriarchs of the House of Luna. Analysing the story's sympathetic portrayal of a guiltless heroine persecuted for her sexual anomaly and its sensuous style reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales, Margarete Stetz argues that the story's appearance in *The Yellow Book* in 1896 was Lee's implicit support for Wilde, a fellow sexual minority whose tragic downfall happened just one year earlier.[381] But apart from this biographical reading, I argue that what Lee achieves in this tale is overwriting forcefully the usual misogynist snake motif connected with women's sexuality into a positive symbol of ideal femininity. From the Greek Medusa, the Christian Lilith, the Romantic lamia, to the little mermaid, the snake tail has marked woman's aggressive sexual appetite and her supernatural power to transform beyond the docile, but it is also regarded as a sign of her bestiality in patriarchal imagination, the revolutionary part of a woman that must be mutilated and suppressed to recuperate her desirability. Yet in "Snake Lady", Oriana's tail as seen by the young prince free from any preconceived notions of sexual propriety, becomes a trait that complements rather than condemns her. The boy loved the snake

[381] See Stetz, "The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head: Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde in the *Yellow Book*", in Maxwell and Pulham eds., 2006.

lady “only the more because she ended off in the long twisting body of a snake. And that, no doubt, was why the knight was so very good to her” (188). The snake lady’s “abnormality”— her snake-ness, her anomalous body combining both feminine and phallic traits, is therefore transformed into a positive transgressive sexuality in the boy’s eyes.

Moreover, the story further elevates the snake lady to a representation of the ideal woman with a transformative power. Alberic’s love for the snake lady led to his first rebellion against his grandfather, which ended in his exile in the ruins of The Castle of Sparkling Waters. Yet this proved to be the next step of his initiation in the snake lady’s cult, for he soon met here his beautiful godmother who gave him a humanistic education, and a grass snake who became his companion. The Sparkling Waters itself was depicted as veritably a Utopia — a fertile feminine space full of wild lives in nature in contrast to the barren and heavily surveillanced Red Palace presided over by Duke Balthasar.[382] Moreover, unlike the strict hierarchy of the Red Palace, Sparkling Waters was where the low and the high, the humble and the magnanimous lived in equality and in respect for each other. If the Red Palace, as Alberic intuitively sensed, was a personification of his grandfather, the Sparkling Waters then was the incarnation of the snake lady, and the positive values nurtured by the snake lady — sympathy, simplicity, love, and loyalty — were in every respect contrasted with the vices of the Duke’s court: vanity, treachery, and exploitation. Alberic’s later discovery that the godmother and the grass snake were different modes of existence of the fairy Oriana further completed the snake lady’s ideal image: her unconventional femininity now combined a maternal abundance, a masculine determination, and even a childlike simplicity. In this analysis, the sensuous snake lady resembles another of Lee’s androgynous woman, the “sexless” Miss Brown mentioned above: both are ideal women who are born “not to have been women”, “women made not for man but for humankind” (*Miss Brown*, II, 308-9). These are the archetypes of Lee’s marvellous women who make trouble not only with gender norms but also with the societies they are sent in: they are endowed with a mission to reform and cleanse the world.

[382] The twelve plaster Caesars, one presiding over each window of the Red Palace which Alberic always found uncanny, as Kane observes, resemble one model of Foucault’s panopticon; see Kane, 2004, p. 54.

The dangerous and despised snake remoulded with a positive energy to reform a corrupted world also reminds one of the equally impressive old snake man in Xuan Ding's story "Bai Laochang" as discussed in Chapter Two. In most world religions and mythologies, the snake had been associated with the prehistoric goddess, a symbol of regeneration and life-giving force.[383] But when the matriarchal religion was replaced by the patriarchal order, the snake goddess generally underwent a dramatic demonization. While the positive Old-European snake goddess was replaced by a slew of demonic snake women from Medusa to the lamia, the legendary creator goddess Nüwa 女媧 with a snake's tail in Chinese mythology also gradually evolved into the barely recognizable demonic snake seductress epitomized in the legend of the White Snake Lady.[384] Snake thus in both Chinese and European culture becomes associated with excessive female sexual appetite, impersonated as a feminine parasite that sucks out men's life energy. The snake woman was especially popular with the late Victorian Decadent artists; for them, she was the model of feminine cruelty, epitomized by Algernon Charles Swinburne's (1837-1909) verbal sketch: "Lamia re-transformed, invested now with a fuller beauty, but divested of all feminine attributes not native to the snake".[385] Lee herself was greatly fascinated with the snake figure. At the age of fourteen, she wrote a crispy brief tale entitled "*Capo Serpente*: *A Legend of the Roman Campagna*" about how a serpent king with a beautiful youth's head mesmerizes an artist.[386] Already in this tale, the mysterious snake figure is described as having an ambiguous yet alluring sexuality, prefiguring the "abnormal" yet attractive femininity celebrated in the snake lady Oriana.[387] Lee's stories in the 1880s were also influenced

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[383] Snake had been a symbol of fertility that combined both femininity and masculinity long before the Christian mythology's association of the snake with Satan. The snake goddess was worshipped in most areas of prehistoric Europe and associated with mysterious life-giving force, which may have lingered on in the Greek god Hermes, a god associated with fertility and healing as well as symbols of phallus and snake. See Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, 1989, pp. 121-37.

[384] See Chang Chia-ju, "The Chinese Snake Woman: Mythology, Culture and Female Expression", PhD Diss., State University of New Jersey, 2004. For the legend of the White Snake Lady in China and Xuan Ding's modification of the snake motif, see Chapter Two.

[385] Swinburne, "Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence", excerpted in *Hauntings*, 2006, p. 280. See also Nina Auerbach, 1982, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, on the many manifestations of the serpent-woman in Victorian literature.

[386] The story was never published in Lee's life. Full text of it is now published in the online Vernon Lee studies journal *The Sibyl*: https://thesibylblog.com/capo-serpente-by-vernon-lee/

[387] Martha Vicinus observes that in *fin-de-siècle* literature, the figure of the adolescent boy is often used by gay and lesbian writers as an embodiment of homoerotic desire. See Vicinus, "The Adolescent Boy : Fin-De-Siècle Femme Fatale?", 1999, pp. 83-108.

by the contemporary snake trope popularized by Swinburne, as in her "Amour Dure" and "Oke of Okehurst" she represents a Medea with lips that "could bite or suck" (52) and an Alice whose figure slips like a snake from one's fingers. But as I have shown in the previous section, these two stories, although referring to the existing trope, also deconstruct the male historian/artist' defining power over the snake-like woman. If "Amour Dure" and "Oke of Okehurst" focus on men's fantasies about ghostly women and problematize the way that they regulate or control the ghostly woman's story, in "Snake Lady" the remarkable woman's own history comes to the fore, but at the same time, the text juxtaposes a dry historical mode with a fairy tale mode and witnesses different discourses' competition over the control of the snake woman's past.

"Snake Lady" begins with a dry historical prologue "In the year 1701, the Duchy of Luna became united to the Italian dominions of the Holy Roman Empire" (182), and then proceeds into the fairy tale in which Prince Alberic was initiated into Oriana's cult; at the end of the tale with both Oriana and Alberic's deaths, the narrative returns cyclically to the historical prologue — "Be this as it may, history records as certain that the house of Luna became extinct in 1701, the duchy lapsing to the Empire" (227). But the story does not end here, instead it proceeds to tell, in the same matter-of-fact tone, that travellers can still find rags of the tapestry "having represented the story of Alberic Blond and the Snake Lady" (228). The story therefore virtually ends with the words "the Snake Lady", forming a rhythmic echo to the title and the extraordinary tale in the centre that the concluding "history" has just suppressed. Although the story purports to begin and end in "dry historical fact", the richly imaginative fairy tale in the core outshines and threatens to break away from its historical container, with the lingering echo of the spell-like "Snake Lady" in the last sentence serving as a sign of its persistence.

This mingling of the historical with the fictional, or a blurring of the distinction between different genres, as critics have noted, is a recurrent feature of Lee's writing.[388] In Lee's "A Seeker of Pagan Perfection", a piece that problematizes the

[388] See for instance Zorn, 2003, pp. 55-6 and Colby, 2003, pp. 247-8. Apart from "The Snake Lady" and the following example, Lee's "The Wedding Chest" (in *Pope Jacynth and and Other Fantastic Tales*, 1904) is also a fantastic tale contained in a historical frame, and her "Ravenna and Her Ghosts: A Medieval Legend" (in *Limbo and Other Essays*, 1897) is an essay that transgresses into fiction.

usual distinction between fiction and non-fiction,[389] the narrative begins with the author speaking directly to her reader: "I give to the reader rather as historical fact than as fiction the study which I have always called to myself: *Pictor Sacrilegus*".[390] But this authorial command is accompanied with an admission that the story's origin is purely in the historian's mind: "Twenty years have passed since first I was aware of its presence… It is presumably a piece of my inventing, for I have neither read it nor heard it related".[391] Such an admission might totally disqualify the proceeding narrative as history, but what Lee the historian (as she claims herself to be) appeals from her reader is precisely to reconsider the criteria of history and fiction. If the personal and perspectival historical method she proposes in her introduction to *Euphorion* is only mildly remonstrating a historiography aimed at universal truth, here she goes even further to suggest that, if history is people's construction of the past, then a picture of the past originating from the historian's mind is no less "true" to the past than one extracted from external sources. The result of this conflation of genres is an invitation for the reader to rethink the boundary between history and fiction and an experimentation with ways in which one mode of narrative may penetrate and transform into the other.

"Snake Lady" continues this problematization on the differentiation between history and fiction; moreover, the different narrative modes in the story — the dry historical frame and the fantastic core — each represent a narrative impulse regarding the regulation of the past: in Kathryn Hume's words, one is the impulse to mimic reality, while the other is the fantastic.[392] The mimetic impulse of the text tries to confirm what is written is the reality, and it only tells us that in the year 1701 House Luna became extinct; this is a disenchanted time from which the snake lady had been exorcised. The fairy tale contained within the historical frame leaves space for Alberic and Oriana's story to develop, yet in this fantastic temporality, there were already signs of a rival between the official history of House Luna that dispelled the snake lady and

[389] The piece was first published in 1891 in *The Contemporary Review* and included in Lee's essay collection *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), but later it was treated as a fantastic tale and often anthologized in Lee's supernatural story collections, for instance in *The Snake Lady and Other Stories* by Grove Press in 1954 and *The Collected Supernatural and Weird Fiction of Vernon Lee*, by Leonaur in 2011.
[390] *The Collected Supernatural and Weird Fiction of Vernon Lee*, vol. 1, p. 132.
[391] Ibid., p. 132.
[392] See Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, 1984.

the oral history lingering precariously on where her existence could be traced. The minstrel's song about Alberic the Blond and the Snake Lady from which Alberic learnt of Oriana's past is one such trace, and the priest's memory of a "foolish poem", "in very poor style" about the same legend, is another (211). A similar para-history bearing traces of the fantastic woman also exists in "Amour Dure": the Prefect's son told Trepka that in his childhood his nurse would threaten him with a visit from "Madonna Medea, who rode in the sky on a black he-goat" (59). Medea riding a he-goat certainly is an image distorted by Duke Robert's biased history of the woman, but it also evidences the endurance of the woman's memory: when almost all her traces are eliminated from official histories, her spirit becomes part of the collective unconscious of Urbania.

The minstrel's song and the priest's poem are already fossils of a remote past in Alberic's time. Thus, the story contains narratives of three historical times: the remote past which witnessed Oriana and Alberic the Blond's romance, the more recent past (or present) and the core of the story in which Alberic encountered the snake lady, and an unspecified modern time in which the story is related, which condenses all the former times into a terse sentence "In the year 1701 the Duchy of Luna…". It is not difficult to see that the remoter the time, the richer the narrative language and the stronger the snake lady's presence, while the linguistic abundance of this feminine realm dwindled to a barren historical dry fact of the present time. The minstrel's song about Oriana and Alberic the Blond forms part six, spatially occupying the core of the thirteen-part story. In keeping with the style of chivalric romance, it is the most sympathetic of the snake lady. Interestingly, this sympathetic narrative of Oriana's past is partly confirmed and partly condemned in the following part seven where Alberic, shocked in his sickbed, sought to verify the story with a neighbouring priest. The priest, believing that the prince was possessed by an evil spirit, related how Alberic the Blond and a second Marquis Alberic both failed Oriana. His source was the folk poem mentioned above, but representing as he was the orthodoxy of the church, he denounced the poem as "foolish", "in very poor style", of "a very inferior composition" and appealed to "the uneducated" (211). Thus, already in the oral tradition of Oriana's story there is side by side a commoner's celebration of the fairy and the church's suppression of her as a witch. If part six and part seven at the centre of the story function to establish the snake woman's past, we see two forces competing

for the control of that past, dramatized comically in the manner in which the priest recounted the snake woman's story as a foil to exorcise the woman. The paradox of the priest's suppression evidences precisely the woman's power to revolt against regulating discourses: to exorcise her is to speak of her, and linguistically she will never die.

The fairy tale section of "Snake Lady" in which Alberic was successfully initiated into the snake lady's cult of sexuality, offers a tolerant space where an alternative androgynous femininity could be imagined, yet it also witnesses the height of hostility against the snake woman, as Duke Balthasar succeeded in doing what all his ancestors failed to do — killing the immortal fairy for good. Such a tragic ending may reflect that Lee's confidence in the type of remarkable woman who may reform the society had already lapsed since *Miss Brown*. But on the other hand, the killing of the snake lady leads to the extinction of the Luna House, therefore it is also a deadly blow to what the Duke represents: an intolerant patriarchal regime. In the end, what we get from the story is a terse historical frame barely containing its fantastic contents, and implicit in this arrangement of different narrative modes is a yearning to break away from history towards fantasy, a yearning that frequently surfaces in Lee's fiction.

### 4.4 Conjurers of the Past: The Historian versus the Novelist

Nowhere is the conflict between history and fiction more dramatized than in Lee's novel *Louis Norbert: A Two-fold Romance* (1914), where two modern figures, a young archaeologist (a synonym for historian) and a middle-aged aristocrat Lady Venetia collaborate in a historical research on a seventeenth-century French orphan Louis Norbert who had been adopted by Venetia's ancestors. The historical research unearths not only the real identity of Louis Norbert, but also an ill-fated seventeenth-century romance that is paralleled in the twentieth century, thus the subtitle "a two-fold romance". The eponymous hero, Louis Norbert, is nicknamed "the ghost" of "the Ghost's Room" in Lady Venetia's ancestral home. This "ghost" of Louis Norbert, to be sure, is not a genuine ghost, but in haunting Lady Venetia's youthful memories and in being purged from history by certain regimes so that only fragmentary traces of him remain, Louis Norbert is an effectively ghosted figure, just like so many people who had died silent victims in the violence of history and returned as ghosts in the Chinese *zhiguai*. Although the story is not about a genuine ghost, it does focus on the process

of piecing together the lost story of the "ghost"; in other words, it is about unearthing the truth of the past. As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, making up a story of the ghost is one way of conjuring up the past while writing history is another, therefore as a novel that self-consciously contests different discourses on the construction of the past — history versus fiction — as well as the implicit gendered dimension involved in this construction, *Louis Norbert* is a meta-ghost story about the writing of the ghost's story.

In keeping with the phrase "two-fold" in the subtitle, characters in the novel are staged as parallels as they are introduced in the beginning like characters for a dramatic performance: "Personages of the Twentieth Century" and "Personages of the Seventeenth Century".[393] Each of the main characters is also presented in dialectical relation with the others by a logic of desire and identification: Lady Venetia, bearing the same middle name with Artemisia del Valore in the seventeenth century, is her modern counterpart, while the young archaeologist occupies the position of the youth Louis Norbert; at the same time, each of the modern personage takes a romantic interest in the seventeenth-century character of the opposite gender — the archaeologist loves Artemisia while Lady Venetia loves Louis Norbert. Thus triangulated, desire travels both between man and woman and across time, creating a multilayered net in which every dot is not isolated but can sympathize with and even personify the others. But even more important than the cross-pairing of characters is a pair of related concepts, corresponding respectively to the research method of the male archaeologist and Lady Venetia — "to discover" or "to invent"; while the historian and the woman's dispute over the two terms seems to be a linguistic question in the beginning, gradually it reveals to a vital question in their construction of the ghost's past and in each gender's construction of the other.

Early on in their correspondence, when Venetia seems unable to find any more traces of Louis Norbert in her family's Muniment Room, the archaeologist writes to encourage her to "invent" something about her "ghost":

> … there are other and perhaps better ways of getting news of him. Do you remember writing to me that if I could find out nothing I was to "make it up"?

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[393] *The Collected Supernatural and Weird Fiction of Vernon Lee*, vol. 2, p. 199. Later in-text quotations from *Louis Norbert* all refer to this edition.

