The Others: Desire, Anxiety, 

DISSEPTION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy 
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Qin Chen

Graduate Program in East Asian Languages and Literatures

The Ohio State University

2016

Dissertation Committee:

Kirk A. Denton, Advisor
Mark Bender
J Ronald Green
Heather Inwood
ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of postsocialist Chinese horror cinema—namely, horror film of the period from 1989 to the present—and centers around the question of how Chinese horror films are responding to the dramatic changes China has experienced over the past three and a half decades. The return of the horror genre, which had been effectively banned in the Mao era, is a consequence of both market reforms and the social malaise and anxieties engendered in the radical social and economic transformations of this period. Through analyzing multiple issues in a large number of horror films in the framework of the Self/Other dichotomy from different perspectives of history, gender, class, and identity, this dissertation seeks to broaden our understanding of both postsocialist China and postsocialist cinema.
DEDICATION

To my beloved parents
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been a long road for me to reach this point. The dissertation would not have been possible without the advice, help, and support from many people. First and foremost, I wish to thank my adviser, Prof. Kirk Denton, an inspiring and understanding mentor, for his tenacious dedication and support offered during the course of my graduate studies, research, and dissertation writing. He read every draft of the chapters of my dissertation with patience and encouragement, and contributed insightful comments on my project. I also want to thank my committee members—Prof. Mark Bender, Prof. J Ronald Green, and Prof. Heather Inwood—who not only gave me invaluable feedback during my candidacy examination, but also have generously participated in every stage of the project’s transformation. Prof. Linda Mizejewski was of great help in the early stages of this work. The example she set in her own scholarship as well as in her course “Women and the Horror Film” has been an important influence in my approach to film studies. I am grateful to other mentors at the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures who contributed their expertise and enthusiasm, including Prof. Patricia Sieber, Prof. Meow Hui Goh, and Prof. Marjorie K.M. Chan. Thanks also go to Debbie
Knicely and Steven Knicely for their immense help and support during my studies and works as a Graduate Teaching Associate at the Ohio State University.

Prof. Dai Jinhua, my former MA advisor at Peking University, deserves special mention. Her insightful studies in multiple areas (gender studies, cultural studies, and film studies) not only offered me a good model of interdisciplinary research, but also directly contributed to this dissertation in many ways.

As a Ph.D student in the DEALL, I have been lucky to benefit from the input and support of a number of colleagues and friends: Qiong Yang, Mengjun Li, Man He, Ziying You, Bo Zhu, Yifan Pai, Evelyn Huang, Kana Abe, and Litong Chen.

Finally, I am forever indebted to my family for their unconditional love and support throughout my life. This dissertation is dedicated to my loving parents.
VITA

2003.............................................................B.A. Chinese Literature, Peking University

2006.............................................................M.A. Comparative Literature, Peking University

2010.............................................................M.A. East Asian Languages and Literatures, The Ohio State University

2008 to present .........................................Ph. D Student, Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: East Asian Languages and Literatures
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication........................................................................................................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments.................................................................................................................................................................................. iv

Vita........................................................................................................................................................................................................... vi

List of Figures .................................................................................................................................................................................... x

A Note on Romanization ....................................................................................................................................................................... xv

Introduction................................................................................................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 1: Trauma or Karma: Allegorical Moments and the Politics of Historical Memory.................................................................................................................................................................................. 40

Introduction................................................................................................................................................................................................ 40

The Emergence of Horror in the Post-Mao Era........................................................................................................................................................................42

Negotiation between Commercialism and Ideology: Presentation of Historical Violence and the Politics of Chinese Rating System..........................................................................................................................................................47

Thematic and Generic Innovations in *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion* ........70

Ghost, Villain, and the Police: Innovations in Themes................................................................................................................................. 71

Story within A Story and Film within A Film: Innovations in Narrative Structures.. ..................................................................................................................................................................................................... 89
A Visual and Auditory Feast of Horror: Innovations in Form

Spectral Time and Haunted Mansion, Historical Trauma and Institutionalized Insanity

Conclusion

Chapter 2: The Horror Cinema of Infidelity: Lust, Anxiety, and the Cultural Politics of Gender

Introduction

Unfaithful Wives and Female Infidelity as Allegories

Love Triangle, Concubine Culture, and Women as Cultural Capital

Femme Fatale and Virtuous Woman: The Monstrous-Feminine in the Horror Cinema of Infidelity

Conclusion

Chapter 3: Phantom of the City: Social Stratification, Alienation, and Ambiguous Others

Introduction

Urban Horror: Reconfigurations of Space and Power

Modernization, Urbanization, and Alienation

Conclusion

Chapter 4: Eroticism and Exorcism: History, Identity, and the Politics of Erotic Ghost Films

Introduction
History and Nostalgia: Li Han-hsiang’s *The Enchanting Shadow* ………………….242

Utopia and Dystopia: *A Chinese Ghost Story* Trilogy and King Hu’s *The Painted Skin* ……………………………………………………………………………………………………..256

Betrayal and Return: Remakes of *The Painted Skin* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* in the New Millennium…………………………………………………………………….285

Conclusion………………………………………………………………………………………………305

Conclusion………………………………………………………………………………………………309

Bibliography …………………………………………………………………………………………….314

Appendix: Filmography …………………………………………………………………………………………….337
### LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure 1.1 | The poster of *The Lonely Ghost* states that it is “China’s first horror movie with stereophonic sound” and “not appropriate for children” to watch. | 53 |
| Figure 1.2 | “Not Appropriate for Children and Teenagers,” a warning before the movie begins. | 54 |
| Figure 1.3 | *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion* was publicly showed on CCTV-6 (channel logo in the bottom right corner). | 56 |
| Figure 1.4 | Elementary students take the pledge that they would not forget national humiliation, and reinforce national defense, in memory of the Mukden Incident of 1931. | 62 |
| Figure 1.5 | A still of *Red Cherry*, in *Film Stories Monthly* 3 (1996). | 64 |
| Figure 1.6 | The opening remarks and the closing remarks of *Man Behind the Sun* reminds audiences of a history that must not be forgotten. | 66 |
| Figure 1.7 | *Red Cherry* claims on its poster that it is a film “dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the victory by the global war against fascism.” | 67 |
| Figure 1.8 | The dead man opens his eyes, which suggests an unfinished wish or an everlasting grievance. | 72 |
| Figure 1.9 | The so-called “friend” murders Xiaoju and fakes her death as a suicide in the basement of an old mansion. | 72 |
| Figure 1.10 | The shot of Huo Feng holding his portable recorder resembles the image of masculine heroes in Hollywood or Hong Kong cinema, such as Rambo holding his M60 machine gun. | 77 |
| Figure 1.11 | Gazing at the camera, Yu Hong’s question is for both Xiaoju and spectators. | 89 |
| Figure 1.12 | The twist ending of *The Lonely Ghost*. | 91 |
Figure 1.13 As an important prop, Xiaoju’s keychain appears in many scenes .......... 95
Figure 1.14 A co-director’s name appears in the big-character poster painted on a corridor wall............................................. 97
Figure 1.15 Creepy chalk murals run through the building. ......................... 99
Figure 1.16 The bathtub suddenly becomes a blood pool. ............................. 100
Figure 1.17 Chucky in Child’s Play; the avenging doll that Xiaoju’s ghost possesses; the lovely pink doll Yu Hong owns .................................................. 102
Figure 1.18 The resemblance between The Exorcist (top) and The Lonely Ghost (bottom) .............................................................. 103
Figure 1.19 The overlapping of past and present through photos.................. 107
Figure 1.20 The wife in The Foggy House finds some dusted photos of her persecuted parents in the Cultural Revolution. ..................................................... 109
Figure 1.21 While You sees U.S dollars, what spectators see are “paper money” for the dead ............................................................................. 115
Figure 1.22 The statement on screen at the end of Death Is Approaching attributes the insanity to the Cultural Revolution. .................................................. 120
Figure 2.1 Xiao Li’s boyish attire and slim figure form a sharp contrast with her mother’s curvaceous body in the sexy purple silk nightdress.................................. 135
Figure 2.2 Both the wife and the mistress find that Chen Jiaqiao is a collector of pretty young women ................................................................. 151
Figure 2.3 Fearing losing his girlfriend someday, Jiang kills her and seals her in a wall of his apartment .......................................................... 154
Figure 2.4 Hong’s success contrasts sharply with Jiang’s failure in the swimming pool sequence ................................................................. 157
Figure 2.5 In one dream/fantasy sequence, Jiang, a mentally castrated man, has to witness Li raping Wenxin, but can do nothing about it .......................... 159
Figure 2.6 Jiang feels lost and isolated in this rapidly changing society .......... 160
Figure 2.7 The stereotyped contrast between a femme fatale and a virtuous woman is explicitly showed in the character posters of Painted Skin (2008) ................. 162
Figure 2.8 Lu gazes at and touches herself in the bathroom .......................... 165
Figure 2.9 The ending sequence (bottom) parodies an early sequence (top) in terms of both plots and mise-en-scène, except for the switching gender roles.........................167

Figure 2.10 The last scene of Daytime Ghost is a low-angle shot of a skyscraper, a symbol of urbanization and upward mobility.................................................................169

Figure 2.11 While being gazed by Wang and the audience, Xiaowei, a desiring subject, also gazes at Wang.................................................................171

Figure 2.12 Xiaowei attributes Peirong’s accusation to her jealousy, and asks them to accept her as Wang’s concubine. Yet Wang refuses, as there is only one Mrs. Wang .. 173

Figure 2.13 The sharp contrast between Sharon (top) and Rose (bottom). .............. 179

Figure 3.1 As a winner in the social transformation, Hong leisurely practices golf in his office. ........................................................................................................189

Figure 3.2 Jiang feels incompatible with the outside rapidly changing world. .......... 190

Figure 3.3 Jiang somersaults in the air and dissolves into the sky in a surrealistic way. 191

Figure 3.4 In her dream/fantasy, Baober flies out of the window and into the sky ...... 192

Figure 3.5 Liu looks thirstily up at Rose’s greenhouse. ........................................ 194

Figure 3.6 Rose hires Liu to dump red paint on her greenhouse, and ridicules Liu’s habit of counting bills. .................................................................197

Figure 3.7 Liu sees himself in the mirror-like elevator door, which reminds him of his identity as a security guard. .................................................................198

Figure 3.8 After temporarily enjoying the feeling of being the owner of this luxury apartment and Rose’s husband, Liu is disillusioned and offended by Rose’s scornful attitude.................................................................200

Figure 3.9 Liu commits suicide by jumping off the high-rise building ............... 201

Figure 3.10 Yan lurks in every hidden corner of the expansive and labyrinthine compound.................................................................204

Figure 3.11 The clash between Yan (left) and May (right) is not just a battle for a child between two mothers, but also a confrontation between different social classes. ........ 207

Figure 3.12 A poster of Home suggests that affection can overcome the horror and resentment inherent in class conflicts. .................................................................209
Figure 3.13 Long takes of the urban landscape from day to night. Left: Chongqing in *The Door*; right: Shanghai in *A Chilling Cosplay*.

Figure 3.14 The sharp contrast between the majestic urban environment and the small humanity.

Figure 3.15 Baober witnesses the modern rebirth of the new Beijing, which becomes one of her traumatic memories.

Figure 3.16 Baober sitting in the rubble of a construction site, blankly looking up at the sky.

Figure 3.17 Suffocated by her life, Baober cuts her uterus to prove the existence of the baby, the incarnation of her spiritual pursuit.

Figure 3.18 Similar to *Buried*, *Variant* tells a story about a character trapped in a destroyed elevator struggling to escape the claustrophobic death trap with limited props.

Figure 3.19 Lost in loneliness, Ying tells the cat that she is the last human on earth.

Figure 3.20 Protagonists in *The Door* (left) and *Variant* (right) peek at the unknown outside world through the peephole (or quasi-peephole).

Figure 3.21 The upsidedown city not only suggests the impending building collapse accident, but also indicates the overwhelming pressure from urbanization and modernization.

Figure 4.1 It was claimed that “*The Enchanting Shadow* has entered into competition at the Cannes Film Festival” on the cover of *Southern Screen* (May 1960, No. 27), the official movie magazine of the Shaw Brothers.

Figure 4.2 The opening shot of *The Enchanting Shadow*.

Figure 4.3 The ending shot of *The Enchanting Shadow*.

Figure 4.4 Different settings of Nie Xiaoqian’s boudoir in *The Enchanting Shadow* (1960; top) and *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987; bottom).

Figure 4.5 Different costumes and make ups of the Tree Demon role in *The Enchanting Shadow* (1960; left) and *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987; right).

Figure 4.6 One of the scariest scenes in *A Chinese Ghost Story II*: General Zuo discovers that all the court officials are no more than walking dead.
Figure 4.7 The demon, in the shape of a golden Buddha, asks protagonists: “The masses like to worship idols. Why do you set yourselves against the masses?” ............................................ 270

Figure 4.8 The fetish cult ritual in The Painted Skin (1993) ......................................................... 277

Figure 4.9 The role of the Yin-Yang King in The Painted Skin (top) resembles the role of Dongfang Bubai, the leader of the Sun Moon Holy Cult, in Swordsman II (bottom), in terms of both costume and personality. ........................................................................................................ 279

Figure 4.10 Xiaowei suggests an identity switch between her and Peirong. ................. 295

Figure 4.11 Cannibalism in Hong Kong horror cinema: A Lian holds a human heart as a gift in We’re Going to Eat You (1980), A Feng tastes the human rib in The Untold Story II (1998), and Xiaowei feasts on sliced human heart in Painted Skin (2008). ............... 298

Figure 4.12 The advertisement calling for a stop to mainland “locusts” on Apple Daily (left) and a street poster calling for maintaining distinct identity apart from mainland China (right)........................................................................................................................................ 300
A NOTE ON ROMANIZATION

For the readers’ convenience, this dissertation uses the *pinyin* system. But for Hong Kong filmmakers who already have general or international cultural currency, such as Li Han-hsiang, King Hu, Tsui Hark, Ching Siu-Tung, Wilson Yip, and Gordon Chan, to name a few, their names will not be translated into *pinyin*, for purposes of readability and consistency in English.
INTRODUCTION

In June 2003, one month before getting my bachelor’s degree from Peking University, I was quarantined in a courtyard near the south gate of the university, with other students who just returned to school after a leave during the outbreak of SARS in Beijing. The temporary quarantine station had three buildings. Although allowed to leave buildings into the small yard to take a walk, we were prohibited from visiting students living in other buildings, not to mention gathering together to exercise. In the two-week observation period, there were 24-hour security guards at the gate, prohibiting unauthorized entry and exit. In this isolated, monotonous world, it seemed that there was not much choice for us to kill time, except for chatting, reading, surfing the Internet (if you were rich enough to own a laptop and fortunate enough to have brought it into the quarantine area), or watching movies downloaded from the Internet. During a time when daily news reports updated the latest SARS deaths, watching horror films, ironically, became a favorite leisure activity for me and my roommates. It was during that period that I watched for the first time a large number of horror films, and since then, I have been an avid horror fan.
Since horror films are often associated with violence and obscenity, my fascination with them is a weird hobby that I am embarrassed to mention to others. Especially when some of the films contain graphic depictions of violence against women, watching them somehow becomes a guilty pleasure for me. It was not until I came to the United States to pursue my doctoral degree and got a chance to read some studies on horror cinema that I first realized the horror film is not just a lowbrow genre that aims only at sensational stimulation or entertainment. As David J. Skal argues in _The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror_: “much of our imaginative life in the twentieth century has been devoted to peeling back the masks and scabs of civilization, to finding, cultivating, and projecting nightmare images of the secret self.”¹ For Skal, horror cinema is by nature a reflection of social malaise and the national psyche. While abundant scholarly attention has been paid to Western horror films and Asian horror cinemas in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, the horror cinema of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC), especially its contemporary horror cinema, is still a relatively forgotten corner of the cultural mapping of horror films.

My purpose in writing this dissertation is not to do a thorough introduction to Chinese horror cinema from its origins to the present, as Colette Balmain does for Japanese horror in her _Introduction to Japanese Horror Film_.² Rather, I mainly focus on postsocialist cinema—namely, horror film of the period from 1989 to the present—and

² Colette Balmain, _Introduction to Japanese Horror Film_ (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).
my inquiry centers around the question of how Chinese horror films are responding to the dramatic changes China has experienced over the past three decades. How, for instance, did this genre, which had been effectively banned in the Mao era, get revived in postsocialist China? Why has the horror genre suddenly gained popularity in the PRC? What kind of ideological discourses and social realities are reflected in horror films? What strategies have Chinese horror films adopted to find a balance between state censorship and the market? How do cultural producers and consumers negotiate with both the state and the market in articulating new forms of subjectivity? Since the word “Chinese” as a signifier may suggest a problematic monolithic identity, my dissertation also tries to answer such questions as how did horror films made in different areas (PRC and Hong Kong) reconcile the nature of cultural continuities or discontinuities? What cultural collisions or collusions can be read from horror movies? Do postcolonial Hong Kong horror movies make any accommodations to the PRC market in a global context? Do these diversities and negotiations reflect back on cultural questions of a more fundamental or seminal nature? In that sense, for example, we can understand how stereotypes and characters in the same erotic ghost film have been adopted and reused in a different ideological context and quite often for specific ideological purposes. Since this dissertation is a study of postsocialist horror cinema, it is necessary to examine the two keywords—“postsocialist” and “horror”—before moving into detailed issues of Chinese horror cinema.
Postsocialist China and Postsocialist Cinema

Beginning with the post-Mao modernization of the 1980s and the globalization of the 1990s, China has undergone a dramatic social and economic transformation in the past three and a half decades. On the one hand, the phenomenal economic growth in China since the 1980s, together with its adjustment to the capitalist global market, has led to a consensus, shared by people from different ideological persuasions, that China has abandoned socialism and embarked on a capitalist trajectory. On the other hand, despite its economic miracle and its increasingly active role in the global economy, China still retains both its socialist structures and socialism as its ideological foundation. The two facets together have led to what the state defines as “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Zhongguo tese de shehui zhuyi 中国特色的社会主义), a situation that has engendered abundant tensions and contradictions in the social and cultural arena.

In the current English-language scholarship, most scholars agree that Chinese society and culture, including cinema, has changed dramatically since the socialist heyday. Recent Chinese cinema should thus be examined in the scope of Chinese postsocialist society and culture in a broader sense. Where scholars disagree is how to interpret the changes that characterize China’s recent modernity, and how to name the socio-cultural shift, even rupture, they have observed in the post-Cultural Revolution era of “reform and opening-up” (gaige kaifang 改革开放). Terms under consideration include “postmodern China,” “Chinese modernism,” “alternative modernity,” and “postsocialist modernity.”
Chris Berry and Paul Pickowicz tend to argue that China transformed from socialist to postsocialist as early as in the late 1970s. Berry views postsocialism as an extended transitional phase between Maoist socialism and liberal capitalism, and postsocialist filmmaking in China is another cultural revolution in the sociocultural sense. In his words, “both China and Chinese cinema have undergone significant change since 1976, transforming China into a postsocialist society and culture and Chinese cinema into a postsocialist cinema.”

Pickowicz defines postsocialism a structure of feeling that remained repressed in the Maoist era but found vocal articulation in the post-Mao era. That structure of feeling is characterized by the emergence of an ambiguous culture in Deng Xiaoping’s (1904-1997) China, with alienation and disillusionment as its two thematic foci. Other scholars tend to define postsocialism in less general terms and highlight the sociohistorical rupture of the 1980s to the 1990s, with 1989 as a pivotal turning point. In Yingjin Zhang’s opinion, the Tiananmen Incident on June 4, 1989 plays an important role in differentiating the so-called “post-New Era” (hou xinshiqi 后新时期)/post-Tiananmen period significantly from the New Era (xin shiqi 新时期) studied by Pickowicz and Berry. Xudong Zhang also asserts that the June Fourth Incident “marked the end of the so-called New Era and all its popular and intellectual euphoria about

---

modernity, progress, and subjectivity.”

Although viewing Deng Xiaoping’s historical “southern tour” (nan xun 南巡) of the coastal special economic zones in 1992 as an even more important turning point in the history of Chinese culture, Jason McGrath agrees that the June Fourth Incident resulted in prevalent disillusionment and cynicism among intellectuals and artists, which led to “an abandonment of high cultural ideals and an embrace of commercialism and the profit motive in the following decade.”

Except for the works of Pickowicz and Berry, most scholarship on Chinese postsocialist cinema are about movies produced in the last decade of the twentieth century and into the new millennium.

The scholarship on Chinese postsocialist cinema focuses on the following issues: changing cinematic themes (e.g., grand narratives of national allegory in Fifth Generation films, traumatic individual experience, Orientalist representations, cultural identity, gender ideology, the privatization of desire, etc.); the diversification of production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption (e.g., the marketization of domestic studios, overseas investments, international film festivals, conditions of spectatorship, DVDs and piracy, national cinema and transnational cinema, etc.); and the conflict, negotiation, and

---


7 Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3. In McGrath’s opinion, “with this tour Deng symbolically reaffirmed the course of the reforms and removed any lingering hesitation in the state bureaucracy after the turmoil of 1989.” McGrath accepts the notion of postsocialism as a necessary complement to modernity in contemporary China. For McGrath, postsocialism is not just a condition that characterizes nearly all of the formerly communist “second world” but is rather a global, universally shared condition. In other words, with the collapse of the “alternative modernity” of communism, we finally return to the “singular modernity”—the global postsocialist (capitalist) modernity.
conspiracy between commercialization and state censorship (e.g., commercial films such as Feng Xiaogang’s New Year’s Films, art films such as the Sixth Generation underground films, etc.). Few scholars, however, are interested in PRC horror films and how they are intertwined with many of the above issues related to postsocialist cinema more broadly.

The only existing English-language research on PRC horror cinema, to my knowledge, are Laikwan Pang’s “The State Against Ghosts: A Genealogy of China’s Film Censorship Policy,” Li Zeng’s three essays (“Horror Returns to Chinese Cinema: An Aesthetic of Restraint and the Space of Horror,” “Ghostly Vengeance, Historical Trauma: The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion (1989),” and “Painted Skin: Romance with the Ghostly Femme Fatale in Contemporary Chinese Cinema”), and Erin Yu-Tien Huang’s Ph.D. dissertation “Capital’s Abjects: Chinese Cinemas, Urban Horror, and the Limits of Visibility.” Pang examines the genealogy of China’s film censorship policy, specifically its repression of ghosts, which to her, “is not only an ideological doctrine for reason but also a political strategy for dominance.” Li Zeng regards the revival of horror in the new millennium as a product of the commercialization of the Chinese film industry.

---


as well as of the influence of foreign horror imports; the themes and styles of Chinese horror, Zeng writes, “have been shaped by and felt the impact of censorship and social/cultural transformations taking place since the early 1990s.” She also characterizes Chinese horror films as embodiments of an “aesthetic of restraint.” Zeng’s examinations of *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion* (hereafter *The Lonely Ghost*) and *Painted Skin* (2008) are good case studies of PRC horror films. Zeng investigates how *The Lonely Ghost* challenges the conventional image of the female ghost, surpasses the genre’s limited criticism of the patriarchy, and asserts a female agency at the center of the historical narration; and she also shows how *Painted Skin* embodies the role of the female body and its sexuality in patriarchal society as a site where social and cultural conflicts are addressed and negotiated. Erin Yu-Tien Huang’s Ph.D. dissertation is a transnational study of urban horror from China, Taiwan, and the Chinese diasporic center of Kuala Lumpur, in which she specifically discusses Li Shaohong’s urban-themed thriller films including *Baober in Love* (2004), *Stolen Life* (2003) and *The Door* (2007). Except for Zeng’s essay on *The Lonely Ghost*, most of these studies focus on Chinese horror cinema of the new millennium, and generally view the turn of the century as the beginning of the revival of the horror genre. Yet as I demonstrate in this dissertation, before the full-scale revival of the horror genre in the new century, a considerable number of horror films were made and screened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which are not only thematically provocative, but also ideologically challenging. An examination of the similarities and dissimilarities between the horror cinema in the 1990s and the new
millennium, will help us to better understand the social and cultural transformations within the post-1989 period. In addition, while Pang argues that China “continues to exercise a direct centralized control on film, preventing any seeds of political destabilization from sprouting while maintaining a puritanical culture that minimizes the depiction of such ‘debauched’ cultural phenomena as pornography, violence and corruption,”\(^\text{10}\) she ignores the fact that in China as long as a film is ideologically correct, its depiction of pornography, violence and corruption was, to a great extent, tolerated, sanctioned, and even encouraged, as I demonstrate in this dissertation.

