

Jenny Wu

Professor Yanming An

CHIN4010-Pre Modern Chinese Literature

April 25, 2023

## Study of Ghost Stories in Chinese and American Culture

The uncertain afterlife has been and always will be a mystery for the living. However, due to cultural and religious differences, there are various versions of the afterlife. This derives the question about the existence of ghosts. When we die, we want to believe that it is not the end; perhaps we are still conscious, but then where do we go? Being an ambiguous topic, literature, more accurately, ghost stories can give insight about ghosts and the afterlife. The main concepts this paper will discuss are comparing Chinese and American ghost stories and the ideology behind them.

A short story, “The Jade Guanyin” written in the Ming dynasty conveys some ideas about the afterlife. In the story, Xui-xui, the ghost, died under the order of the prince of the kingdom. After her death, she as a ghost went back home to her husband, Cui Ning, a jade sculptor, and convinced him to flee to another place together. There, they lived happily; meanwhile, Xui-xui even brought her parents to live with them. Change arose when Guo Li, bodyguard of the prince, saw Xui-xui again. He was startled because he knew that Xui-Xui died the day she met with the prince. So who is the person that he just saw? This story reveals many interesting concepts about the afterlife in Chinese culture.

First, parallelism is present between the world of the dead and the living. Xui-Xui was able to still interact with her living husband after she died. It was as if she could freely flow between the two worlds. Being a ghost, instead of trying to avenge her death, she simply went

home to her husband in an attempt to continue her previous life. This provides a positive perspective of the afterlife. Secondly, the importance of family is expressed in this story; even after Xui-xui's death, she, as a ghost, still brought her parents to live with them. This filial aspect emphasizes its importance in Chinese culture. Lastly, the story presented ghost Xui-xui the same as if she was alive. After death, she did not have any supernatural powers or abnormal appearances. Xui-xui as a ghost was presented as human-like.

Another ghost story, Ying-ning, gives insight about fox fairies. Calling a woman a fox fairy is not a compliment in Chinese culture. Typical characteristics of a fox fairy are ones such as beauty and the ability to manipulate one's thoughts. In the story, Ying-ning is the daughter of a fox fairy, but she was not presented with those typical characteristics. Wang, a boy from a decent family saw Ying-ning at a festival and fell in love with her at first sight. Wang searched for the beautiful girl for some time and finally found her. He invited her to his house and met his mother. They ended up getting married. Afterwards, Ying-ning confessed to Wang that she was not truly human. Her biological mother was a fox fairy, and she was raised by a ghost. The reason she confessed is because she wanted to visit her parents' graves freely because after all they are dead. Fortunately, Wang accepted all the craziness and, with her, every Spring Festival visited the Qing's family grave together.

Like Xui-xui in the previous story, Ying-ning was of human form; she behaves just as a human does. There again is the idea of parallelism between the worlds of the dead and the living. This story also suggests that the world of the dead is not terrible. The ghost that raised Ying-ning was just as much of a mother as Wang's mother. Another point made by the story is the grave visiting aspect in Chinese culture. In Chinese culture, it is believed that there is an afterlife. Therefore, the living must worship their ancestors and the dead loved ones, so they would live a

good life in their afterlife. People place wine and food before their graves, and also burn currency of the dead world there in the attempt to satisfy them with food and money in the world of the dead. This is also part of the filial piety system in Chinese culture.