> Well, I venture to say the same to you — *invent*! It is but another form of the Latin word which means to *discover*! (Italics original, 247)

He then proceeds to recollect how one evening in their first acquaintance, Venetia entertained a group of friends by telling them a sentimental love story of a German couple, while revealing in the end that all these people were just products of her imagination. Such, the archaeologist assures Venetia, is her genius for "inventing". However, the seemingly complementary letter meets only with the woman's indignation, who reproaches the historian in her next letter and insists that in the matter of Louis Norbert she refuses absolutely to be associated with the concept of inventing.

Lady Venetia's strong detest of the historian's seemingly well-meant recommendation to "invent" seems at first confusing, until later she reveals how this association between women and "to invent" veils a sinister bias against women's intellectual capacity; and it is this crude type-casting of women by men that she objects to. Early on Venetia admitted in a letter to the historian her perception of the latter's opinion of women: "I remember you said at Pisa… that frivolous people … like me divide the world's contents into things they like and things that bore them, and never suspect there may be any other order in the universe". (227) This description of an aristocratic idle woman immersed in her own fancy of a ghost is reminiscent of the self-absorbed and over-imaginative Alice Oke. Indeed, the middle-aged Venetia may well be a mature Alice if the latter survived her first loveless marriage from the heat of aestheticism of the 1880s. At the same time, the amateur woman embarking on a historical research with an intuitive methodology likely to be frowned upon by male colleagues also in some sense reflects Lee's self-perception. In this sense, the outspoken Venetia becomes the spokesperson for all of Lee's women characters suffering under male voyeurism and prejudices. While Alice Oke only retreats to a state of indifference to men's ceaseless scrutiny of her, the mature Venetia is ever alert to men's tendency of imposing on women their fancies and is determined to take control of her own image whenever she senses traces of misunderstanding and prejudices.

The archaeologist's following letter assures Venetia his total respect for the method of inventing, "For a hypothesis is a scientific *invention*" (256). But from then on, the historian and the woman seem to have exchanged their positions regarding "inventing" and "discovery". While Venetia shuns from "invention" and urges the archaeologist

to "formulate historical hypothesis" (258), the latter insists that "for the present saying 'formulate' to him is exactly the same as saying 'invention' to you", while elsewhere he proudly asserts that "*we* [meaning the archaeologist and another young woman who assists his research] invent, dear Lady Venetia" (258, 261). It is as if now the woman has become a scientifically-minded historian while the archaeologist turned into a romantic inventor. Does this mean that the amateur woman's intuitive methodology has now gained full approval from the historian? Her next bold hypothesis about Louis Norbert's parentage brings them back to the dispute over "to invent" or "to discover".

In a long letter, Venetia announces to the archaeologist her "discovery" of Louis Norbert's origin as the legitimate son of the French King Louis XIV and Cardinal Mazarin's niece Marie Mancini. Moreover, she now agrees with the archaeologist that to say "invent" is the same as "to formulate a theory", and goes a step further to equate her discovery with the very truth as she announces "I have not invented, unless inventing may mean (by the way, you hinted something to this effect) — may mean *discovering the truth*" (269). Such a bold hypothesis (and insisted as *the truth*) immediately meets with the historian's admonishment and disproval, who now recoils from his former encouragement and resorts to a vocabulary that redraws the difference between him as a historian and the amateur woman whom he now complements as "a poet or novelist":

> After all, it is only what would have happened to a poet or novelist; and, as I have already ventured to say, a poet and a novelist are lost (or perhaps gained!) in you, dear Lady Venetia; only I, a poor plodding historian, am bound to protest, in the name of historical documents, against the gratuitous interpretation of your vision of Louis Norbert's birth in the light of a marriage between Louis XIV and the Berenice of our Pisan spies. (275)

Therefore, when the woman does try to equate "inventing" with "discovery", the man clings to the rigid historic standard of his profession and feels obliged to disqualify her theory as the fancies of the "poet or novelist"; moreover, he reverts to his initial prejudice of Venetia as one of those great ladies "addicted to some form or other of spirit-rapping" (201), for which "poet or novelist" is only a euphemism. The woman in turn rightly senses the man's condescension, and in her next letter eloquently spells out men's inclination to fantasize about women and to impose that fantasy on women,

which can be seen as a protest on behalf of all those women figures moulded by male desire and ambition (Medea da Carpi and Alice Oke instantly come into mind):

> But there it just is, and all men, historians or not historians, are *exactly* alike in this — once you get a wrong notion into your head at the beginning, no power on earth will ever get it out again or prevent you seeing the most *obvious fact* distorted through it! ... you have written me down as a foolish woman with a hopeless tendency to romancing about everything, what you call *a born poet or novelist*. Almost the most riling part of it is this amiable attempts (so like a man towards a woman!) to turn an unjustifiable accusation into a compliment — of course that all hang together with your recommending me to *invent* (I was perfectly right in being angry with you, although you afterwards explained it away). And now you think I am inventing, I suppose. And all the time it is you, my poor young, learned friend, who have been inventing, *inventing a me* utterly unlike the reality. (282, 283)

It seems that the woman is stretching a scholarly dispute into a general complaint of men's manipulation of women's image; however, the dispute over "inventing" or "discovery" from the very beginning is a problem concerning different genders' approach towards the past, and a series of images and concepts encountered in their research have been aligned along gendered categories. Lady Venetia, being a woman and an amateur historian, is believed by the archaeologist to be some form of "table-rapper" or "crystal reader", so it is more commendable to ask her to "invent" instead of "to discover the truth" or "form a historical hypothesis", for her method is that of "a novelist or poet", and her childhood affinity with the "Ghost's Room" where Louis Norbert's portrait is hung binds her irrevocably with fancy and imagination; while on the other hand, the archaeologist/historian is (and consciously presents himself to be) a scientific pedant, who is obsessed with scientific scepticism and relies his research solely on dry historical documents excavated from the Muniment Room and the Pisan Archives. Therefore, if the archaeologist is right in protesting against Venetia's flippant historical deduction, the latter is also justifiable in pointing out the historian's hidden gendered prejudices — her reaction is a protest of men's marginalization of women into the charming but ephemeral role of intuitive spiritualist mediums or ghost seekers and a riot against men's making of woman's image.

So far, the joint historical research of the archaeologist and Lady Venetia revolves around two competing methods to reach the truth of the past (i.e. the origin and death of Louis Norbert), which in a dramatic sense re-enacts the subtle competition between two historical discourses I have traced out in Lee's introduction to *Euphorion*: one is a man's, scientific, authoritative and that of the historian; the other is a woman's, intuitive, amateurish, and prone to be discredited as fantasy or "poetic". However, just as these two approaches compete with each other, they are also shown to be complementing and even converging with their opposite when the man and the woman enter a deeper understanding of each other and of the past. The major dichotomies in their debate of Louis Norbert's origin — invention versus discovery, facts versus fancy, — gradually shift sides so much so that while the above delineated gendered dyads are constantly emphasized, they are also being confounded. The "most obvious facts" in Venetia's complaint quoted above, of course, refer to what she perceives as the historian's prejudice of her, yet in each person's case, fancy is always inseparable from what he or she perceives to be the fact about the other, so the archaeologist suggests: "After all, are not all the persons in whom we take the most vivid interest just, to that extent, creations of our own?" (248) Furthermore, it is increasingly difficult to tell who is "inventing" the ghost. Venetia rightly accuses the archaeologist of inventing a "she" who never exists; however, isn't she also inventing a pedantic historian in her self-defence, and inventing a Louis Norbert whose tragic ending fits her own understanding of romance?

The root of all these conflating and exchanging of meanings lies in the shared root of "invent" and "discover", as the historian reminds us in the beginning that inventing "is but another form of the Latin word which means to ***discover***". The OED records one of the modern meanings of "invent" as "to devise something false or fictitious; to fabricate, feign, 'make up'", exactly the kind of association that Venetia objects to as she is aiming at "the truth" of the ghost instead of fabrication, yet one of the word's obsolete meaning is "to come upon, find; to find out, discover", which slides uncannily to the opposite approach to arrive at the past — "to discover".[394] The etymology of the word seems to suggest that if in the beginning "to discover" and "to invent" are both legitimate ways to arrive at the truth of the past, sadly in the anti-romantic modern

[394] "invent, v." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 22 May 2017. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/98960?rskey=cd0h2R&result=3#eid>

time the historian's method becomes the only acceptable one while the other is regulated into a distinct sphere of "fabrication" — a fancy, a romance, a job befitting "a novelist or poet".

Although the historian disapproves of Venetia's intuitive method, gradually more and more evidence is unearthed in their research to support her hypothesis — the novelist's approach seems to be gaining the upper-hand. Yet just as they are nearing the end of their excavation of the ghost, a newly discovered record of Louis Norbert's death in the Florentine archive shatters all their previous construction of the ghost's story and brings their research to a dead end. The true ending of the ghost becomes ungraspable at this point, and it seems that the whole romance around "the ghost" now risks forever remaining a ghost, i.e. little more substantial than a woman's fantasy story.

It is the archaeologist who saves the joint research with his last letter to Venetia, in which he presents a translation of the memoir of Abbess Artemisia, a critical historical document that not only explains how Louis Norbert met his death but also chimes perfectly well with Venetia's initial vision of the lovers' romantic tragedy. However, such a vital historical document in the reconstruction of the ghost's history, as the archaeologist admits, is obtained through a "Faustian contract", and the purportedly fantastic origin of the document inevitably problematizes the nature of the ghost's story it proves:

> I was ready, like Faust and others among my fellow pedants, to sell my soul.
> I have done so, and I venture to send you herewith registered, and as a humble Christmas greeting, its price.
> These Memoirs of the Abbess of St. Veridiana, previously known in the world as Artemisia del Valore, were composed in a language you are not quite familiar with, though (for reasons which I will later explain) I am unable to inform you whether that language is Latin, Greek (which that learned muse possessed fluently) or mere Italian; so what I send you is a translation made to the best of my slight powers. (333)

The historian's statement is deliberately evasive. Does the final revelation of the ghost's death really involve a Faustian contract, or is it only a euphemism for the fact that the historian, betraying the ethics of his profession, has forged the document to console his beloved? Venetia's exclamation that "I really do not know …whether I

believe you to be a dealer in stolen goods or a poet" (350) may suggest that she suspects it is the second case, but it is clear that by now both agree, after all, it is the novelist/poet's method that wins in solving the mystery of Louis Norbert. However, the paradoxical nature of the document as the price of a "Faustian compact" and a translation of an original manuscript places it forever in the liminal space between history and fancy, facts and fabrication. The word "translation" itself implies both the difference between the translated text and the original and something in common in the target language and the source language, with the translator or transcriber taking whole responsibility and liberty with the difference. In this case, the archaeologist's request of Venetia to "desist from all questions concerning the original of this document and its whereabouts, let alone the manner in which it has come into my hands" (333) is a gesture that both veils and reveals the critical part that the translator plays in this final product. Such a claim and disowning resembles exactly what Vernon Lee the historian does in her historical-fictional essay "Ravenna and Her Ghosts" mentioned above, where taking full advantage of the potentials of "translating", she presents us a fresh translation of a Ravenna ghost story whose manner of acquisition "I am not at liberty to divulge".[395] In their conspiracy to take liberty with a "translation" of the past, the archaeologist, who "after all, was secretly a poet" (206) merges with the historian Vernon Lee, and the historian-poet's final solution to arrive at the past is to contract a Faustian compact that blends history and fantasy into an indissoluble "translation" (or in other words, an invention).

The manner in which the historian works as a "translator" of a forbidden language also reminds one of the female revenant stories by Wang Tao that involve a "planchette message" mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. The stories of these ghosts are believed to be "transcribed" (another way of translating) by the literati who hold the séances, therefore constituting a genuine trace of the ghosts. What Wang emphasizes is the authenticity of the ghosts' "testimony" while downplaying the role of the literati transcribers. The inescapable effects of shadowing and covering-up of such a method have been explored above. Lee's romance foregrounds the inventive role of the translator/historian, but still, to obtain a half-historical half-fantastic message from the dead seems to be the only possible way to conjure up the ghost. In this sense, every

[395] *The Collected Supernatural and Weird Fiction of Vernon Lee*, vol. 2, p. 188.

novelist/poet is a conjurer of the past, and every historian is a translator of the unobtainable ghostly message.

The final evocation of a Faustian contract, as analysed above, again blurs the distinction between history and fiction, and the ill-fated romance between Louis Norbert and Artemisia in the seventeenth century, if we trust it did exist, existed only just beyond what historical evidence can verify. The whole romance of the twentieth century, in the form of a historical excavation of a ghost and a constant probation of its own historical methodology, is a meta-ghost story as it comments on the making of the ghost's story. In form and content, the story tries to answer the question: how to arrive at the truth about the ghost? And its answer points to the realm of fantasy: the undecided zone between facts and fancy (in this case a history rescued from limbo through a magical Faustian contract). In keeping with the destabilizing effects of fantasy, the text of *Louis Norbert* is a verbal labyrinth where almost everything is in codes, where the appearance may not correspond to the essence and the real signified slide forever beneath layers and layers of signifiers. Such a riot with meaning and signification fundamentally boils down to the idea of romance. As with "invention", "discovery" and "translation", "romance" too is a concept whose multiple meanings are given a free rein in the story. "Romance" in its modern usage most commonly refers to a love story, and the story seems to end on this note as Venetia makes a comparison between her relation with the historian and the romance of the seventeenth century. But romance in its earlier senses are also actualized in the story, i.e. 1) romance as a special literary genre that involves mainly chivalric legends and 2) romance as a story that is about remote places and personages, far from everyday reality.[396] In the extent that Louis Norbert is willing to die for his love and the historian willing to sell his soul to the devil for Venetia, the modern story resonates with the core spirit of the medieval chivalric romance; and for the whole business of excavating remote personalities which hinges on a series of coincidences, the story is self-consciously a romance that testifies the relevance of fiction and fabrication (or invention, in the text's terminology) to a disenchanted modern world. After all, the origin of the word "romance" is the French *roman*, which simply meant "past history

[396] Adapted from "romance, n. and adj.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, Web, and "Romance." *Britannica Academic*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 5 Aug. 2008. Web.

in the vernacular" and it is only later that it shifts to the meaning of "a wholly fictitious story."[397] Therefore, for ghosts or ghosted persons like Louis Norbert, a romance, in essence a fiction rather than history, may be a more effective way to arrive at their past.

Like *zhiguai* stories discussed in the previous chapters, Vernon Lee's ghost stories are also permeated with a sense of the past. But as a woman art historian and a lesbian writer, Lee may be more alert to the gendered role of the historian. While ghost story writers conjure up ghosts fashioned by their own images and desires, historians too conjure up the past which, using another language, is also a "romance". By exposing the complex gendered manipulation in men's history-making and ghost-making, Lee problematizes the seemingly objective position of the male historian/ghost maker; thus, she frees the ghost woman from the role of a mere spectacle scrutinized and moulded by male desires. Moreover, as with all writers of the ghost's story, Lee is aware of the powerful and subverting potential of spectrality and haunting. Terry Castle summarizes well the persistent power of the ghost: "The ghost, in other words, is a paradox. Though non-existent, it nonetheless appears. Indeed, so vividly does it appear — if only in the 'mind's eye'— one feels unable to get away from it."[398] Castle, of course, is using the ghost as a metaphor for the phantomized lesbian identity in Western culture, of which Lee as a lesbian writer must have felt poignantly. But not only lesbians can make up their identity through the figure of the ghost; indeed, ghost is such a potent being that a variety of people who could not enter "history" — the totality of recognized human experience — for various reasons, can now come back as ghosts. Being herself a woman who struggled to obtain the authority of a historian just as her contemporary Victorians were struggling to redefine women's position in society, Lee's ghost stories show her suspicion towards history-making, and instead of legitimizing the ghost's history, she proposes haunting as a more efficient returning of ghosts. As deconstructionist Julian Wolfreys argues in his *Victorian Hauntings*, haunting in a broader sense is not only the visitation of ghosts from the past, but a process that "puts into play a disruptive structure", or, as Wolfreys quotes Rodelphe

[397] "Romance", *Britannica Academic.* Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 5 Aug. 2008.
[398] Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, 1993, p. 46.

Casche's remark of the phantom, "the phantasmatic is the space in which representation is fragmented."[399] To accept the state of haunting, as Lee's stories suggest, is to refuse to put an end to the ghost's story by either locating that story in authoritative history or mere fancy, but to allow it to persist in the liminal realm of fantasy, between facts and fancy, fiction and history, yet always a part of reality. Haunting also points to the fragmentation in representation, the fissures in interpretation, the incomprehensibility of life, and the alterity within. This revolt against interpretation and textual closure, as my next chapter will show, will also surface in E. Nesbit's Gothic ghost stories.

[399] Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny, and Literature*, 2002, p. 6.