The Horror Genre and Critical Approaches

Despite the easy recognition and popularity of horror films, it is difficult to define them in terms of genre. Robin Wood characterizes the horror genre as “normality is threatened by the monster,”\(^\text{11}\) Michael Armstrong believes that “all horror films are based upon fear of the unknown,”\(^\text{12}\) and Andrew Tudor states that “the ‘threat’ is the central feature of the horror movie narrative.”\(^\text{13}\) So it seems that the core of a horror film is designed to frighten the viewer, cause dread and worry, and to invoke the viewer’s worst hidden fears of the threat from the uncanny and the unknown. For Noel Carroll, audience reactions to the sight of monsters in horror movie relates, in a more socially pervasive sense, to

---

\(^{10}\) Pang, “The State against Ghosts,” 469.


deeply internalized fears concerning cultural disorder (or dirt), which the monster allegorically represents.\textsuperscript{14} Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed provide a similar definition: horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order finally to exclude it and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human.\textsuperscript{15} Here, the key terms of the horror film are the deviation from order and the breakdown of boundaries.

Some scholars, such as Carol J. Clover, Linda Williams, and Isabel Cristina Pinedo, explore the seemingly paradoxical psychological mechanism of the horror film. As Williams remarks, “the horror film may present an interesting, and perhaps instructive, case of oscillation between masochistic and sadistic poles.”\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, Pinedo points out that the horror film produces a kind of “recreational terror,” a pleasurable encounter with violence and danger for female spectators. In her words, the horror film offers a site where “pleasure shares the field with danger.”\textsuperscript{17} In other words, horror features dark and revolting traits that simultaneously attract and repel—a genre that can entertain and captivate spectators, on the one hand, and evoke their dread and anxiety, on the other. And this ambivalence is precisely the charm of the horror film.

\textsuperscript{17} Isabel Cristina Pinedo, \textit{Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 69.
Different from the above-mentioned scholars, who tend to treat film genre as a set of formal conventions, Rick Altman tends to consider genre as a cultural product constituted by media practice and subject to ongoing changes and redefinitions by active users, such as filmmakers, studios, critics, and audiences. To Altman, a genre is not a set of conventions, but “lies somewhere in the overall circulation of meaning constitutive of the process.”

Through analysis of the constitution of genres, from production to consumption, Altman illustrates how distinctive generic qualities arose in conjunction with more dominant genres, and only later established their independence as a result of a cycle of successful films that developed and refined elements into a recognizable formula. Although Altman’s genre study is not specifically focused on horror, his innovative approach helps us to understand the complex historical, social, and economic dynamics behind the development of the horror genre in China.

As Barry Keith Grant claims in her introduction to The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film, “issues of gender remain central to the genre…for gender…is like horror itself, both universal and historical, biological and cultural.” To date, feminist psychoanalysis has constituted the most common critical approach to the horror film. Dealing with the body, sexuality, and desire, this approach suggests a framework for examining the cultural suppression of female sexuality in the horror

---

18 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 84.
19 For example, the studios’ interest in profitability encouraged generic practices as a means to appeal to different sectors of the public and permanently maintain the audience’s interest. And generic terms, as well as a genre’s distinctive elements and defining relationships, are employed most conspicuously by critics who propose viewing perspectives to spectators based upon connections to earlier films.
cinema of a patriarchal society. Another dominant critical approach is sociological analysis. Discussing horror cinema in a broader scope and locating specific periods or varieties of horror movies, sociological analysis explores the social construction of horror movies and their role in culture. Taking into consideration the different histories and conventions of Chinese and Western horror cinemas, this dissertation adopts a mixed method: while some chapters investigate gender issues in a feminist psychoanalytic framework, other chapters tend to decipher the complicated political and historical codes behind horror movies, and examine the politics of social consensus. To better explain the uniqueness of Chinese horror cinema and provide a background for my study, a brief introduction to the history of Chinese horror cinema is first necessary.

A Genealogy of Chinese Horror

Ma-xu Weibang’s 马徐维邦 Song at Midnight (Yeban gesheng 夜半歌声, 1937) is usually regarded as the first Chinese film to belong to the horror genre. In this Chinese variation of The Phantom of the Opera (dir. Rupert Julian, 1925), the monstrous phantom is reshaped as a revolutionary who has been disfigured and victimized by a feudal landlord. The process of unmasking a haunting “ghost” thus becomes a denunciation of feudal powers. And given that the film was released in 1937, the same year the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, the male protagonist’s appeal to the young generation to fight against darkness also turns the film into an implicit manifesto against Japanese imperialism. This film not only became the most profitable film of the year, but also
garnered positive critical reviews. In Yomi Braester’s words, this film is “a curious grafting of the Hollywood horror genre and Chinese Marxist discourse.”

Five months after the release of *Song at Midnight*, on July 7th, Japan launched its full-scale invasion of China, and Japanese troops attacked Shanghai in August. The eruption of war not only brought a bloody catastrophe to China, but also engendered a new cinematic circus of fear and shadow. During the so-called “solitary island” (gudao 孤岛) period (1937-1941), the horror film became one of the most popular entertainment film genres in Shanghai. The popularity of entertainment films, including horror, during this period, can be attributed to two factors. First, since the administrations in the International Settlement and French Concession maintained a cautious and ambivalent relationship with the Japanese occupiers, their film censors sometimes cut plots or directly banned films with strong and obvious resistance themes. Under these conditions, it is utterly unrealistic to expect Chinese filmmakers to openly challenge the Japanese in their films. But as Poshek Fu points out, films produced at that time, including popular commercial entertainment films, reflected the tactic of “involving calculated risks, enormous resourcefulness, and political ingenuity,” and “apolitical entertainment that was deliberately depoliticized became significantly political.”

---

21 Yomi Braester, “Revolution and Revulsion: Ideology, Monstrosity, and Phantasmagoria in Ma-Xu Weibang’s Film *Song at Midnight,*” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 12, no.1 (Spring 2000): 82.
22 From Shanghai’s fall in November 12th, 1937 to the breakout of the Pacific War on December 8th, 1941, Shanghai’s International Settlement (consisting of the British and American concessions) and the French Concession were surrounded by Japanese occupiers and Chinese anti-Japanese revolutionaries, making it a “solitary island” in the war, a semi-occupied city and a semi-colonial metropolis.
and inhuman cruelty had become so much a part of the times in which people lived, the horror film, just as other entertainment films, not only offered spectators temporary relief and escape from the cruel reality, but also a way to overcome fear and anxiety. As David J. Skal comments on the commercial success of The Ghost of Frankenstein (dir. Erle C. Kenton, 1942) in wartime U.S., “man-made monsters were the perfect toy soldiers to battle semiconscious fears … the brute image of the monster, able to dispose of any obstacle, may have provided a rallying point for morale-battered wartime audiences.”

In the decade following the success of Song at Midnight, Ma-xu Weibang directed a series of horror films with a strong personal style, and he became known as the “Father of Chinese Horror Cinema.” Hinting at the turmoil and darkness of society under occupation, Ma-xu Weibang’s films are, in Tadao Satō’s words, “artistic works full of horror and sorrow.”

After the communist takeover of mainland China in 1949, however, all art forms, including film, had to serve the masses and politics, in particular the advancement of socialism. Film became a powerful tool for social inclusion, mass education, and, most important, political propaganda and ideological edification. In the socialist period prior to the 1980s, film genres in Chinese cinema, as Shuyu Kong contends, “were officially defined and authorized for propaganda and pedagogical purposes,” since it was the

---

25 Satō Tadao 佐藤忠男. Zhongguo dianying bainian 中国电影百年 [A hundred years of Chinese film], trans. Qian Hang 钱杭 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2005), 47. Although Ma-xu’s Begonia (Qiu haitang 秋海棠, 1943) is not, strictly speaking, a “horror film,” it continues the deformity of the male protagonist in Song at Midnight series, as well as his harrowing suicide at the end of the film.
government who financially supported and institutionally monitored the production and distribution of movies.\(^{26}\) Unfortunately, the horror genre, as well as the formulas that constitute its essence, as Josephine Woll puts it in her study of Russian horror cinema, “contradict almost every major tenet of Marxist historical materialism ... of socialist realist dogma.”\(^ {27}\) So it is not surprising that this genre was banned in the Mao era for its inappropriate themes and contents, though some counter-espionage films (\(fante pian\) 反特片) and detective films during that period made use of horror elements. For example, \(The\ Bell\ Rings\ in\ an\ Ancient\ Temple\) (\(Gucha\ zhongsheng\ 古刹钟声\), dir. Zhu Wenshun 朱文顺, 1958), a counter-espionage film set in the Second Sino-Japanese War, as some scholars point out, is actually “a horror film well packaged with strong ideological tendencies,”\(^ {28}\) in which heroes from the Eighth Route Army (\(balu\ jun\ 八路军\)) investigate a mysterious ancient temple and eventually find some lurking Japanese spies who have disguised themselves as monks. The plot and mise-en-scène of the film successfully creates an atmosphere of horror and suspense.

With the economic reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s, the Chinese film industry and film culture underwent a drastic transformation. The state studio system collapsed, and the conventional socialist definition of film genre was greatly challenged.

---

\(^{26}\) Shuyu Kong, “Genre Film, Media Corporations, and the Commercialisation of the Chinese Film Industry: The Case of ‘New Year Comedies’,” \textit{Asian Studies Review} 31, no. 3 (2007): 228.


\(^{28}\) Zhang Boqing 章柏青 and Jia Leilei 贾磊磊 eds., \textit{Zhongguo dangdai dianying fazhan shi} 中国当代电影发展史 [The history of contemporary Chinese cinema] (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2006), 429.
As Ying Zhu asserts, “the drumbeat of Chinese cinema since the late 1980s clearly champions cinema’s economic value, resulting in the transition of Chinese cinema from art wave to entertainment wave.” On the one hand, through experimental art films that emphasize artistic innovation and ideological iconoclasm, Fifth Generation filmmakers and some younger underground filmmakers intentionally broke down previous definitions of genre. On the other hand, due to cutbacks in state funding, studios were pressured to become financially self-sufficient, which led them to produce a much higher number of entertainment films for their market potential, often in cooperation with private production companies, both domestic or based in Hong Kong or abroad. As Shuyu Kong remarks, “not only has private money now become the major source of investment in today’s film industry; media corporations’ box office approach and business management in filmmaking have significantly altered the mode of film production and consumption.”

As Hollywood cinema has demonstrated, horror might be one of the highest grossing genres in the movie business, especially since it usually has relatively low production costs compared to competing genres. Small budget, low risk, high reward,

30 Shuyu Kong, “Genre Film, Media Corporations, and the Commercialisation of the Chinese Film Industry,” 236.
31 For example, the original The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974) terrified spectators with the simple visual of a man with a murderous power tool. This economical horror film cost only $140,000 to make and grossed $26 million, a significant box office number in 1974. The Blair Witch Project (1999) was made by unknown directors (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez) and actors for $60,000 and grossed nearly $250 million worldwide—another perfect example of how horror films pique audiences’ interest because of the scares, rather than the recognizability of the actors. The Paranormal Activity series (2007-2015) cost only $28.015 million, yet grossed $889 million.
horror seems to be an ideal genre for filmmakers, especially unknown filmmakers, to start a career in the market-oriented film industry. If in the entertainment film boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s Chinese cinema witnessed a return of the horror genre with a few self-conscious horror films, such as *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion* (Heilou guhun 黑楼孤魂, dir. Liang Ming 梁明 and Mu Deyuan 穆德远, 1989) and *Don’t Be Young* (Weiqing shaonü 危情少女, dir. Lou Ye 娄烨, 1994), then with the Asian horror fever initiated by the international success of the *Ringu* cycle and the *Ju-on: The Grudge* cycle at the turn of the millennium, a full-scale revival of the horror genre appeared in the new millennium. *Cameraman* (Shan ling xiongmeng 闪灵凶猛, dir. A Gan 阿甘, 2001), the self-claimed “PRC’s first horror film” grossed over ¥13 million, with a budget less than ¥1 million. It was followed by two more horror films by the same director—*Ghosts* (Xiongzhai youling 凶宅幽灵, 2002) and *The Game of Killing* (Tianhei qing biyan 天黑请闭眼, 2004)—both of which earned revenue several times their investments. With A Gan’s successful model, more filmmakers ventured into the genre, and the year 2005 saw a conspicuous number of horror and thriller films.

---

32 *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion* (1989) is PRC’s first horror film in the strict sense, which was produced 12 years before A Gan’s *Cameraman* (2001), the self-claimed PRC’s first horror film.


34 Apart from PRC-made horror films such as *Suffocation* (Zhixi 窒息, dir. Zhang Bingjian 张秉坚), *Seven Nights* (Qi ye 七夜, dir. Zhang Jing 张鲭) and *Ghost Inside* (Yi shen yi gui 疑神疑鬼, dir. Herman Yau 邱礼涛), as well as co-produced horror films such as *Home Sweet Home* (Guaiwu 怪物, dir. Pou-Soi Cheang 郑保瑞) and *The Curse of Lola* (Zuzhou 诅咒, dir. Li Hong 李虹), some earlier Hong Kong horror films
In 2011, *Mysterious Island* (Gudao jinghun 孤岛惊魂, dir. Zhong Jichang 钟继昌), starring Yang Mi 杨幂, earned almost ¥90 million, a staggering eighteen-fold return on its investment. Its box-office record for horror cinema was not broken until 2014 when *The House That Never Dies* (Jingcheng bashiyi hao 京城 81 号, dir. Raymond Yi 叶伟民), a film with an investment of ¥ 40 million, eventually grossed nearly ¥407 million.

According to a market analysis, “Chinese films’ average rate of return is 80% lose money, 10% make money, and 10% break even, whereas horror films have a rate of return: 80% make money and 20% break even. It is almost a no-lose situation [for horror cinema].”

However, while horror movies were profitable in China, they suffered from poor production quality, flaws in logic, flat characters, clichéd endings, etc. As A Gan, the self-claimed PRC’s first horror director, acridly comments on Chinese horror cinema: “If you don’t want to be condemned, don’t shoot horror films, because that kind of thing does not exist in China at all and has no hope.”

Attributing his failure in terms of critical reviews to the PRC’s strict censorship, A Gan soon turned his focus to other film genres and gave up his interest in horror.

---

were also publicly screened in the mainland in 2005, including *The Death Curse* (古宅心慌慌, dir. Pou-Soi Cheang, 2003), *The Eye II* (Shiyue jingqing 十月惊情, dir. Pang Brothers, 2004), and *Koma* (Jiuming 救命, dir. Chi-Leung Law 罗志良, 2004).


A Gan’s frustration suggests the quandary faced by Chinese horror cinema: although mainland China rarely imports foreign horror films for public exhibition, the pirate market (including both pirated DVD and free video sharing websites) has played an important role in popularizing the horror genre in the new millennium, through which Chinese horror fans have become accustomed to extreme cinemas and the best horror films from Hollywood and other Asian countries. As such audiences in China are unlikely to be satisfied with a horror cinema that adheres to what Li Zeng calls an “aesthetic of restraint,” in which horror films have to “deal with ideologically correct themes and present violence and horror with visual and aural restraint.”37 While the visual and aural restrain is associated with China’s censorship, the convention of presenting “ideologically correct themes” can be traced back to Song at Midnight.

Yet what I want to highlight here is the “human/ghost” trope embodied in the ideological interpretation of The Painted Skin (Hua pi 画皮, dir. Bao Fong 鲍方, 1966), a Hong Kong erotic ghost film introduced into the mainland China in 1979 and mainland audiences’ first encounter with a horror film in the strict sense since the founding of the PRC. Since this trope has played a key role in the production and consumption of Chinese horror cinema, as my dissertation demonstrates, it is necessary to give a sketch of this rhetoric here in the Introduction.

37 Li Zeng, “Horror returns to Chinese Cinema.”
The Politics of the “Human/Ghost” Trope

With the “reform and opening-up” policy, in the late 1970s China began to import some Hong Kong films, including Bao Fong’s *The Painted Skin*, a horror film produced by Hong Kong Phoenix (Feng Huang 凤凰) Motion Picture Corporation in the 1960s. The film is adapted from a story of the same name in Pu Songling’s 蒲松龄 (1640-1715) *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai zhiyi 聊斋志异, hereafter *Liaozhai*), a Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) collection of supernatural tales. In the original story, a scholar by the name of Wang encounters a beautiful girl and brings her home, without knowing that she is actually a ghost who must “paint” and graft a skin over her body to look like a human being. Not until Wang accidently discovers her identity does he enlist help from a Taoist priest, who gives him a Taoist fly whisk (*fuchen* 拂尘) to hang outside his bedroom to keep the ghost away. Yet the whisk turns out to be useless. The ghost smashes it, breaks into Wang’s bedroom, and pulls out his heart. Although the Taoist priest is later invited by the Wang family to exorcise the ghost, it seems that it is beyond his ability to resurrect Wang. Nevertheless, he provides a clue to Wang’s wife to seek help from a madman in the market. The virtuous wife then pleads with the mad beggar to save her husband, yet in return only gets humiliated, physically and mentally. Frustrated and ashamed, she goes home, making up her mind to die with her husband. Yet a miracle takes place at the last minute: Wang’s wife cries so hard that she suddenly feels the urge
to vomit; she coughs out a human heart, which falls straight into Wang’s body and resuscitates him.38

Bao’s film begins with a frame story in which an old man visits Pu Songling and tells him a story about “The Painted Skin.” Wang is cast as a frustrated scholar who has repeatedly failed the imperial examination, and the ghost claims to be the daughter of the court official in charge of the local imperial exam. The scholar therefore succumbs not only to the ghost’s sexual temptation, but also to the prospect of officialdom presented by her father. According to Bao, the film “made additions and subtractions to the simply-plotted ‘The Painted Skin’, taking out the ‘lunatic beggar returns his heart’ subplot that bordered on absurdity and replacing it with a ‘family framed and torn apart by a fierce ghost’. The main characters and plot were given a major makeover within the frame of the original narrative. In doing so, the original flavor and essence of Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio would hopefully be preserved and the dregs removed.”39 Hence the film was rewritten as an allegory about how a ghost, disguised as a pretty woman, seduces a married man, destroys his family, and eventually leads to his violent death.

As the first horror movie publicly screened in the People’s Republic of China, The Painted Skin undoubtedly opened up a new world of apparition and dread to mainland audiences who had no access to this discontinued genre within a state-monopolized film industry guided by communist materialist ideology. On the one hand, scary scenes, such

as the moment when the female ghost peels off her disguised human skin and the scene in which she digs out the male protagonist’s heart, became haunting nightmares for audiences; it was even widely rumored that an old woman literally died of fright in a theater when watching the film.\(^{40}\) On the other hand, erotic scenes that display the feminine beauty and sexuality of the ghost, explicitly provided for the first time what Laura Mulvey calls “voyeuristic pleasure” to the mainland audience, since the images of women in Maoist cinema were mostly masculinized or desexualized.\(^{41}\)

In July 1979, *Movie Review* (Dianying pingjie 电影评介), a film journal in China published a review of *The Painted Skin* that pays no attention to this new viewing experience, but sophisticatedly captures the film’s didactic and moralistic intention, highlighting the conversation between Pu Songling and a kid at the end of the film.

Kid: Sir, do ghosts really exist?
Pu Songling: If you say they do, they do.
Kid: What do you mean?
Pu Songling: Well, we have never seen a ghost. But there are people around us who behave like “ghosts.” They fool people with their good looks. Careless ones will be devoured by them. Keep alert and keep away from them!


\(^{41}\) Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18. In conformity with the egalitarian character of the Maoist culture of the body, the gender distinctions of the subjects were by and large erased. The image of women in Maoist cinema were mostly masculinized or desexualized. Nevertheless, the beautiful female spies in counter-espionage films (*fan te pian* 反特片), and those lightly dressed female soldiers in *The Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzi jun* 红色娘子军, dir. Xie Jin 谢晋, 1961) and its 1971 ballet version, may to some extent have served as the desired object of male gaze. For more information about the image of women in Maoist cinema, see Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, “Invisible Women: Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Women’s Film,” trans. Mayfair Yang, *positions* 3, no.1 (1995): 255-280.
Regarding this conversation as the soul of the entire film, the reviewer further argues, “in our lives, aren’t some people fooled by such disguises? Lin Biao 林彪 (1907-1971) and the Gang of Four (Sirenbang 四人帮 1966-1976), in the guise of revolutionaries, with their far-left politics and most-revolutionary speech, enticed many naive and good people. Some of them were led astray and trapped without awareness. They didn’t know they were victims, and they didn’t know they had been poisoned.... We should never forget such lessons of history and the thrill of truth.”

As such, an erotic ghost film was associated with traumatic collective memory and touched a raw nerve with many people who had lived through the Cultural Revolution. The analogy between the evil female ghost and Jiang Qing 江青 (1914-1991), Mao’s wife and the leader of the Gang of Four, was more than transparent for audiences at that time.

Intriguingly, although at that time The Painted Skin had never been adapted into a film in communist China, the expression “bo... huapi” (剥画皮, literally “peel off the painted skin of...”) was a popular expression meaning to “unmask” in Chinese revolutionary discourse of the Mao era. Targets being attacked with such a rhetoric might be states (e.g., the U.S., Japan, even the Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet honeymoon was interrupted in the early 1960s), or officials who failed in factional struggle within the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP; e.g. Gao Gang 高岗, Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇, etc.).

---
or “reactionary” intellectuals and academic authorities (e.g. Wu Han 吴晗, Deng Tuo 邓拓, Liao Mosha 廖沫沙, Wu Zuguang 吴祖光, etc.), or “poisonous” fictional works and movies (e.g. the movie The Life of Wu Xun, the novel Song of the Youth, and the historical drama Hai Rui Dismissed from Office, etc.). In the “Anti-Lin, Anti-Confucius Campaign” from 1974 to 1976, Lin Biao, juxtaposed with Confucius, was fiercely attacked for his fake identity as a revolutionary. After the Cultural Revolution ended in October 1976, the Gang of Four was made into a new target of “peeling off” in state newspapers and journals.

This rhetoric both indicates how successful the enemy had been in deceiving the public through his/her disguise and demonstrates how insightful “we” are in debunking the lie and unmasking the enemy. The subject “we” is an ambiguous term, roughly equivalent to “the people” (renmin 人民) or “everyone” (dajia 大家), whereas the term “they” is used to address those who are easily deceived by the enemy. This “we/they” dichotomy is interesting yet problematic, since it intentionally ignores the fact that “we” and “they” are not discrete groups, but overlap and interweave most of the time. In a society highly centralized and politicized, accusers of the so-called “enemies” in the present might have been adherents to those “enemies” (e.g. Lin Biao) in the past. In a poem entitled “My Thoughts after Watching The Painted Skin,” published in the same issue of Movie Review as the film review cited above, another author writes:

---

43 The Life of Wu Xun (Wuxun zhuan 武训传, dir. Sun Yu 孙瑜, 1951), Yang Mo’s 杨沫 Song of the Youth (Qingchun zhi ge 青春之歌, 1958), Wu Han’s 吴晗 Hai Rui Dismissed from Office (Hairui baguan 海瑞罢官, 1960).
How can you know a person from their appearance?
A ghost can pretend to be a beauty.
It’s pathetic that so many mediocre people,
Don’t know that she is only a masked ghost.  

The poem both criticizes those “mediocre people” and ambivalently shows a certain understanding and compassion for their credulity, because it is really hard to distinguish a masked ghost from a human.

This binary “human/ghost” trope, however, is not new in Chinese horror cinema. As early as in Song at Midnight, the opposition between the protagonist and the villain is represented as a confrontation between light and dark. This trope may also best be exemplified in the distinct fates of two plays: The White-Haired Girl (Baimao nü 白毛女, 1945), a modern revolution-themed play, and Li Huiniang 李慧娘, a traditional vengeful-ghost-themed kun opera (kunqu 昆曲). While the former became one of the most popular plays in Maoist China with its famous slogan “the old society turned human beings into ghosts, whereas the new society turns ghosts into human beings,” the latter was banned in 1963 for advocating a dangerous principle that “ghosts do humanity no harm” (yougui wuhai lun 有鬼无害论).

