

REVIEWS



China



Judith T. Zeitlin. *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. 312 pages, B/W photographs, 27 illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$59.00; ISBN 978-0-8248-3091-5.

IN POST-MEDIEVAL China, as in much of East Asia and the west, ghostly apparitions signal unfinished business: the unsatisfied souls of the dead need to be placated or comforted so that they will stop haunting the living. In *The Phantom Heroine*, Judith Zeitlin examines the Chinese literary ghost tradition from roughly 1580 to 1700, the period that witnessed the collapse of the Ming dynasty and the establishment of the Qing. Her materials are the narratives, poetry, and plays in which elite authors of the day shared with each other the tales they heard or that they themselves elaborated. Noting that whatever the oral popular versions of these tales may have been, our only access to them is in the classical Chinese written versions penned by elite authors, she concentrates on “the complex set of concerns that the subject allowed men of letters to address” (8).

These men of letters (and, as Zeitlin shows, women of letters as well) were raised on the paradigm of the dynastic cycle and its inevitable connotations of loss, and they used the figure of the ghost to explore their own feelings about the mutable body, the impermanence of writing, the trauma of dynastic change, and illusion as emblemized by theater. Zeitlin demonstrates that not just ghosts but specifically female ghosts were, by the late sixteenth/seventeenth century in China, the favored instruments of this exploration. This was, moreover, the high tide of the literary cult of *qing* or intense emotion, and Zeitlin therefore focuses on “a distinct pattern of imagination in seventeenth-century Chinese literature—the revival of a phantom heroine through the power of love” (197).

By “historicizing the production and consumption of ghost literature,” Zeitlin has another aim as well, namely to counter the “abiding influence” of nineteenth-century sinologists and missionaries who “read ghost stories indiscriminately as re-

positories of timeless religious beliefs or ‘superstitions’ of the Chinese” (9). Rejecting the paradigm of static “belief,” she concentrates instead on *representation*: how do the literary conventions representing the ghost change over time, and why? How does the phantom heroine gain paramount importance? And what does this tell us about the social construction not just of femininity in this period, but also of masculinity? In short, though she rejects an old-fashioned form of folklore studies, she is hardly divorced from social realities. What she gives us is a much more subtle way to get at those realities.

The Phantom Heroine begins by showing that the ghost tale still lives on in Hong Kong film: the 1987 *Chinese Ghost Story* (*Qiannü youbun*), directed by Ching Siu Tung, is loosely based on a seventeenth-century tale from one of Zeitlin’s prime sources, Pu Songling’s (1640–1715) *Liaozhai’s Records of the Strange* (*Liaozhai zhi yi*). The popular culture devices of the modern film, however, diverge from those of its source—the modern ghost is menaced by a giant tongue that sucks its victims dry; the original story lacks a monster altogether, since its focus was on comforting the ghost. To get at the characteristics of her seventeenth-century source tales, Zeitlin divides *The Phantom Heroine* into four chapters: “The Ghost’s Body,” “The Ghost’s Voice,” “Ghosts and Historical Time,” and “Ghosts and Theatricality,” followed by a coda on the late seventeenth-century drama *The Palace of Lasting Life* (*Changsheng dian*), by Hong Sheng (1645–1704).

In chapter 1, Zeitlin traces the feminization of the ghost from the martial males of the Yuan dynasty to the fragile and delicate females of the seventeenth century. Concomitant with this is a growing emphasis on the *generativity* of the male body, as ghost after ghost is resurrected by an infusion of male bodily fluids. The trope of death as the regeneration of life is realized in numerous stories where the union of man and ghost produces a healthy son, who goes on to succeed in life even as his ghost mother retreats to the shades. In chapter 2, the unsatisfied longings of female ghosts are expressed in a poetic language that became a genre of its own, a language of will-o-the-wisps, wind, and chilly moonlight that Zeitlin traces to the Tang poet Li He (790–816). These ghostly poems must be matched by the living male hearer before the female ghost, often a palace lady from a fallen dynasty, can find peace.

Fragile bodies and ghostly voice come together in Chapter 3, in tales of palace women condemned to wander as their ruined palaces sink into the earth, and bodies, writings, and beloved objects crumble into dust. The *huaigu* they chant, a genre of “poetic reflections stimulated by visits to historic sites” (88), allow the male authors of these tales to accomplish their own “work of mourning” (here and throughout the book Zeitlin uses this key Freudian concept) for the fallen Ming. In Chapter 4, the mysteries of death and unresolved longing and the doubling whereby life and death confront each other are explored through discussion of the representation of ghosts in theater, that liminal space where the unreal becomes briefly real. This extremely valuable chapter resumes evidence of a nearly-lost tradition of ghostly gestures and stagecraft in the late imperial theater. Finally, the coda shows us how the ghost scenes in *Palace of Lasting Life* “reprise but pull in new directions” (181) many of the themes of the book.

Two brief comments may be offered here, though they in no way detract from Zeitlin's work: first, there does seem to be evidence that the short plays known as *zaju* continued to be performed during the Ming; the drama aficionado He Liangjun (1506–1573), for one, maintained a household troupe that he trained to perform *zaju*, though of course Zeitlin is correct that the longer *chuanqi* plays were by far the dominant Ming performance genre. Second, male ghosts did continue to frighten the populace: in women's epitaphs and in the early Qing play *The Chaste Compendium* (*Zhen wen ji*), dead fiancés or husbands appear to women in terrifying dreams, demanding that the women follow them in death. However, they appear in nowhere near the numbers of Zeitlin's phantom heroines. *The Phantom Heroine* draws together a wealth of recent research as well as a wealth of primary sources, and it sets a high standard for further work in this field.

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