# Chapter 5 The Dead Woman Returning: E. Nesbit's Female Gothic Myth

In her long narrative poem "The Moat House" (1886),[400] Edith Nesbit (1858-1924) relates the story of an innocent nun seduced and abandoned by her noble lover for an advantageous marriage. Pregnant with the man's child, the rejected woman's only way to revenge is to throw herself under the wheel of her former lover's wedding carriage. The wedding continues, but the guilt-stricken man is forever haunted by ghosts: "And at night he wakes and shivers with unvanquishable dread/ At the ghosts that press each other for a place beside his bed, /And he shudders to remember all the dearness that is dead."[401] Here the ghost becomes synonymous with the wronged woman, returning to perturb the man's guilty conscience. The poem's dramatization of a woman betrayed and abandoned by her lover, as Nesbit's biographer Julia Briggs analyses, might contain a reflection of the author's suppressed resentment for her own unfaithful husband.[402] Yet the same narrative pattern — the fall of the wronged woman and her return as a ghost to her human lover — is to appear again and again in Nesbit's ghost stories in the 1890s. As I will show in this chapter, the story of this returning ghost converges with popular contemporary myths about women and death, and for the woman writer, it becomes a powerful tool for critiquing contemporary gender relations.

In the last chapter, I traced how Vernon Lee's ghost stories expose the constructed-ness of the man-made history of a ghost woman. The idea of history is important to women writers in the *fin-de-siècle*, because knowledge about the past provides a starting point for rethinking women's status in the present and making changes in contemporary social establishments. While not all women writers had the insight of a professional historian as Vernon Lee did, another way to probe the construction of gender through fiction was to appropriate existing myths. As metahistorical and metafictional narrative patterns that are pertaining to the way we make meaning of everyday life, myth has always already informed the construction of history, literature, and philosophy. In literary critic Laurence Coupe's conceptualization, "myth shapes

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[400] In Nesbit's poetry collection *Lays and Legend* (first series, 1886).
[401] *Lays and Legends*, *Victorian Women Writers Project.* Indiana University Digital Library Program, n. d. Web. http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/vwwp/VAB7091
[402] Briggs, *E. Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, 1987, p. 119.

history, and therefore it shapes culture. The religious beliefs, social customs and linguistic commonplaces of each age are reaffirmations of, and elaborations upon, primitive mythic pattern."[403] In this sense, the literary texts that are informed by primary mythic patterns can be seen as both mythography — offering interpretations to existing mythic paradigms, and mythopoeia — functioning as a new myth. This is especially true in a genre like the Gothic that is saturated with conventions, for conventions in another perspective imply a discernible literary lineage and repetitions of powerful plots that are pertaining to myth. In this chapter, I explore E. Nesbit's Gothic ghost stories as mythography and mythopoeia. Specifically, I argue that these stories, while working with an awareness and adaptation of the existing Female Gothic literary tradition, satirize existing myths about femininity and weave new ones for the Gothic heroine, with the returning female ghost functioning as the pivotal figure.

Two aspects of Nesbit's ghost stories constitute my focus: their Gothic opacity and their convergence with myths about the dead woman. Nesbit's Gothic stories capitalize on textual irresoluteness and often refuse a linear, coherent explanation, which on the one hand disrupts the signification process, while on the other hand reflects the contradictions experienced in contemporary women's lives. These features strengthen the unsettling power and gender critique of the stories, for anti-resolution means refusing to moralise, which points to an epistemological uncertainty instead of a reaffirmation of order. The thematic concern of these ghost stories — the dead woman rising and returning — in a sense are all reincarnations of the prototype in "The Moat House", but are complicated with new interpretations and a convergence with other narrative traditions. The idea of ghostly justice is no longer equated with the grip that the ghost asserts on her human lover as implicated in "The Moat House", but instead relies on the unending haunting effects the text creates; in other words, the ghost of the returning woman aims not at revenge, but to upset, expose and parody. In "The Ebony Frame" (1893) and "Uncle Abraham's Romance" (1893),[404] the ghost woman's returning to her human lover is dramatized as a clash between the past and

[403] Coupe, 2009, p. 112. In Coupe's analysis, the basic mythic paradigms like deliverance and vegetation myths influence not only the structure of key texts of literature, but also the structure of religious and philosophical schools like Christianity and Marxism.

[404] "The Ebony Frame", "Uncle Abraham's Romance", and "From the Dead" are collected in Nesbit's 1893 collection *Grim Tales*, after having appeared in periodicals, but I am not able to locate the periodicals where they initially appeared.

the present, the result of which is not a triumph of the ghost over the present but the melancholic effect that her haunting creates, thus ensuring the ghost's forever presence; in "The Shadow" (1905?),[405] the ghost figure becomes an emblem for inexplicableness and anti-interpretation, yet it is this anti-linear logic that offers an occasion for women characters to build mutual understanding. In "From the Dead", the trajectory of the Gothic ghost lover merges with two contemporary myths about women —the ideal dead woman and the fallen woman, but the story deconstructs these myths from within. Finally, in "The House of Silence" (1906) Nesbit rewrites a familiar Female Gothic plot into an allegorical myth, ripping bare the romanticization involved in the traditional plot and itself an empowering myth for the Gothic heroine.

### 5.1 An Ambiguous Life

Since Ellen Moers coined the word "Female Gothic" in 1978, the notion has evolved much from Moers' original stipulation.[406] Yet although different definitions apply, critics using the term can generally discern a distinct tradition of Gothic fiction originating with Ann Radcliffe, which focuses on the persecution, imprisonment, escape and spiritual growth of an innocent Gothic heroine, favours the sublimated terror over the violent horror, and employs ghostly elements to indicate past injustices which more often can be explained away or set to rest once family secrets are revealed and the villain's threats eliminated.[407] In exploring the sufferings and sense of persecution that woman characters feel in society, home, and marriage, E. Nesbit's ghost stories certainly touch upon the central themes in the tradition of Female Gothic. The Gothic heroine constantly in danger in a menacing environment is reincarnated in various forms in Nesbit's stories I am to discuss below, some familiarly recognizable while some ironically transformed. However, the other common features of Female

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[405] "The Shadow" is included in the 2006 anthology of Nesbit's horror stories *The Power of Darkness*, with no information for its original publication. The *ISFDB* (Internet Speculative Fiction Database) identifies the story as originally published with the title "The Portent of the Shadow" in the magazine *Black and White*, 23 Dec. 1905, which I am not able to verify (http://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/title.cgi?583501). I have found "The Portent of a Shadow" published in *North Otago Times*, 12 May 1906, Supplement, from *Papers Past*, a website of digitalized New Zealand publications (see https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NOT19060512.2.36).

[406] For a review of Female Gothic criticism, see Wallace and Smith, 2009.

[407] In Wallace and Smith's words, there is a discernible plot that "centralized the imprisoned and pursued heroine threatened by a tyrannical male figure, it explained the supernatural, and ended in the closure of marriage." (2009, p. 3)

Gothic — resolution and realisation of justice— are rarely found in Nesbit's stories, with the bleak ending of her most famous "Man-size in Marble" (1893) just one such example (which may partly account for its being frequently anthologized). Ambiguity and the deliberate refusal to closure are an important trademark of Nesbit's stories, and as I will argue below, they open fissures in the seemingly coherent social structures and unleash a more powerful critique on existing moral orders than stories that are "artistically rounded-off".[408] In this sense, Nesbit's stories about a heroine's sufferings and fears that cannot be explained unequivocally capture vividly the often tumultuous experiences of Victorian women in a fast changing society, and can be regarded as a variation of the Female Gothic.

However, to re-evaluate Nesbit's ghost stories as Female Gothic also faces difficulties. On the one hand, Nesbit's ghost stories are often neglected even by her biographers and never considered an important part of her oeuvre, as the author has long been typecast as a writer of children's literature.[409] Unlike her popular children's fiction, her horror story collections, *Grim Tales* (1893), *Something Wrong* (1893), and *Fear* (1910) have long been out of print, and it is only recently, with the publication of two anthologies of her stories *The Power of Darkness* (2006) and *Horror Stories* (2016) that many of her horror stories are made more accessible.[410] On the other hand, for those who want to recuperate Nesbit's ghost stories from a feminist perspective, they have to confront the "feminist-or-not" question. Yet it is here that the problem arises: for E. Nesbit, while sometimes challenging the limits that society allowed for her gender, is otherwise difficult to be categorized as a feminist as she conspicuously distanced herself from the political activism struggling for women's rights. Yet if her adult novels, as Amelia Rutledge argues, are a domestication of the New Woman character,[411] her ghost stories, as some critics show and as I will demonstrate in this

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[408] "From the Dead", in E. Nesbit, *Power of Darkness: Tales of Terror*, 2006, edited by David Davies, p. 169. If not otherwise indicated, later citations of Nesbit's ghost stories all refer to this edition.
[409] Her biographer Doris Langley Moore (*E. Nesbit: A Biography*, 1966) does not explore this part of her literary work at all, while in Briggs' more recent biography Nesbit's ghost stories are only mentioned in passing in connection with her suppressed childhood fears (1987, pp. 12-4, p. 20).
[410] *Power of Darkness*, Wordsworth Editions, 2006; *Horror Stories*, Penguins, 2016.
[411] Rutledge describes several of Nesbit's adult romances as "boomerang" that resorts to the marriage plot to cancel out the transgression of the New Woman character. See Rutledge, "E. Nesbit and the Woman Question", 1999.

chapter, apparently allow her more freedom to interrogate the unequal gender relations of her time.[412]

Nesbit in her biographer Briggs' words is a woman "who presented a mass of contradictions, and whose various roles, whether imposed or willingly assumed, were often difficult to reconcile".[413] Being one of the founding members of the socialist Fabian Society, a prolific writer who for a long time was the chief breadwinner of her large family, and a somewhat experimenter of open marriage with her husband Hubert Bland, Nesbit's bohemian lifestyle embraced that of the New Woman in many aspects. However, she was resolutely reticent about women's suffrage even when her Fabian friend Charlotte Wilson (1854-1944) enlisted her in the cause. Briggs in her biography mentioned that when invited to read a paper on "Motherhood and Breadwinning" by the Fabian Women's Group, Nesbit changed her topic to "The Natural Disabilities of Women" which shocked her audience and spurred a series of rebuttals.[414] Nesbit attributed her reluctance to support women's suffrage to her worries that it may endanger the socialist cause, yet as Briggs shows, such is at best a tactical excuse while the real reason might be a mixture of the influence of Nesbit's more conservative husband Hubert Bland who believed women's rightful place to be in the domestic sphere (an ironic opposite of the real situation in his marriage) and Nesbit's own idealization of romantic love.[415] Nesbit in her own political stance, therefore, could not be easily reclaimed as pro-feminist.

However, whatever Nesbit's political stance towards the Suffrage movement was, her fiction may or may not voice the same ideas. The fantastic genre itself, as many critics have noticed, often allows women writers more freedom to express ideas or sentiments that may otherwise be censored in more "serious" genres.[416] Therefore, I agree with Margree in her recent re-evaluation of the feminist orientation in Nesbit's ghost stories.

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[412] For criticism of Nesbit's ghost stories, see Freeman, "E. Nesbit's New Woman Gothic", 2008; Kathleen A. Miller, "The Mysteries of the In-between: Re-Reading Disability in E. Nesbit's Late Victorian Gothic Fiction", 2012; and Victoria Margree, "The Feminist Orientation in Edith Nesbit's Gothic Short Fiction", 2014.
[413] Briggs, 1987, xvi.
[414] Ibid., p. 334.
[415] Ibid., p. 333-5.
[416] See for instance Emma Liggins and Daniel Duffy's discussion of the "conservative or radical" function of Victorian popular genres, of which the ghost story is an important one (*Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Texts: Divergent Femininities*, 2001, xiv-xv).

Margree argues that the special form of Gothic supernaturalism releases possibilities for critiquing social hegemonies, especially the unequal Victorian gender relations.[417] E. Nesbit's writing as a whole may be heterogeneous, incoherent, and swinging between conservative or radical moves as her life choices were; but this, I believe, is the very reflection of the contradictories that featured many, even the most radical Victorian women's lives in an intrinsically contradictory time. For the transitional *fin-de-siècle* was characterized by ideological shifts regarding notions of marriage and sexuality and witnessed radical changes in gender relations and women's roles in society. Perhaps no genre is better than the Gothic ghost story in encapsulating such disruptions and inconsistencies, for it is a genre that destabilizes meaning and capitalizes on inconsistency and inexplicableness.

Indeed, an important feature of Nesbit's ghost stories, as I mentioned above, is their Gothic opacity — the ambiguity in language and interpretation, and a refusal to lay the ghost to rest, which, as explored in the previous chapter, is an important feature of texts that haunt. The abrupt violent ending of "Man-size in Marble" in which the guiltless heroine dies as a rape victim of two marble soldiers whose motive is not accounted for, still reads shocking today and must be more so in the 1890s when the readers were more familiar with ghost stories in which the comings and goings of ghosts are governed by a logic of retribution. Ghosts in many cultures, as I have observed, is a marker of guilty conscience or hidden injustice, and the appearance of the ghost itself sets in motion the mechanism for righting wrongs. Nesbit's ghosts indeed are often concerned with past injustices, especially the injustices or persecutions suffered by women from the men they love or from a hostile patriarchal society. In this case, the past that returns and the present it disrupts are tinted with gendered tones. In the following section, I explore the conflicts between the past and the present and between women and men resulted from the ghost's return. What is most upsetting of this clash is the narrative's refusal, or the present's inability to appease the ghost and therefore set the past to rest. This results in a bleak ending in which the wound from the past can never heal, and the shattered protagonist turns into a melancholia, awaiting a life of perpetual mourning. In other words, the haunting of the past never ends, and the fissure of normalcy opened by the ghost is never fixed.

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[417] Margree, 2014, p. 426.

The resolute ambiguity and denial of a closure in Nesbit's ghost stories showcase the most subversive perspective of Gothic texts of haunting as they attack the unity of meaning and the seamless coherence of reality.

### 5.2 A Conflict between the Past and the Present: The Amorous Ghost Returning

While Vernon Lee's protagonists are often fascinated with a ghost returning from a particular historical period, Nesbit's ghosts from the past more often are not eminent figures in history or carrying with them emblematic traces of their own time. They are the unsettled shadows of the ghost seer's own conscience and their return indicates grievances of a more personal nature. Yet "The Ebony Frame" and "Uncle Abraham's Romance" in *Grim Tales* (1893) are an exception to such rules. In both stories, the male protagonist's ghost lover is indicated to have been a witch and ousted by society to varying degrees in their own lifetime. Such a history of being a "witch" immediately suggests scenes of these women's persecution and injury suffered from an intolerant society, which although not taking up the main stage, serve as a back-story of the ghost's interaction with her modern male lover. The ghost women's past identity as "witches" in a sense make them analogous to the female victims of war depicted in Wang Tao's stories. For both groups of victims, their ghostly status recalls injustices on a structural level. In this sense, the romance between the living man and the ghost woman symbolically becomes a convergence or conflict between the present and the past, with the Victorian man's comfortable conscience being upset by a sense of guilt from the past. These stories however also refuse to resolve this conflict or offer a textual closure; instead, in their deliberate departure from a logic of moral retribution, the past is never put to rest and is allowed to upset the peace of mind of the present forever. Hayden White observes that narrative in general (from the purely imaginary fiction to the purportedly real history) "has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or more generally, authority";[418] moreover, a "fully realised story", —in the sense of a story with a plot, an ending, a sequence of events endowed with the significance of causes and effects, — is also predicated with "the impulse to moralise reality, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine".[419] Conversely then, if there is any ambiguity or uncertainty regarding

[418] White, 1987, *The Content of the Form*, p. 13.
[419] Ibid., p. 14.

the status of the authority, the ground to effect a closure for the story would be lacking. An ambiguity or ambivalence towards the unity of meaning and the status of the authority in the world (in the form of gender relationships for instance) is precisely the condition evoked in Nesbit's stories, thus the refusal to closure equals to a refusal to accord any position in the story a moral authority.

"The Ebony Frame" centres on a modern man's fascination with an ancient portrait of a beautiful woman. As if in answering his desire, the portrait woman steps down from the frame and tells the man that they have been predestined for each other, and that the doomed love in their previous life had left the woman in the cursed state of the undead. Curiously, this story in 1893 reads almost like a sequel to Vernon Lee's "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" in 1896 removed to the modern time. The climax of both stories concerns the male protagonist's encounter with the dangerously beautiful woman in the portrait, and both writers rewrite their *femme fatale* into a victim of their respective tyrannical society — snake lady is cursed and banished from society for her abnormal sexuality, while the lady in the ebony frame is burnt as a witch simply because of her above-average intelligence. While the seventeenth-century Prince Alberic fails to free the snake lady from his grandfather's persecution, will the fatal woman in the ebony frame have a better chance this time with her lover's modern incarnation in the heart of nineteenth-century London?