---

45 This statement was first made by He Jingzhi 贺敬之, one of the co-writers of the Yan’an version of Baimao nü. See Meng Yue 孟悦, “Baimao nü yanbian de qishi: jianlun Yan’an wenyi de lishi duozhixing” 《白毛女》演变的启示 – 兼论延安文艺的历史多质性 [The transformation of The White-Haired Girl and its significance: on the polyphony of history in Yan’an literature], in Zai jiedu: dazhong wenyi yu yishi xingtai 再解读: 大众文艺与意识形态 [Rereading: mass literature and ideology], ed. Tang Xiaobing 唐小兵 (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), 68–69.
46 For more on Li Huiniang, see Maggie Greene, “A Ghostly Bodhisattva and the Price of Vengeance: Meng Chao, Li Huiniang, and the Politics of Drama, 1959-1979.” Modern Chinese Literature and Culture
The similar interpretation of *Song at Midnight* and *The Painted Skin*, as well as distinct fates of *The White-Haired Girl* and *Li Huiniang*, in terms of the politics of culture, symptomatically reveals, as Li Daoxin puts it, one rule a successful Chinese horror film must follow: “only by substituting the contest between the human and the ghost for the combat between light and dark, can Chinese horror films be supported by the ideology. Only by substituting the ‘evil other’ for an ‘enemy’ with clear race, class, gender, and identity, can Chinese horror films be understood and accepted.”

As mentioned previously, the 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a short revival of the horror/thriller genres, including erotic ghost films. The confrontation between the human and the ghost becomes more complicated and ambiguous in these erotic ghost films. Take *Ghost Sisters* (Guimei 鬼妹, dir. Sun Yuanxun 孙元勋, 1985), for instance. The film is adapted from “Xiao Xie” (小谢), a *Liaozhai* story about a scholar’s encounter with two ghost sisters and their ensuing adventures. The two female ghosts—Qiurong 秋蓉 and Xiao Xie—are described as victims of gender hierarchy and class oppression:

---


48 For more analysis of this temporary revival of the horror genre, see Chapter 1.

whereas the original story pays no attention to the cause of their deaths, the film creates characters with tragic backstories in which one ghost was forced to marry a sickly boy of a rich family and died because of false accusations of adultery and murder, and the other ghost committed suicide because she was forced to marry an old lascivious landlord. Obviously it is the “dark society” that turns those pretty young girls into ghosts wandering at night. The original ghost tale is thus repackaged as an imperial version of *The White-Haired Girl*. At the same time, the dichotomy between the good human and the bad ghost is challenged by the male protagonist’s statement “there are bad people and good ghosts.” Moreover, the film presents the irony that the bureaucratic system of the underworld is more efficient and fairer than its human counterpart: the city god (*chenghuang* 城隍) who rules local ghosts responds much earlier than the so-called “Judge Bao” (*Bao qingtian* 包青天) style magistrate, the cultural icon of justice in Chinese society, to issues of corruption.

This ambiguous human/ghost dichotomy is also embodied in Xie Tieli’s 謝鐵骊 *Inside an Old Grave* (*Gumu huangzhai* 古墓荒斋, 1991). The film interweaves four *Liaozhai* stories (“Twenty Years a Dream” 连锁, “Grace and Pine” 娇娜, “The Painted Skin” 画皮, and “The Magic Sword and the Magic Bag” 聶小倩). Most ghosts and spirits the male protagonist encounters are loving and kind characters, whereas the human world depicted in this movie is fraught with the ugly and the dangerous. When the male

---

protagonist again meets Lian Suo, the female ghost whom he resurrects from the dead, she ironically sighs: “Thank you for your great kindness, turning me into a human being from a ghost. Yet unexpectedly I become a ghost again when we meet.” The reason why Lian Suo died in the first place is because she committed suicide out of a sense of profound desparation with the human world, including with her own parents.

Such an ambiguous human/ghost relationship was further reversed in a TV drama series (1986) adapted from Liaozhai stories. Sung by Peng Liyuan彭丽媛, now China’s first lady, the theme song says:

    Ghost is not ghost
    Monster is not monster
    Ox-ghosts and snake-spirits are
    More lovely than those decent gentlemen.

In “rehabilitating” the so-called “ox-ghosts and snake-spirits” (niugui sheshen 牛鬼蛇神), the song deliberately reverses the Maoist “human/ghost” trope demonstrated by Bao Fong’s The Painted Skin.51 As a phrase derived from Buddhism,52 “ox-ghosts and snake-spirits” was first rhetorically used by the Tang (618-907) poet Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852) in describing the demonic verse of Li He 李贺 (790-816), who is known for his supernatural

51 Intriguingly, most members in the consultative committee for this TV drama series are intellectuals denounced with the label “ox-ghosts and snake-spirits” in various mass movements in the Mao era, such as Cao Yu 曹禺 (1910-1996), Feng Zhi 冯至 (1905-1993), Yang Hansheng 阳翰笙 (1902-1993), Wang Zhaowen 王朝闻 (1909-2004), to name but a few.

52 The ox-ghost refers to the “ox-head” (niutou 牛头), a guardian of the underworld in Chinese mythology, and the snake-spirit refers to Mahoraga, a great serpent, one of the eight kinds of nonhuman beings who protect Buddhism.
and fantastic imagery. The term was later widely accepted by literati to characterize Li He’s poetry. It was first creatively adopted by Mao Zedong to refer to superstitious traditional operas in a talk with high-ranking officials in January 1957, then to dissident intellectuals in the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957). The phrase later became a popular critical term in the cultural discourse and a social stigma attached to people who were identified as opponents of socialism, the Communist Party, and Mao’s power. During the Cultural Revolution, one of the most resounding slogans was:

---


54 Pu Songling, for instance, used this term in his preface to Liaozi: “ivy-cloak and mistletoe-girdle! Thus was the Lord of the Tree Wards (the official title of Qu Yuan 屈原) moved to rhapsodize. Ox-ghosts and serpent-spirits! Thus was the Bard of the Long Nails (Li He’s nickname) driven to versify.” See “Author’s Preface,” in Pu Songling, Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, trans. John Minford (London: Penguin, 2006), 454.

55 “Some phenomena are unavoidable at a given time, and after their occurrence a way will be found to cope with them. For example, in the past rigid control was exercised over the repertory of drama and this or that piece was banned. Once the ban was lifted, all sorts of plays about ghosts and monsters (niugui sheshen 牛鬼蛇神) such as The Story of a Haunted Black Basin and Retribution by the God of Thunder appeared on the stage.” See Mao Zedong, “Zai shengshi zizhiqu dangwei shuji huiyi shang de jianghua” 在省市自治区党委书记会议上的讲话 [Talks at a conference of secretaries of provincial, municipal and autonomous region party committees], The Talk of January 27, 1957, collected in Mao Zedong Xuanji 毛泽东选集 [Selected writings of Mao Zedong], volume V (Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 1977), 369.

56 On June 14, 1957, People’s Daily (Renmin ribao 人民日报) published an editorial entitled “The Bourgeois Orientation of Wenhui Daily during a Certain Period,” criticizing Wenhui Daily (Wenhui bao 文汇报) and Guangming Daily (Guangming ribao 光明日报) for their attacks on the regime and the policy of the Communist Party. Then Mao wrote a follow-up editorial for the People’s Daily. In the editorial entitled, “Wenhui Daily’s Bourgeois Orientation Should Be Criticized,” published on July 1, 1957, Mao argued, “the purpose was to let demons and devils (chimei wangliang 魌魅魍魉), ghosts and monsters (niugui sheshen) ‘air views freely’ (daming dafang 大鸣大放) and let poisonous weeds sprout and grow in profusion so that the people, now shocked to find these ugly things still existing in the world, would take action to wipe them out.” See Mao Zedong, “Wenhui bao de zichan jieji fangxiang yingdang pipan” 文汇报的资产阶级方向应当批判 [Wen hui pao’s bourgeois orientation should be criticized], editorial written for the People’s Daily, July 1, 1957. Collected in Mao Zedong Xuanji 毛泽东选集 [Selected writings of Mao Zedong], volume V (Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 1977), 453-454.
“Sweep away ox-ghosts and snake-spirits.”57 And the cowshed (niupeng 牛棚) was the term for the living spaces in which thousands of intellectuals were confined.

The redefinition of the nature of ghost and human seemingly suggests a new dichotomy: the good ghost and the bad human. Yet why ghosts appear to be lovely is precisely because they are humanized and endowed with great personalities, whereas “decent gentlemen” are allegorically no more than beasts or ghosts in human form. In other words, the new “human/ghost” trope, though showing a certain skeptical, even critical, attitude towards Maoist discourse, still ironically retains in substance a Maoist mode of ideological thinking.

As María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren point out, “the figure of the ghost has haunted human culture and imagination for a long time … in this era, the ghost already operated as a powerful metaphor for encounters with disturbing forms of otherness (including that contain inside the self, the home, and the homeland).”58 The narrative of the ghost has long been part of modern Chinese literature and culture. A haunted house, an evil ghost, or a cannibalistic banquet were used in the May Fourth period as symbols of an oppressive society, a cannibalistic traditional culture, and even a flawed national character. As David Der-wei Wang puts it, in the Republican era, 

---

57 On June 1, 1966, People’s Daily published a front-page editorial entitled “Sweep away All the Ox-Ghosts and Snake-Spirits” (Hengsao yiqie niugui shesheng 横扫一切牛鬼蛇神), advocating the removal of all class enemies who promoted bourgeois ideas within the party, the government, the army, and among the intellectuals. On the same day, China National Radio broadcasted a Big-Character Poster (dazi bao 大字报) written by seven faculty members of Peking University, criticizing the CCP Beijing Municipal Committee and Peking University for being controlled by the bourgeoisie and advocating attacks on those in authority. These two events triggered the national rebel movements at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

“although ghosts appear to have been kept at bay by enlightened literati, chances are that they still lurked not far behind the façade of the new literature. More intriguingly, modern Chinese writers and intellectuals cannot carry on their enlightened discourse without invoking, or even inventing, new ghosts.” 59 And there is a “vigorous return of ghosts to elite and popular Chinese culture in the 1980s.” 60 The haunting of revenants reflects the vicissitudes of society, the mental dilemma and historical scars entangled with issues of ideology, modernity, and identity.

If the ghost-themed films (and TV drama series) in the 1980s reflects a relatively ghost-tolerant policy (although, it should be said, ghosts in those films are limited to fictional characters from a pre-modern era who usually serve as a metaphor for social injustice), the horror cinema of the new millennium reflects a tightened-up censorship of the ghost, according to which, all the ghost figures, even those in pre-modern narratives, should be exorcised. 61 That is why the ghost in Mysterious Island turns out to be a psychopath, and the phantom in the haunted house in Seven Nights is actually made by some drug dealers. The ghost in No. 32, B District (dir. Lü Jianmin 呂建民, 2011), a Chinese variation of the hit Paranormal Activity, is actually a man who takes revenge for his daughter. The apparition and phantom in The Deserted Inn (Huangcun kezhan 荒村客栈, dir. Zhang Jing, 2010) is nothing but a story written by the female lead. The

60 Ibid., 265.
61 For more information about this tightened-up censorship of the ghost in the new millennium see Chapter 4.
paranormal activity in *Suffocation* eventually turns out to be the male lead’s
hallucination. *Blood Stained Shoes* (Xiuhua xie 绣花鞋 dir. Raymond Yip, 2012), a Hong
Kong-mainland co-produced film, though it successfully creates a ghostly atmosphere,
repeats the popular Maoist trope—“The old society turned human beings into ghosts, the
new society turns ghosts into human beings”—and is a modern version of the anti-feudal
theme. No matter how much the film appears to depict supernatural horror, the audience
knows there are no “real” ghosts or supernatural beings in the film. No matter how much
suspense a horror film builds as the story goes on, the mainland audience has come to
expect the clichéd ending: the so-called “ghost” is either a trick manipulated by one
character or a hallucination suffered by another. Given such a specific social context for
Chinese horror cinema, I use the term “horror film” in this dissertation in a loose sense
that is often interchangeable with the thriller film.

Although they vary in quality and have been neglected by scholars, some horror
movies/thrillers in postsocialist China, as I demonstrate in this dissertation, respond in
quite sophisticated ways to the dramatic changes China has experienced over the past
three and a half decades. They also reflect on serious issues such as the legacy of
historical trauma, problems in the national psyche, social and economic stratification, the
resurgence of gender inequality, the shock to traditional family values, alienation and
isolation, the abuse of science, and the like. These films may be primarily for
entertainment, but they reveal much about the fears and anxieties of a society going
through fast-paced economic and social changes.
Theoretical Framework and Chapter Plans

As mentioned previously, Li Daoxin points out that the only way a Chinese horror film can be understood and accepted by the mainstream ideology is by substituting the contest between the human and the ghost with a struggle between light and dark and making a clear definition of the “evil other,” who may be an enemy with clear race, class, gender, and identity. This argument can be demonstrated with the PRC-made erotic ghost movies mentioned previously, or other horror movies/thriller films produced in the 1980s: incarnations of the enemy might be feudal landlords and corrupt officials (*Ghost Sisters*, *Inside an Old Grave*), Japanese invaders (*Man behind the Sun*), the kuomintang (hereafter KMT) government and its spies (*The Foggy City*, *The Mystery of St. Paul Hospital*), bandits and gangsters (*Mysterious Buddha*, *The Horror Night*), smuggling rings (*A Mysterious Case in the Forest*), or the Gang of Four and their henchmen (*Murder Case in No. 405*, *Ghost*).

In using what Li describes as the “Other,” I am not only referring to the “Self/Other” dichotomy in phenomenology, according to which, the Other is dissimilar to and the opposite of the Self, of Us, and of the Same; I am also referring to the image of what Sigmund Freud calls “doppelganger” in his essay “The ‘Uncanny’,” the basis of all monster images as well as a defense mechanism. When the unconscious mind senses a mortal danger to the ego, eye, limb, or genital, it creates an imaginative stand-in for the
threatened part.\textsuperscript{62} In other words, the Other is no more than the doppelganger of the Self. My use of the term “Other” also alludes to Alejandro Amenábar’s \textit{The Others} (2001). In this ghost horror movie starring Nicole Kidman, the female protagonist living in a haunted house eventually finds that she and her kids are ghosts rather than humans. The idea of “spectral incognizance” suggested by its twist ending demonstrates the interchangeability and fluidity of the human/ghost relationship, and offers a method for better understanding the ambiguous “ghost/human” trope and other paradoxical dichotomies in Chinese horror cinema.

Starting with \textit{The Lonely Ghost}, PRC’s first horror film in the strict sense, chapter 1 sets this film in a larger cultural and social context in comparison with historical horror movies such as \textit{Man Behind the Sun} (Hei taiyang qisanyao 革命前哨, dir. Mou Dunfei 牟敦芾, 1988). The chapter examines how Chinese horror cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s negotiated between the market and censorship, and how state ideology regulated the cinematic presentation of historical memory. Although several films are discussed in this chapter, I concentrate in particular on a close reading of \textit{The Lonely Ghost}, focusing on its thematic explorations and generic innovations and how it integrates serious contemplation about the past with highly entertaining plots, as well as horrific images and sounds. Through examining \textit{The Lonely Ghost}’s intertextual relations with other contemporaneous horror movies, such as \textit{Death Is Approaching} (Siqi linjin 死期临近, dir. Mou Dunfei 牟敦芾, 1990)...

期临近，dir. Xie Hong 谢洪, 1989) and The Foggy House (Wuzhai 雾宅, dir. Huang Jianzhong 黄健中, 1994). I further analyze how revenants in those films bring about a spectral time, conjure a “mute” past ignored by the official historical narrative, and express a concern about China’s future; I also examine the theme of “insanity” in post-Mao horror cinema, which is not only an embodiment of what Michael Rogin calls “political demonology,” but also an allegory of the national psyche after the Cultural Revolution.

With the end of the New Era, the dramatic social and economic changes China has experienced in the past two and a half decades have engendered abundant tensions and contradictions in people’s everyday lives and living space, including in love, marriage, and family. Reconfigurations of space and power in cities turns the urban environment and apartments into new sites of horror. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 are therefore two sides of the same coin: while the former tends to examine gender issues in urban horror films from a feminist perspective, the latter focuses on social stratification and class differences caused by China’s rapid modernization and urbanization.

Chapter 2 examines the theme of marital infidelity and the cultural politics of gender in the family horror of the 1990s and of the new millennium, paying particular attention to the melodramatic narrative, as well as the social contexts of these films. The chapter consists of three sections. Through a close reading of two PRC horror movies—

Nightmare in the Ghost City (Guicheng xiongmeng 鬼城凶梦, dir. Li Qimin 李启民,

63 Michael Rogin, *Ronald Regan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xiii.
in comparison with Hong Kong horror films that involve plots of female adultery, the first section analyzes how women’s desire and sexual autonomy (represented by unfaithful wives) are presented in both mainland and Hong Kong cinema of the 1990s as the source of family tragedies. This chapter also demonstrates how the issue of female adultery can be used in different ideological contexts and serve different political purposes: whereas in mainland reform-era cinema it is associated with economic autonomy and upward mobility, in Hong Kong it reflects political impotence and anxiety about the 1997 handover. After sketching the resurgence of concubine culture in contemporary China and the complex historical, social, and economic dynamics behind this phenomenon, this chapter also examines how women in the horror genre have functioned as cultural capital and accessories of urban success in postsocialist China, through a comparative study of *Deadly Delicious* (Shuangshi ji 双食记, dir. Zhao Tianyu 赵天宇, 2008) and *The Door* (Men 门, dir. Li Shaohong 李少红, 2007). The last section of this chapter discusses images of the femme fatale (monster) and the virtuous woman (angel), two female role types with opposite feminine attributes in conventional patriarchal narratives, in the horror cinema of infidelity. Through a comparative study of *Daytime Ghost* (Bairi nügui 白日女鬼, dir. Zhao Wenxin 赵文炘, 1994) and *Painted Skin* (Huapi 画皮, dir. Gordon Chan 陈嘉上, 2008), this chapter also analyzes how the specter of concubine culture shapes and eventually transforms the figure of the femme fatale from a rebellious subject to a submissive object. In delineating how presentations of the wife figure in *Curiosity*...
Kills the Cat (Haoqi haisi mao 好奇害死猫, dir. Zhang Yibai 张一白, 2006) vacillate between the femme fatale and the virtuous woman, this chapter also analyzes how the confrontation between the two eventually undermines the patriarchal ideology in China today.

Chapter 3 investigates the presentation of urban space and social stratification in Chinese horror cinema of the new millennium. Through close readings of The Door, Curiosity, and Home Sweet Home (Guaiwu 怪物, dir. Pou-Soi Cheang 郑保瑞, 2005), the first section of this chapter examines how reconfigurations of space and power turn living space into a site of horror in a time of social and spatial transformations. By exploring the relationship between characters and the urban setting in films such as Li Shaohong’s Baober in Love (Lian’ai zhong de baobei 恋爱中的宝贝, 2004) and Guo Hua’s 过华Variant (Yizhong 异种, 2015), the second section delineates the politics of the global-urban imagination in contemporary China and analyzes the sense of alienation engendered by China’s urbanization.

If chapter 1 can be viewed as an exploration of the politics of historical memory in which the past is presented as the Other that needs to be redefined and recreated from the perspective of the Self (present), chapter 2 examines the politics of gender in which the female is regarded not only as cultural capital but also the Other that needs to be regulated in patriarchal society. Chapter 3 then examines the cultural politics of social stratification in which the loser is defined as the Other that should be marginalized and eliminated from the promising Self. The final chapter is a study of the relationship
between mainland China and Hong Kong, in which the former has long been seen by the latter as a special “Other” who plays a vital role in the latter’s identity construction.

Through textual analysis of different versions of *The Painted Skin* and *A Chinese Ghost Story*, this chapter demonstrates how stereotypes and characters in the same erotic ghost story derived from *Liaozhai* can be adopted and reused in different ideological contexts and for specific ideological purposes. While the reception of Bao Fong’s *The Painted Skin* in post-Mao PRC can be read as an allegory of the Cultural Revolution, *The Enchanting Shadow*, and *A Chinese Ghost Story* and its remakes reveal Hong Kong’s changing attitude towards the PRC and its oscillation between desire for and anxiety toward mainland China.

As the dissertation demonstrates, the “Other/Self” dichotomy can be understood as various binary narratives: victimizer (the Gang of Four)/victim (people) narrative about the Cultural Revolution, the suppressed past/promising future dichotomy promoted by the new ideology (chapter 1), the femme fatale/virtuous wife dichotomy, or the male/female confrontation in the horror cinema of infidelity (chapter 2), the intruder/defender battle, or the loser/winner clash in social stratification and class differences (chapter 3), and mainland/Hong Kong relationship in terms of identification (chapter 4). Yet the boundary between the Other and the Self is usually porous, and the figures even interchangeable. In focusing on politics of cultural discourses and social consensus behind horror films, I do not mean to suggest that only the party/state and its new ideology has played a vital role in those fluid processes. Rather, I hope to suggest a
complicated social and cultural matrix in which the Self/Other dichotomies, just like genre in Rick Altman’s study, experience ongoing changes and are frequently redefined by various active social agents: the government, media, school, family, men, women, nation, citizen, and so forth, who may achieve compromises sometimes (e.g. in the new millennium, not only men, but also women begin to believe in the conventional gender roles in patriarchal society), or collide with each other.
CHAPTER 1: TRAUMA OR KARMA:
ALLEGORICAL MOMENTS AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORICAL MEMORY

We cannot repeat enough that the dead, for whom history mourns, were once living.\textsuperscript{64}

—Paul Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative}, 1984

\textbf{Introduction}

The year 1989 is remarkable in the history of Chinese cinema, not only because this year marked the end of the so-called “New Era” and the socio-historical rupture of the 1990s from the 1980s, as most scholarship on postsocialist China suggests,\textsuperscript{65} but also because the PRC made its horror “debut” that year with \textit{The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion} (Heilou guhun 黑楼孤魂, dir. Liang Ming 梁明 and Mu Deyuan 穆德远, hereafter \textit{The Lonely Ghost}), a horror movie with a strong generic self-consciousness. As one of the most accomplished popular films of the 1980s, \textit{The Lonely Ghost} not only offered mainland audiences at that time a visual and auditory feast of horror, but also provided them a glimpse of an “allegorical moment,” which Adam Lowenstein defines as “a

\textsuperscript{64} Paul Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative} Volume 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 312.

shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined." 66

This chapter first sketches the emergence of horror in the post-Mao era, then, in contextualizing *The Lonely Ghost* in a larger cultural and social sphere in comparison with historical horror movies such as *Man Behind the Sun* (Hei taiyang qisanyao 黑太阳 731, dir. Mou Dunfei 牟敦芾, 1988), the second section of this chapter examines how Chinese horror cinema during this period negotiated between the market and censorship, and how state ideology regulated the cinematic presentation of historical memory. I then go on in the third section to discuss several films, and concentrate in particular on a close reading of *The Lonely Ghost*, not only because it is acknowledged as the PRC’s first horror film, in the strict sense of the term, but also because it perfectly integrates an introspection about the Cultural Revolution with the horror genre. Therefore, the discussion focuses on the thematic explorations and generic innovations of this film and examines how it integrates serious contemplation about the past with highly entertaining plots, as well as horrific images and sounds. In the last section, in examining *The Lonely Ghost* in its intertextual relations with other contemporaneous horror movies, such as *Death Is Approaching* (Siqi linjin 死期临近, dir. Xie Hong 谢洪, 1989) and *The Foggy House* (Wuzhai 雾宅, dir. Huang Jianzhong 黄健中, 1994), I further analyze how revenants in those films bring about a spectral time, conjure a “mute” past ignored by the

official historical narrative, and express a concern about China’s future; I also examine the theme of “insanity” in post-Mao horror cinema, which is not only an embodiment of what Michael Rogin calls “political demonology,” but also an allegory of the national psyche after the Cultural Revolution.