In contrast with the two positive perspectives in the previous stories, Lu Xun's story of Xianglin Sao is the opposite. In the story, Xianglin Sao lived a hard life. Her first marriage ended with the death of her husband in an accident soon after. After that, she was married off to another man by the hands of her mother-in-law from her first marriage in exchange for money. She later gave birth to a son which opened her up to the chance of a good life, but her second husband died and her son was taken by a wolf. Her second marriage ended like her first, but this time she was not married off again but simply thrown out the house. It is not easy for a woman with no skills, no status, and no family to depend upon to live with dignity in Chinese society at the time. At the end she became a beggar. The reason the story is classified as a ghost story is because of the three questions Xianglin Sao asked and the three answers she received. The three questions were: After a person dies is there indeed such a thing as the soul? Then there is also a Hell? Then in this Hell do all deceased members of a family come together again, face to face? The author's answers to her questions contributed to her death at the end. It was because Xianglin Sao looked so hopeless, the author lied about the first question. He responded "perhaps, I supposed there is." It was not his true thought. He was a scholar, so he knows there is not a definite answer to her questions, but because he lied on the first question, he lied on all the questions. At the end, Xianglin Sao committed suicide. She died in fear because she was expecting to be split in half in her afterlife since she married into two families.

The spectrum of this story touches on several societal concepts such as the inequality of women status and the marriage system of the time. In that time, women were to be dependent

upon men. One evidence of that is, although being the main subject, Xianglin Sao was never referred to by her own name. Xianglin Sao meant the wife of Xianglin. This not only speaks about the inequality between the two genders but also the corruption of the marriage system. Xianglin Sao did not have a say about her marriage.

In Chinese culture, the afterlife is believed to be the same for everyone. There is no difference between royalty and peasants, men or women. Everyone is simply a soul that faces the jury of the Lord of the death world. This concept of the unexistence of social hierarchy in death comes from Zhuang Zi's ideology. He believed that being dead might be better than being alive. In the living world, there is pain, fear, and people are split into social classes based on power and finance but all that is lost in the dead world.

Confucius ideology, although not a religion, is a belief system that acts as a guide similar to religion though not having a god. Confucianism is down to earth and mainly focuses on people. It gives insight into how people should behave within the society. Confucius himself never spoke much about ghosts, spirits, and the afterlife because he believed those concepts excelled beyond his intellect. He did not speak of them because there is no hard evidence supporting any theories. From the standpoint of Confucianism, talks about the afterlife, immortals, ghosts are all out of imagination.

Although not contributing to ideas of the afterlife, Confucius influences are still visible in all the short stories mentioned. It is telling how important the concept of family and filial piety is in Chinese culture. Even in ghost stories like these, family still plays a part. In "The Jade Guanyin," Xui-xui did not forget her parents even after her death. Ying-ning never parted from her ghost mother because she was dead. In "Xianglin Sao," it is obvious that even in the death

world, families are to unite together. This is evidence that Confucianism has deep roots in the Chinese central tradition.

Unlike Chinese culture which lacks central religion, the United States of America mainly practices Christianity, but how does this affect the creation of ghost stories? Here is an example: Washington Irving, in October of 1992 released his short story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” In this story lives a headless horse that haunts the town. It was said that this headless horseman appears in the dark, riding a horse and holding a pumpkin jack-o-lantern in one of his hands to hold the place of his lost head. Furthermore, he roams around in the night in search of his lost head. The origin of this tale dates back to the American Revolutionary War. The headless horseman was a soldier that fought the Battle of the White Plains. He died by decapitation by a cannonball during the battle. When the fighting was done, his comrades only brought home his body but not his head. This story suggests that in American culture, people who die of unnatural causes will not rest at peace.

This is fairly common in American ghost stories. There are many stories regarding haunted houses, mansions, and abandoned hospitals. Different from Xui-xui case, the ghost of American ghost stories seem to become connected to the place they died. They can only appear when situations are right, for example only appearing when it is dark. The headless horseman only roamed the historic battlefield. Unlike ghost Xui-xui who fled home, the headless horseman seems to be stuck there for eternity searching for his head. The lack of family presents differentiates the stories from the two cultures.

Another American ghost story, “The Ghost Family,” tells another viewpoint. The story itself is a short verbal campfire tale. The story went like this: a family went camping in a heavily wooded area. When they all sat around the bonfire roasting marshmallows, they heard a scream

coming from the woods. The father of the family went to search for the source of the sound. A few steps into the wood he heard a whisper “We’re coming for you. That’ll be you.” Frightened by what he just heard, he ran back to the bonfire where his family sat, but they all vanished. The father called for help, and officials got involved. They were nowhere to be found. Many years later, someone saw the family in that same exact location, just not the father. The story abruptly ends.