The beginning of the story shows a sentiment quite different from Lee's nostalgic fairy tale; instead of beckoning towards the past, we are plunged directly into the prosaic concerns of the modern male narrator: the hard-up-ness of struggling in London as an unsuccessful journalist, the exuberance of suddenly becoming rich by inheritance, and the contentment of being in possession of a furnished house in Chelsea and the love of a pretty girl. All these are very down-to-earth concerns of a modern man, but perhaps a little too down-to-earth that the reader may sense between the lines of the man's self-congratulatory narrative a slight disapproval from the author. The man's desire for wealth is so dominant that he feels "life had nothing left to offer except immediate possession of the legacy", and his urge for gratification even outweighs his feelings for his hitherto sweetheart Mildred (143). The routine courtship between the narrator and this mediocre Mildred is revealed to be lacking in sincerity and even secretly despised by the narrator. Like Lee's historian Spiridion Trepka, the man in this story aspires for romance of a grander style, but his narrative also inadvertently

reveals his pettiness of mind, which throws doubt on whether he is worthy of such a romance.

Nevertheless, the narrator soon finds the fatal portrait that promises a remarkable romance. The way the portrait is discovered by the narrator is telling enough: reminded by a maid, he is immediately spurred to dig in the attic of the inherited house for this portrait, in case "it were some priceless old master" (144). He finds in the ebony frame two portraits nailed together face to face, one apparently of the narrator himself in cavalier dress, the other a woman in black gown of the type of beauty admired by the Pre-Raphaelite artists — a sure trait of a *femme fatale*. The discovery of a magic painting in supernatural literature is a crucial incident, as the crossing of the painting often marks the crossing of the boundary between normality and anomaly. Once the protagonist steps into the magic painting world — a heterotopia bound by rules other than those of the familiar one — the dissolution and rewriting of regulating boundaries ensue. The classic "The Painted Wall" in *Liaozhai zhiyi* introduced before serves as an epitome for such stories: while the man gazes at the remarkable woman in the painting, the object of his desire, he is also absorbed in the woman's gaze, and in a moment of self-abandonment the man finds himself inside the painting world, a world of fantasy and alterity that is governed by the woman's rules.[420] "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" also uses the magic painting motif: it is the young Prince's love for the embroidered tapestry that leads him to the wonderland of the Sparkling Waters, restaging the motif of a man entering his desired painting world. In both "The Painted Wall" and "Snake Lady", the painting world marks a fantastic space governed by the remarkable woman, a departure from the normality of the empirical world outside, and in entering this alternative painting world, the male lover must relinquish all known rules and let himself be guided by the woman's instructions. Whether this alternative magical realm is considered as an illusion (as in Pu's case) or a utopia marked by a

[420] "The Painted Wall" is emphatically structured around the motif of the painting world as an illusion begotten by human mind, but as Zeitlin notes, it is also one about the flexible boundary between illusion and reality and ultimately, the painting as the threshold leading to a higher level of enlightenment (1997, pp. 183-93). Wai-yee Li comments on the significant role of the woman in painting in this fantastic transformation: "She [the lady in painting] embodies the fulfilment of desire and at the same time lays down premises of a new order." (1993, p. 44). Although Pu's concern in this tale may be primarily a metaphysical debate on illusion and enlightenment, motifs of painting as an alternative realm and the painting woman as the crucial initiator are powerful and enduring. See more discussion on "The Painted Wall" in Chapters Two and Three.

maternal abundance (as in Lee's case) is subsequently determined by the author's attitude towards the alterity that is woman.

Therefore, it is significant that in Nesbit's story, it is not the man who enters the woman's painting world, but Pygmalion-like, he wills the woman out of the picture by the sheer strength of his desire. The different condition of the encounter determines that Nesbit's tale is decidedly different from Lee's, for instead of exalting a luxuriant past, the past that is represented by the ghost woman is thrown into the midst of a secularised and industrialised present. It is this juxtaposition of two languages and two modes of love — one archaic and grand, the other modern and prosaic — that strikes a jarring note to the newly reunited couple's passionate love declaration. The painting woman tells the narrator her sacrifice for their love in the past: in order to meet the man again, she had sold her soul to the devil before being burnt as a witch, so that her ghost may be kept in the ebony frame to wait for the man's reincarnation in centuries to come. However, with a mundane setting in the heart of London and the petty-mindedness of the male narrator introduced before, such talks about ecclesiastical terms as soul, heaven, and hell sounds comically out of place. The overwhelmed narrator responds with an equally high-sounding promise of love; however, even as he denies his insincerity, the denial reveals a retrospective caution that distances him from the woman's passionate speech:

> "The other gain," she said slowly, "I gave my soul for. It is this. If you also will give up your hopes of heaven I can remain a woman, I can move in your world — I can be your wife. Oh, my dear, after all these years, at last— at last."
>
> "If I sacrifice my soul," I said slowly, with no thought of the **imbecility** of such talk in our 'so-called' nineteenth century"— "if I sacrifice my soul, I win you? Why, love, it's a contradiction in terms. You *are* my soul." (149, my emphasis)

The militant advancement of scientific materialism in the nineteenth century had greatly shrunk the space of talks of devil, hell and soul in people's lives.[421] Especially in this story, the prosaic London setting and the male narrator's previous obsession with wealth make it doubtful whether he cares about his soul at all, thus leaving the

[421] On the so-called "crisis of faith" in the nineteenth century, see Robin Gilmour, 1993, "The Crisis of Faith" in *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context, 1830-1890*; Walter Edwards Houghton, 1957, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*, pp. 58-61, pp. 94-6.

ghost woman's grand speech about heaven and soul sounds slightly comical. Therefore, notwithstanding the man's promise, the incompatibility of such high-sounding language with a mundane present already foretells the futility of the ghost woman's attempt to revive. If the returning of a victimized spirit of the past brings with her the opportunity to acknowledge and even rewrite her sad story, such a hope is undermined here, for her modern lover does not even want to enter an empathy for her: "Make me understand. And yet — No, I don't want to understand. It is enough that we are together." (148) In contrast, once initiated, Prince Alberic in Lee's tale sets out to learn of Oriana's past, even if knowing the past means for him a symbolic death and a rebirth. The male narrator in "The Ebony Frame" in the beginning is established in the comfortable position of a bourgeoisie life (emblematically represented by the "furnished house in Chelsea"); to step into the woman's alternative painting world, or even to allow her full entrance into his world, would be a risky departure from this self-contended norm.

It is thus not difficult to predict the story's bleak ending. Having promised to revive the painting woman the coming midnight, the narrator realises that he is obliged to entertain Mildred as his guest the next day. It now becomes clear to him what each of the two women represents: a comfortable but conventional dull bourgeoisie marriage, or a promise of dangerous passion from the past that is now rare? Detesting Mildred's banality, the man runs away from his house in panic. This seemingly running away from Mildred becomes highly equivocal when he returns at midnight to find the house in flames: for to absent himself from the modern woman is at the same time to absent himself from the ghost woman in the ebony frame. His next action only heightens the ambivalence of his motive: he runs into the flame and saves Mildred inadvertently while witnessing the ebony frame consumed by fire. Unconsciously or purposely, the man effects a second and final burning for the undead witch/ghost.

The fire thus drastically pulls the narrator back from alterity to normality: on the verge of abandoning Mildred for a union with the woman of the past, the fire restores him to an uneventful comfortable marriage with Mildred. Although the allusion to a careless housemaid places the cause of the fire to an indifferent external character, the vagueness surrounding the final scenes suggests implicit schemes and betrayals. It seems that Mildred and the narrator come into a certain compliance at this fatal moment to ensure the portrait woman's doom. It is questionable whether the narrator

had not secretly wished for the burning of the witch, for although a life of transgression is titillating enough, to totally abandon his comfortable middle-class life for the remarkable woman would be too much a sacrifice. A telling detail reveals the real stake of the man: as all the inherited furniture is heavily insured, the burning of the house does not affect his financial standing. Therefore, the text, although inserted with the ghost woman's grand speech of immortal love, still begins and ends with the man's practical monetary concerns. The past intervenes in the present briefly with the ghost woman's visit, but seems to lack the vital power to fully take hold of the "stout and dull and prosperous" present (152).

"Uncle Abraham's Romance" in the same book uses again the plot of an amorous ghost returning from the dead to a mortal lover. The protagonist is the young narrator's lame old uncle, who has remained single all his life but has secretly cherished a romance in his youth: a nightly rendezvous with a mysterious beautiful woman at the churchyard. Katherine Miller argues that in this story disability is presented as empowering and even liberating, for it puts the normally superior man in an equal position with the ghost woman, so that an untroubled romance can proceed.[422] However, despite the uncle's nostalgic obsession with this romance, the romance itself, upon further examination, is not as idyllic and innocent as it first looks. When asked by the curious narrator who the lady is in a miniature portrait, the uncle replies: "A lady who died long ago, my dear" (29). As the plot unfolds, the implied meaning of this initial answer surfaces — "a lady who died long ago" indicates not only the remote origin of the romance but also that the lady's identity is throughout marked as someone "died long ago", in other words, a ghost. The fact that his lover is a ghost is revealed accidentally to the infatuated uncle as he finds in his relative's house that fatal portrait with the lady's name and "*Ob*. 1723" inscribed on the back (31). The uncle had given the lady his solemn promise to return on the night of the next new moon when he was forced by his father to leave, and this horrible revelation presently sent him into a fit which kept him from fulfilling his promise. The lady kept her part of the promise: she never appeared again. Just like the narrator in "The Ebony Frame", the male lover is detained from returning to the witch/ghost woman at the critical moment, and the betrayal effectively ends all possibility of the man's reunion with the ghost. The

[422] Miller, 2012.

remorseful man may lament his loss for life, but the question remains: despite all his declaration of love and loyalty, has he not secretly recoiled from the fatal woman and consciously or unconsciously broken his promise? The uncle's epithet of the ghost woman as "a lady who died long ago" subtly betrays his estrangement from the ghost woman: essentially, it is the woman's alterity as a ghost that marks her place in his heart.

In both stories, the appearance of the ghost woman in front of the mortal man engenders a collision between the past and the present. It is significant that both women have the reputation of being a witch, an identity that presumably would have put them in a position of isolation and persecution in their lifetime and partly accounts for their return. For the appearance of ghosts is often governed by a logic of justice and retribution: unresolved injustices and sufferings from the past will not be suppressed forever, and eventually they will reincarnate in the form of ghosts to perturb the present. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* illustrates well how the ghost disturbs the present with a request for justice, as did numerous Chinese *zhiguai* stories following such a logic of retribution.[423] Yet in Nesbit's two stories of returning ghost/witch, the ghost woman's history of persecution lingers in the background but never fully controls the stage; justice or righting wrongs is not her main concern. Even though the ghost woman does not put an obligation on the modern man to right her wrongs, her influence on the infatuated lover still seems limited: for the past as represented by the ghost woman has to deal with not only the man but a modern world where systematic pressures on individuals to keep to the norm prove stronger than the man's determination to unite with the alien woman — social etiquette binds the male narrator in "The Ebony Frame" to Mildred, and the lame uncle could not say no to his father's decision to keep him away from the ghost girl.

The past and the ghost woman that embodies it in these two stories eventually fail to gain recognition and entrance in the man's present world, yet their return is far from ineffectual, for the unresolved ending in Nesbit's stories, here as elsewhere, is less a gesture of compromise than a deliberate refusal of a logic of clear delineation. The stories end without a satisfactory remedy for the ghost's past injuries, but the logic of retribution at the same time means that once the problem is solved, the ghost will be

[423] See for instance Liu Yuan-ju, 2006.

effectively exorcised and the text-world will return to its initial state of unquestionable harmony: a world with no place for ghosts. The ghost's (partial) disappearance in the end, on the other hand, leaves an indelible mark of guilt on the male narrator which is to stay with him for life. The male lover survives the supernatural encounter, but is no longer the same man;[424] he becomes the melancholic trauma survivor, bound to keep the lost woman a part of his subjectivity in his retelling of the ghost's story. The traces of the past thus linger on in the present and the ghost woman's haunting memory becomes a loss that the man must learn to internalize and to transmit to the reader. The textual disappearance of the ghost conversely ensures her eternal presence: she is always there and not there.

Christine Berthin argues that Gothic as a haunted writing — haunted by its textually unexplained secrets and undefined shadows and by its own linguistic otherness — must be read as "the literature of melancholy", for "the dead are never dead, and things never totally disappear behind the signifiers that represent them".[425] In stories of dead returning women discussed above, ghosts become a metaphor for an unrelenting past that penetrates the present with a sense of haunting; these are melancholic literature not because they offer samples of any particular pathology but precisely because of this haunting irresolution they open up. They are truly Gothic for their denial of closure and explanation; they leave a fissure in the text that is neither fully suppressed nor mendable, a constant questioning of the epistemological inconsistency of our seemingly self-sufficient present.

The Gothic, according to Berthin, also embodies an essential fantastic drive for its attack on the smooth chain of signification in language. Building on the framework of fantasy developed by Todorov, Jackson, and Hume, Berthin defines the fantastic as a literary impulse primarily marked by its "untenable position" — "The fantastic is born of the impossible stasis between figure and ground, opacity and transparency, depth and surface, inside and outside".[426] The fantastic drive in Gothic disturbs its reader because of its powerful disruption of orders of meaning from within: "it is a force within language which seems to push signification away from mimesis and to undo

[424] Such a plot also appears in other Nesbit stories, for instance "Man-size in Marble" and "From the Dead" from *Grim Tales*.
[425] Berthin, 2010, *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts*, p. 58.
[426] Ibid., p. 59.

the sense of objective reality the symbolic system creates."[427] The opacity of meaning and linguistic ambiguity (as for instance manifested in the episode of rescue in "The Ebony Frame") are also an important feature of Nesbit's ghost stories. Nesbit is skilful at exploiting fear with her sometimes gruesome representation of death and violence, but the most disturbing horror, as one character in her story "The Shadow" describes it, is the undefinable something that one is "so near to seeing and hearing, just near", but "something one could just not see" (174). "The Shadow" is the exemplary story that capitalizes on Gothic opacity; in a self-reflexive manner, it comments on the non-commensurability of ghost stories, and illustrates perfectly the powerful critique of gender relations unleashed by this inexplicability.

### 5.3 A Shadow Haunting Love and Marriage

Romantic love and marriage are often considered the proper site of interest for women both within and outside of fiction. They are also the familiar narrative elements in the Female Gothic, most notably the strand originating with Ann Radcliffe.[428] It is in the Female Gothic that family, marriage, and romantic love — the traditional safe havens for women — are exposed to be a site of horror and haunted by ghosts.[429] Nesbit's ghost stories offer many bleak and sometimes macabre representations of marriage (although her adult romances invest much on the opposite). But here I want to stress that it is not merely the representation of horror within marriage that lends her ghost stories the particular force to upset, but more importantly, the lack of textual closure and ontological certainty. "The Shadow" epitomizes this ambiguity and difficulty with interpretation. Things in marriage do not go right and a sense of the supernatural haunts everyone, yet as the narrator observes, "there seems to be no reason why any of it should have happened" (169). In White's formulation, this is precisely the kind of "unfulfilled" story for its narrative lacks a pattern with discernible causes and effects, therefore fails to moralise. But this refusal to pin down causes and effects, — in the ghost story's case, to name the origin of horror and then to exorcise it — is

[427] Ibid., p. 60.
[428] Moers identifies two strands of Female Gothic, one originating with Radcliffe, featuring the plights of the persecuted heroine, the other with Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, which she interprets as a birth myth. See Moers, 2004.
[429] Nickianne Moody argues that it is precisely the concerns of justice and secrets within the home that make the ghost story a gendered genre which allows women writers to "pursue public or private debates concerning women's experience". See Moody, 1996, p.78.

precisely what gives such stories their unsettling force. Particularly in the late Victorian age, legal and practical conditions in marriage and gender relations were undergoing radical changes, making marriage and women's role in it an uncanny site, permeated with familiarity and strangeness. On the one hand, women were conceptualized as the "Angel in the House" and guardian of the Victorian home, itself sanctified as a protective temple for virtue, nurturing, and reverent love against the corruption and lust outside; on the other hand, until the Married Woman's Property Act in 1882, women's property rights within marriage were barely protected and marriage very much constituted as a civil, and sometimes even literal, death for women, the very opposite of the ideal notion of marriage as the destined ending of romantic love.[430] In such a tumultuous time, women's real experience of love and marriage may be as contradictory, multi-layered, and undefinable as the ambiguities evoked in Nesbit's stories.