The Emergence of Horror in the Post-Mao Era

If the 1979 public screening of Bao Fong’s *The Painted Skin* (1966) was the mainland audiences’ first encounter after 1949 with a horror movie in the strict sense, it was not long before mainland film studios themselves began to produce their own horror movies. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the mainland witnessed for the first time in its history a flourishing of the horror/thriller genres. Apart from those erotic ghost films adapted from *Liaozhai* stories (as examined in the Introduction), detective thrillers, science fiction horror films, action-adventure horror films, family horror films, serial killer/slasher movies, and “ghost” horror movies were produced and screened publicly in China. Yet the boom in horror cinema was only the tip of the iceberg of the surge of the

---

67 Michael Rogin, *Ronald Regan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, xiii.
68 Different from those PRC-made counter-espionage films or crime films that made use of horror elements at that time, Bao’s *The Painted Skin* aims to evoke fear and panic first, though it also delivers a serious moralistic message. Although not until 1979 was *The Painted Skin* publicly screened in the mainland, it was shown for some high-ranking CCP officials in Zhongnanhai as early as 1966. Bao even complained to Chen Yi, the Vice Premier, that the last scene in which the female lead takes off the painted skin and turns into a ghost isn’t horrifying enough, and Chen scolded him: “Why so horrifying? Don’t get into horrorism!” See Bao Fong’s interview in Xianggang yingren koushu lishi congshu 2: lixiang niandai—changcheng, fenghuang de rizi 香港影人口述历史丛书 2：理想年代——长城、凤凰的日子 [Oral history series (2): an age of idealism: Great Wall & Feng Huang days], ed. Wong Ain-ling 黄爱玲 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2000), 110.
69 Representative horror movies and thrillers of this period include: *Murder Case in No. 405* (405 mousha an 405 谋杀案, dir. Shen Yaoting 沈耀庭, 1980), *The Foggy City* (Wu du mang mang 雾都茫茫, dir. Shen Yaot...
popular “entertainment films” (yule pian 娱乐片) during this period, especially after the mid-1980s.70

Several factors contributed to the emergence and popularity of entertainment films. First, as China’s economic reforms progressed in the 1980s, the film industry gradually transformed from a state monopoly to a marketized and privatized industry. The state cut subsidies, granting film studios and local distributors more economic

---

autonomy but also more financial responsibility. Film studios were pressured to become financially self-sufficient, resulting in a financial crisis, as critics pointed out in 1988, “haunting 22 film studios.” It was therefore not coincidental that studios favored entertainment films for their commercial potential.

Second, although it was still regarded as a powerful tool for propaganda and pedagogical purposes, the government began to recognize that film could also be used as an appropriate form for entertainment and that entertainment films could also be used to deliver ideological messages. Since there was a mass demand for popular entertainment in the 1980s, film became the preferred form of mass entertainment, especially for residents in rural areas, due to the lack of competing entertainment options (e.g. low percentage of household ownership of TV sets and videocassette recorders). Movie theatres quickly expanded into suburban and rural areas after the third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in 1978. The emergence and popularity of TV programs in the later 1980s offered tough competition for the film industry, which had to then further rely on popular cinema to attract audiences.

---


73 Until 1985, there were 10632 rural theatres and 2800 urban theatres. See Shen Yun 沈芸, *Zhongguo dianying chanye shi* 中国电影产业史 [The history of Chinese film industry] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2005), 211. The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (zhonggong shiyi jie sanzhong quanhui 中共十一届三中全会) marked the beginning of China’s “Reform and Opening Up” policy and declared the arrival of a New Era.
Third, although some scholars expressed moral concern about the dangers of entertainment films, many filmmakers, theorists, and critics acknowledged their importance and actively legitimized this “lowbrow” popular culture. The resulting debate on entertainment cinema laid a solid theoretical foundation for the future commercialization and industrialization of the Chinese film industry in the market reform era. As Rui Zhang points out, “the rise of non-political entertainment films was also a result of a cultural and political liberalization that was supported by film authorities.” In this relatively relaxed and liberal social environment, Chinese filmmakers began to experiment on a diversity of genres and themes. Not surprisingly, horror, one of the highest grossing genres in the film industry (as Hollywood horror cinema has demonstrated) won investor favor and became one of the most popular genres in this wave of entertainment films.


75 Rui Zhang, The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang, 25.

76 Besides horror/thriller, martial arts films and comedy films were also popular entertainment genres during this period. Mysterious Buddha (1980), a martial arts film with a strong horror element, took second place in the box office at the time of its release. Shaolin Temple (Shaolin si 少林寺, dir. Zhang Xinyan 张鑫炎, 1982), a Hong Kong-mainland coproduced martial arts film was a huge hit. It not only sold 480 film prints, the highest record during the New Era period, attracted as many as 300 million filmgoers into the theaters, and broke box-office record, but also initiated a nationwide Shaolin fever in the 1980s. The adaptation of Wang Shuo’s 王朔 satirical fiction, such as The Trouble Shooters (Wanzhu 顽主, dir. Mi Jianshan 米家山, 1988), was also very popular. See Yingjin Zhang and Zhiwei Xiao eds., Encyclopedia of Chinese Film (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 217. Also see Wang Yongwu and Weng Li, “1988 Zhongguo dianying shichang beiwanglu,” 295.
While most of the scholarly attention to films of this period has been paid to the Fifth Generation art films, little has been written on contemporaneous entertainment films, especially horror movies. However, as Li Zeng points out, “while the horror films may be less aesthetically innovative than the Fifth Generation film-makers’ works, some of them are no less thematically provocative and ideologically challenging.” Although some horror movies continued to be packaged as variations of Maoist counter-espionage films, others directly addressed contemporary social issues, such as the abuse of science and technology, the deterioration of traditional family values, moral degeneration in an increasingly commercialized society, and the historical trauma caused by the Cultural Revolution. *The Lonely Ghost*, for instance, not only presents a historical allegory of the Cultural Revolution, but also satirizes the state ideology of the reform era that officially represses memory about the past and focuses only on economic reforms.

---

77 Although legitimized by liberal film authorities in the critical debates from 1986 to 1989, entertainment films of this period have still been largely neglected, intentionally or unintentionally, in Chinese film scholarship, especially compared with the so-called “exploratory films” (*tansuo pian* 探索片), the internationally acknowledged art films produced by the Fourth Generation and Fifth Generation with strong thematic and artistic exploration. The dichotomy of “entertainment film/exploratory film” is roughly equivalent to the dichotomy of “commercial film/art film” nowadays. A similar neglect also exists in the Western scholarship on Chinese cinema in the past three decades, though a few scholars have paid attention to the popular cinema in post-Mao China, especially comedy films represented by Feng Xiaogang’s “New Year Comedies” since the later 1990s. See Paul G. Pickowicz, “Popular Cinema and Political Thought in Post-Mao China: Reflections on Official Pronouncements, Film, and the Film Audiences,” in *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People’s Republic*, eds. Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1989), 37-53, Shuyu Kong, “Genre Film, Media Corporations, and the Commercialisation of the Chinese Film Industry,” and Rui Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang*. 78 Lì Zeng, “Ghostly Vengeance, Historical Trauma,” 110.
Negotiation between Commercialism and Ideology: Presentation of Historical Violence and the Politics of Chinese Rating System

In a review written around the release of *The Lonely Ghost*, one writer asserted that this film is “the first commercial horror film to be exhibited with stereophonic sound since the founding of the PRC, and the first film rated as ‘Not Appropriate for Children and Teenagers’ since the PRC’s first motion picture rating system and censorship was implemented on May 1, 1989.”

Several key words stand out in this statement: commercial horror film, stereophonic sound, not appropriate for children and teenagers, rating system, and censorship. While stereophonic sound is more related to the filming process and viewing experience (which will be examined in the next section), the other key words may help us to better understand the negotiation between commercialism and censorship faced by filmmakers during that period.

First, *The Lonely Ghost* demonstrates a successful business model for independent commercial filmmaking. As film studios were pressured after the mid-1980s to become financially self-sufficient, more and more state studios began to cooperate with private production companies. Similar to what Shuyu Kong describes as the trade in “book license numbers” (*shuhao* 书号) between publishing houses and private book dealers in

---

China’s book market beginning in the mid-1980s,\textsuperscript{80} it was common during this period for film studios to share their logos (\textit{changbiao 厂标}) with private investors in the name of co-production.\textsuperscript{81} As an unspoken rule in the film industry from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, this trade was not only profitable for state studios, it also helped them meet annual quotas for film production, as assigned by the Film Bureau. Like the trading of book license numbers, the trade in studio logos reflects the complex and ambiguous transition from a centralized planned economy to a free market economy.

According to Liang Ming, co-director of \textit{The Lonely Ghost}, they bought the logo from Shenzhen Pictures (\textit{shenzhen yingye gongsi 深圳影业公司}), and secured investment from the Kunming Vanguard Art Entertainment Centre (\textit{Kunming qianwei yishu yule zhongxin 昆明前卫艺术娱乐中心}), a township-village enterprise, whose name only appears in the ending credits.\textsuperscript{82} The film turned out to be a great success in terms of both box-office revenue and critical reviews: it earned five times its investment and was regarded critically as an excellent melange of Chinese art and commercial modes.


\textsuperscript{81} Zhao Shaoyi 赵绍义, “Gua changbiao xuyu” “挂厂标”絮语 [Notes on sharing the film studio logo], \textit{Dianying chuangzuo 电影创作} [Cinematic creation] 3 (1997): 75-77.

\textsuperscript{82} See Liang Ming 梁明 and Hou Liang 侯亮, “Diwudai” zhong de haigui pai: fang daoyan, sheyingshi Liang Ming”“第五代”中的海归派——访导演、摄影师梁明 [A returnee of the “Fifth Generation”: an interview with Liang Ming, director and cinematographer], \textit{Dazhong dianying 大众电影} [Popular cinema] 20 (2006): 35. Also see Hu Bugui 胡不鬼, “Zhuanfang jingdian kongbu pian heilou guhun daoyan Liang Ming: dangnian meiyou Zhang Yimou pai bucheng” 专访经典恐怖片《黑楼孤魂》导演梁明：当年没有张艺谋拍不成 [An interview with Liang Ming, the director of the classic horror film \textit{The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion}: the film would not have been possible without Zhang Yimou’s support], last modified September 19, 2008, http://i.mtime.com/753159/blog/1456574/. (accessed March 5, 2016)
of filmmaking. Although unnoticed in academic scholarship, Chinese horror aficionados and critics have repeatedly cited it as a representative work of PRC horror cinema.

Second, *The Lonely Ghost* bears witness to the PRC’s first motion picture rating system, which was adopted in 1989 and then abolished in the early 1990s. Today, the film censorship system in China is infamous for being both highly regulated (though with ambiguous rules about what is acceptable and what not) and having no rating system. The absence of a rating system after the early 1990s has meant that all films must be suitable for all ages, a policy that has led to numerous troubles and controversies. As a foreign filmgoer observed:

The bloody drama *Flowers of War* was allowed into theatres in the Chinese mainland while it was rated R (18 or over) in the United States. When I saw the film last year, parents were frantically ushering their little ones out of the theatre when the graphic violence of the Nanking Massacre intercut with the relentless flirtations of sing-song girls couldn’t be taken anymore.83

However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, China did briefly implement a rating system on both domestic and imported films. It began with a document issued by the Central Committee of the CCP in December 1988 that required the state to “establish a censorship and rating system of film and TV works, and to specify films and TV programs that are not appropriate for students of high, middle, and elementary schools.”84


84 Central Committee of the CCP, document No. 14, “Yao jianli dui yingshipian de shencha dingji zhidu, dui zhongxiaoxuesheng buyi guankan de yingshi zuopin zuochu mingque guiding” 要建立对影视片的审查定级制度，对中小学生不宜观看的影视作品作出明确规定 [Announcement of the implementation of film censorship and exhibition rating system on some films], 1988.
Following this instruction, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television (guangbo dianying dianshi bu广播电影电视部), SARFT’s predecessor, hereafter MRFT) issued the “Announcement of the implementation of film censorship and exhibition rating system on some films” on March 25, 1989 (hereafter 1989 Announcement), in which the category of “Not Appropriate for Children and Teenagers” (shaonian ertong buyi guankan少年儿童，不宜观看, hereafter NACT) was first proposed. Films containing any of the following content would be rated in this category:

1. plots with rape, theft, drug abuse, drug trafficking and prostitution;
2. plots with violence, murder, or action that can easily cause children to be afraid;
3. plots depicting sex and sexual behavior;
4. plots depicting abnormal phenomena in society.\textsuperscript{85}

The specific protection for children and teenagers from graphic depiction of sex and violence was further explained in a regulation issued in November 1989 by the Chinese Film Distribution and Exhibition Company (hereafter CFDEC), a subsidiary company of the MRFT. According to “Regulation for Exhibiting Films Rated ‘Not Appropriate For Children and Teenagers’” (fangyin shaoer buyi yingpian de guanli banfa放映少儿不宜

\textsuperscript{85} MRFT, document No. 201, “Guangbo dianying dianshi bu guanyu dui bufen yingpian shixing shencha, fangying fenji zhidu de tongzhi”广播电影电视部关于对部分影片实行审查、放映分级制度的通知 [MRFT’s announcement of the implementation of film censorship and exhibition rating system on some films], March 25, 1989. http://210.73.66.144:4601/law?fn=chl234s112.txt. (accessed March 5, 2016). In 1998, the MRFT reorganized as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (guojia xinwen chuban guangdian zongju国家新闻出版广电总局, hereafter SARFT), an executive branch under the State Council of the PRC, whose main task is the administration and supervision of culture industries including the press, radio, TV and film industry, Internet, etc. In 2013, the SARFT was merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication (xinwen chuban zongshu新闻出版总署) to form the General Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (guojia xinwen chuban guangbo dianying dianshi zongju国家新闻出版广播电影电视总局).
影片的管理办法, hereafter 1989 Regulation), if a movie contains material inappropriate for people under the age of 16, producers should print the “NACT” warning label on each copy of the film before the title comes up, and distributors and exhibitors are responsible for indicating the rating on movie posters and other promotional materials, and checking filmgoers’ IDs to verify their ages before selling tickets and giving them permission to enter the theatre.  

This rating system did not last long. According to a talk by Tian Congming, the vice minister of the MRFT, to film studio executives, the category of “NACT” was deleted from China’s regulations of film censorship as early as 1995. In Film Censorship Regulation (Dianying shencha guiding 电影审查规定), the PRC’s first film censorship law issued by MRFT on January 16, 1997, the category of “NACT”

---


87 In this talk, Tian reviewed MRFT’s work in the past five years, including issuing the tentative regulations of film censorship, deleting categories such as “NACT” and “Internally Circulated Films” (neican pian 内参片) and further improving the film censorship. See Tian Congming 田聪明, “Dianying ‘bawu’ de huigu, ‘jiuwu’ de shexiang ji 1996 nian de gongzuo” [Review of the cinema’s ‘Eight Five Year Plan’; envision of the ‘Ninth Five Year Plan’ and work in 1996—a talk at the forum with film studio executives], in Zhongguo dianying nianjian 中国电影年鉴 [China film yearbook], ed. China Film Association 中国电影家协会 (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1996), 35.
disappeared and reasserted the old policy that all films released in China must be suitable for general audiences.  

In her study of post-1989 cinema, Rui Zhang attributes the abolishment of this rating system to some notorious cases of films’ taking advantage of the “NACT” category to market and promote adult and sexual content. She uses the case of The Village of Widows (Guafu cun 寡妇村, dir. Wang Jin 王进, 1989) as an example to demonstrate why MRFT found that the implementation of the rating system had somehow gotten out of hand and actually “caused more problems than it offered protections.”  

Liu Yang also points out that some filmmakers and distributors abused this rating category to attract audiences to the thrilling, sexual, and violent content of their films and to guarantee box office success.  

Like the case of The Village of Widows, the great commercial success of The Lonely Ghost also partially related to this rating system. As its title suggests, this is a ghost film. It depicts a female ghost that constantly haunts the house in which she was murdered during the Cultural Revolution and takes brutal revenge against her persecutor.  

---

89 Rui Zhang, The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang, 29-30. Ironically, according to the research by a journalist from People’s Daily, there is no evidence that the film was officially rated as “Not Appropriate for Children” by MRFT or Beijing municipal government. So it was no more than advertising campaigns manipulated by the press and promoted by the film distributors. See Li Li 李力, “Guafu cun: ertong buyi de youhuo yu sikao” 《寡妇村》——“儿童不宜”的诱惑与思考 [The Village of Widows: temptation and thinking of “not appropriate for children”], Renmin ribao 人民日报, February 28, 1989, 4.  
Since it was the first film officially rated “NACT” after the rating system became operative, this rating actually helped to promote the film by arousing audiences’ curiosity, as the directors have admitted. In Mu’s words, “NACT became the most influential ad for The Lonely Ghost, and many filmgoers went to see this film just because of this rating” (See Fig. 1.1 and 1.2). 91

Fig. 1.1 The poster of The Lonely Ghost states that it is “China’s first horror movie with stereophonic sound” and “not appropriate for children” to watch.

---

91 See Mu Deyuan’s interview in “Dianying de biaoqing” II 电影的表情 (二) [Expressions in cinema II], in “Dishi fangying shi” 第十放映室 [The 10th screening room], a weekly film review television program on CCTV-10, 25 (2011), on May 1, 2011. Online video see http://tv.cntv.cn/video/VSET100228771676/63e08d6263094974542685b496867f44 (accessed March 5, 2016)
The great commercial success of the film can be demonstrated by some data: more than 370 release prints were sold and the film’s ticket price on the black market was jacked up to 6 yuan, whereas the regular ticket price was only a few cents.\textsuperscript{92} Compared with the dismal film market of the previous year, this film stands out as a great success. As two film critics sarcastically describe the film market in 1988, “they enthusiastically estimated that *Dragons and Kites* could sell 150 prints, yet it only sold 60 prints; they highly praised *A Dong Love Story*, but it failed to sell even one print... *Evening Bell* only sold one print to Jiangsu and six or seven prints to Japan. Those distribution companies who purchased more prints than needed last year became more cautious this year, and film studios are more calculating, because a print is worth 9000 yuan.”\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., see Liang Ming’s interview. Also see Hu Bugui, “Zhuanfang jingdian kongbu pian heilou guhun daoyan Liang Ming: dangnian meiyou Zhang Yimou pai bucheng.”

with CCTV-10, Liang even expressed ambivalence about the NACT category, because even as it promoted the film, it also limited its distribution due to official regulations. Liang believed that if the distribution had not been limited, the number of prints sold might even have increased to four or five hundred.94

Though The Lonely Ghost was rated a “NACT” film, the restriction for children and teenagers was not strictly enforced. Many people, especially members of what would be called the “post-80s” (baling hou 八零后) generation, managed to watch this film in their childhoods,95 which could be partially attributed to parents’ ignorance of the rating system and the cinema staff’s “carelessness” in implementing it. But what concerns me here is the ambiguous, even paradoxical, attitude of the government in terms of NACT content, as I examine in the following. The Lonely Ghost was later publicly shown on CCTV-6, an all-ages movie channel in China’s state television network, after the rating system was abolished in 1995 (see Fig. 1.3).

---

94 See Liang Ming’s interview in CCTV 10, “Dianying de biaoqing.”
95 The term “post-80s,” or “the post 1980’s generation,” refers to the generation, especially in urban cities, whose members were born between 1980 to 1989 in Mainland China after the introduction of the one-child policy. This generation, the first to grow up entirely within the reformist era, currently makes up a major portion of China’s young adult demographic.
In her study of Chinese film censorship, Laikwan Pang argues that China “continues to exercise a direct centralized control on film, preventing any seeds of political destabilization from sprouting while maintaining a puritanical culture that minimizes the depiction of such ‘debauched’ cultural phenomena as pornography, violence and corruption.” Yet Pang ignores the fact that as long as a film is ideologically correct, its depiction of pornography, violence and corruption was, to a great extent, tolerated, sanctioned, and even encouraged in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Watching The Lonely Ghost was actually, for many children and teenagers, not even their first encounter with a movie with horror elements. In 1987, many young students were organized by their schools to watch Bloody Evidence of the Massacre in Nanjing (Tucheng xuezhe 铁城血证, dir. Luo Guanqun 罗冠群, 1987), a war-themed movie, to receive “patriotic education.” The film was the first to depict the Nanking massacre.

---

96 Laikwan Pang, “The State against Ghosts,” 469.
Massacre in the Second World War (hereafter WWII) on screen, including scenes in which Chinese women are raped and killed by Japanese soldiers.

One year later, Man Behind the Sun (Hei taiyang qisanyao 黑太阳 731, dir. Mou Dunfei 牟敦芾), a Hong Kong-mainland co-produced historical horror movie about “Unit 731,” the notorious biological and chemical warfare research unit of the Japanese army in WWII, was released in both Hong Kong and the mainland. The film shows how Unit 731 undertook lethal human experiments on Chinese, Korean, and Russian prisoners of war to test new biological weapons. Because of its graphic depiction of war atrocities through detailed description of various cruel experiments and grotesque torture, this film was judged suitable for adults only and hence became the first film to be rated “Category 3” (equivalent to the US rating NC-17) in Hong Kong. Some mainland audiences shared this concern about the film. In a review published in 1989, after acknowledging the films’ thematic significance and aesthetic value, the reviewer expressed his concern about the film’s graphic depiction of violence:

The defect of this film is that some scenes are too gory and horrific, such as “peeling off the skin” of the arms of a Chinese woman after freezing them, slaughtering “the little dumb boy” by “disemboweling him alive,” the bleeding human heart, and the bleeding stomach and intestines...Even for me, a man who has served in the army

---

97 The film was produced by Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd (yindu jigou youxian gongsi 银都机构有限公司), a Hong Kong-based, China state-owned film company.
98 Category 3 films (sanji pian 三级片) is a special category of Hong Kong cinema known for its graphic representations of sex and violence. The Hong Kong motion picture rating system was established under the Movie Screening Ordinance Cap. 392 on November 10, 1988. The ratings were previously issued by the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority (TELA), and initially provided three levels of ratings. Category 3 is level 3 and for persons aged 18 and above only. The ratings were amended in 1995, creating three levels of main ratings, and two sub-ratings for one level.
and has been to the front line, cannot bear watching [those scenes], let alone children. [So I] suggest rating it as “not appropriate for children and teenagers.”

Yet ironically, not only did the film fail to be rated as “NACT,” school children were organized to collectively watch this serious educational war film, because it reflected atrocities committed by the Japanese invaders during WWII. A netizen from Harbin even recalls that he/she was organized by his/her kindergarten to watch the film, because the site of Unit 731 is near Harbin and has become a key part of local patriotic education campaigns. Like The Lonely Ghost, this film was later shown on the CCTV-6 movie channel. It was also made into a ten-episode TV drama series shown in prime time on CCTV in 1991. The commercial and critical success of Man Behind the Sun also

---

99 Shi Dianhua 施殿华, “Chumu jingxin de hei taiyang qisanyao” 触目惊心的《黑太阳·七三一》 [The shocking Man Behind the Sun], Dianying pingjie 电影评介, 10 (1989): 5. What’s more shocking is the fact that all the bodies being tortured and dismembered in this movie are real corpses bought from hospitals. See Zheng Jintao 郑锦涛, “Mou Dunfei he hei taiyang dianying” 牟敦芾和黑太阳电影 [Mou Dunfei and the Black Sun series], in Dianying pingjie 电影评介, 5 (1995): 17.


initiated a flurry of imitations and rip-offs, such as *Devil’s Den of Breast Milk* (Rennai mochao 人奶魔巢, dir. Zheng Yongming 郑永明, 1989), *Man behind the Sun 2: Laboratory of the Devil* (Qisanyao sharen gongchang 731 杀人工厂, dir. Godfrey Ho 何志强, 1992), and *Man behind the Sun 3: A Narrow Escape* (Siwang lieche 死亡列车, dir. Godfrey Ho, 1994), to name but a few.

The horrific cinematic presentation of fascist atrocities reached its peak in 1995, as China celebrated the 50th anniversary of the victory of the global “Anti-Fascist” war and the triumph of China’s War of Resistance against Japan. Besides conventional war feature films such as *The Marco Polo Bridge Incident* (Qiqi shibian 七七事变, dir. Li Qiankuan and Xiao Guiyun), movies about the Nanking Massacre became hot topics. Following *Don’t Cry, Nanking* (Nanjing da tusha 南京大屠杀, dir. Wu Ziniu 吴子牛) was Mou Dunfei’s *Black Sun: The Nanking Massacre* (Hei taiyang: Nanjing da tusha 黑太阳：南京大屠杀), a sequel to *Man behind the Sun* that was highly praised by the Film Bureau.104 Ye Daying’s 叶大鹰 *Red Cherry* (Hong yingtao 红樱桃), a sentimental and exotic revolutionary film set in wartime Russia, became the highest-grossing film of the year.105 It tells about how a group of Chinese orphans of communist martyrs who had been studying in Moscow suffered from and survived through the Nazi assaults. As

---

5. The prime time in Chinese television refers to the 19:00-to-22:00 time slot, the so-called “Golden Time” (huangjin shijian 黄金时间).
effective audiovisual materials for patriotic education, those movies were, without exception, strongly promoted by the government and recommended by the State Education Commission for students in elementary, middle, and high schools.