The supposed purpose of this ghost story was simply to initiate fear. It felt like a supernatural force abducted a whole family except the father to take revenge on him. Evidence to this point would be what the unknown subject whispered to the father. Pursuing that the family that vanished died, once again we see the concept of immobility in ghosts like expressed in the previous American ghost story. Another common aspect is revenge and power of ghosts in American ghost stories. Ghosts obtain great powers and take revenge on their killer and or haunts the area they died. This is extremely different from the Chinese ghost stories. All the ghosts in those stories mentioned in this paper are humane. Xui-xui was never suspected to be a ghost until Guo Li raised that flag. Ying-ning’s ghost mother was gentle and caring.

A significant factor that contributes to large differences between the ghost stories of the two cultures are the central traditions. As stated before, central traditions of Chinese culture are established upon Confucius ideology. Meanwhile, Christianity is the foundation of cultural traditions in America. In Christian religion, when people die, they either go to heaven or hell depending on their actions when they were living. This may be why ghost stories are so scary in American culture. The afterlife is set in stone; ones that are good make their way to heaven, and those who sin are sent to Hell. Ghost stories may serve as a way to scare people into behaving well.

After analyzing the three ghost stories of Chinese literature, it can be said that common elements of Chinese ghost stories are parallelism between the living and the dead world, the continuity of filial piety, and the consistency of the presence of family. Xui-xui of “The Jade Guanyin” and the fox fairy, the ghost mother, and Ying-ning of “Ying-ying” all present a positive perspective on ghosts and the afterlife. In the case of Xianglin Sao, the perspective was bad because for fairness sake, Xianglin Sao was believed to have to be splitted in half when becoming a ghost since families reunite in the world of the dead and she belongs to two families. Unlike having positive and negative perspectives in Chinese culture, American culture has primarily a negative perspective that revolves around fear, revenge, and haunting.

In my opinion, people have religion and ideology because they want to have some sort of control and sense of safety. For example, in Chinese culture, people believe that the afterlife is a better place. Similarly, people of Christian faith believe in the existence of heaven. There is nothing in the world to prove it; people just have to believe. The point of believing is to not fear death. Referencing Zhuangzi’s idea of death which is death may be better than living, it really serves the same purpose. However, I side with Confucius’ standpoint more. Believing that there is or isn’t an afterlife does not change the fact that everyone eventually dies.

Another argument I would like to make is that superstition is something that cannot be fully rejected yet also not fully accepted. Superstition, like religion, is an intangible concept. If one believes they exist, they exist. In the world today, some believe that God certainly exists, some believe that ghosts are not real, and others only believe in science and deny everything that is not supported by evidence. Chinese society, especially in the pre-modern area, almost everyone believed in superstition. Being one of the factors that contributed to Xianglin Sao’s suicide, it is a powerful concept. Similar to Confucius’s stance on ghosts and spirits, I believe

that superstition should not be emphasized too much but also should not be ignored. Animism is an element of Chinese culture, and superstition is established upon it. Having been around for so long, there must be a good reason. Therefore superstitions of Chinese



## Works Cited

- Birch, Cyril, and Donald Keene, editors. *Anthology of Chinese Literature: From the 14th century to the present day*. Grove Press, 1965.
- “The Ghost Family | Dartmouth Folklore Archive.” *Dartmouth Journeys*, 18 November 2016, <https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/folklorearchive/2016/11/18/the-ghost-family/>. Accessed 27 April 2023.
- Irving, Washington. “The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, by Washington Irving.” *Project Gutenberg*, 27 June 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/41/41-h/41-h.htm>. Accessed 27 April 2023.
- culture should not be fully ignored.