Nesbit's own unconventional marriage with Hubert Bland was the very opposite of the idyllic and peaceful, and may offer the psychological origin for her portrayal of troubled marriages. Bland was described by many acquaintances as having an unusual amount of sexual energy, who not only made Edith pregnant seven months before their marriage but also fathered two children with Edith's close friend Alice Hoatson.[431] Edith showed exceptional generosity and kindness in taking the then pregnant Alice into her household and later adopting her two children by Bland as her own.[432] However well she managed to maintain her open marriage with Hubert and Alice, a suppressed feeling of injury and resentment occasionally surfaces in Nesbit's poetry and fiction.[433] Her favourite plot, as noted by critics, is a love triangle where two women (usually cousins or best friends) fall in love with the same man or two men rival over the same woman.[434] Jealousy, resentment and even wicked schemes thus

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[430] Wilkie Collin's *The Woman in White* (1860) dramatized precisely how the wife's disadvantaged legal position in marriage literally led to her death. By the late nineteenth century, debates on women's rights for education, work, and vote and on the current marriage institution had greatly challenged the previous romantic concept of marriage and home. See Houghton, 1957, pp. 341-53.
[431] Briggs's biography of Nesbit quotes Bernard Shaw, a close friend of the couple, who commented that Hubert Bland kept three wives simultaneously (1987, p. 108).
[432] Ibid., pp. 107-27.
[433] Briggs discusses the thinly veiled sentiments of jealousy and self-destruction in several of her poems collected in *Lays and Legends* (1886), but she does not mention her prose fiction (1987, pp. 118-20).
[434] This is a plot used profusely in her story collection *In Homespun* (1896) as well as in her horror stories.

ensue. Especially when the plot is used in her ghost stories, the lightness of romantic rivalry can easily turn into scenes of violence and death. Both Lowell T. Frye and Victoria Margree note the often pessimistic portrayal of marriage in Nesbit's ghost stories: what appears in the beginning as promising conjugal bliss often deteriorates rapidly into one or both spouses' death.[435] In Frye's words, the bleak portrayal of marriage serves as a caution that "marriage is truly the end of life for the woman, the loss of self the price of wifehood."[436]

"The Shadow" is framed as a somewhat meta-ghost story for its self-reflexive critique of the genre, and its conclusion that the "real ghost story" is a story with no logical explanation foregrounds the crucial function of inexplicableness in the Gothic. Somewhat singular in Nesbit's ghost stories, this one is told by two women narrators (one narrator's story framed in another's, a typical narrative structure for the Gothic) in an exclusively all-female setting.[437] It is Christmas night in a manor house, and three young girls after their exhausting dances retreat in their bedroom to tell each other ghost stories. The Christmas season, the old manor house, the well-lit mantelpiece in contrast to a bitterly cold winter night outside, and even the small female community are all typical ingredients of the genre. The story begins directly with the young narrator — one of the three girls — commenting on the story to be told which reads like the author's comment of the genre: "This is not an artistically rounded off ghost story, and nothing is explained in it, and there seems to be no reason why any of it should have happened" (169). But presently the narrator assures that, nevertheless, real ghost stories, or in other words the best of the kind, are precisely like this one — "no explanation, no logical coherence" (169). The proceeding story is true to this claim: so much is felt in the ambivalent space it creates, but nothing can be pinned down, and the incoherence creates a haunting trace even after the story ends (or does it ever end?).

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[435] See Frye, "The Ghost Story and the Subjection of Women: The Example of Amelia Edwards, M. Braddon, and E. Nesbit", 1998, and Margree, 2014. Examples of such portrayal can be found in Nesbit's "John Charrington's Wedding" where the dead bridegroom returns to claim the life of the bride on their wedding, "Hurst of Hurstcote" which ends in husband and wife dying in a grave, and the famous "Man-size in Marble".

[436] Frye, 1998, p. 189.

[437] Most of the first-person narrators in *The Power of Darkness* (2006) are men. Interestingly, Nesbit's story in dialect collection *In Homespun* feature predominantly female narrators — rural or working class women who are witty, shrewd, and sometimes even wicked, suitable heroines for a ghost story.

After the first young narrator sets up the conventional milieu of ghost story-telling (with vague references to classic stories of the genre), the true ghostly element is introduced as the second narrator, Miss Eastwich, the gloomy housekeeper, enters the ghost story-telling community almost as a ghost herself. The initial foreboding that the young narrator feels towards the elderly woman is gradually melt down as the latter softens with the girls' warm welcome and reveals a suppressed self through her story-telling, but this initial confusion of the housekeeper with a ghostly intruder presages her ambiguous position in the story she is to tell. The story happened some twenty years ago, when Miss Eastwich's two best friends married each other. The young narrator, posing herself as one better capable of sophisticated understanding than the other girls, hints at what is left unsaid in the elderly woman's narrative: that she had loved the man too and he knew it, but rejected her for her friend. A year after their marriage, Eastwich was invited by the man to nurse his now sick pregnant wife Mabel, but she soon found that it was not Mabel who needed her care, but the seemingly perturbed husband. There was something vicious about their villa, a disturbing presence that the haunted inhabitants were just about to hear and see but just could not, and it seemed to disturb only Eastwich and her uncomfortable ex-lover the husband. This exacerbating feeling of being followed by something undefinable almost drove the nurse to madness, until one night she saw the always "almost" there thing finally there. The paragraph that describes this first sighting of "the thing" is vividly unnerving precisely because of its vagueness, the language itself strained to its limits to show what is perhaps intrinsically un-representable:

> Yet I said, "Mabel?" not because I thought it could be Mabel who was crouching down there, half in and half out of the cupboard. The thing was grey at first, and then it was black. And when I whispered, "Mabel", it seemed to sink down till it lay like a pool of ink on the floor, and then its edges drew in, and it seemed to flow, like ink when you tilt up the paper you have split it on, and it flowed into the cupboard till it was all gathered into the shadow there. (175)

Afterwards, this shapeless moveable thing was named "the shadow", because to the nurse's horror she found the thing tend to draw itself into a shadow that was nearest, and very often that was her own shadow. Horribly still, the shadow was not bound by the haunted-house rule to attack only a particular spot at a particular hour; it could

appear at any time, always in a borderline state between visible and invisible ("It seemed as though I could only just see it, as if my sight, to see it, had to be strained to the uttermost." 175). It is now clear that it was not the house that was haunted, for the fashionable villa was newly built and had never been inhabited before;[438] the malicious "thing" was brought about by the inhabitants themselves, as its intriguing trait to merge with its seer's own shadow possibly implied an internal origin of the horror.

In Miss Eastwich's reminiscence, each of the three friends was hoping only for the best for the others, yet the story soon revealed its bleaker side as the shadow was increasingly associated with death. After Mabel delivered her baby girl, Eastwich saw the shadow again, this time crouching outside Mabel's door and presently melt inside it. Mabel was found dead; and the next time Eastwich saw the shadow, it crouched between "us" — denoting she and the widowed husband — and Mabel's coffin. Just as the narrator and Eastwich have warned, this is not an artistically rounded-off story and does not lead anywhere; so much seems to be hanging in the air and inviting interpretation, yet no certainty can be assured. The shadow — the centre of the mystery — becomes a symbol for the dark emotions of everyone involved in the story, but is it resentment, jealousy, or guilt? Initially, the shadow seemed to be connected with the husband's past debt to an abandoned lover, just as the ghostly shadows haunting the unfaithful lover in "The Moat House". However, even as the guilty husband invited over his potential debtor Eastwich and obtained her forgiveness, the shadow still could not be exorcised; instead, it seemed to be more and more associated with the nurse and eventually lead to the wife's death.

Could the shadow initiate from somewhere else? People familiar with E. Nesbit's biography would be surprised by the similarity between the love triangle explored here and Edith's own entangled relationship with her husband and her friend Alice Hoaston. In 1885, Edith was pregnant with her fourth child, and during February 1886 Alice Hoaston nursed Edith through her childbirth.[439] Alice was always a good nurse, and her company was a great solace to Edith during her delirium when the child died

[438] Emma Liggins interprets the horror of the house as the uncanniness of modernity, see Liggins, in Young and Barley eds., "Beyond the Haunted House: Modernist Women's Ghost Stories and the Troubles of Modernity", 2015.
[439] Briggs, 1987, p. 112.

shortly after birth. However, Briggs' biography shows that it was during this period of nursing that Alice was made pregnant by Hubert Bland. No one could know what happened precisely between Alice and Hubert in those days, just as the pregnant Mabel in the story was throughout excluded from her husband and friend's discussion of the shadow downstairs, even if this exclusion was meant for her wellbeing. Alice was in late months of pregnancy by the autumn, and still not knowing who the father was, Edith in a chivalrous act persuaded Alice to move in her household as a housekeeper and later adopted the daughter as her own, so that her unmarried friend's reputation was saved. The revelation of the affair came some time later, and the injured wife somehow managed to forgive both husband and friend with whatever feelings of jealousy and resentment stifled.[440]

Similarly occupying the position of the nurse and housekeeper in her two friends' marriage, Miss Eastwich in "The Shadow" seems to be a substitute for Alice Hoaston, and her occasional coalescence with the deadly shadow makes her an extremely ambiguous character, for she displayed all the familiar characteristics of the innocent and courageous Radcliffean heroine while at the same time seemed to be harbouring a malice.[441] In the housekeeper's narrative she presents herself as the altruistic friend who self-abnegatingly administered to the needs of the married couple, however, it was not peace she brought to their marriage, but on the contrary horror and death. There is a strong implication in the narrative that somehow Mabel's death was brought about by her friend: after seeing the shadow disappearing inside Mabel's door, Eastwich prayed that "Mabel might never know the horror that he and I had known" (175). In this seemingly altruistic wish that spares her friend the ugly knowledge of the "thing", an exclusive intimacy is created between "he and I" that shuts Mabel out. The "thing" that is so horrible and ungraspable thus begins to take on the appearance of desire: a guilty desire which secretly binds the husband and the nurse together and leaves the wife out. In a fantastic manner, it is this exclusion from knowledge that killed Mabel, for somehow the nurse's prayer was answered and Mabel died in her sleep, no longer able to learn of the shadow — a miraculous realisation of the nurse's

[440] Ibid., pp. 114-7.
[441] In Moers' summary, Ann Radcliffe's Gothic heroine is "a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine" (2004, p. 124).

speech that reveals what is perhaps already hidden in it: the secret wish to kill Mabel. Critics have noted how Nesbit tends to use magic as both a means for gratification of desire and a source of horror in her children's fiction, as wishes granted always lead to something unexpected and ugly that turns against the wisher.[442] In Freud's conceptualization of the uncanny, instantaneous wish-fulfilment leads to feelings of uncanniness for it occasions the return of the repressed — the repressed in this case is the notion of "omnipotence of thoughts", a mental phase in primitive men assumed to have long been surmounted.[443] In the context of a Gothic story, the magically granted wish becomes uncanny because it reveals sinisterly what probably is before language and anti-language: if language is thought to be an intricate system of symbols, then the narrative in which what is meant as metaphor becomes real destroys that system, and together with it the barrier between what is real and what is fictional. The Gothic plot then becomes fantastic writing par excellence for its usurpation of the symbolism of language — meanings run riot and distinctions are nullified.

Nesbit's portrayal of Eastwich is indeed ambivalent and full of contradictions: she seems to be a variation of the conventional innocent Gothic heroine, who now surprisingly becomes the origin of horror, yet her role in her friends' marriage in some respects also resembles Edith's own. Implied as the ex-lover of Mabel's husband, Eastwich was the one who somehow had a longer bonding therefore a "prior" right with the man. Briggs suggests that much of Nesbit's inner world is reflected indirectly in her literary work. If as Brigg argues, the wronged heroine in "The Moat House" reflects Edith's own sense of jealousy and self-destruction,[444] then a similar case can be argued for Eastwich in "The Shadow" who vicariously embodies Nesbit's self-perception: the earlier and rightful partner of the man who endured the pain of being betrayed by the two people she loved, yet graciously offering them her forgiveness.

As my analysis so far has shown, no definite meaning can be fixed for the shadow, for a deliberate vagueness keeps the central image so ambiguous that it remains a shapeless horror. The plot so far keeps up with the young narrator's promise of "no explanation, no logical coherence" (169), and in the narrator's view, this is the feature

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[442] See for example Gore Vidal, "The Writing of E. Nesbit" in *New York Review of Books*, 3 Dec. 1964 issue.
[443] Freud, 2003, "Uncanny", p. 147.
[444] Briggs, 1987, pp. 118-9.

of the only true type of ghost story. However, while Eastwich's story ends with her last seeing the shadow at the man's funeral, "the ghost story" that the younger narrator promises in the beginning has not ended yet, as the girls soon find their current temporality contaminated by the ghostly time of the past. It turns out that one of the girls who has fainted in the dance is Mabel's baby, and it is seeing her again that stirs up Eastwich's long buried memory. With this revelation comes the apex of horror: the shadow reappears with the narration of its story outside the door of the fainted girl's room, and everyone on site experiences the uneasiness of just almost seeing and hearing it. Typical for Nesbit, the ending comes abruptly and unsettling: Mabel's baby is found dead. Although an inherited heart disease from her mother is given by the doctor as the cause of death, the naturalistic interpretation can hardly explain away the tangible reappearance of the "thing" that everyone on site has felt. The threat of the shadow, as it turns out, crosses over not only the narrative boundary of Eastwich's story but also leaves its trace on the reader for the lack of a logically coherent explanation. Entering the scene with an external comment on the conventions of the genre, the story turns itself into this unending haunting circle.

"The Shadow" capitalizes on the anxiety engendered by epistemological uncertainty. It is the opacity of language, the gap in a seemingly seamless symbolic world, — in the story literally embodied by the characters' difficulty to see, hear, and know exactly what "the thing" is — that makes the text such an exemplary case of Gothic haunting. Gothic texts are haunted writing, writes Berthin, for they are inhabited by an "other which is at work within and against discourse": "this other, an anti-symbolic force of chaos manifest itself thematically and formally".[445] The shapeless shadow and its refusal to signification epitomize this kind of anti-symbolic chaos that constitutes the Gothic in Berthin's conceptualization, and the story as a self-reflexive commentary on the ghost story genre points to an aesthetic of opacity.

As I have mentioned above, "The Shadow" is a singular case in Nesbit's ghost stories for its all-female narrators and the female-exclusive community established around the act of ghost story-telling; and it is through telling the story of the "ghost"— the shadow — that women's entangled experience and dormant feelings in the intricate case of love and marriage can gain expression. If we situate the story within the

[445] Berthin, 2012, p. 58.

tradition of Female Gothic, then its deliberate departure from delineation explored above and the exclusively female-controlled narration begin to take on a political significance. While Eastwich's role in her friends' marriage is ambiguous throughout, she as a character in the younger narrator's story is also being constantly scrutinized and re-evaluated from dimensions of class and age, thus revealing a totally different aspect of the older woman's life which is meant to arouse sympathy. The housekeeper initially enters the ghost story-telling milieu as a sinister intruder, someone who has "built a wall round her" with "her persistent silence" (170), but her narrative opens up the opportunity for the wealthy younger narrator to re-evaluate the serving staff's living conditions, their repressed emotional lives and her own previous lack of understanding of them. The act of ghost story-telling thus operates as a unique way of female socialization that is both therapeutic (for the teller) and educational (for the listener) and an equalizing opportunity for women of different classes and ages to reach over to each other in mutual understanding.

Female exclusivity is important in achieving this delicate space of mutual understanding, so an exclusion from men is repeatedly mentioned in the narrative. The story-telling happens after the girls' retreat from their Christmas dances, and a sexually suggestive description revealingly indicates how an exclusion from men — metaphorically represented by the scraping "harsh fingers" of cedar branches — is necessary for women to enter a space of confidentiality needed for invoking the ghost: "the stillness of the manor house, broken only by the whisper of the wind in the cedar branches, and the scraping of their harsh fingers against our window panes, had pricked us to such a luxurious confidence in our surroundings, …that we had dared to talk of ghosts" (169). As the story proceeds, voices of men along the corridors outside are inserted occasionally as a reassuring background noise for the intimate scene happening inside, reassuring precisely because they are safely barred outside just as the "harsh fingers" of the cedar trees are separated from the warmth of the room. In Miss Eastwich's story, the man occupying the central stage remained a nameless "he", while both women characters, Mabel and Miss Eastwich had imposed their presence upon the scene. The revelation of the fainted girl's identity is equally telling — "Mabel's baby" is what everyone calls her. Since the girl certainly is no longer a baby and not only Mabel's daughter but also the husband's, to denominate her as "Mabel's baby" seems to emphasize a distinctively female lineage. Indeed, since the husband

has no name in the story, in other words, no place-holder, the daughter can only be "Mabel's daughter". Mabel's baby is not the only haunting presence that spills out of a ghostly narrative; the younger narrator's story also has a lingering trace that goes beyond her narrative: after the death of Mabel's daughter, Eastwich becomes the housekeeper of the "youngest of us all" — the girl who is most sympathetic to the older woman and who probably would offer her a warmer life. Thus the narrative as a whole forms an almost complete cycle of female reciprocity, which, although lacking a coherent logic demanded by the rule of signification, establishes instead a community of mutual understanding and help among the women characters involved. The feminine circle is almost complete, apart from the narrator's allusion in the end that the heart disease of Mabel's baby might instead be inherited from her father. Although the heart disease explanation does not clear the clouds surrounding the shadow in any way, this tentative beckoning towards the husband does suggest an externalization of the "pathology" of the story and a subtle reversion of the Gothic trope which tends to attribute the ultimate horror to a monstrous maternity.[446] After all, it may be the father/husband who is the origin of the whole "disease" that traumatised the ex-lover, unconsciously killed the new mother, and passed its cursing trace on the daughter. The potentially externalized origin of the horrible shadow therefore contrastingly marks out a safe and healthier feminine space among the women involved.