Historical memory and presentation of the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-1945) has played a key role in the narrative of modern Chinese history in China. This is not only because it was a moment of crisis when China was on the brink of national subjugation and annihilation, but also because it has long been portrayed, as Kirk Denton points out, as “the pivotal period in the revolutionary movement that allowed the CCP to emerge from the shadows and become a legitimate claimant to political hegemony in China.”

Patriotic education centered around the humiliated “Old China” (jiu Zhongguo 旧中国), including during the War of Resistance against Japan, has also long been part of national political pedagogy. Especially after the June Fourth Incident, in order to dislodge the worship of the West that had helped foment much of the unrest leading up to 1989, the government launched successive nationwide patriotic education campaigns through textbooks, newspapers, films, museums, and monuments that drew concerted attention to China’s “century of humiliation.”

The theme of “not forgetting national humiliation” (wuwang guochi 勿忘国耻) has therefore been elaborately

106 Kirk Denton, Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014), 133.
combined with nation building and state legitimation. As Denton points out, this nationalist attention to Japanese imperialism happens at precisely the time that the market reforms are radically transforming the Chinese economy, and “socialism” as an ideology is disappearing from the Chinese landscape. Nationalism therefore becomes the new ideological core of Chinese political discourse.\textsuperscript{108}

It was quite common for students to be asked to write film reviews (\textit{guanhou gan} 观后感) and read related materials after watching the patriotic movies mentioned above. A film review on \textit{Man Behind the Sun}, for instance, was published in \textit{Chuzhongsheng fudao} (初中生辅导 Assistance and Guidance for Junior Middle School Students), a journal for middle school students.\textsuperscript{109} Through such patriotic education, from film-watching to review-writing, students learn about the atrocities committed by Japanese imperialists, the corruption of the KMT government, the sacrifice of revolutionary forebears to win today’s peace, and, most important, the CCP’s key role in China’s historical struggle for national independence from foreign invaders.\textsuperscript{110} The suffering of Chinese people during the war, as represented in these violent historical films, also asks students to keep in mind that “weakness, disunity, and disorder at home invites foreign aggression and results in loss of Chinese identity, as China’s century-long humiliation

\textsuperscript{108} Kirk Denton, \textit{Exhibiting the Past}, 133-152.
\textsuperscript{109} Feng Jin, “Faxisi xijun zai Zhongguo: hei taiyang 731 guanhou.”
\textsuperscript{110} For quite a long time, the KMT government during WW II, especially during the first period of the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance (July 7, 1937-October 25, 1938 Fall of Wuhan), was portrayed in the narrative of modern Chinese history as a corrupted, impotent regime. The role of the Nationalist army was also downplayed, especially in comparison with the people’s war of resistance led by the CCP. Not until in the 1980s has the effort of the KMT forces in the war, especially major battles on the KMT main battle fronts, been acknowledged by PRC’s historical narrative.
and suffering before 1949 demonstrated” (see Fig. 1.4). The community activities organized by schools to view and study these films reflects the role of what Louis Althusser calls “Ideological State Apparatus”: “the school ... teaches ‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its ‘practice’.”

![Elementary students taking pledge](image)

Fig. 1.4 Elementary students take the pledge that they would not forget national humiliation, and reinforce national defense, in memory of the Mukden Incident of 1931.

Most of the films mentioned above contain a large amount of graphic depictions of violence and sex. The display of Japanese atrocities (blood, corpses, torture, slaughter,

---


113 The Mukden Incident (jiuyiba shibian 九一八事变) or Manchurian Incident took place on September 18, 1931, was a staged event engineered by Japanese military personnel as a pretext for the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (northeastern China). It was designated by Republic of China as National Humiliation Day, and has equally been memorized by the People’s Republic of China.
etc.) could best be categorized as what Julia Kristeva calls “work(s) of abjection,” in which women’s beautiful yet vulnerable bodies are ideologically packaged as an effective form of accusation of war crimes. Sequences of war rape, in which women are chased, raped, and slaughtered by Japanese soldiers, became a default part of movies about the Nanking Massacre. In other films, such as Devil’s Den of Breast Milk, women were made into “human cows” to produce milk. The display of their naked bodies, especially scarred breasts, was intended as evidence of Japanese atrocities, but it also provides a “voyeuristic pleasure” to spectators. The most impressive scene of Red Cherry might be the one in which Chuchu, the female protagonist, naked from head to toe, is being tattooed with a German imperial eagle on her back by a Nazi general (see Fig. 1.5).

115 The cinematic presentation of female victimization by Japanese atrocities in the Nanking Massacre continued into the new millennium. Lu Chuan’s City of Life and Death (Nanjing Nanjing 南京南京, 2009) shows the miserable experience of “comfort women” (wei’an fu 慰安妇), sex slaves in military brothels of the Japanese Imperial Army. Zhang Yimou’s The Flowers Of War describes the intertwined fates of two groups of women—prostitutes and girl students—after the fall of Nanking.
As many scholars have noticed, different from conventional historical narratives in the Mao era that emphasize China’s heroic resistance and victory, a new narrative that stresses national suffering and victimization has appeared in PRC’s historiography since the 1980s.\(^\text{116}\) This trend was also echoed in the arena of cinema with the boom of war films (including historical horror movies) about Japanese atrocities in the later 1980s and 1990s. But what interests me is the government’s double standard in defining “NACT” content. On the one hand, according to the 1989 Announcement and the 1989 Regulation, any films containing plots with rape, sex, violence, murder, or action that can instill fear

should not be shown to children and teenagers. On the other hand, it seems that the presentation of war victimization in the name of nationalism and patriotism was beyond the scope of censorship and the rating system. Instead of being judged as violent or salacious, the gory and/or sexual level of the victimization in these films was viewed as germane to their power to accuse and condemn the “enemy.” The reason these inhuman atrocities were screened for the public (including children and teenagers) is because they constituted historical truth and would better help audiences know and remember history.

Text at the beginning of Man Behind the Sun, for instance, reminds the audience of a history that should not be forgotten, and its closing remarks dedicate the film to the “hundreds of thousands of people who have suffered in the experiments” (see Fig. 1.6). The film’s function as historical memory was also embodied in the process of distribution and exhibition of Mou’s Black Sun: The Nanking Massacre: Mou not only set the release date for July 7th, the anniversary of the day Japan launched its full-scale invasion of China in 1937, but also donated the film’s domestic copyright to the

---

117 A similar case that exemplifies the censorship’s double standard is A Gan’s Ghosts (2002), a slasher film set in the Republican period. With obvious tributes to Scream (dir. Wes Craven, 1996), Ghosts tells about how a priest in the guise of the “ghost” (wearing a white mask with a scarlet red mouth in the shape of a grim smile and a black cloak that recalls the killer’s appearance in Scream), slays, one by one, a group of young medical interns with a cleaver, since they refuse to follow his “religion.” Although A Gan explained that he got the idea for this film from a news report on an African heretical practice, the reason why this relatively violent and gory slasher film “gained approval quite easily; almost no alteration was required,” was precisely because it could be used as a cinematic presentation of the national propaganda campaign against Falun Gong 法轮功 at that time. In A Gan’s words, “its theme caters to the need [of the government] (ticai taoqiao 题材讨巧).” See Xie Xiao 谢晓 and Wu Jieming 伍洁敏, “Cong kongbu pian songshen zhi lu toushi Zhongguo dianying fenji” 从恐怖片送审之路透视中国电影分级 [Viewing Chinese film rating in relation to the censorship of the horror film], Nanfang dushi bao 南方都市报 [Southern metropolis daily], last modified March 17, 2004, http://fun.hsw.cn/2004-03/17/content_903585.htm. (accessed March 30, 2016).
Memorial Hall of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japan (Zhongguo renmin kengri zhanzheng jinian guan 中国人民抗日战争纪念馆). Similarly, an advertising poster for Red Cherry dedicates the film to the fiftieth anniversary of the victory of the global war against fascism (see Fig. 1.7). In the words of one of the film’s characters, “Chuchu’s tattooed skin would be the living fossil, to show those who come after us what war is like.”

Fig. 1.6 The opening remarks and the closing remarks of Man Behind the Sun reminds audiences of a history that must not be forgotten.

---

Fig. 1.7 Red Cherry claims on its poster that it is a film “dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the victory by the global war against fascism.”

As “historical documents,” these films no longer belong to the genre of horror. Because they are regarded as documentaries or at least quasi-documentaries about war crimes and can facilitate learning about history, they are not subject to the NACT rating. Gore and eroticism are no longer about issues of violence and obscenity, but “evidence” of fascist atrocities, “realistic” presentations of the confrontations between the good, innocent self and the evil, salacious other, as well as historical records of the dark, repressive, and humiliating past.119 The intriguing combination of serious moral themes with sensational violent or erotic details somehow characterizes the entertainment cinema

119 The display of exposed female body, especially topless girls in rape scenes, also appears during this period in some films irrelevant to the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance, such as The Price of Frenzy (Fengkuang de daijia 疯狂的代价, dir. Zhou Xiaowen 周晓文, 1988), The Woman Warrior Black Butterfly (Youxia hei hudie 游侠黑蝴蝶, dir. Lu Jianhua 陆建华 and Yu Zhongxiao 于中效, 1988), and The Swordsman in Double Flag Town (Shuangqi zhen daoke 双旗镇刀客; dir. He Ping 何平; 1991). Similar to the war films, they were allowed to be shown to the public either because they emphasize the confrontation between good (police, swordsman) and evil (rapist, bandit), or because they reveal the darkness of the old society that forms a sharp contrast with the new society.
of this period, which often aroused ambivalent feelings in spectators: being entertained and excited in terms of the film-watching experience and morally ashamed for such enjoyment. As a scholar commented on Red Cherry in 1995, “in terms of morality, the film is discomforting, oppressive, and shocking, on the one hand, and watchable and pleasing in terms of viewing experience, on the other hand... If we disregard the moral and political perspective to watch [this film], some evil things are indeed beautiful from the perspective of aesthetics, especially [the general] tattooing the symbol of violence on a girl’s body, which creates a special effect.”

It is remarkable that Red Cherry was not only China’s biggest box office hit in 1995, but was also selected by the government as the Chinese entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 68th Academy Awards. While box-office records indicate its commercial success, the official sanction of this movie suggests another perspective from which to understand the “victim narrative.” As Xudong Zhang asserts, “the reform policies of depoliticization and opening to the outside world provided a window opportunity for a collective vision to map itself onto an imagined international—and purportedly universal—language.” This collective fanaticism for the global context is embodied in the government’s attempt to get recognition and cultural capital from a global institution (represented by Academy Awards) and in the film’s presentation of

---

120 In the summer of 1995, Film Art (Dianying yishu 电影艺术) and Popular Cinema (Dazhong dianying 大众电影), two film journals, invited some scholars and film critics to watch Red Cherry and discuss it. Their talk was selectively published on Film Art. This comment was given by Tao Dongfeng 陶东风. See “Hong yingtao pindu” 《红樱桃》品读 [On Red Cherry], Dianying yishu 电影艺术 1 (1996): 47.

121 Xudong Zhang, Postsocialism and Cultural Politics, 7.
victimization. Denton notices that this “obsessive attention to China’s victimization” not only serves a nationalist purpose, but also “has ethical and economic implications.”

The shared historical experience of China and other Asian countries of being victimized by fascist Japan in WWII, according to Denton, helps China to get “a kind of moral upper hand” and hence “legitimize its authority” in its economic and political competition with Japan.123 *Red Cherry*, though not presenting victimization at the hand of the Japanese, tells a story about how Chinese people, together with people in Europe (represented by the Soviet Union), suffered from and fought against Nazi Germany. It both suggests a common sentiment of victimization—China’s War of Resistance is presented as an integral part of the worldwide war against fascism—and, as Denton puts it, is “connected to China’s new status in the global economy and its pretensions to global greatness.”

Through combining historical trauma with the state ideology into an entertaining exotic story, *Red Cherry* becomes the site where commercialism allies with politics.

The complex politics and rhetoric of the rating system and censorship in the late 1980s and 1990s, as examined above, made it possible for *The Lonely Ghost* to be produced and released in 1989. In the in-depth analysis of the film in the following two sections, I examine how this film deliberately debunks so-called official “historical memory” and satirizes the state ideology in the New Era with its thematic exploration and generic innovation.

---

123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 143.
Thematic and Generic Innovations in *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion*

On May 1, 2011, in “The 10th Screening Room” (*dishi fangying shi* 第十放映室), a weekly film review television program on CCTV-10 (the science and education focused channel of China Central Television), *The Lonely Ghost* was introduced as “the first thriller (*jingsong pian* 惊悚片) … since the founding of the PRC,” and “the best thriller in the history of Chinese cinema.” In critic Hu Bugui’s opinion, the reason why this film is repeatedly mentioned and cited is “primarily because it perfectly integrates self-reflection on the Cultural Revolution into the nerve endings of the horror genre... The high degree of its integration of horror and social criticism, makes it a unique case that cannot be duplicated.”

While horror was banned in the Mao era as a genre inappropriate to socialism, and most horror movies/thrillers in the 1980s were still packaged in the form of counter-espionage films or crime/detective thrillers, *The Lonely Ghost* for the first time, differentiates horror from other dominant genres and established a set of recognizable generic formulas for the PRC horror cinema. In his interview with CCTV-10, Mu

---

125 Given the special social context of Chinese cinema, horror movies and thrillers are almost interchangeable in terms of generic definition. It seems for the official media, “thriller” is a more conservative and safer term than “horror.” According to Tu Xiaowen, the producer of “The 10th Screening Room,” they were once going to do a special program on horror movies, and an official met her, requiring “it’s OK to do horror movies, but they cannot be too horrific.” Tu was confused and had to respond “that’s a really high artistic requirement.” See “‘Dishi fangying shi’ gaiming huigui wangluo, tucao yijiu lanpian men chandou ba” “第 10 放映室” 改名回归网络 吐槽依旧烂片们颤抖吧 [“The 10th Screening Room” has been renamed and returned to the internet, which mocks bad films as usual; be trembling, flops!], last modified January 2, 2014, http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/0102/c40606-23999752.html. (accessed April 8, 2016)

126 CCTV 10, “Dianying de biaojing.”

127 Hu Bugui, “Zhuangfang jingdian kongbu pian heilou guhun daoyan Liang Ming: dangnian meiyou Zhang Yimou pai bucheng.”
claimed that this film meets all the generic formulas, and Liang asserted that audiences and even filmmakers at that time had not seen any Chinese horror film like this one. As “The 10th Screening Room” remarks, “as the first thriller … since the founding of the PRC, The Lonely Ghost challenged Chinese audiences’ tolerance for fear at that time,” and from that time on horror appeared as an independent genre in Chinese cinema, and audiences were no longer satisfied with those quasi-horror movies in the name of counter-espionage films or detective films.

**Ghost, Villain, and the Police: Innovations in Themes**

The film opens with a dying man’s testament during the Cultural Revolution. After entrusting his fortune and daughter, Xiaoju 小菊, to an old friend, who promises to take care of the girl like his own daughter, the man passes away. When the friend tries to cover his body with a white sheet, the dead man, to the accompaniment of creepy background music, suddenly opens his eyes, which emit two beams of green flashing light (see Fig. 1.8). This opening scary scene sets a dark overtone for the entire story, as the Chinese idiom “dying with eyes open” (si bu mingmu 死不瞑目) usually suggests an unfinished wish or an everlasting grievance. The friend then closes his eyes, covers his face, and leaves the hospital with Xiaoju. While their footsteps are still echoing in the staircase, accompanied by the tinkling sound of Xiaoju’s keys, the camera, without any warning, cuts to a shabby basement, where we see the shadow of a person, who we later...

---

128 CCTV 10, “Dianying de biaoqing.”
learn is Xiaoju, hanging from a noose (see Fig. 1.9). Instead of treating her like his daughter, the so-called “friend” murders the girl and usurps the estate. After cleaning up the crime scene and faking her murder as a suicide, he leaves the basement, closing the door behind him. Yet, to the accompaniment of harsh chilly music, the closed door opens slightly, a glimmer of light stretches out, and several dots of light fly out and transform into the movie title (see Fig. 1.3).

Fig. 1.8 The dead man opens his eyes, which suggests an unfinished wish or an everlasting grievance.

Fig. 1.9 The so-called “friend” murders Xiaoju and fakes her death as a suicide in the basement of an old mansion.
This five-minute pre-credit sequence, during which the face of the “friend” is never shown, is full of mystery. Audiences are kept in suspense: who is he? Where is he going? What will happen as the film progresses? Then the movie proper begins ten years or so later with a film crew making a film titled *The Orphan Girl* (Gunü 孤女). Huo Feng, the sound recordist, takes Yu Hong 于红, the female lead, to his apartment building to record her footsteps for the movie. In this old mansion, whose residents have almost all been evacuated because it is to be demolished, Huo accidentally records some strange sounds from the locked basement, and Yu sees the phantom of a little girl. As the story unfolds, Huo discovers that he can record in advance the screaming of victims of the ghost’s vengeance, while Yu keeps hallucinating images of the tragic past of Xiaoju and her family: her mother was raped, and Xiaoju was murdered. As the two are getting closer to the truth, Xiaoju’s ghost, incarnated in the form of a doll, has started haunting the building and taking revenge for herself and her family: she kills Lao Lin 老林, who raped her mother; drives insane You Fei 尤飞, who persecuted her father and stole their family heirloom (a gold Buddha statuette); and finally kills her murderer, Zheng Lei 郑磊, the director of *The Orphan Girl*.

In her study of *The Lonely Ghost*, Li Zeng mainly focuses on the image of Xiaoju, examining how she differentiates herself from the conventional female ghost figures in Chinese supernatural literature and films, how she forms the doppelganger relationship with the female protagonist Yu, and how she asserts female agency in the historical narration of the Cultural Revolution. While Zeng offers insightful analysis in the
interpretation of the ghost, I want to highlight two more images that deserve our attention for their thematic innovations: the image of the villain and the absence of the police. Therefore, to me, there are three salient innovations in terms of characterization in *The Lonely Ghost*: the unusual ghost, the unusual villain, and the absence of the police.

First, through the characterization of Xiaoju, *The Lonely Ghost* both echoes the long-banned vengeful-ghost theme in the PRC (e.g. the *kun* opera *Li Huiniang*) and redefines the image of “ghost” in conventional narratives. Both Jay McRoy and Colette Balmain have observed that in the Japanese *kaidan* (supernatural tales) tradition and horror cinema, the “vengeful sprits, or *yūrei* ... are mainly ... female.”¹²⁹ Revenants in Chinese literary ghost stories are also primarily female. On the one hand, this gender imbalance, as Anthony Yu points out, can be attributed to male authors’ erotic fantasies in which women were presented as the Other.¹³⁰ According to traditional Chinese philosophy of *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳), the female by nature has an affinity with the ghost, since both of them belong to the category of *yin*, which is associated with the feminine, darkness, baseness, evil, weakness, ghosts, etc., whereas *yang* is associated with opposite attributes such as masculinity, brightness, ascendancy, goodness, strength, humanity,

As Judith Zeitlin asserts, “this distinctive pattern of imagination suggests some of the figural richness of ghosts with regard to gender, defined in its broadest terms as the cultural, social, and literary construction of male-female difference. The fixation on female ghosts also points to a seemingly paradoxical preoccupation with the materiality of the phantom’s gendered body.” On the other hand, the reason why the ghosts are usually female is associated with women’s subordinate role and their miserable experiences in a patriarchal society. Yet in contrast with those amorous female ghosts (e.g. Xiao Xie, Qiuqong, Lian Suo, Nie Xiaoqian, etc.) who fall in love with and depend on male saviors to solve their predicament, as I examine in the Introduction and Chapter 4, or avenging ghosts who mostly pin hopes on male authority figures on earth or in hell to realize justice—such as Dou E in The Injustice to Dou E (Dou’e yuan窦娥冤), a famous zaju (杂剧) play by Guan Hanqing 关汉卿 (1220-1300)—Xiaoju rebuffs any

---

131 Femininity is described as “yin and tender” (yinrou 阴柔) in Chinese, whereas masculinity is “yang and tough” (yanggang 阳刚); hell is called the “yin realm” (yinjian 阴间), whereas the human world is the “yang realm” (yangjian 阳间).
133 Dou E, the title character, is a young widow who serves her mother-in-law filially after her husband passes away. Yet she is wrongly accused of murder and sentenced to death by a corrupt official. Before her execution, Dou E swears that her innocence will be proven if the following three events occur after she dies: her blood will spill on the white banner but will not drip onto the ground; there will be heavy snowfall in the sixth lunar month (in the midst of summer) and the thick snow will cover her dead body; Chuzhou (the local place) will experience a drought for three years. All three events occur after her death. Three years later, Dou E’s ghost appears before her father, who sold her as a child bride when she was little to pay his debt. Now he has become a senior government official, to whom Dou E’s ghost reveals the truth. The case is therefore reinvestigated and the play ends with the rehabilitation of Dou E and the punishment of real criminals.
help from the patriarchal society, and tries to get her own revenge in a manner that Li Zeng calls “rejection of the establishment, law, rationality and the patriarchal figure.”

Huo, the male protagonist, is established at first sight as a conventional hero. It is he who first hears the strange sounds and then bravely investigates the basement, where he unwittingly releases Xiaoju’s avenging spirit. His earlier mocking of Yu’s hallucination shows his faith in science and rationality, and his persistent investigation of a cold case from the Cultural Revolution and his emphasis on the need for evidence reveal his belief in law and social regulations to maintain justice. Intriguingly, in addition to Huo’s scholarly spirit (*shusheng yiqi* 书生意气), as embodied in male protagonists in scholar-ghost romances, *The Lonely Ghost* also specifically endows him with masculine traits. In the sequence in which Huo tries to persuade Xiaoju to seek justice through the law, there are a series of close-up shots of him expertly assembling the portable tape recorder, which easily reminds the audience of firearms assembly. The shot of Huo holding the grip of his recorder resembles the image of masculine heroes in Hollywood or Hong Kong cinema, such as Rambo holding his M60 machine gun (see Fig. 1.10). The pendant lamp in the background behind Huo’s head, appears like a sun or a halo, suggesting the power and justice behind the hero. When Huo walks towards the basement, to the accompaniment of the music from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Richard Strauss’s tone poem “Also Sprach Zarathustra”), he seems like a warrior with both physical strength and moral fiber. As this music is a soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick’s epic

---

134 Li Zeng, “Ghostly Vengeance, Historical Trauma,” 112.
science fiction film (1968), Huo’s role therefore recalls that of David Bowman, the lonely astronaut who explores unknown space and the mysteries beyond human knowledge.

Fig. 1.10 The shot of Huo Feng holding his portable recorder resembles the image of masculine heroes in Hollywood or Hong Kong cinema, such as Rambo holding his M60 machine gun.

However, after Huo puts the recorder in the basement, asking Xiaoju to record her story as evidence to prosecute Zheng in court, and warns Zheng to leave the house, Xiaoju flies into a rage. Her furious screams echo across the house and the building shakes. When Huo puts on his headphones to listen to Xiaoju’s confession, he only hears her resentful screaming: “You are in my way!” Instead of appreciating Huo’s overture, Xiaoju punishes him for his superior sense of justice and reason—Huo falls into a coma due to bleeding from his ears. When Huo awakens in the hospital, he has to admit that Xiaoju was right: Zheng has not only escaped legal sanctions all of these years, he has become a nationally famous director with his new award-winning film *The Orphan Girl.*
Huo then asks Yu to assist Xiaoju in her revenge as the only way to realize justice. Through Xiaoju’s defiance of law, reason, and normality as well as her final triumph over her victimizers, The Lonely Ghost challenges and undermines the conventional gender dichotomy of the rationale/scientific male and the irrational/superstitious female.