As with other stories of female ghosts examined in the first section, "The Shadow" does not end with a resolution of the ghost's problem or a satisfactory closure of the ghostly narrative. Both the ghost and its effects — the shadow and the "disease" of Mabel's baby — reach out of the older woman's narrative and are barely contained within the younger woman's narrative. The "not artistically rounded off" story means that not only no explanation is given to its horror and mystery, but also that the ghost's story can never end — and that is when the story stops being just a story but also transmits into real women's lives. Nesbit's life as a socialist and a New Woman, as I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, presents irresolvable contradictions and inconsistencies. Like most women writers of her time, she tended to embrace over time and in varying contexts both extremes of the spectrum of opinions regarding

[446] For instance psychoanalytically oriented critic Claire Kahane interprets the Gothic heroine's fear as ultimately the fear of the monstrous mother. See Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror", 1985.

women's position in family and society. As Briggs shows, Nesbit at times can be extremely conservative so as to deny women's equal abilities to work as men (her "Natural Disabilities of Women" is such a case) or to work out her sense of injuries in marriage by internalising a wife's subordinate position in her poems,[447] while on the other hand she did not hesitate to enjoy sexual freedom outside of marriage or to devote herself to work while leaving the "wifely" duties to others. The inconsistencies in her gender ideologies can be observed in her writing across genres, but the multi-layered-ness of the Gothic lends itself well to accommodate such inconsistencies. Gothic writing intrinsically embraces vagueness and refuses logical consistency; its language at times can be shockingly revealing as well as secretive. "The Shadow" as I have examined is an exemplary case of such, containing intimate episodes that are almost autobiographical while at the same time remaining ambiguous and full of contradictions. In this sense, the ambiguity and non-resolution of Nesbit's Female Gothic are not only a perturbing deconstruction of the signification process but also a true reflection of the contradictions and lack of coherence that characterised many contemporary women's life in a transitional period.

### 5.4 Fantasy over Her Dead Body: The Fallen Woman Arising

As I have mentioned above, Nesbit's "The Moat House" in 1886 ushers in the figure of the returning ghost as an emblem for what is uncannily irrepressible: man's guilty conscience and a belated justice for the wronged woman. "The Ebony Frame" and "Uncle Abraham's Romance" are all later incarnations of the same ghost woman, though in these Gothic tales the major power of the ghost lies not in the efficacy of her revenge but her haunting. The returning dead woman can also cause trouble for her human lover and expose the hypocrisy of the gender script under which she suffers when her story as a ghost overturns popular contemporary patriarchal myths for women. Stories of the dead woman and the fallen woman are cautionary tales for regulating a model womanhood: the woman who deviates from accepted models of femininity is considered fallen and punished by death; but death absolves her sins as

[447] Briggs analyzes a pair of love poems in *Lays and Legends* (1886), "Husband of Today" and "Wife of All Ages" which offer a different treatment of the theme of jealousy and infidelity than the one explored in "The Shadow". The wife in the poem is resentful of the double moral standards for men and women, yet in the end compromises by accepting that a wife is contented with possessing only a part of the husband's heart (1987, pp. 119-20).

she is now reduced to the desired state of passivity, therefore can once again be recuperated as the site of male voyeurism and man's ideal goddess. However, if the irresistible charm of the dead woman reflects men's fantasy of an exotic and passive feminine ideal, the horror of the dead woman's body suddenly turning active lays bare this self-delusion and mocks its hypocrisy. "From the Dead", another story from *Grim Tales* (1893) I am going to focus on in this section, reworks the patriarchal myth of the sexually active (therefore monstrous) woman atoning for her sins by death. The most famous variant of this myth is of cause the fairy tale "Snow White", which, as explored by many feminist critics, chimes perfectly well with the Victorian misogynist myth that "the ideal woman is the dead woman".[448] Gilbert and Guba in their seminal *Madwoman in the Attic* use the Snow White tale as an allegory for the double fate of women in the nineteenth-century cultural imagination: the aggressive Queen and the selfless and angelic Snow White are one and the same; ultimately it is Snow White, "dead and self-less in her glass coffin", a worshipped art object and a possession of the prince that has triumphed over the Queen and "proven herself to be patriarchy's ideal woman".[449] "From the Dead" acknowledges this mythical structure that traces the trajectory of the woman's fall and rise sanctioned by sadistic patriarchal worship of the dead women, but provides a transformed and ironical realisation of this myth which ridicules its illusoriness and impotence. Lawrence Couple draws from the practices of Bible interpretation two different types of mythography: an orthodox typology and a radical typology. Orthodox typology leads to perfectionism and absolutism, which ultimately exorcises the fantastic and closes the narrative, while radical typology perpetuates the process of myth-making —"While orthodox typology works in terms of closure, radical typology works in terms of disclosure".[450] If the original misogynist myth sets the "type" of woman's tale that patriarchy tells to women, then Nesbit's reworking, in Coupe's conceptualization, provides the "anti-

[448] Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim first interpreted Snow White as a cautionary tale for pubescent girls' premature sexual desire, yet many feminist critics criticized this interpretation as precisely an endorsement of patriarchy's polarization of the sexually aggressive woman and the angelic woman. See Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning & Importance of Fairy Tales*, 1977, pp. 199-215. For feminist interpretations of Snow White, see for instance Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber, 1980, *Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 36-42; Susanne Kord, "Bad Blood: The Cost of Sexual Curiosity in Archetypal Tales", 2009. On the Victorian exaltation of the beautiful dead woman in art, see Elizabeth Bronfen, 1992, *Over Her Dead Body*; Bram Dijkstra, 1986, *Idols of Perversity*.
[449] Gilbert and Guba, 1980, p. 42.
[450] Coupe, 2009, p.100. On orthodox and radical typologies, see Coupe, pp. 98-101.

type" that forms new ways to establish women's own history, therefore is a radical typology of myth-making.

"From the Dead" begins with what is a common plot in Nesbit's stories: love triangles. Ida Helmont is in love with her friend Elvira's fiancé Arthur Marsh, yet Elvira secretly loves Ida's brother Oscar. Ida shows Arthur his fiancé's love letter to Oscar, and in a state of indignation, Arthur breaks his engagement to set Elvira free. The decision benefits everyone as Elvira and Oscar are soon happily married, and Arthur turns his attention to Ida and "loved her as I never loved Elvira" (35). The male narrator pours out unreserved praise for his newly found love: "There never was anyone like her. She was brave and beautiful, witty and wise…. She was the only woman in the world. There was a frankness — a largeness of heart — about her that made all other women seem small and contemptible." (35) The praise indeed captures in abstraction Ida's unique personality, for she is definitely not the conventionally admired modest Victorian lady. She is not satisfied with the passive woman's role in heterosexual courtship; instead, she openly courts the man she chooses even though she has the charm to have half of her acquaintances at her feet (which flatters Arthur's vanity and as he admits, may be one of the reasons he loves her). Moreover, Ida is not hesitant to show her love physically. When she shows Arthur the letter in the beginning, she involuntarily touches his shoulder and kisses his forehead, betraying her love for him before a reciprocal is guaranteed. In many ways, the woman has strained the limits of acceptable female roles in middle-class courtship, and Arthur declares that he "worshipped her" for these rare qualities (35). The sincerity of his declaration and his tolerance for the woman's transgression are yet to be tested. In their honeymoon, after Arthur confidently declares to his wife that "Nothing in heaven or earth can come between us now" (35), Ida confesses that the love letter she passed to him was a forgery. It is the man's half-hearted theatrical reaction towards this confession that ruins what could have been a happy marriage. He flings Ida away, reproaches her as a liar and denounces her, even though he knows well at the moment he means none of it — it is his injured manly vanity and an imagined manly "nobility" that dictate him to react so. As Margree points out, the contrast between the man's outward indignation and his inward longing for his wife, juxtaposed theatrically in the narrative here,

implies a critique of the socially expected gender roles for men and women.[451] Although Arthur declares his admiration for an unconventional woman like Ida before, now he reveals that he is still clinging to a much more conservative gender model:

> I don't know whether I expected her to creep to my knees and implore forgiveness. …I did not mean what I said. No, oh no, no; I did not mean a word of it. While I was saying it, I was longing for her to weep and *fall* at my feet, that I might *raise* her and hold her in my arms again.
>
> But she did not *fall* at my feet; she *stood* quietly looking at me. (36, italics mine)

The self-contradictory statements here ("I don't know…" soon contradicted by "I was longing…") reveals that even in reconstructing his memory (the story is narrated five years after the major events) the male narrator is trying to gloss over his cruelty and true attitude towards his wife. But it is obvious to the reader what the man really wants from the woman: he wants the once goddess-like, worshipped woman to fall at his feet, to acknowledge her subordinate wife's position, to metaphorically kill herself (her self-esteem and her pride), so that the husband can once more raise the fallen woman and place her upon his altar. Elizabeth Bronfen points out insightfully in *Over Her Dead Body* Western culture's aestheticization of the beautiful dead woman, upon which men transfer their anxiety of their own death and build their own immortality. The prologue Bronfen chooses for her book, a quote from Thomas de Quincy's *Joan of Arc* (1847), deserves to be cited here as it serves as a perfect footnote to Nesbit's male narrator's mentality:

> Yet, sister woman, though I cannot consent to find a Mozart or a Michael Angelo in your sex, cheerfully, and with the love that burns in depth of admiration, I acknowledge you can do one thing as well as the best of us men— a greater thing than even Milton is known to have done, or Michael Angelo; you can die grandly, and as goddesses would die, were goddesses mortal.[452]

It is as a slaughtered and reclaimed goddess — reclaimed, of course, by himself— that Arthur desires to redefine his wife's position in their marriage. Yet Ida would not fall at his feet and let him raise her up again. Instead, the woman *stands* and *looks* back,

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[451] Margree, 2014, p. 430.
[452] Thomas De Quincy, excerpt from *Joan of Arc*, qtd. in Bronfen, 1992.

asking for a hearing for her explanation and interrogating the man's sincerity. Once again, the deviant woman reverts the prescribed gender script by refusing the hysterical and wailing "woman's role" and usurping the rational "man's role". What she expects is an honest communication between equals, yet it is the husband who reacts in a hysterical manner and constantly aborts the woman's effort to communicate. Denied love and a hearing, the woman manages to maintain her pride by retreating quietly from the man's life. When Arthur returns from his long walk ready to forgive his wife, Ida has disappeared, respecting his decision that they will never meet again. All efforts to find her fail until several months later a brief note from his wife leads Arthur to a gloomy Derbyshire farm, only to be told by Ida's nurse that she is already dead.

The first part of the story ends here, and Part II, through Arthur's conversation with the nurse, reveals what the wife had suffered. The indignant nurse who has loved Ida while nursing her here acts as her spokesperson and bombards the belated husband with reproaches. Ida had come to the farm already pregnant and let the nurse take her for a fallen and abandoned woman. The nurse's reprimand of the husband in this section, though partly based on her misunderstanding, still rings true as a poignant criticism of the husband's self-centredness, and more broadly, of the harsh and intolerant gender modalities that push deviant women like Ida first to social obscurity and then to death.

Ida's death evinces the punishment that society exacts on women who do not conform to acceptable gender models. As Bram Dijkstra demonstrates powerfully in his study of *fin-de-siècle* fascination of feminine evil, one of the prominent misogynist tropes in art and literature of the time was the exaltation of the beautiful dead woman. In Dijkstra's words, death is regarded as "the ideal state of submissive womanhood".[453] A "self-sacrificial sleep death" was encouraged by artists as the model feminine virtue, a Christ-like martyrdom, and any true loving woman should be contented to die in self-effacement. Yet the true sinister effect of this romanticized and promoted female death, points out Dijkstra, is to reduce the male-female relationship in "a simple matter of dominance and submission" in which the male ego is exalted and gratified with an

[453] Dijkstra, 1986, p. 60

imaginary battle won over his motionless, surrendering partner.[454] Similarly, Bronfen theorizes the mechanics of power at work in the literary trope of a beautiful female body in death displayed for and gazed at by a male lover. Citing Snow White as an epitome for the aestheticized feminine death, she points out:

> Finally, as auto-icon, Snow White performs the apotheosis of one of the central positions ascribed to Woman in western culture; namely that the 'surveyed' feminine body is meant to confirm the power of the masculine gaze. In Lemoine-Luccioni's words, Woman doesn't look; she gives herself to be looked at; she is beauty and being beauty, she is also an object of love.[455]

Ida in "From the Dead" is precisely the kind of woman who revolts against this diminishing feminine model prescribed for women. Facing her husband's accusation, she does not "fall" at his feet and let herself be surveyed, but stands still and does *look* back. Thus she is denounced by the husband, but once she indeed "falls" and lies in a "sleep-death", the dead woman can once again entice the man's desire and be appreciated. Ida's dead body is revealed in the text in what Bronfen calls an aestheticized, or even fetishized manner — as if the dead woman is an art object on display, the nurse draws back the white sheet covering her body and announces: "don't [sic] she look beautiful?" (41) The husband, just like the prince gazing over Snow White's corpse displayed in its glass coffin, can't help but observe how irresistible the dead woman becomes. While he had shunned physical touch from the woman when she was alive, he now gives her kisses freely in her death:

> She did not look like one dead. Her lips were still red, and it seemed to me that a tinge of colour lay on her cheek. It seemed to me, too, that if I kissed her she would awaken, and put her slight hand on my neck, and lay her cheek against mine — and that we should tell each other everything, and weep together, and understand, and be comforted.
>
> So I stooped and laid my lips to hers as the nurse stole from the room.
>
> But the red lips were like marbles, and she did not waken. She will not waken now ever any more. (41-2)

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[454] Ibid., p. 61.
[455] Bronfen, 1992, p. 102.

It is important here that the husband affirms in his narrative "she did not waken" and "will not waken", for although Arthur fantasies about reviving his wife with his kiss, he knows perfectly well it is precisely death, which renders the woman in an inaccessible beyond, that removes her disobedience and makes her redeemable. Again, Bronfen's observation is illuminating here:

> As a corpse, the feminine beloved loses her quality of being Other (another sex), and becomes the site where the gazed-at object and the object desired by the gazing subject merge perfectly into indistinction. In a superlative manner, she confirms the imaginative power and desire of the mourning lover. This absolutely untouchable dead woman signifies, in Kristeva's words, jouissance as nostalgia, within reach but lost for ever. By turning the feminine into a dead body, phallic idealisation places itself on a pedestal.[456]

The dead Ida is for Arthur the inaccessible nostalgic beyond, upon which he can himself rise in the image of the perfect mourning lover. Early on, when the nurse in misunderstanding Arthur as never having loved Ida, reproaches him sarcastically: "p'raps you'd like to see 'er safe under ground afor yer go? I'll bound you'll put a big stone slab on'er — to make sure she don't rise again." (40) The nurse's assumption that Arthur would despise Ida as if she is a vampire is of course unjustified, but the sentences when read retrospectively reveal to be strikingly prophetic and illuminating, for later Ida does "rise again", and Arthur's reaction is no better than putting a stone slab on her, revealing that what leads to the woman's tragedy is essentially her sexual activeness, seen as a dangerous transgression and punished like a vampire by an intolerant society.[457]

So far, the story shows how a non-conforming woman is forced back to the ultimate gender role expected of her, i.e. death, the "ideal state of submissive womanhood" in Dijkstra's words. However, if Ida refuses the self-effacing compliance required of her, she conforms in an indirect way. Her husband desires her to fall at his feet so he can raise her up again; in a metaphorical sense, she imposes on herself another mode of "falling" — she withdraws from her London society, lives invisibly as a social outcast,

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[456] Ibid., p. 98.
[457] Kord makes a connection between the undead Snow White and the female vampire. See Kord, 2009, pp. 210-14. Indeed, if we consider the commonly accepted connection between vampirism and excessive sexual appetite, then the rising Ida in this story is distinctively vampiric.

and lets the nurse assume she is unmarried, a "fallen" woman. All these actions are her self-effected "falling" in another direction other than what is expected of her, a rebellion against the society which has failed her. Nina Auerbach in her study of the Victorian myths about women singles out the myth of the "Fallen Woman", which although renders the culpable woman a social outcast, also unleashes for her a tremendous transforming power; and death, the most common ending for the fallen woman, becomes the "symbol of her fall's transforming power" which suggests "the simultaneity of her fall and apotheosis."[458] It is worth noting that in Nesbit's story, the identity of a fallen woman is not enforced on Ida, but is a myth she actively weaves around herself, as if knowing that through her active "falling" she can rise again. Therefore, even when Ida is brought back to a state of model femininity by her death in Part II, her revolt has started before that. Part II serves as a transition for both husband and wife: the husband initially not believing Ida's death has learned to accept the fact and finds peace with the dead woman, while the wife having fallen so low to death, gathers strength for her rising in Part III.

If so far the story has been a negative manifestation of the misogynist myth that "the ideal woman is the dead woman" as examined by Bronfen and Dijkstra, the entrance of the Gothic in the final part adds a new chapter to this myth which rips bare the hypocrisy and male impotence hidden in this gender tale. When lying in bed in the room next to the one where Ida's corpse lies, Arthur realises in darkness a sound coming from the death chamber. Stricken with horror, he struggles to quench his apparent repulsion with a weak declaration of love: "Dead or alive, is she not your darling, your heart's heart? Would you not go near to die of joy, if she came back to you?" (43) However the narrative in this part has already betrayed the man's true attitude towards his dead wife; the dead woman is no longer a person but a thing, the abject reality of mortality that the living man must distance himself from to maintain and reaffirm his subjectivity, so the denominator for Ida since Part III has been changed from "she" to "the dead", "the dead woman", "the corpse", and in the climax of horror when the dead finally enters the room, "it": "It came straight towards the bed, and stood at the bed foot in its white grave-clothes, with the white bandage under its chin. ... Its eyes were wide open, and looked at me with love unspeakable." (43)

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[458] Auerbach, 1982, p. 161, p. 165.

The cold-sounding "it" clearly reveals the abject status that Ida now holds in her husband's eyes, but it also denotes a form of being that has transcended the cultural positions allocated to both women and death as in "the dead woman" or "the corpse". Not dead, nor a living woman, the new status of ghost gives Ida the freedom to transgress walls and man's chambers as well as the newly unleashed power to interrogate, to demand love, and to terrify. Melissa Makala in her discussion of women's ghost stories observes the multi-layered meanings of "it":

> In women's use of "it" to describe supernatural beings, the term carries with it an implicit critique of the status of women's identity in the nineteenth century. The nebulous, protean quality of ghost is its source of power. Apparitions defy categorization, and therefore defy many of the social limitations placed on the living. This is especially true of female ghosts, who gain more freedom in their supernatural form. They are beyond the usual nineteenth century cultural restraints which were imposed on them because of their gender and/or class. Ghosts come back whether they are wanted or not.[459]

What Ida's ghost wants from her husband, is an opportunity to continue her confession denied her when she was alive. Now as a ghost, standing by the bed of the living man, she can finally explain herself: that although the letter was her forgery, the content was not, for Elvira really loved Oscar and there was no deception there. What she says next reveals Ida's distorted compliance with the dead woman plot and Nesbit's parody of the self-delusion involved, for the dead woman asks: "You'll love me again now, won't you, now I am dead. One always forgives dead people." (43) Paralysed by horror, the living man's answer is a weak "yes", yet the ghost wants more — she wants to kiss her husband and moves towards his bed. Ironically, the thrilling scene is a reversal of the climax in Snow White: instead of being gazed at, admired, kissed, and resurrected to life by the saviour prince, the dead woman arises from her exhibition table and makes sexual advances to the man lying in his bed. This proves to be the final strain that totally "unmans" Arthur, as he shrieks like a hysteric and hides himself under the bed sheet. The myth that man raises himself up at the altar of the dead goddess is totally exploded, and the dead woman that is conjured up by this fantasy is found dead again outside her death chamber. The narrator in "From the Dead", failing the woman

[459] Makala, 2013, pp. 58-9.

he loves for a second time, is doomed to live in remorse and guilt with Ida's child, who has "never spoken and never smiled" (44). As with other Nesbit's stories discussed so far, the ghost's retreat does not mean the end of haunting, as the silent child, a surrogate for the ephemeral ghost, stays with the husband as a silent witness for his past cruelties towards the woman he loves.

It is interesting to note a certain parallel of plots between "From the Dead" and another of Nesbit's stories — "Barring the Way" in *In Homespun* (1896), the only story that evokes the ghost in a collection largely conforming to the realist tradition. Both stories deal with "fallen" women arising as ghosts — women who are made pregnant and abandoned by the men they love and die in childbirth. Ellen, the working-class heroine of "Barring the Way", dies with her new-born baby in her father's house after returning from an elopement. One day the rascal returns and provokes the father, and has to run towards the church for his life from the angry father. But in the churchyard he is apparently barred by some spectacle of horror — alluded to be the ghost of Ellen with the baby in her arms — and dies under the father's knife. In both stories, the evocation of the ghost gives the woman penalized by death a new power to confront her betrayer, but the Gothic elements of "From the Dead" apparently allow the author a sharper interrogation of the unequal gender relations and the myth of the ideally self-effacing dead woman. "Barring the Way" evokes only the conventional plot of the revenging ghost: the rascal receives the deserved punishment, but the narrator, Ellen's surviving sister, still endorses the doctrine that a woman can only wipe clean her moral taint by wiping herself out ("when a woman had done what she had done, the only way to get forgiven is to die").[460] The chilling ghostly visit in Part III of "From the Dead" as I examined above however deconstructs from within the myth of man's worshipping of the passively eroticized dead woman, for the two lovers comply with the traditional romantic plot almost in every move, yet the rising ghost woman is still stricken dead a second time by the man who claims to love her. The macabre Gothic myth that Nesbit creates obviously speaks more truth about Victorian gender relations than the realist story, and acts as a powerful anti-type for the patriarchal myths it evokes and reverts.

[460] Nesbit, "Barring the Way", *In Homespun*, originally p. 34, in *Victorian Women Writers Project*. n. d. Indiana University Digital Library Program.

As I mentioned in the beginning, Nesbit's Gothic tales of the returning ghost woman are both mythography and mythopoeia. If the various reincarnations of the returning ghost I discuss so far can be seen primarily as a satire of existing mythic narratives, then "The House of Silence" (1906), as I will show below, is an exemplary case of Nesbit's creative literary myth-making, which works to redefine the cultural values of certain concepts and to empower certain groups.

### 5.5 A New Gothic Myth for Women

Nesbit's career as a *fin-de-siècle* woman writer is as difficult to categorise as her multi-faceted Gothic ghost stories. A prominent feature of her ghost stories, as I have argued in this chapter, is their ambiguity, contradictions, and refusal to delineation. If Vernon Lee's ghost stories are unique among contemporary women writers in the removal of their focus from the distinctive women's experiences to the mechanics of men's construction of women, Nesbit's stories are more centrally located in the feminine sphere and prioritise the repressed and inexplicable women's sentiments — in a sense, they self-consciously situate themselves as a myth of the ghost woman. Unlike the kind of "social supernatural" that Makala uses to categorize many Victorian women's ghost stories,[461] Nesbit's stories very often start with a self-reflective understanding of woman's writing tradition and proceed to appropriate or remould a myth from it, although a social critique is never lacking as shown in "From the Dead" and "Man-size in Marble". "From the Dead" displays a self-reflective twist of the Victorian myth of the dead and fallen women, and in the following, I will illustrate through "The House of Silence" how Nesbit reformulates a common trope into a self-mythologizing allegory for men and women.

"The House of Silence" is anthologized in Nesbit's later story collection *Man and Maid* (1906).[462] Perhaps for its unsettling effect, contemporary reviews of the book all singled this story out for praise. An anonymous reviewer for *The Bookman* says the story "has an almost allegorical force",[463] yet what that allegory contains is difficult to grasp, for the story, unlike Nesbit's other quick-paced stories, is minimalist in plot and characterization. In a dreamlike ambience, it follows the thrilling night adventure

[461] Makala, 2013, p. 7.
[462] Nesbit, *Man and Maid*, London: Unwin, 1906, in *The Complete Novels of E. Nesbit*, 2013.
[463] *The Bookman*, August 1906, p. 187, in *The Complete Novels of E. Nesbit*.

of an unnamed thief in an unnamed deserted country house. Throughout the story, the reader is given only the thief's perspective, and as the title suggests, since it is a "house of silence", silence is the only palpable second character, pervading the story with a stifling sense of claustrophobia. The thief, having obtained information that treasures may be found in this long deserted manor house, skilfully breaks into it and wanders in its endless corridors and empty rooms, until he crosses the secret trap door that leads to a chamber full of valuable treasures. The restrained deprecating tone that the text uses to describe the treasures and the overwhelming effects they have on the thief seems to imply a critique of the injustice of class inequality and the pathology of human greediness, a subtle emergence of the author's socialist ideology. The unfolding of the story seems to affirm this cautionary tone: the thief, after loading himself with treasures, takes the wrong trap door and immediately discovers that he is now enclosed in a damp vaulted passage whose winding twists and turns give no hope of an outlet and that he must "die like a rat" (230) in this prison of dark passages — a proper punishment for greed.

Yet is this the allegory that *The Bookman*'s reviewer indicates? The climax of horror offers an unexpected turn to this cautionary tale and re-posits retrospectively the whole story as a gender allegory. The thief finally finds a door in the passage, and seizing this opportunity for escape, he hastily crosses the door to enter an enclosed courtyard, where sunlight has not yet touched and tall weeds grow. In the centre of the weeds, the thief unexpectedly stumbles over a spectacle of horror:

> It was the long, firm, heavy plait of a woman's hair. And just beyond lay the green gown of a woman, and a woman's hands, and her golden head, and her eyes; all about the place where *she* lay was the thick buzzing of flies, and the black swarm of them. (231, italics mine)

The decomposing corpse of a woman as the reward of the thief's escape from the claustrophobic damp passages, is horrifying for its graphic vividness as well as for the utter inexplicableness of the spectacle. Nesbit's language here showcases the suspended moment of unrepresentability of Gothic horror, when language overstrains and contradicts itself: instead of telling the reader directly it is the corpse of a woman, the language hedges around the "plait of a woman", "the green gown of a woman", "a woman's hands", "golden head", "her eyes" etc., as if the woman has broken down into all parts of a woman all over the place, yet the woman herself is blotted from sight,

something too terrible to behold, too ungraspable to be named. Yet instead of denaturing the corpse as a repulsive other, as the pronoun "it" used by the male narrator in "From the Dead" does, the text at the same time forces its reader to acknowledge the unrepresentable spectacle, although broken into parts, still as a woman, as the personal pronoun "she" shows. The horror of the dead woman, revealed at the end of the thief's vigil and as the ultimate secret of the imprisoning dark passages, thus is the true allegory of the story. The thief, horrified by the spectacle, hurriedly rushes back to the dark passage, now a lesser horror to him than the corpse of the woman. The story ends with a refrain of the beginning, as the thief finally finds a way out of the passage and returns to the road outside the park. As with Nesbit's other stories, no explanation is given as to why a woman's corpse would appear at the place, and no resolution is reached. But the thief's adventure itself, when viewed retrospectively with the horror of the dead woman as its ending point, becomes precisely an inversion of the Female Gothic plot. As Susanne Becker observes, the house is an iconic metaphor for what she calls "gothic forms of feminine fiction".[464] The house is traditionally gendered as women's space, and more specifically in Female Gothic it evokes the horror of women's confinement; thus the "female figure enclosed" in the most secretive part of the house, remarks Becker, "dramatically signifies women's assigned place of enclosure and constraint; of domestic horror with no escape."[465] "The House of Silence" dramatizes precisely that sense of enclosure and horror with no escape, but makes these horrors suffered not by a woman, but a male villain. The thief's night adventure in this story retraces the trajectory of the Radcliffean heroine: he enters a dilapidated Gothic house hidden from common eyes, gets lost in its endless corridors, and under its appearance of wealth and splendour, finds himself trapped in a womb-like subterranean inside, absolutely cut out from communication with the outside world and threatened to be imprisoned there for life. The thief experiences all the horrors, entrapment, and sense of persecution that a Gothic heroine may encounter, and the silence of the house, which the thief senses alternatively as a companion or a stalker, becomes a palpable metaphor for the entrapped woman in a similar situation. The horrible fate of this persecuted heroine,

[464] Becker, *Gothic Forms of Feminine Fiction*, 1999.
[465] Ibid., p. 10.

which previous Female Gothic fiction tends to cover up with a final marriage plot, the story reveals graphically as its centre: the dead woman swamped by flies.

However, the thief as the protagonist of this inverted Gothic plot is in every respect the opposite of the Gothic heroine: he is far from innocent or virtuous, and instead of being driven to the dungeon by villains, he is the villain who penetrates the house of silence with a criminal intent. In making the Gothic villain experience vicariously the sense of persecution and entrapment suffered by the Gothic heroine, the story epitomizes the radical mythography conceptualized by Coupe as it turns an old myth of woman into a new one. The silent womb-like house not only takes in the man, but it also engulfs and overpowers him, and confronts him at the end of his pilgrimage with what he has always endeavoured to deny or transmit to his other: the very materiality of death, the abjection that he has attributed to women to establish his own ego.[466] In this sense, the story becomes effectively an empowering myth of femininity: it is a house of silence, seemingly passive and long deserted, defenceless to the thief's penetration, yet it has a magic of itself, hiding at its core not only boundless treasures but also the collapse of reason and symbolization — that which governs the world outside — the unrepresentable dead woman in the backyard.[467]

Nesbit's ghost stories, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, are full of contradictions and ambiguities as her life was, but it is precisely this opacity, this refusal to resolution and clear delineation that give these stories a power to upset, a valuable quality of fantastic writing that has been given much academic attention. Nesbit's ghost stories, like Vernon Lee's, are distinctive productions of their time that trace the struggles of a newly emergent consciousness about women's roles, sufferings, and capacities. While Lee's stories focalize history and the mechanics of history-making, Nesbit's stories are in themselves a para-history making, in other words, a myth-making — by appropriating and remoulding various myths about women and femininity, she makes a new myth of her woman as inexplicable, anti-interpretation, and powerfully haunting.

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[466] On the theme of the abject feminine in Nesbit's stories, see Margree, 2014, pp. 428-30.

[467] The description of this house of silence coming to life under moonlight is reminiscent of the description of the moon-lit manor house in *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), one of Nesbit's most terrifying children's novels. The house in both stories seems to be a surreal wonderland, full of invisible moving things, splendours, and occasionally, horrors.

# Chapter 6 Conclusion

**"**If people recite these values, ghosts can be exorcised; if ghosts recite these values, people can be exorcised." 人誦此咒，可以驅鬼；鬼誦此咒，可以驅人.

—Ma Boyong, "Ghosts in Wuhan University" (2014)[468]

Ghosts are liminal entities; they show a disrespect for our usual defining categories and travel freely over time, between the self and the other and, as this cross-cultural study has shown, across cultures. Zhang Longxi has expressed his belief that "cultural encounters will manifest themselves *in* and *as* textual encounters",[469] and I hope through my close reading of the literary ghost figure in the preceding chapters, I have succeeded in demonstrating the commensurability between Chinese and British culture in their understanding and appropriation of this powerfully liminal figure. More specifically, I have tried to show that there is a similar poetics of the ghost embedded in the ghost literature of the two countries in the late nineteenth century, which an isolated study of either the English ghost story or the Chinese *zhiguai* would fail to reveal. The ghost literature in both countries had been appropriated by various marginalized and disadvantaged groups as a ghostly history of their own which enabled an expression of new gender identities and a contestation of existing narratives of orthodoxy: while male literati in China used their history of ghosts to rethink the history of the state, British women writers found in ghost stories an arena for formulating a fantastic women's history as opposed to men's manipulation of women's history.

The discursive space offered by the ghost literature relies on the ambivalent status of the ghost as perceived in both cultures: the ghost is at once a cultural anomaly and an inevitable product of orthodox culture, ephemeral yet at times powerful, belonging to the past yet traversing freely across time. Derrida has claimed that "The spectral logic

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[468] "Ghosts in Wuhan University" is a short story written by the contemporary Chinese writer Ma Boyong, first published online and subsequently censored. I will return to the story's suppression later in the chapter. The story, however, can still be accessed online, for instance from here https://daily.zhihu.com/story/4739443

[469] Zhang, *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures*, 2007, p. 8.

is de facto a deconstructive logic."[470] It is this liminal nature of the ghost, especially its inherent tension with chronology (as indicated in the conception of history) and categorization (as the conceptual premise in the delineation between the self and the other) that makes it a particularly versatile conceptual device for marginalized groups who seek to question established cultural and societal structures and to construct new possibilities for a changing self. Stories of ghosts, as the introduction chapter has shown, have traditionally appealed to those people who felt themselves alienated from the centre of power; in China, they were the frustrated male literati class, and in Britain, they were the women writers who were largely excluded from positions of authority. The marginalized groups harnessed the potency of the ghost by using their ghost narratives to confound social normality, to express the tabooed and unsayable, and to visualize alternative models of social rules and gender relations. In the ideologically chaotic late nineteenth century, a shared ethos in both China and Britain was a preoccupation with time, whether as implied in the alarmed awareness of the impending ending of a dynasty in China or the agitating premonition of imminent social changes in Britain. The ideological uncertainties of the period engendered tremendous anxieties with one's identity, as well as anxieties with the ideas of history, whether national or personal. Consequently, history and the notion of the self, especially one's gender identity, have been the two focuses of my study of the ghost literature. Particularly, I have traced the powerful role that ghost stories play in functioning as a para-history and in subjectivity formation for the marginalized groups.