Moreover, The Lonely Ghost for the first time sets a ghost story in contemporary China. As mentioned in the Introduction, the politics of Chinese censorship allows limited presentations of the ghost in film and television, and when they do appear, they are usually fictional characters derived from traditional fantasy fiction, such as Wu Cheng’en’s 吴承恩 (1500-1582) Journey to the West (Xiyou ji 西游记), Xu Zhonglin’s 许仲琳 (1567-1620) Investiture of the Gods (Fengshen bang 封神榜), and Pu Songling’s Liaozhai. These types of ghost stories are acceptable to the censors because they reflect the creative “imagination” of ancient Chinese culture and, more important, represent the social injustice and darkness of feudal China. In fact, The White-Haired Girl, a popular revolutionary play in the Mao era, inherits themes from both the traditional ghost-cum-love story and the vengeful-ghost story. The relationship between the female protagonist (Xi’er 喜儿) and the male protagonist (Dachun 大春) reasserts the “passive female victim/active male savior” dichotomy: Xi’er plays the role of a “female ghost,” while Dachun is a combination of both male savior and the authority figure (here represented by the CCP) in conventional ghost stories. Xi’er’s accusation against the landlord intimates why the vengeful-ghost story is ideologically threatening in Communist China: “I am the ghost of someone who was persecuted to death. I want to tear your flesh and
Therefore the presence of Xiaoju in *The Lonely Ghost*, both challenges the conventional gender dichotomy and breaks the Maoist “human/ghost” trope (“the old society turned human beings into ghosts, whereas the new society turns ghosts into human beings”), because the “new society,” like the “old society,” can also turn people into ghosts—especially a vengeful ghost full of resentment.

Second, similar to the innovative image of the ghost, the image of the villain in *The Lonely Ghost* is also ideologically provocative. As mentioned in the Introduction, in his study of the relationship between ideology and Chinese horror cinema, Li Daoxin points out that “only by substituting the contest between the human and the ghost for the combat between light and dark, could Chinese horror films be supported by the ideology. Only by substituting the ‘evil other’ for an ‘enemy’ with clear race, class, gender, and identity, could Chinese horror films be understood and accepted.”

This argument can be demonstrated with the PRC-made erotic ghost movies examined in the Introduction, or other horror movies/thrillers produced in the 1980s. Incarnations of the enemy might be feudal landlords and corrupt officials (*Ghost Sisters, Inside an Old Grave*), Japanese invaders (*Man behind the Sun*), the KMT government and its spies (*The Foggy City, The Mystery of St. Paul Hospital*), bandits and gangsters (*Mysterious Buddha, The Horror Night*), smuggling rings (*A Mysterious Case in the Forest*), or the Gang of Four and their henchmen (*Murder Case in No. 405, Ghost*). As Zuo Gaoshan puts it, the conception of

---

136 Li Daoxin, “Yishi xingtai fenwei yu Zhongguo kongbu dianying de buke yuqi,” 35.
enemy is used by countries to confirm their political and national identities, and the so-called “‘national enemy’ in the twentieth century is a form of moral judgment and of political control ... The nature of vocabulary such as ‘national enemy,’ ‘the enemy of the people,’ or ‘class enemy,’ is like words such as ‘traitor’ and ‘betrayer’ that can prove a priori the correctness of the self and allow one to be intoxicated with such an illusion.”

However, the villain(s) in *The Lonely Ghost* is not the evil Other(s)—an identifiable external enemy. Rather, they are members of the “people” in post-Mao China, who were part of the collective Self. In order to better understand this paradoxical dichotomy between the Other and the Self (the villain and the people, the suppressed past and the promising present, etc.), I first sketch the official post-Mao narratives about the Cultural Revolution, before diving into a close reading of *The Lonely Ghost* later in this section and in the next.

In the early post-Mao era, the Cultural Revolution was defined in the official narrative as a disaster mistakenly initiated by the leader (Mao) as well as an aberration perpetrated by a small group of radical careerists (the Gang of Four)—a conclusion that was still used by the state media in 2016 on the 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution. In this narrative, the people/masses (*renmin qunzhong* 人民群众) are presented as both victims of the social catastrophe and victors in the national triumph over the two counter-revolutionary cliques. As the “Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” (*Guanyu...*

---

jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi 关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议 (hereafter 1981 Resolution) proudly claims, “although we suffered from sabotage by the counter-revolutionary Lin Biao and Jiang Qing cliques during the ‘cultural revolution’, we won out over them in the end. The Party, the people’s political power, the people’s army and Chinese society on the whole remained unchanged in nature. Once again history has proved that our people are a great people and that our Party and socialist system have enormous vitality.”138 The 1981 Resolution also asserts that the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee held in December 1978 marks a “great turning point in history” in which “the scientific principles of Mao Zedong Thought and the correct policies of the Party have been revived and developed under new conditions, and all aspects of Party and government work have been flourishing again.”139 Although the Resolution admits that the Party’s work still suffers from shortcomings and mistakes and is still confronted with numerous difficulties, it declares that “the road of victorious advance is open, and the Party’s prestige among the people is rising day by day.”140 In this narrative, the chapter on the Cultural Revolution has ended, and the national focus has been placed on progress in the New Era.

---

138 The 1981 Resolution is an important official document adopted by the sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (Zhonggong shiyi jie liuzhong quanhui 中共十一届六中全会). It not only summarizes the achievements and failures (including the Cultural Revolution), as well as Mao’s attributions and errors since the founding of the PRC, but also provides historical and theoretical basis for the reconfiguration of power within the CCP and the state. Since that time the reformists (the second-generation CCP leaders led by Deng Xiaoping) took de facto control of China. The English translation of the 1981 Resolution see: https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm. (accessed May 1, 2016)

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid.
In contrast with the traumatic historical memory of the War of Resistance against Japan discussed in the first section of this chapter, which has been promoted by the state, the historical memory of the Cultural Revolution remains, to a great extent, a social taboo and a collective oblivion in China. As John Gittings comments on Li Zhensheng’s *Red-Color News Soldier*، “although the post-Mao Chinese government has labeled the cultural revolution ‘10 years of chaos’, it still tries to suppress any real inquiry into the countless human tragedies it caused.”

Even up to May 16th, 2016, the 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese news organizations, as Chris Buckley comments, still “have found no room to note the traumatic turning point in modern Chinese history.”

Similarly, history education on the Cultural Revolution in schools also presents a selective historical memory. As Yin Hongbiao, a historian of the Cultural Revolution and a professor at Peking University, points out in an interview with *The New York Times*,

---


142 Chris Buckley, “Chinese Newspaper Breaks Silence on Cultural Revolution,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/17/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution.html?_r=0. (accessed May 17, 2016). The only two exceptions that broke the general silence were the *People’s Daily*, a major official newspaper of the CCP, and *Global Times* (Huanqiu shibao 环球时报), an English-language Chinese newspaper under the auspices of the *People’s Daily*. While reaffirming the 1981 Resolution’s “unshakably scientific and authoritative” condemnation of the event, both articles claim that China would never undergo a repeat of the Cultural Revolution and urge people to focus on the party’s achievements and on the future. See Ren Ping 任平, “Yishi weijian shi weile genghao qianjin 以史为鉴是为了更好前进 [Summing up and absorbing the lessons of history in order to use it as a mirror to better advance], Renmin ribao 人民日报, May 17, 2016, 4; Dan Renping 单仁平, “Wenge’ yi bei chedi fouding “文革” 已被彻底否定 [The Cultural Revolution has already been completely repudiated], *Huanqiu shibao* 环球时报, May 17, 2016. http://opinion.huanqiu.com/shanrenping/2016-05/8937703.html (accessed May 17, 2016)
“after decades without education in the history of the Cultural Revolution and the terrible things and great destruction that happened, young people are rarely told of these things, and so younger officials and students don’t really understand it.”

As one of the most bizarre, complex, and catastrophic episodes in China’s history, the Cultural Revolution thoroughly exposed the dark side of human nature. The reasons it was such a large-scale mass movement, lasted so long, and caused such tremendous harm to the nation is not a problem that could be solved simply by a leadership change and the trial of the Gang of Four. As Ba Jin (1904-2005) confessed in his Random Thoughts, “we cannot just blame Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, we have to blame ourselves. It was we who were buying those feudal thoughts, so Lin Biao and the Gang of Four could develop their business. Otherwise, how could a simple ‘decree’ ruin one’s family and take one’s life away? How could we ‘wish’ Lin Biao and Jiang Qing ‘good health forever’ several times a day…?”

The origins of the Cultural Revolution cannot be reduced to few careerists’ manipulations of Mao’s mistakes; it lies in both the political system and China’s cultural tradition. The duality of human nature and the ambiguity of the victim/victimizer dichotomy can be demonstrated, for instance, in a case of persecution recalled by Li Zhensheng: “When Ouyang Xiang was down, everyone kicked him. Those who could not reach his upper body kicked his lower body. You say that they

---

143 Chris Buckley, “Chinese Newspaper Breaks Silence on Cultural Revolution.”
144 Ba Jin, Suixiang lu 隨想錄 [Random thoughts] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000), 52-53. Random Thoughts was a five-volume collection of Ba Jin’s essays originally published in a column in Ta Kung Pao from 1978 to 1986. It not only records Ba Jin’s personal memories, but also reflects his confessional consciousness of the individual’s role in the Cultural Revolution.
were all brutal and inhuman? No, they were normal people, just like you and me. Yet once they were involved in the revolutionary upsurge, they all wanted to show their proletarian revolutionary passion ... Everyone screamed ‘rebellion’, just like today everyone screams ‘anti-corruption’.”

Although the large-scale rehabilitation of victims of the Cultural Revolution like Ouyang Xiang was undertaken in the New Era, many crimes and criminals have yet to be exposed. If we say that Ba Jin’s confession of his own dishonorable words and deeds as a victimizer marks a rare expression of conscience and introspection, then for most people who experienced the Cultural Revolution, the past is more like a nightmare they are unwilling to face and examine. Red Guards (红卫兵), rebels (造反派), informers, torturers, murderers, and those who ascended to power through persecution, were all suddenly absolved of wrongdoing with the fall of the Gang of Four; indeed, they became “innocent” victims and “survivors” of the Cultural Revolution.

Admittedly, a number of films produced in the late 1970s and the 1980s—the so-called “wounds cinema” (伤痕电影)—touched on the issue of the

---

145 Lin Zhiyang 林知阳, “Li Zhensheng: sishiba nian qian, ta zai diban li cangxia le liangwan zhang wenge dipian” 李振盛: 48年前，他在地板里藏下两万张文革底片 [Li Zhensheng: 48 years ago, he hid 20,000 negatives of the Cultural Revolution under his floor], last modified May 13, 2016, http://www.15yan.com/story/15QveAARy4U/?f=wx&from=groupmessage&isappinstalled=0. (accessed May 15, 2016). Ouyang Xiang 欧阳湘 is the son of Ouyang Qin 欧阳钦 (1900-1978), who served as party secretary and governor of Heilongjiang province. When Ouyang Qin was attacked in the Cultural Revolution as an anti-Mao authority and the biggest capitalist roader (走资本主义道路当权派) in Heilongjiang, Ouyang Xiang wrote to the Heilongjiang Revolution Committee defending his father. He was then labeled a counter-revolutionary and persecuted to death. Only in August 1978 was Ouyang Xiang rehabilitated by the Heilongjiang government.
Cultural Revolution,146 but their reflections on the chaotic decade are mostly restrained and their political critiques are usually, as Wang Hui puts it, “moralized, ethicalized, and emotionalized.”147 The narrative about the Cultural Revolution is deliberately packaged in a specific genre—family melodrama—and traumatic experiences are usually presented through tragic family stories or sentimental failed love stories set in the past turmoil. Although some of them trace the systemic origins of the Cultural Revolution to the Anti-Rightist Movement in the 1950s, their demands for justice and accountability are mostly presented through calling for rehabilitation and reform rather than questioning the legitimacy of party rule and communist ideology. As Li Zeng points out, they “assert the Communist Party’s role in restoring justice and social order, and their endings usually suggest that the Cultural Revolution is over and people can now live normal and hopeful lives under the new leadership.”148 In these films, the traumatic past is no more than an unfortunate prelude to the great chapter of the “revival of the nation” in the New Era.

The Lonely Ghost, however, suggests another interpretation of the Cultural Revolution. As the film shows, none of the criminals who persecuted Xiaoju’s father and

146 Representative works of “wounds cinema” include Troubled Laughter (Kunao ren de xiao苦恼人的笑, dir. Yang Yanjin and Deng yimin 邓一民, 1979), The Thrill of Life (Shenghuo de zhanying生活颤音, dir. Teng Wenji 滕文骥 and Wu Tianming 吴天明, 1979), Tear Stains (Leiben泪痕, dir. Li Wenhua 李文华, 1979), Evening Rain (Bashan yeyu巴山夜雨, dir. Wu Yonggang 吴永刚 and Wu Yigong 吴贻弓, 1980), Come Back, Swallow (Yan guilai燕归来, dir. Fu Jinggong 付敬恭, 1980), The Crystal Heart (Shuijing xin水晶心, dir. Zhang Jianyou 张健佑 and Zheng Huili 郑会立, 1981), Xie Jin’s 谢晋 The Legend of Tianyun Mountain (Tianyunshan chuanqi天云山传奇, 1980), The Herdsman (Muma ren牧马人, 1982), and Hibiscus Town (Furong zhen芙蓉镇, 1986), Yang Yanjin’s On a Narrow Street (Xiaojie 小街, 1981), and Yu Yanfu’s 于彦夫 Forget Me Not (Wu wang wo勿忘我, 1982), to name but a few.


148 Li Zeng, “Ghostly Vengeance, Historical Trauma,” 117.
stole their family heirloom, who raped her mother thus causing her suicide, and who murdered Xiaoju and usurped her property were punished after the Cultural Revolution. Rather, they became decent people, some of whom even have respected occupations and promising futures. Nobody knows or remembers their past atrocities, but, as David Wang asserts (in a different context), “where men forget, ghosts remember.”\(^\text{149}\)

In addition to the film’s innovative images of the ghost and the villain, the third notable facet of *The Lonely Ghost* is the absence of the police. As representative agents of the state, police appear in almost all contemporary Chinese horror movies, especially those with crime plots and murder. According to Giorgio Agamben, the police and their weapons display “sovereign violence” and are “perhaps the place where the proximity and the almost constitutive exchange between violence and right that characterizes the figure of the sovereign is shown more nakedly and clearly than anywhere else.”\(^\text{150}\) The police in Chinese cinema are not only the embodiment of justice, but also incarnations of the legitimacy of the socialist regime. If a Chinese filmmaker wants to avoid the presence of the police in a horror film, the best solution is to set the story in another place or at another time: isolated islands (e.g. *Mysterious Island, To Forgive*), oceans (e.g. *Lost in Panic Cruise*), or the wilderness (*Cameraman, The Deserted Inn*), or in the past,


especially during the Republican period (*Don’t be Young, Ghosts, Matrimony, Blood Stained Shoes*, etc.).

However, *The Lonely Ghost* adopts another tactic. A policeman does appear in the movie, but he is only a retired police officer whose role is to narrate history rather than execute the law. When Huo asks him why the police in the Cultural Revolution did not continue their investigation of Xiaoju’s case, he simply replies: “At that time, there were suicide cases every day. Since the police, prosecution, and court system (*gong jian fa* 公检法) had all been smashed, who cared about [Xiaoju’s case]? It was done, and the case was closed.” This conversation ironically challenges the conventional representation of the police in Chinese cinema: executers of justice, protectors of the people, sworn enemies of criminals, and the like. *Murder Case in No. 405*, a 1980 crime film set in 1976, had already depicted police officers as villains, but the reason why the officers frame and murder others is because they are henchmen of the Gang of Four; and their conspiracy is also eventually foiled by Chen Minghui 陈明辉, a heroic police officer. The film is thus a political allegory of the confrontation between good people and the evil enemy (the Gang of Four and their henchmen), and ends with Chen’s belief in a better future: “everything will pass away, and only the truth will last forever.” Compared with this film, *The Lonely Ghost* is clearly more cynical and pessimistic. What might strike the

---

spectator most is not be the disorder and impotence of public security organs during the Cultural Revolution, but the retired police officer’s indifferent and apathetic attitude toward Xiaoju’s death. Even though he noticed a suspicious detail at the scene of the “suicide,” he did not bother to pursue it in his investigation. Instead of feeling regret for the tragic fate of the poor girl, he takes neglect of duty for granted. The film makes clear that he enjoys his leisure-filled retirement and has no interest in contacting former colleagues to reinvestigate Xiaoju’s unsolved case.

Huo eventually gives up his faith in law and social justice, and persuades Yu to help Xiaoju. After Yu goes to the old mansion and contacts Xiaoju, Xiaoju transfers her spirit into an audio tape and rolls it to Yu’s feet. We then see a close-up shot of Yu holding the audio tape and gazing at the camera and saying: “You can take revenge in your own way. We will help you get justice. Yet what about the future?” (see Fig.1.11). This interrogation apparently is not only for Xiaoju, but also for the spectator. We have to ask, what does Yu mean by “future”? Whose future, and what kind of future? These questions, as well as the protagonists’ transformation from law-abiders to vigilantes, implicitly express a concern about China’s present and future, since a society that intentionally and selectively forgets its past will not go far. It is in this regard that The Lonely Ghost is thematically provocative and ideologically challenging, qualities that distinguish it both from other horror movies and thrillers in the 1980s and from “wounds cinema.”
Story within A Story and Film within A Film: Innovations in Narrative Structures

Apart from the film’s subversive innovations in terms of the image of the ghost, villain, and the police, the most thematically provocative and ideologically challenging part of The Lonely Ghost might be its twist ending and creative narrative structure. With its story-within-a-story and film-within-a-film structure, this movie deliberately conveys its directors’ thoughts on the post-Cultural Revolution era and serves as a good example of meta-film.¹⁵²

At the end, just when the cliffhanger sequence in which Zheng is chased by Xiaoju’s ghost and finally hanged in the dark mansion reaches its climax, the film

---
¹⁵² The strong “metacinematic” element of The Lonely Ghost is probably drawn from the earlier horror tradition, such as films like Song at Midnight (1937), which involves a drama troupe and its rehearsals and performances. It also, to some extent, recalls Yasujirō Ozu’s I Was Born, But... (1932) in terms of characters’ self-consciousness of the metacinematic nature of the film.
suddenly cuts to an insane asylum, where a patient, played by the same actor who plays Zheng’s role, is enacting the hanging and concluding his “story” with a comment “then he was hanged.” It seems that this abrupt ending baffles the other patients, all of whom have appeared as characters in the ghost story, who have gathered to listen to his story. Yet none of them speaks even a word of comment on it. The awkward silence is then broken by the sound of a door creaking open. A nurse, played by the same actress who plays Yu, enters the frame with a medical cart. With her command “it’s time to take pills,” the film ends with a close-up shot of various colorful pills (see Fig. 1.12).

153 A similar sequence of the killer role enacting the hanging also appears in The Act of Killing (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), a documentary film about the Indonesian killings of 1965–1966, anti-communist purges that led to an estimated one million deaths. The director invited former perpetrators, such as Anwar Congo and Adi Zulkaedy, to reenact their violent massacres in whichever cinematic genres they wish in the documentary. In one scene, Anwar played a victim of hanging and could not continue. This documentary resembles The Lonely Ghost not only in terms of the switching roles from the victimizer to the victim (in the hanging scene), or the exhibition of the filmmaking process, but also in terms of their challenges to the ideological taboo and collective oblivion of a traumatic past. While The Lonely Ghost satirizes the state ideology that intentionally forgets and represses the past, The Act of Killing also helps Indonesia to confront its dark past.
With obvious tribute to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1920), a quintessential German Expressionist film, this twist ending not only strategically circumvents the film censorship that prohibits ghosts from appearing in realistic movies, but also conveys the filmmakers’ serious introspections about the Cultural Revolution. If *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a horror film in which mysterious serial murders by an ambitious doctor are revealed to be delusions of a protagonist-storyteller, is an examination of brutal and irrational authority and an allegory of German social attitudes in the period following World War I, then *The Lonely Ghost* is an allegory of the social psyche of the Chinese people after the Cultural Revolution. As Liang states in an
interview, he and the other director felt that Chinese people were all sick, in varying degrees and forms, at that time, so “everyone needed to take pills after the Cultural Revolution.”

Bliss Cua Lim views ghost films as historical allegories that “make incongruous use of the vocabulary of the supernatural to articulate historical injustice, referring to ‘social reality’ by recourse to the undead.” Compared with the original karmic ghost revenge tale, in which historical justice is finally realized—though it is a belated justice—the frame story demonstrates again the nihility of supernatural forces such as the ghost, and denies the possibility of karmic retribution as well as the realization of justice. As Li Zeng puts it, “the satisfaction of seeing Xiaoju complete her revenge is undercut by an awareness that such vengeance is possible only in the imagination.” In other words, while ghosts remember the past and haunt the present, they are ironically exorcised by a rational yet forgetful society. Retribution and reparation cannot happen in reality; they exist only in a madman’s fantastical tale. In this sense, pills in the twist ending of The Lonely Ghost, which are used to treat madmen’s hallucinations and delusions, can also be read as a symbol of the mainstream endeavor to sink into the collective oblivion of the past in the name of science and rationality.

A similar irony is embodied in the contrast between the frame film and “film within a film.” As mentioned before, the movie proper of The Lonely Ghost begins with

---

154 Hu Bugui, “Zhuanfang jingdian kongbu pian heilou guhun daoyan Liang Ming: dangnian meiyou Zhang Yimou pai bucheng.”
156 Li Zeng, “Ghostly Vengeance, Historical Trauma,” 119.
Zheng’s shooting *The Orphan Girl*. The protagonists, Huo and Yu, belong to the cast and crew of the film. There are several scenes showing the process of filmmaking, including the scene in which Zheng instructs Yu to emote with her eyes. According to Zheng’s explanation, we can roughly deduce the film’s plot: an orphan girl is adopted by a man, who treats her as her own daughter; when she grows up, he offers her money and the opportunity to go abroad; however, though deeply grateful, she refuses his favor, preferring that he leave his money to his biological daughter; she even makes plans to furtively leave home and her beloved adoptive father to avoid the dilemma caused by her father’s kindness and her own humility. The parallelism between this film and the frame film is more than transparent: the role of the orphan girl resembles Xiaoju, whose mother committed suicide and whose father entrusted her to Zheng before his death. While the orphan girl is well taken care of by her adoptive father, Xiaoju, by contrast, was cruelly murdered by Zheng, a good friend of her father “for twenty years.” Her lonely spirit has been locked in the dark basement for more than ten years and suffers in anger, resentment, bitterness, and grief.

In another filmmaking scene, Zheng criticizes the unnaturalness of Yu’s performance in one scene. Her character, Zheng tells her, is supposed to be looking for “a precious keychain” left by her father, a “relic,” not a “lost wallet.” This detail reminds us of Xiaoju’s keychain, a significant prop through the entire film. The keychain is a precious relic left to her by her father, but it is also evidence of her murder: when Zheng fakes her murder as a suicide, he hangs it around her neck. Later in the film, the sound of
the keychain tinkling becomes a scary omen of her haunting and vengeful presence. At the end of the film, among the audience of patients listening to the storyteller’s tale is a little girl (played by the same actress who plays Xiaoju), who has a keychain draped around her neck, thus further enhancing the parallel between the embedded ghost-revenge story and the absurd frame story (see Fig. 1.13). The sharp contrast between Zheng’s film and his deeds appears extremely ironic when he gives an acceptance speech for his award-winning film. He claims that his movie was made “to arouse people’s conscience and sincerity in getting along with each other” and “promote national virtues such as sincerity, kindness, cooperation, and solidarity.” When later asked by a reporter whether foreign audiences would appreciate his film, Zheng replies that although cultures and histories vary from nation to nation, love is a common theme for all human beings. What could be more ironic when coming from the mouth of a brutal murderer!
Fig. 1.13 As an important prop, Xiaoju’s keychain appears in many scenes (Xiaojie waiting outside her father’s ward; Zheng hangs it around her neck after the murder; Huo discovers the doll with Xiaoju’s keychain in the basement; a girl visiting the mental hospital takes off her keychain).

Moreover, it seems that characters in The Lonely Ghost are also highly aware of the duplicity of the filmmaking. In his conversation with Lao Li, the person responsible for evacuating residents in preparation for the demolition, Huo says that he cannot move out right away due to his tight filmmaking schedule. Then Lao Li replies with a satirical tone: “You guys who are making films only know how to educate others, yet fail to do so when it is your turn.” Lao Lin, an elderly neighbor, also comments on Huo’s choice to record footsteps in the old building in which they live: “You filmmakers are so weird, trying to find inspiration here.” In the sequence when Huo reports Lao Lin’s mysterious
death to Zheng, Zheng teases him: “It’s not you who murdered him, right?... because you are not so smart.” Huo replies ironically: “So I cannot be a director.” Obviously, Huo’s answer alludes to Zheng’s murder of Xiaoju, as he is “smart” enough to get away with murder. Intriguingly, rather than feeling offended, Zheng accepts this comment as a compliment, and reaffirms: “I think so too. You could probably never be a director.”

While the plots and characterization in The Orphan Girl form a sharp contrast with the ghost-revenge story, The Lonely Ghost also shows an interesting self-reflexivity and self-mocking. When Huo complains to the director that the stairs in their studio set are too cheesy and hopes that the stage designers can do better, Zheng simply answers: “We only have a budget of 700,000, where can I get so much money?” Interestingly, the budget of The Lonely Ghost was also about RMB 700,000 yuan, an amount that could not have been raised without the help of Zhang Yimou, who was friends with Liang Ming. The affinities between the worlds in and outside The Lonely Ghost extend to names. When Huo investigates the basement for the first time, attentive audiences may notice that a co-director’s name—Mu Deyuan—appears in the big-character poster ($dazi bao$ 大字报) painted on a corridor wall (see Fig. 1.14). We are told nothing about the fictional Mu Deyuan in the film, but he is probably one of the denounced “ox-

---

157 Zhang and Liang were classmates in Beijing Film Academy. When Zhang had already become an internationally recognized director with the success of Red Sorghum ($Hong gaoliang$ 红高粱, 1987), Liang just started to film his debut and could hardly get any funding. Thanks to Zhang’s endorsement, Liang successfully got the funding from a private enterprise. See Xing Dajun, “Di wu dai dianying daoyan Liang Ming: dangnian paishe kongbu pian, Zhang Yimou wei wo danbao lailai touzi.” 第五代电影导演梁明: 当年拍摄恐怖片, 张艺谋为我担保拉来投资 [Liang Ming, a director of the fifth generation: when I shot a horror film, Zhang Yimou vouched for me in to get a funding], *Beijing guangbo dianshi bao renwu zhoukan* 北京广播电视报人物周刊 41(2012), October 8, 2012, 11.
ghosts and snake-spirits.” This self-mocking coincidence blurs the boundary between past and present and challenges the collective oblivion of the Cultural Revolution.

Fig. 1.14 A co-director’s name appears in the big-character poster painted on a corridor wall.

**A Visual and Auditory Feast of Horror: Innovations in Form**

In addition to thematic exploration and narrative innovation, *The Lonely Ghost* also established a set of formulas for Chinese horror cinema, including plot development, characterization, mise-en-scène, as well as the effects of visual, auditory, and mixed cues. The twist ending in which the protagonist is revealed to be someone with a mental illness,
for instance, has been adopted by many Chinese horror movies as a perfect way to circumvent censorship.\(^{158}\)

Compared with its cinematic predecessors, *The Lonely Ghost* makes extensive use of conventional tropes of the horror genre to create an atmosphere of terror and suspense, such as the shabby corridor, squeaky stairs, the mysteriously opened door, creepy chalk murals, blood in a bathtub, ghosts appearing in mirrors, the bizarre doll, uncontrollable twinkling lights, and the like. Even before Xiaoju’s case is revealed, the dark mansion is immersed in an ominous and scary atmosphere. Creepy chalk drawings appear on walls throughout the building; we see, for example, eerie figures with the face of a human and the body of a plant, smiling hideously or weeping sadly (see Fig. 1.15). The discomfort caused by those murals reaches its peak when Huo walks into the basement, where he is surrounded by yet more murals, which clearly symbolize Xiaoju’s resentment and grief and declare her presence as an avenging ghost who challenges the collective oblivion of the past. Another horrific scene occurs when Xiaoju haunts Lao Lin: he first notes something wrong with his television set, then hears some strange sounds from the bathroom. As the camera slowly pans over every corner of the bathroom, spectators, along with Lao Lin, are captured by a horror of the unknown. With the sound of dripping, we see a drop of blood melting into the bathtub water. Lao Lin looks up, but finds nothing. Following the direction of his gaze, the shot suddenly cuts to the bathtub again,

which has already turned into a blood pool, a scary and shocking image that can be understood in Julia Kristeva’s sense of “abjection” (see Fig. 1.16).

Fig. 1.15 Creepy chalk murals run through the building.
The bathtub suddenly becomes a blood pool.

*The Lonely Ghost* also owes some of its horror to its canny tapping into foreign, especially American, horror references. While those classic horror movies were out of reach to most mainlanders in the 1980s, they were inspirations for filmmakers (who had access to the films through the film school archive) to conceive of a real horror movie that brings spectators a completely new and thrilling viewing experience. As Liang Ming admits, while there were horror movies like Ma-Xu Weibang’s *Song at Midnight* before
the founding of the PRC, there were few horror movies made after 1949, so they had to refer to foreign horror movies in shooting *The Lonely Ghost.*

In addition to its obvious tribute to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in terms of the twist ending, the image of the fierce-looking doll that Xiaoju possesses recalls Chucky in *Child’s Play* (dir. Tom Holland, 1988), about a doll possessed by the soul of a serial killer. This use of the terrifying doll helps to endow Xiaoju with an inhuman and homicidal quality that is quite different from the amorous ghosts in traditional erotic ghost stories and films who are usually pretty and seductive. Li Zeng notices that there is an interesting doppelganger relationship between Xiaoju and the actress Yu, who both experience “a similar vulnerable and exploitative situation” in their relationship with Zheng, the patriarch and manipulator. I agree with her. In a scene in which Zheng visits Yu’s hotel room, the camera lingers behind Yu and gives a close-up shot of her nightstand, where we see a lovely pink doll with a pleasing smile sitting behind the telephone (see Fig. 1.17). This doll, as Li Zeng remarks, suggests Yu’s “submissiveness and traditional femininity”: in the same scene, Yu dares not to refuse Zheng’s sexual advances (when he touches her face) and his invitation to go out dancing. In this sense, Yu’s “ghostly eye,” an ability to see the ghost, not only creates an alliance between her and Xiaoju—she sees (and re-experiences) what Xiaoju has suffered in the past—but also reverses her relationship with Zheng: she is empowered as a gazing subject, whereas

159 See Hu Bugui, “Zhuanfang jingdian kongbu pian heilou guhun daoyan Liang Ming: dangnian meiyou Zhang Yimou pai bucheng.”
160 Li Zeng, “Ghostly Vengeance, Historical Trauma,” 114.
161 Ibid., 115.
Zheng becomes the one being looked at in a crime scene. After this reversal, the lovely pink doll never appears again.

Fig. 1. 17 Chucky in *Child’s Play*; the avenging doll that Xiaoju’s ghost possesses; the lovely pink doll Yu Hong owns.

The film also clearly evokes *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973). Yu’s character recalls the role of Chris MacNeil, an actress who is making a film and later finds her daughter Regan has been possessed by a demon. The sequence in which Huo hears the ghost’s moaning on the tape recorder resembles the sequence in which Father Damien Karras hears the demon’s strange language recorded on cassette tape. The scene where Lao Lin dies falling down the stairs recalls Karras, with the demon (Pazuzu) trapped in his body, throwing himself out of the window onto the stairs below. And the scene where Zheng visits the old mansion and hastily leaves the building after Huo’s

---

warning reminds us of the scene where Father Lankester Merrin visits Regan’s house on a foggy night. The mise-en-scène in both films features a mansion in the night mist, a man under the misty night lighting, and a taxi that occupies almost half of the frame (see Fig. 1.18). The scene in which Xiaoju’s ghost imitates Huo’s voice to entice You Fei into the basement with a promise to let him act in a film, resembles Pazuzu’s toying with Karras with his mother’s voice in the exorcism sequence.

Fig. 1.18 The resemblance between *The Exorcist* (top) and *The Lonely Ghost* (bottom): recording and hearing the voice of the demon/ghost; characters dying on the stairs; characters take a taxi and visit the house on a foggy night.

However, although inspired by *The Exorcist* in terms of characterization, plot development, and mise-en-scène, *The Lonely Ghost* tells a completely different story. Whereas *The Exorcist* ends with the exorcism complete and order restored, the ghost-revenge tale in *The Lonely Ghost* both demonstrates and satirizes the impotence of the law, authority, and normality. Whereas *The Exorcist* is adapted from a novel that claims to be inspired by a true story (the 1949 exorcism of Roland Doe), *The Lonely Ghost* ends
with a twist in which the preceding story is revealed to be no more than the imagination of a madman. Whereas the former demonstrates the power of religious belief, the latter seems to assert the victory of science and rationality, two key terms in the post-Mao ideological discourse that contributed to the repression of the haunting past. Interesting as the intertextuality between the two films may be, clearly this is a form of creative engagement with another film, not simple imitation.

The success of *The Lonely Ghost* as a horror film, of course, also lies in its sound effects. As mentioned in the second section of this chapter, this was China’s first horror movie to use stereophonic sound. Tao Jing 陶经, the sound recordist of *The Lonely Ghost* (who resembles Huo’s role in the film), believes that the use of stereophonic sound helped their film build and maintain an atmosphere of horror. With stereo, the ghost’s moaning, for example, could be made to sound as if it was coming from behind the spectators. Mu Deyuan also recalls that they specifically ordered light-emitting diode (LED) to visualize the horror. “While the left channel was used to record the realistic sounds, the right channel was for the unknown sounds.”163 The intensive and creative use of sound effects, including the film score, also gives sound in *The Lonely Ghost* a visible quality, because spectators cannot help imagining the source of the creepy sounds they hear.

---

163 CCTV 10, “Dianying de biaoqing.”
Spectral Time and Haunted Mansion, Historical Trauma and Institutionalized Insanity

*The Lonely Ghost* is not the only horror movie from this period to reflect on the Cultural Revolution. The examination of national disaster through a haunting story is echoed in Huang Jianzhong’s *The Foggy House* (1994), a Chinese version of George Cukor’s *Gaslight* (1944). The film begins with newlyweds’ returning home. As soon as they move into her family’s old house, the wife encounters various mysterious events and hears her dead parents’ moaning every night. Her husband tries to convince her that she is mad and sends her to see a psychiatrist, who diagnoses her with a mental illness and puts her in a mental hospital. As the story unfolds, it turns out that her husband has slowly manipulated her into believing that she is going insane, and he and the psychiatrist were conspiring to usurp her big house. The two co-conspirators are not only lovers, but were also Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution who persecuted her parents to death.

Although neither film directly and explicitly presents the violent and traumatic scenes of the past in a linear narrative—as in Fifth Generation works such as Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (Bawang bieji 霸王别姬, 1993), Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Blue Kite* (Lan fengzheng 蓝风筝, 1993), and Zhang Yimou’s *To Live* (Huozhe 活着, 1994)—the specter of the Cultural Revolution haunts every corner of the houses and the minds of characters in these two films. The haunttings presented through ghost narratives, as Bliss Cua Lim points out, “are not merely instances of the past reasserting itself in a stable present, as is usually assumed; on the contrary, the ghostly return of traumatic
events precisely troubles the boundaries of past, present, and future, and cannot be written back to the complacency of a homogeneous, empty time.”  

The overlapping of past and present, for instance, is embodied in the opening credits sequence of *The Foggy House*, in which the wife introduces her family history to her husband by leafing through a family album. The old mansion where she spent her childhood and in which they are now living was passed down from her prestigious ancestors to her parents. When the album turns to the page of her parents’ wedding photo (which was obviously taken during the Republican period), the husband places a photo of he and his wife next to it, suggesting a resemblance between the past and present, as well as an attempt to directly connect the glory of the Republican era with the present that intentionally skips over the thirty years between the end of the Republic and the post-Mao reforms (see Fig. 1.19). Yet when the wife turns to the next page, on which two group photos of Red Guards are shown, the husband is not only surprised, but also feels


165 The national attempt to directly connect the present with the Republican heyday can also be exemplified by “Shanghai nostalgia,” a prominent cultural trend in the 1990s. As many scholars have noticed, this nostalgia is not only associated with Shanghai’s economic boom in the 1990s or its need to “seek to reconnect its own past while striving to regain its place in the national and transnational markets of the 1990s” (Xudong Zhang), but also resonated with the new state ideology which “establishes a historical foundation for the ideology of the present market economy” through “gloriing nostalgically in the commercial and cultural life of Republican Shanghai” (Kirk Denton). And the reconnection to the modernized past, which intentionally ignores the thirty years between the end of the Republic and the post-Mao reforms, also indicates a national cultural semiotics of biding “farewell to revolution,” as China attempts to reconstruct its cultural identity in the age of globalization and modernization (Dai Jinhua). See Xudong Zhang, “Shanghai Nostalgia: Postrevolutionary Allegories in Wang Anyi’s Literary Production in the 1990s,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 8, no.2 (2000): 353; Kirk A. Denton, “Museums, Memorial Sites and Exhibitionary Culture in the People’s Republic of China,” *The China Quarterly* (2005): 582; Dai Jinhua’s speech on *Lust, Caution* (Sejie 色戒, dir. Ang Lee, 2007) at Peking University: “Shenti, zhengzhi, guozu: cong Zhang Ailing dao Li An” 身體·政治·國族——從張愛玲到李安 [Body, politics and nation: from Eileen Chang to Ang Lee], last modified December 12, 2007, https://www.douban.com/group/topic/2318333/ (accessed May 20, 2016).
uncomfortable and shows some resistance to the photographic presentation of this moment of history: he tries to tear them out of the album, but his wife stops him, saying they are “also part of the history of this mansion,” because the house was occupied by Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution.

Fig. 1.19 The overlapping of past and present through photos.

The names of the protagonists are never revealed in the film, but are simply noted as “the wife” and “the husband” in the opening credits. Their roles hence can be read as two symbolic positions in post-Mao China: whereas the husband’s attitude suggests the majority’s (also the government’s) evasive attitude toward the turbulent decade, the wife
shows courage and sanity in dealing with the traumatic past. In this regard, although the haunting phenomenon in this film is finally revealed to be the husband’s strategy to drive her insane (just as Xiaoju’s haunting is exorcised in the twist ending of *The Lonely Ghost*), we can also understand them as evocations of specters of national trauma.

The intertwined presentation of space and time in this film depicts the present reality (when the newlyweds live in the mansion), on the one hand, and recalls a specific historical period (when her parents were persecuted and tortured by Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution), on the other. It is this interwoven fabric of heterogeneous spaces and times that produces the sense of the horrific. Whether the wife’s fear comes from the past or is the realistic manifestation of her mental disturbance is the focus of the film’s suspense through the entire film, until it is unraveled at the end. The wife, who escapes from the asylum, eventually finds in the basement of the mansion the tape recorder her husband used to project sounds of her parents’ moaning and screaming when being interrogated and tortured, as well as some dusty photos of her parents in the Cultural Revolution (see Fig. 1.20). With those photos, the forgotten past and its revenants come out of the shadows and vividly reaffirm their presence to us. As Roland Barthes asserts, “[I]n photography, I can never deny that the thing was there. Past and reality are superimposed... The photo of the departed beings comes to touch me like the delayed...
rays of a star... The bygone thing has really touched, with its immediate radiations (its luminances), the surface that is in turn touched by my gaze."166

Fig. 1.20 The wife in *The Foggy House* finds some dusted photos of her persecuted parents in the Cultural Revolution.

Barthes’s argument of the role of photography in giving access to the past is echoed in Jacques Derrida’s statement in *Ghost Dance* (dir. Ken McMullan, 1983), an experimental film about ghosts, memory, and the past. When Derrida, playing “himself” in the film, is asked by a student whether he believes in ghosts, he gives the following answer:

> The cinema is the art of ghosts, a battle of phantoms. I think that’s what the cinema’s about, when it’s not boring. It’s the art of letting ghosts come back... I believe that modern developments in technology and telecommunication, instead of diminishing the realm of ghosts... enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us... I say, “Long live the ghosts.”

Derrida is right. The development of modern technology and telecommunication, literally and allegorically, does not exorcise ghosts; it enhances their power and hauntings. One of

---

the most well-known examples of this statement might be Masayuki Ochiai’s *Shutter* (2008), a Thai horror film in which the male protagonist, a photographer haunted by his dead ex-girlfriend, eventually finds in a photo that the ghost has been with him all along, riding on his neck. The camera captures what the human eye cannot see, and the unspeakable ghost declares her presence through modern technology. A similar sequence occurs in *The Lonely Ghost*. When Huo unwittingly finds a photo of You Fei standing in front of the stolen statuette (an heirloom of Xiaoju’s family) and looks at the camera in astonishment, Huo asks him about the statuette, and You denies he stole it, since dead men tell no tales (*si wu dui zheng* 死无对证). Yet as You says that he does not remember taking such a photo, spectators are kept in suspense and horror: then who took this photo for him? Was there an invisible ghostly photographer? Does it mean that Xiaoju’s ghost has been with him all along, and that he is just unaware of her presence?

Apart from photography, other media technology, such as telephones, television sets, tape recorders, and cassette tapes, are also used in *The Lonely Ghost* to convey the horrific. When Huo talks with Yu over the phone, the signal is suddenly disrupted, and he hears strange sounds emanating from the phone. In the first ghost-revenge sequence, the signal of the TV Lao Lin is watching appears weak, then it suddenly shuts off. The ghost of Xiaoju can both deliver her message through the tape recorder and transfer her spirit into an audio tape. After Yu brings the tape to the auditorium, where Zheng is giving his acceptance speech, Xiaoju hides in a taxi. When Zheng leaves the auditorium and gets in the car, he is appalled to discover that it is not a taxi driver driving the car, but an
invisible ghost, who finally brings him to the old mansion. The frequent use of modern technology and telecommunication in this ghost film reminds us of Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (1998), a Japanese horror movie made nine years after the release of *The Lonely Ghost*. The main characters and plot developments in these two films are intriguingly similar: a man and a woman who are disturbed by a haunted tape (or a cursed videotape) start an investigation and eventually discover the secret of a murdered girl, a victim of patriarchal violence; while they believe that they have soothed her anger by sharing her traumatic experience, it turns out that the avenging ghost never forgets and never forgives. While technology and telecommunication in *Ringu* are the source of dread, demonstrating the idea that a curse could be, as Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano puts it, “disseminated through trans-media (such as Sadako crawling out of a television screen, a notice of death via telephone, and videotape functioning as a medium for transferring the curse to others),”¹⁶⁷ they suggest in *The Lonely Ghost* a possibility of communication, even comprehension, between ghost and human and between past and present. As Liang Ming puts it: “there are two worlds: the ghost world (yinjie 阴界) and the human world (yangjie 阳界). How can the two worlds communicate with each other? We had to find something [to connect them] ...We thought it should be audio recording. We humans

---

cannot hear the ghost’s voice, but the recorder can make it out. Of course it is just a form of magic realism, something that by no means could happen in reality.”

When Huo, a materialist, finally acknowledges the presence of Xiaoju and that what Yu sees are not just hallucinations, he makes an interesting comment: “You see the past, I record the future.” The coherent linear narrative is thus challenged by the blurring of boundaries between the past, the present, and the future. The past and the future have presence in the present; all three are interwoven with each other. While Huo can hear victims screaming in ghost-revenge events that have yet to take place, Yu sees the past superimposed on the present: in the sequence when Lao Lin recalls Xiaoju’s family tragedy, Yu has a vision of him raping Xiaoju’s mother, thus contradicting his professed innocence in the tragedy; later in the scene on the film set, when Zheng instructs Yu to act more emotionally, Yu looks at Zheng and begins seeing scenes of him murdering Xiaoju. However, Huo’s apprehensions of the near future change nothing; he always attempts to intervene in a what Li Zeng calls a “desperate, too-late situation.”

Yu’s ability to see the past, by contrast, helps her form an alliance with Xiaoju and realize the ghostly vengeance through a karmic retribution. This contrast allegorically suggests that if we have not recognized and thoroughly examined the past ("seeing the past"), a focus on the future ("recording the future") is problematic and useless. As the CCP’s ideological focus shifted from politically-oriented class struggle to market-oriented reforms in the 1980s, China experienced rapid economic growth and radical social change.

---

168 CCTV 10, “Dianying de biaoqing.”
169 Li Zeng, “Ghostly Vengeance, Historical Trauma,” 115.
developments. Yet along with this economic miracle came state limitations on democracy and freedom of speech, repression of the traumatic past, as well as social evils brought by rapid marketization and commercialization, such as moral deterioration, the worship of money, corruption, speculation, and the like. The gap between idealism (for a modernized and democratized China) and reality stimulated social upheaval and unrest at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s and ended violently with the June Fourth Incident, which, in Xudong Zhang opinion, “marked the end of the so-called New Era and all its popular and intellectual euphoria about modernity, progress, and subjectivity.”

While revealing experiences of a traumatic past in the figure of ghosts, The Lonely Ghost and The Foggy House also set their stories in this transitional period at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. The haunted mansions in both films are, therefore, not only testaments to the past turbulence, but also silent witnesses of China’s dramatic social transformation. In The Lonely Ghost, we see the conflict between government/real estate companies and residents, inflation (e.g. two film crew members discuss the rising price of a color TV set), the underground trade in cultural relics (e.g. You Fei sells the gold Buddha statuette to Zheng Lei), the worship of the west, and so forth. The film also reflects a world in which Western commodities and life styles have become part of urban life (e.g. Coca-Cola, disco nightclub, pop music, etc.), winning awards at international film festivals is the dream of every filmmaker (e.g. Zheng promises Yu she can attend an international film festival and helps her to become an international star), going abroad is

---

170 Xudong Zhang, Postsocialism and Cultural Politics, 270.
a fashionable opportunity (e.g. Lao Lin’s son has gone abroad and never came back, and the orphan girl in the film-within-a-film is also offered the opportunity to go abroad), and the dollar is the symbol of success and prosperity. One of the most telling and scariest moments in the film occurs in the revenge sequence in which the ghost entices You Fei into the basement with Huo’s voice and piles of “U.S. dollars.” Whereas You is in ecstasy over the “dollars” he sees dropping in front, the spectator sees only “paper money” for the dead (see Fig. 1.21). This detail satirizes the worship of both money and the West in the reform era, and by the end of the scene, You has been driven mad.

171 “Paper money” (zhiqian 纸钱), also known as “ghost money,” is a Chinese tradition that goes back thousands of years and one that is held to this day when memorizing the dead and honoring the ancestors. For more information about this tradition, see C. Fred Blake, *Burning Money: The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011).

172 As a social phenomenon and cultural ethos, the worship of the west in the 1980s is also embodied in *River Elegy* (He shang 河殇), a hit six-part TV documentary series, which shocked its audiences in the late 1980s and initiated a national controversy. It presented with a passionate account the sharp contrast between the energetic Occidental-blue civilization and the dying Oriental-yellow civilization. The Yellow River is portrayed as a source of poverty and disaster, and the Great Wall is “a huge monument of tragedy constructed by the fate of history” rather than a symbol of the strength, glory, and enterprising spirit of the Chinese people. The Yellow (River) civilization, just like other primitive agricultural civilizations, naturally lacks the spirit of science and democracy and resists plurality and change. The documentary concluded that this kind of civilization can no longer provide Chinese people with nourishment and energy, and only the energetic Occidental-blue civilization can save China and its people. For more information and discussion of *River Elegy* and its controversy, see Xiaomei Chen’s “Occidentalism as a Counter-Discourse: The He shang Controversy,” in her *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 23-42.
While You sees U.S dollars, what spectators see are “paper money” for the dead.

The portrait of insatiable greed in the market age, when China witnessed what Jason McGrath calls “an embrace of commercialism and the profit motive,” is also echoed in *The Foggy House*. Villains in this movie—former Red Guards who persecuted the parents of the female protagonist—now have, like Zheng in *The Lonely Ghost*, decent jobs and unblemished reputations: one is a writer, the other is a psychiatrist.

One of the “horrors” of these films is that the villains of the past are hidden among us in the present, disguised by the masks of their decent professions. In this sense, they are living ghosts who form a contrast in the films with the real ghosts. Is it the historical violence of the Cultural Revolution that shaped them into what they are, or is it the anarchy during the Cultural Revolution that arouses their dark side? Does human nature

---

change over time? Or, should we ask, has society really changed with the end of the Cultural Revolution? Are people getting greedier and greedier as commercialization and marketization have swept China? The presentation of past historical trauma is intertwined with an introspection of China’s present, and hence these two films are not only historical allegories of the Cultural Revolution, but also social satires of the “economics-oriented” new state ideology.