A recurrent idea underlying this dissertation is that ghost stories can be conceptualized as a kind of para-history, and ghost story writers, either overtly or implicitly, appropriate the role of the historian in their creation of the literary ghost. History and fiction are both important ways to narrativize human experiences, yet while traditionally history has been regarded as a factual genre therefore a discourse with a

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[470] Derrida and Stigler, 2013, p. 39. Derrida makes a distinction between the spectre (which he pairs with phantom) and the ghost [*revenant*] in the same article (p. 38). Probably in an effort to distance his "spectre" from the ghost evoked in psychoanalysis and especially Freud's notion of the uncanny, Derrida links spectre with visibility: "specter, as distinct from ghost [*revenant*], speaks of the spectacle", while ghost [*revenant*] for him is related with "coming-back [*revenance*]" (p. 39). However, the ghost in psychoanalysis and especially the idea of the uncanny which already contains inherently its opposite (the *unheimlich* contained in the *heimlich*) is not as incompatible with deconstruction as Derrida thinks. On a synthesis of deconstruction and psychoanalysis, see for instance Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*, 2007.

certain authority, fiction is the realm of the imagination that at best, as with realist writers, can reflect a mediated reality. However, with postmodern philosophers like Hayden White, history is conceptualized as a narrative no less governed by stylistic rules of literature,[471] and the narrativity in both fiction and history is not a natural given, but a "form" that already carries with it a "content": to establish the authority of certain cultural subjectivities.[472] This understanding of history is no less than a deconstruction of the objectivity of history, but for fiction writers, the implication may be different. If history as a narrativizing discourse is involved in implementing the authority of certain cultural subjects through the process of evaluation, selection, and discrimination inherent in the act of story-telling, then fiction writers self-stylized as "historians of the ghost" can also appropriate the authority and discursive power of history by "historicizing" the past with a story. Through constructing a fictionalized history of the "ghosted" figures, writers of ghost stories may establish the authority of other groups of cultural subjects who may not have the opportunity to legitimize themselves through history-writing. History-writing is thus intrinsically connected with the affirmation of subjectivity.

Stories of ghosts, in this sense, come as a particularly apt tool for fiction writers to effect their alternative "history"-writing. In this dissertation, especially in Chapters Two, Three and Four, I have shown how writers of ghost stories have used their ghost story writing as a para-history writing. In times of national crisis, a mythologized and fictionalized appropriation of a community's popular memory of the past can help people make sense of and even affect the historical present.[473] Both Chinese writers Xuan Ding and Wang Tao revisit their national history (especially the critical moments of history like dynastical changes) in their ghost stories and make this "ghost history" serve the contemporary men in different ways. Xuan excavates the unarchived or badly archived parts of national history to mythologize this history and the unrecognized self, so that the contemporary self may reunite with his cultural heroes and gain power from his forefathers in preparation for a dangerous encounter with the (demonized) Western other. Wang, on the contrary, questions the official version of national history through focusing on its spectres so that the contemporary man, freed from the burden of

[471] White, 1973.
[472] White, 1987, p. 13.
[473] See Cohen, 2014.

tradition, may better confront his Western rivals. A critique of the process of history-making, implied in some of Wang's tales about history's silenced others, is also the central concern in Vernon Lee's fantastic ghost stories, but the woman writer turns her focus on women's private history manipulated and appropriated in the process of men's grand project of rewriting national history. If for Wang Tao, official state history is an uncanny burden from which the contemporary Chinese man must break away to seek new possibilities for his nation and himself, for Vernon Lee, men's history of women mediated by a male desire of possession is what excluded women from her own history, and it is also what her stories about the ghosted women set to critique. The result of this critique is not establishing a rehabilitative version of history against the existing one, but to create a liminal space between history and fiction where the ghost woman has the power to haunt and perturb the present. If all the above three writers engage with the idea of history in the public realm, E. Nesbit's stories involve history in the private sphere: the ephemeral, suppressed, and often inexplicable experiences in a woman's private history. Nesbit's stories of the ghost (especially of the wronged woman ghost) are an appropriation of the literary history of the Female Gothic, and for Nesbit to write the ghost woman's history becomes a literary myth-making which parodies or reverts contemporary misogynist myths about women. Both Xuan and Nesbit are well aware of the power of myth-making and their ghost tales reveal the proximity of history and myth: while the former elevates the national history into a national myth which reinforces what that history promotes, the latter weaves women's experiences into a new myth of the ghost woman that breaks away from contemporary restrictive gender scripts for women. The differing roles that the ghost literature plays in the reformation of power once again prove that this is a genre with a paradoxical relation with orthodoxy: at times, it can be dissenting or conforming to the orthodox power centre.

Stories of ghosts, at the same time, are also stories about the self and the relation between the self and the other. The ghost points to liminality; both what is regulated outside of the self and what is unrecognized and suppressed within can find their expression in the figure of the ghost. The beautiful female ghost has always been an embodiment of the ideal self and the defining other for the Chinese male literati who wrote about her over centuries, and in the transitional late nineteenth century, ghosts, together with other anomalous entities like foxes and snakes, became an apt device to

reorganize the relation between the self and the other. I have mentioned Wang Tao's and Xuan Ding's reworking of national history through their literary ghost, but equally important with this looking back was their preoccupation with a contemporary identity crisis, particularly exacerbated in the late Qing by the confrontation with an ominous other: the intruding Westerners. The aim for this reconstruction of history, as mentioned earlier, is ultimately to offer the contemporary literati conceptual frameworks to envisage a revalorized male self against a feminized (and sometimes demonized) alien other. While the ghost can occupy both the position of the self and the other for the male writers, for British female writers, the ghost's paradoxically powerful yet powerless status — powerful in their defiance of regulating categories yet powerless in their social invisibility, — makes it more appropriately a metaphor for the marginalized self. While Lee's stories, as mentioned earlier, focus more on the mechanism of men's construction of women instead of women's experience, her celebration of the snake woman (an anomaly defying categorization, therefore perceived as dangerous as the ghost) does represent for us an ideal model of femininity featuring a sexual fluidity. Nesbit's stories of the ghost woman, on the other hand, penetrate directly into the paradoxes and injustices as experienced by many Victorian women, foregrounding the sense of inexplicableness in this marginalized experience.

So far, I have traced meticulously the textual encounters manifested in the Chinese and English ghost literature, and I hope I have demonstrated some similarities of this amorphous writing across cultures. While throughout this study I have used terminologies like the Gothic, the fantastic, the *zhiguai*, and the accounts of anomaly, each term originating from its distinctive cultural and historical soil, now I will recapitulate the features of what I call the ghost literature in both cultures with the help of these originally cultural specific terms. Ghost literature, in both Chinese and British cultures, is a mode of the Gothic, a subversive fantastic literature, and a literature of the anomaly.[474]Admittedly, these terms carry with them a cultural specific genealogy,

[474] Among the three, the concepts Gothic and fantasy have already been tested outside of their original British or European soil. On the concept of global Gothic, see for instance Glennis Byron, "Global Gothic", in Punter and Byron eds., 2012 and Andrew Hock Soon Ng, *Interrogating Interstices: Gothic Aesthetics in Postcolonial Asian and Asian American Literature*, 2008. Scholars of Chinese literature have also tried the applicability of the notion of fantasy in Chinese literature; see Campany, 1996; Francis, 1997. The "literature of anomaly", derived from "the accounts of anomaly", however, is a notion peculiar to Chinese *zhiguai* which I believe will also offer insights into phenomena in other cultures.

but by using them inter-culturally, the result I believe is not a cultural imperialism that overshadows their uniqueness, but new insights into the essence of these concepts and affinities between cultures that can be made intelligible through these concepts. While the Gothic is concerned with the tabooed, the suppressed, and the inexplicable in certain historical and cultural atmosphere, to give expression and an ephemeral shape to what is repressed is also a central interest of the ghost literature, as the ghost itself very often embodies that which is buried, suppressed, and regulated into oblivion. Fantastic literature is literature that hinges on liminality, a constant vacillation between different worldviews and modes of narratives. While Jackson argues that fantasy is a literature of subversion for its preoccupation with limits and their dissolution,[475] this deconstructive impulse can also be found in the ghost literature. The ghost defies categorization, delineation, and coherent signification. A preoccupation with ghosts is a preoccupation with what is perhaps undefinable, therefore exposing the epistemological limits of certain ideological and cultural constructions. This trouble with categorization of the ghost also leads to the third feature of the ghost literature that I have explored in this study: a literature of anomaly. While "anomaly" is a defining element in the inception of Chinese *zhiguai* ("records of the strange" or "accounts of the anomaly"), the dialectic between the anomaly and the norm can also help us understand ghost literature in a broader context. The ghost literature is singularly interested in the anomalous, the often suppressed opposite of the norm and the orthodox; however, while the anomaly is what is expurgated from the norm, the norm is also negatively defined by the anomaly. In a sense, the anomaly, though despised and often of illegitimate status, is also an indispensable part of the whole social structure without which the other side of the hierarchy — normality and orthodoxy — would not be functioning well. That is why, as I mentioned in the Introduction, the ghost literature can be both deconstructive and constructive. The ghost literature is concerned with making trouble with regulatory borders; through narrating and investigating the anomaly, the relation between the norm and the anomaly may be redefined, and what is anomalous may also gain the position of the norm, thus unleashing enormous power for writers of the anomaly to create new ways of being and thinking (—a redefinition of such anomalous figures as ghosts, foxes,

[475] Jackson, 1981, p. 45.

and snakes underline the ghost literature I examine in this study). This elasticity of the ghost literature perhaps is the reason behind its appeal, especially in transitional times and for marginalized groups, as this study has shown.

While my dissertation focuses on the ghost literature in a particular historical period in China and Britain — the chaotic late nineteenth century—, and the genre's interaction with the ideological transformations of the time, I want to emphasize that the ghost literature's value in critiquing history and negotiating new models of the self is not limited to a bygone age. One of the defining element of ghosts is that they return, and as Derrida points out, their place is not fixed in some surmounted past, but always already embedded in the reality of our present and gesturing towards us from the future.[476] Peter Buse and Andrew Scott have envisaged a "future for haunting" in their 1999 anthology on theories of ghosts,[477] and the last two decades did respond positively to their prophecy through accumulating scholarship on spectrality as well as ghost narratives that speak to our own age. In the contemporary cyber age when the self is increasingly fragmented and exposed on all channels of social media and government surveillance of the whole society more than ever enforced, the power of the ghost literature for self-expression and critiquing the orthodox perhaps is particularly needed.

This dissertation begins with an epigraph from Feng Menglong which stresses the prevalence of ghosts in a chaotic time. Writing the dissertation in the early twenty-first century, a comparably time of peace as opposed to the time of chaos of the late nineteenth century, I want to end it with a note of the ghost literature's continuing relevance in our contemporary society by introducing the ghost stories of a contemporary Chinese network writers, Ma Boyong. Like many writers of our age, the internet is the first platform where Ma publishes and gradually establishes himself as a writer. From 2014 to 2015, Ma published a series of tales collected under the title "Xin zhiyi" (Tales of the New Strange) on his column on Zhihu.com.[478] These tales

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[476] Derrida, 1994, *Specters of Marx*: *The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, pp. 39-40.

[477] Buse and Scott, "Introduction: A Future for Haunting", in *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, 1999, p. 1. Buse and Scott admitted at the beginning of their Introduction that ghosts seemed outdated and eclipsed by aliens in contemporary popular imagination, echoing Brigg's judgement in 1977 that the English ghost story had become primarily a vehicle for nostalgia and ceased to evolve (*Night Visitors*, p. 14).

[478] Zhihu.com is a contemporary Chinese social media, similar to Quara.com.

are written in a quaint style unlike ordinary speech but reminiscent of vernacular translations of classical *zhiguai* stories from *Liaozhai zhiyi*. While the form is ostensibly old, the stories deal humorously with distinctively contemporary issues: the young generation's addiction to mobile phones, women's reluctance to sacrifice their career for marriage, and more poignantly, the censorship and propaganda of the contemporary government — the last of which won these tales an avid readership, yet expectedly also led to their censorship.[479] One of these tales, "Wuda gui" 武大鬼 ("Ghosts in Wuhan University") epitomizes the ghost's dialectical relation with orthodoxy. Since the eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012 and the current Chinese president Xi Jinping's presidency, a set of moral values collected under the title "Core Values of Chinese Socialism" has been militantly promoted by the government in all social sectors.[480] In the heat of this "education" campaign in 2014, there was even news that students in Wuhan University had been forced to recite the "Core Values" by school authorities, which led to a wave of public criticism. "Ghosts in Wuhan University" responds to this contemporary farce. The Taoist exorcist in the story named Bao Shu confronts a group of ghosts haunting the library of Wuhan University with the question why they have been causing such a disorder for people, and a hilarious answer from the ghost chief ensues:

> "Last month a mandate was issued from the heavenly palace to confer honour to leading educational institutions. The magistrate of Wuchang then dreamt of an immortal, who bestowed on him twenty-four chapters of "Values to Promote Harmony among the People" and told him that whenever people

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[479] Three of these stories, "Xiang zhong Li" 箱中吏 ("Government Officers in the Case"), "Wuda gui" 武大鬼 ("Ghosts in Wuhan University"), and "San guan ji" 三觀記 ("A Record of the Three Temples") were subsequently removed from the author's online column, replaced by a blank page announcing their "political sensitivity" as the sole witness of their once existence (see https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/20017973). Yet interested readers have made copies of them and published them elsewhere so that uncanny traces of these tales remain online today. Ironically, one of the three tales, "Government Officers in the Case" is a story about internet censorship: miniature government officers are found to be hiding inside every computer case of the country and will cut the internet connection with their magic swords whenever a dissenting voice is detected. The tale's subsequent censorship substantiates its historicity.

[480] These values are condensed into twelve words: "prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship" (富強, 民主, 文明, 和諧, 自由, 平等, 公正, 法治, 愛國, 敬業, 誠信, 友善). Because they contain twenty-four Chinese characters, they are also referred to as the "24-word core socialist values". For an authoritative interpretation of these values, see for instance, Du Yifei, "24-Core Socialist Values Engraved on People's Mind", People.cn. Mar. 2, 2016, *People's Daily* (http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0302/c98649-9023926.html).

recite these, splendid memorial arches would erect themselves from the ground and with each recitation the arches would grow higher. And if all the people in Wuchang recite these values, the arches can eventually reach the heavenly palace and share aura with the Jade Emperor. Consequently, fierce government officers were dispatched to force people to recite these values day and night so that morals can be engrained. We are just wandering ghosts and we have been greatly agitated by the recitation, so we have decided to hide in this library. We really did not mean to harm."

Bao Shu then asks: "If so, why would you recite these values too?" The ghost answers: "If people recite these values, ghosts can be exorcised; if ghosts recite these values, people can be exorcised."

"上個月天庭下詔，要旌表教首善之邦。 武昌郡的太守夢中蒙仙人傳授了《敦民和洽觀》二十四篇，誦之便有五彩七寶牌坊拔地而起。每誦一次，牌坊就增長一分。若武昌百姓皆誦此咒，牌坊便可達于天庭，與玉帝同輝。於是悍吏四出，教人日夜誦經，隨時抽查，以彰教化之本。我等皆是孤魂野鬼，不堪其擾。於是計議在圖書館暫避，不是有心害人."

寶樹又說："既然如此，那你們為何也要誦咒呢？" 鬼怪道："人誦此咒，可以驅鬼；鬼誦此咒，可以驅人."[481]

By the time I am writing this chapter, this tale, together with another two with oblique references to government censorship and propaganda have been removed from the author's column. The ghost literature, as an uncanny mirror of contemporary political climate, has again been "ghosted" by orthodoxy. However, just like the persistent haunting of the spectre in and outside of history, traces of such ghost narratives will also linger on in forgotten corners of the internet as an uncanny "ghost history", bearing witness to the absurdity of contemporary political power and the resistances to it. The political power centre may seek to exorcise ghosts with its militantly enforced standard narrative, yet ghosts, as this story shows, can always disturb the seeming harmony of the present by usurping precisely orthodoxy's own narrative. Not only times of chaos call for ghosts; ghosts are always already a part of our contemporary reality and can never be suppressed.

[481] The story can be accessed from https://daily.zhihu.com/story/4739443

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