In addition to the themes of spectral time and the haunted mansion, the recurrent presentation of “madness” also invites an allegorical reading. The female protagonists in both *The Lonely Ghost* and *The Foggy House* are diagnosed with mental illnesses and incarcerated in asylums. In *The Lonely Ghost*, after Huo is wounded by Xiaoju, Yu tries to explain to his doctors that his coma was caused by a ghost. She is considered mad and put into a mental hospital under Zheng’s oversight. Similarly, in *The Foggy House*, when the wife, a character who recalls the role of Paula in *Gaslight* (1944), tells her husband of her encounters with mysterious events, she is judged mad and sent to a mental hospital, where she is treated with painful electroshock therapy.

Several interpretations can be applied to this “madness” theme. First, the suffering experience of those women, as well as *The Foggy House*’s allusion to the “maniacal wife” role in the *Gaslight* films and their literary sources, recalls the image of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar calls “the madwoman in the attic,” a misogynist stereotype that
reflects male fear of woman’s awful procreative power and her “otherness.”

The label of insanity is usually ascribed to women who deviate from norms of expected behavior in patriarchal society. It also echoes a clichéd dichotomy between male and female thinking: the former is associated with reason and modern science, whereas the latter is associated with irrational power and superstitious beliefs. As Britta Schinzel argues, “the conditions under which modern science and technology developed are shaped through the capitalistic production and a special gender role allocation which allocates the sphere of reproduction to women and the sphere of production to men… The rational mind is male… This was to save humanity from the irrational powers of nature (and femininity).”

Male characters such as Huo (in *The Lonely Ghost*) and the husband (in *The Foggy House*) overtly show such a gender bias: Huo initially satirizes Yu’s hallucination and superstition, and the husband insists on sending the wife to see the psychiatrist.

Second, given the specific background of these two films, the experience of the female protagonists can also be read from the broader perspective of national trauma and state politics, since insanity is a recurrent theme in post-Mao cinema. On the one hand, the label of madman or leper, just like the label of “ox-ghosts and snake-spirits,” is part of what Michael Rogin calls, in a different context, “political demonology,” in which

---


“monsters” are created “by the inflation, stigmatization, and dehumanization of political foes.” The practice of forced institutionalization of foes is one of the most efficient strategies in political power struggles. In Chen Fangqian’s *Ghost* (1980), a detective film about the conflicts between good people and henchmen of the Gang of Four, the villain at one point incarcerates two heroes in a leper colony. Looking at *The Lonely Ghost*, *The Foggy House*, and *Ghost* intertextually raises a serious question: did China really root out the “henchmen” of the Gang of Four (since the female protagonists in *The Lonely Ghost* and *The Foggy House* are also put in the asylum due to their confrontations with masked villains)? Or should we ask: has the influence of the Cultural Revolution really disappeared from people’s everyday lives?

On the other hand, the depiction of insanity, especially mass insanity, as mentioned previously, is an allegory of the national psyche after the Cultural Revolution. The symbolic connection between national trauma and people’s mentality is mentioned by Huo in a conversation that takes place early in the film: when Lao Lin recalls Xiaojü’s family tragedy in the Cultural Revolution, Huo makes a comment on her mother’s suicide: “The whole nation was mad, not to mention individuals.” Those “individuals” might refer to people like: Xiaojü’s mother, who was driven insane in the Cultural Revolution; the madman at the end of *Hibiscus Town* (dir. Xie Jin, 1986), who benefited from the political chaos of the Cultural Revolution and dreams of another mass “movement”; You Fei in *The Lonely Ghost*, who is driven mad by the ghost of a past victim (a symbolic

---

176 Michael Rogin, *Ronald Regan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, xiii, xvi.
torture of his conscience); or those madmen in the asylum who appear in the twist ending of *The Lonely Ghost*. Ironically, *The Lonely Ghost* doesn’t offer one word of explanation as to the identities of these madmen, including the character who narrates the ghost revenge story. Spectators might well ask: who are they? Why were they put in the mental hospital? Is the ghost story an urban legend that the narrator heard from somewhere else? Or, did something he had witnessed inspire him to conceive such a story? The one-minute coda not only erases the lingering impression that the ghost revenge story has left on spectators, but leaves more confusion and sense of oppression for them.

The concern about the national psyche in *The Lonely Ghost* is echoed in *Death Is Approaching* (dir. Xie Hong, 1989), a crime movie released in the same year as *The Lonely Ghost*. None of the characters in this film, including the female protagonist, suspects that the male protagonist, her husband and a successful manager in an advertising company, is also a psychotic serial killer who has murdered four victims. As the film progresses, we learn that the reason he becomes a cold-blooded killer is his traumatic experience in the Cultural Revolution: his fiancée was possessed by some lascivious officials, and he was falsely accused of rape and sent to prison. The film ends with a statement on screen that “according to a survey of medical authorities, there are about eight to ten million psychopaths nationwide, of whom only two million have been discovered and gotten treatment and attention. Others, by contrast, live around us. Some of them are the product of the past decade...” (see Fig. 1.22). While *The Lonely Ghost* implicitly suggests the reason for the mass insanity, *Death Is Approaching* explicitly
attributes it to the Cultural Revolution. The blurring boundary between “sanity” and “insanity” in this movie is precisely the origin of horror: we cannot tell who is mad and who is not, because we have been all haunted by the specter of the Cultural Revolution. In words of the killer in *Death Is Approaching*: “In this world, nobody is innocent.”

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 1.22 The statement on screen at the end of *Death Is Approaching* attributes the insanity to the Cultural Revolution.

There are three more details worth our attention for their allegorical implications. The first is Yu Hong’s strategy in *The Lonely Ghost* to leave the mental hospital: she changes her story, telling the doctors that she knows nothing about Huo’s coma and has forgotten everything; she is then pronounced mentally healthy and released. It is ironical not only because Yu wins her freedom by lying, but also because her lie that “she has forgotten everything” resonates with the nation’s repression and collective oblivion of the past. This detail challenges the official post-Mao discourse about the Cultural Revolution, which claims that with the arrest of the Gang of Four, truth has come to the fore. It also
raises a question: does Yu’s lie suggest that only those who have forgotten or claim to have forgotten the past can be defined as part of the collective “Self” and successfully assimilate into society? A similar compromise between individuals and the nation is echoed in the wife’s choice in *The Foggy House*. As soon as she escapes from the asylum, she donates her house to the nation. In the final confrontation sequence, it is this donation that helps her defeat the complacent psychiatrist, who believes that she possesses the title to the house. In other words, only through an alliance with the state can an individual overpower her enemies and rehabilitate herself as a normal person, no longer a madwoman in the attic.

The third detail is the killer’s self-renaming in *Death Is Approaching*. Although he has not been falsely diagnosed with mental illness and incarcerated in an asylum, as Yu Hong and The Wife are, he is falsely accused of rape and sent to prison. The similarity between the two types of institutionalizations demonstrates the prevalence of “political demonology.” And it is ironic that normal people are sent to mental hospitals, whereas real psychos are ignored and released. Different from Yu’s lie and The Wife’s donation, both compromises with the state, the serial killer’s choice in *Death Is Approaching* is to rename himself and get a new identity. The moment he gives up his original name—Luo Zhengzhi 罗正直, which literally means “righteous”—he also abjures his faith in fairness and justice, as well as a hope for the future of his country. His madness reflects the insanity of an entire society, and his presence becomes a living
specter of the traumatic past that moans along with Xiaoju in *The Lonely Ghost* and the dead parents in *The Foggy House*.

In his interview with CCTV-10, Liang Ming makes the following comment on the ghost revenge story: “Ghosts do not really exist. We are all materialists. Yet if you say it is not real, I feel it is real. Especially during that specific era, a specific period of China, such an event happened—I feel it is itself real. Therefore I think it will be more thorough if we use a magic realist form to treat such a film.”\(^{177}\) Liang’s reference to magic realism resonates with Gabriel García Máñquez’s own understanding of his works, which reflect the reality of his nation; to García Máñquez, people’s “rationalism prevents them [from] seeing that reality isn’t limited to the price of tomatoes and eggs.”\(^{178}\) In other words, sometimes ghosts, haunting, insanity, and absurdity are closer to the truth.

**Conclusion**

With the economic reforms since the 1980s, mainland China has witnessed a revival of the horror/thriller genre. While the films in this trend represent the emergence of popular entertainment cinema of the time, they also reflect complex social issues and the national psyche in post-Mao China. In contextualizing *The Lonely Ghost*, one of the most accomplished popular films of the 1980s and the PRC’s first horror film in the strict sense of the term, in a larger cultural and social sphere and in comparison with other

---

\(^{177}\) CCTV 10, “Dianying de biaoqing.”

historical horror movies, I have provided in this chapter a case study of how Chinese horror cinema negotiates between the market and censorship. I have also sketched out and analyzed The Lonely Ghost’s relationship with the PRC’s first rating system and the state regulation of cinematic representations of historical memory.

As Ian Johnson points out, China’s “rulers do not just suppress history, they recreate it to serve the present. They know that, in a communist state, change often starts when the past is challenged.”¹⁷⁹ In contrast with the historical memory and traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution that has long been officially repressed and neglected, memory of China’s War of Resistance against Japan, was promoted by the government and treated in numerous films. The censorship’s double standard explains why historical horror movies such as Man Behind the Sun could be publicly shown to children and teenagers: the depiction of the Chinese people’s experience of atrocities under Japanese imperialism powerfully resonates with a state ideology that legitimizes the role of the CCP in China’s historical struggle for national independence from foreign invaders, on the one hand, and searches for a new status in the global economy, on the other.

Since state ideology leaves little room for films that touch on the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, The Lonely Ghost, The Foggy House, and Death Is Approaching all appear at first glance to be apolitical horror movies: The Lonely Ghost tells an imagined karmic revenge story and denies itself with a twist ending; The Foggy House unfolds a

story in a haunted mansion and ends with a tragic love triangle; and *Death Is Approaching* is a crime movie in which the heroic police eventually discover and defeat the murderer. In order to circumvent the censorship’s ban on “real” ghosts, the ghost in *The Lonely Ghost* and *The Foggy House* is transformed into a madman’s imagination or a trick manipulated by the villains.

Nonetheless, these films, especially *The Lonely Ghost*, manage to reflect in profound ways on the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and the new ideology of post-Mao China. Through innovations in their treatment of the ghost, the villain, and the police, *The Lonely Ghost* challenges conventional stereotypes in Chinese horror cinema, and establishes a set of new formulas through its unique visual and sound effects. The film’s special narrative structure (a story within a story, a film within a film) and its borrowings from Western horror cinema, not only offered spectators a new viewing experience, but also helped to build its inner tension through horrific images and sounds.\(^\text{180}\)

My examination of *The Lonely Ghost* and other horror movies in terms of spectral time and haunted houses, the affinity between haunting and technology, and the relationship between historical trauma and institutionalized insanity also offers instances of what Adam Lowenstein calls “allegorical collision,” collisions that “challenge the

\(^{180}\) The horror formulas and narrative techniques showed in *The Lonely Ghost* have later been repeatedly adopted in PRC’s horror cinema, yet its thematic explorations in terms of national trauma and historical memory have been collectively ignored for decades. Not until 2012, did the spirit of *The Lonely Ghost* revive in *Nightmare* (Qing yan 青魇), a co-produced horror film, directed by Herman Yau 邱礼涛, a Hong Kong director well-known for his violent Category 3 films.
power of national narratives to regulate the meaning of collective trauma.”\textsuperscript{181} As Lowenstein points out, “traumatic events [are] lodged in the past,” but their “echoes resonate in the present.”\textsuperscript{182} Historical specters in these movies bring about not only a “mute” past ignored and repressed by the official historical narrative, but also a concern about China’s future under the guidance of the new ideology.

\textsuperscript{181} Adam Lowenstein, \textit{Shocking Representation}, 177.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
CHAPTER 2: THE HORROR CINEMA OF INFIDELITY: LUST, ANXIETY, AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF GENDER

The streams of the holy rivers are flowing backward.
Everything runs in reverse—justice is upside down.
Men’s minds are deceitful, and nothing is settled,
not even oaths that are sworn by the gods.
The tidings will change, and a virtuous reputation
will grace my name. The race of women will reap
honor, no longer the shame of disgraceful rumor.\textsuperscript{183}

—Euripides, \textit{Medea}, 431 BCE

Introduction

The previous chapter examines horror films that reflect on the historical trauma caused by the Cultural Revolution, including Huang Jianzhong’s \textit{The Foggy House}, in which an indecisive man vacillates between his wife and his former lover (the psychiatrist): he cannot remain faithful to the former, but neither can he continue the original conspiracy with the latter (to usurp the former’s house). The film ends with the violent death of the husband: the psychiatrist notices that he is really falling for his wife and thus stabs him to death. While \textit{The Foggy House} in general presents serious contemplation about the traumatic past, the relationship between characters—a love triangle between an errant

husband, a vengeful wife, and an ambitious mistress—also reflects one of the most popular themes in Chinese cinema since the 1990s: marital infidelity.

In his study of the postsocialist modernity of China, Jason McGrath proposes the idea of “cinema of infidelity,” which to him is associated with both the new desires and the new anxieties awakened during the reform era. He also examines the structural forms of this kind of melodrama from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, which could roughly be categorized into two types according to chronology, geography, gender, and class: one “involves a rural woman engaged in some kind of manual labor who becomes sexually involved with someone other than her (first) husband,” and the other “features an urban male intellectual whose liaisons with a mistress are depicted as part of a lifestyle of economic success and social prominence in the new century.” While the former pattern usually appears in films at the early stage of the reform era, the latter has become a dominant narrative structure in the new millennium.

Although McGrath does not treat horror films of that time, his argument suggests a useful paradigm for the understanding of modern Chinese horror cinema, because marital infidelity has also been a recurrent theme and popular narrative form in horrific melodrama films in the past two decades. One may wonder how a film can be both horror and melodrama simultaneously. The answer is: these two genres are complementary.

---

185 According to John Mercer and Martin Shingler, there are three distinct but connected concepts through which it is possible to make sense of melodrama: either as a genre, originating in European theatre of the 18th and 19th century, as a specific cinematic style, epitomized by the work of Douglas Sirk, or as a sensibility that emerges in the context of specific texts, speaking to and reflecting the desires, concerns and
rather than contradictory, because both of them can address the same concerns in
allegorical or symbolic fashion, embodying social conflicts, desires, anxieties, and gender
struggles in a patriarchal society. In Linda Williams’ words, they are both “body genres”
whose “very existence and popularity hinges upon rapid changes taking place in relations
between the ‘sexes’ and by rapidly changing notions of gender.” If the family
melodrama of the reform era is said to evoke introspection on domestic situations,
husband-wife relationships, the experience of personal desire and loss in a rapidly
changing society, the family horror can be seen to elicit fear around these same themes
and thus evoke contemplation from a different perspective.

This chapter examines the theme of marital infidelity and the cultural politics of
gender in the family horror of the 1990s and of the new millennium, paying particular
attention to the melodramatic narrative, as well as the social contexts of these films. The
chapter consists of three sections. Through a close reading of two PRC horror movies—
Nightmare in the Ghost City (Guicheng xiongmeng 鬼城凶梦, dir. Li Qimin 李启民,
1993) and Don’t Be Young (Weiqing shaonü 危情少女, dir. Lou Ye 娄烨, 1994)—that
involve plots of female adultery, the first section analyzes how women’s desire and

anxieties of audiences. See John Mercer and Martin Shingler, Melodrama: Genre, Style and Sensibility

186 Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” Film Quarterly 44.4 (1991): 12. In
Williams’ opinion, pornography, horror, and melodrama (specifically, “the woman’s film” or “weepie”) all
belong to the “body genre,” a genre that not only displays bodily excess and hence invokes intense
sensation or emotion (“the body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography’s portrayal of
orgasm, in horror’s portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama’s portrayal of weeping.”), but also
focuses on what could best be called a form of ecstasy (“each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to
share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body “beside itself” with sexual pleasure,
fear and terror, or overpowering sadness”). In those body genres, the female body has “functioned
traditionally as the primary embodiments of pleasure, fear, and pain.” See Ibid., 4.
sexual autonomy (represented by unfaithful wives) are presented in horror cinema of the 1990s as the source of family tragedies. Through examining some Hong Kong Category 3 films in the 1990s that involve similar plots of female adultery, this section also demonstrates how the issue of female adultery can be used in different ideological contexts and serve different political purposes: whereas in mainland reform-era cinema it is associated with economic autonomy and upward mobility, in Hong Kong it reflects political impotence and anxiety about the 1997 handover. The second section sketches the resurgence of concubine culture in contemporary China and the complex historical, social, and economic dynamics behind this phenomenon. Through a comparative study of *Deadly Delicious* (*Shuangshi ji* 双食记, dir. Zhao Tianyu 赵天宇, 2008) and *The Door* (*Men* 门, dir. Li Shaohong 李少红, 2007), this section also examines how women in the horror genre have functioned as cultural capital and accessories of urban success in postsocialist China. The last section discusses images of the femme fatale (monster) and the virtuous woman (angel), two female characters with opposite feminine attributes in conventional patriarchal narratives, in the horror cinema of infidelity. Through a comparative study of *Daytime Ghost* (*Bairi nügui* 白日女鬼, dir. Zhao Wenxin 赵文炘, 1994) and *Painted Skin* (*Huapi* 画皮, dir. Gordon Chan 陈嘉上, 2008), this section analyzes how the specter of concubine culture shapes and eventually transforms the figure of the femme fatale from a rebellious subject to a submissive object in patriarchal society. Through delineating how presentations of the wife figure in *Curiosity Kills the Cat* (*Haoqi haisi mao* 好奇害死猫, dir. Zhang Yibai 张一白, 2006) vacillate between the
femme fatale and the virtuous woman, this section also analyzes how the confrontation between the two eventually undermines the patriarchal ideology in China today.

Unfaithful Wives and Female Infidelity as Allegories

McGrath notices that in the rural films of infidelity of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the female protagonist who commits adultery is usually featured as “a ‘rich peasant’ heroine whose private sexual desire confronts public sanction and whose entrepreneurial spirit is unleashed by the new market economy.”^{187} Although there are also a number of horror movies from the 1990s that touch upon women’s infidelity, those movies are almost exclusively associated with an urban setting: some mainland cities or Hong Kong.

Different from their rural counterparts, who are either ambivalent in attitude and therefore pitiable or reassuringly positive, unfaithful wives in horror films are usually regarded as sources of disasters, especially family tragedies. In *Nightmare in the Ghost City* (hereafter *Nightmare*) and *Don’t Be Young*, two PRC horror movies made in the 1990s, both mother figures committed adultery in the past, which not only ruined their families, but also led to the separation of their children from them. Xiao Li 肖丽, the heroine in *Nightmare*, for instance, was sent by her mother to live with her aunt, first in Hong Kong, then Korea. After growing up, Xiao returns to her hometown Fengdu 丰都, a city along the Yangtze River known for its ghostly tourist attractions, to visit her mother Fang Min 方敏 and her stepfather Luo Yan 罗炎. However, starting the first night, she

dreams constantly of her dead father and in reality encounters a series of mysterious events. As the story proceeds, with the help of a young doctor who works for her mother, Xiao eventually discovers that she is not the daughter of her “father,” but a child born of her mother’s adultery with Luo Yan. In order to be with Luo, Fang Min even murdered her sick husband when Xiao was still a baby. Feeling both ashamed of her biological parents (Fang Min and Luo Yan) and aggrieved at her legal father’s death, Xiao takes revenge on her adulterous mother: she “haunts” Fang in the guise of her dead father, eventually driving her to commit suicide.

The plot of Don’t Be Young is in many ways remarkably parallel to that of Nightmare, though at the beginning of the film we are told with text on the screen that it is set in “another time at another place.”188 The story begins with a nightmare in which Wang Lan, the heroine, unwittingly enters a gloomy house where she sees the phantom of her suicidal mother. With the help of her boyfriend and clues from her mysterious nightmares, Wang finds an old house her family used to live in, which legally belongs to her mother. After moving into the big house, Wang rents out several rooms and begins to investigate the real cause of her mother’s death. As she is getting closer to the truth, her life is threatened by a mysterious man, who later turns out to be her missing father. Similar to Xiao’s experience in Nightmare, Wang eventually learns that she is a child born of her mother’s adultery and that one of her tenants, who secretly protects her,

188 The setting of Don’t Be Yong is ambiguous and the story per se could be reset at any time at any place, nevertheless from characters’ dress style and the vertical writing in columns from right to left on newspapers, we can roughly deduce that the story occurs in the Republican era.
is her biological father. Many years earlier, it was her vengeful legal father who drove her mother insane with medicine, thus causing her suicide; and he disappears as well. Now he comes back, only aiming to kill her too.

The plots of both movies center around a daughter’s investigation of the past in a haunted house, which recalls the Gothic tradition of the mysterious “house behind the house” and the curious heroine who wants to find out the secret.\(^\text{189}\) And both movies feature an interesting contrast between the mother and the daughter: whereas the former is a sensual and passionate woman who commits adultery and bears an illegitimate child, the latter is an innocent virgin who has a platonic relationship with her boyfriend (or potential boyfriend). As Fang Min, the mother in \textit{Nightmare}, confesses in front of her “haunting” former husband: “you have been sick for so long. As a woman, I have emotions and desires (qiqing liuyu 七情六欲), and cannot endure loneliness.”\(^\text{190}\)


\(^{190}\) The term “qiqing liuyu” (literally, seven emotions and six desires) refers to human emotions (physiological reactions to stimuli from the external environment) and desires that appear to be innate or primary. Although definitions of this term may vary slightly in different religions and schools, it is generally acknowledged that \textit{qiqing liuyu} are inevitable for human beings, though in the Mao era, individual desires (especially sexual desire) was a forbidden subject. According to Confucianism, the seven emotions are “pleasure (xi 喜), anger (nu 怒), sorrow (ai 哀), fear (ju 惧), love (ai 爱), hate (wu 恶), and desire (yu 欲),” while Buddhism defines them as “pleasure (xi 喜), anger (nu 怒), anxiety (you 忧), fear (ju 惧), love (ai 爱), hate (zeng 憎), and desire (yu 欲).” Chinese medicine theory also applies this concept, according to which, the seven emotions—“pleasure (xi 喜), anger (nu 怒), anxiety (you 忧), worry (si 思), sorrow (bei 悲), fear (kong 恐), and fright (jing 惊)—effectively influence different body organs. The term \textit{liuyu} in Confucianism refers to desires related to “life (sheng 生), death (si 死), ears (er 耳), eyes (mu 目), mouth (kou 口) and nose (bi 鼻),” in which “death” actually means death anxiety and a desire for
to keep her crime a secret, Fang even bribes a clinic janitor, who unwittingly witnessed her crime, with her body. She later bears the janitor a dwarf boy, whom she claims to be her son with her new husband (Luo Yan), yet actually serves as a bargaining chip and hostage in her deal with the janitor. By contrast, the daughter figure in both movies is pure, dispassionate, and submissive. She treats everyone well and sincerely loves her parents—before Xiao learns her mother’s secret, she respects and loves her; so does Wang before she realizes that her missing father has returned home just to kill her.

Although the heroine’s boyfriend assists her in the investigation, comforts her, and rescues her when she is exposed to danger, his physical intimacy with her is limited to holding hands, hugging, and cuddling. Throughout the film, their relationship is pure, and there is no kissing, not even a cheek kiss, between the hero and the heroine.

The contrastive images of mother and daughter not only recall what Gilbert and Gubar categorize as the “monster” and the “angel,” two typical female characters in the patriarchal literary tradition, but also echo what Sigourney Weaver’s role (in The Cabin in the Woods) calls the “whore” and the “virgin,” two popular archetypes of immortality. Buddhism tends to use the term wuyu (literally, five desires) that arise from contact of the five sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body) with their respective objects (color and form, sound, smell, taste, and texture).

191 Gilbert and Gubar use the figure of Bertha Mason as the so-called “Madwoman in the Attic” to make an argument about perceptions toward female literary characters in the patriarchal literary tradition. In their opinion, all female characters in male-authored books can be categorized as either the “angel,” a pure, dispassionate, and submissive female figure, or the “monster,” a sensual, passionate, and rebellious figure. While the former is the ideal female figure in patriarchal society, the latter is regarded as the madwoman and hence should be locked in the attic. Women writers in the nineteenth century, before being able to move on to self-definition, also had to struggle with this patriarchal dichotomous paradigm, in terms of which they were defined by male writers and which were so alien to their sense of themselves as women and as writers. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic.
Western horror cinema. They also resemble, to an extent, what Carol Clover calls the “sexual transgressor” and the “final girl” in her study of American slasher films, in which the former is usually among the first victims because of her engagement in illicit sex and the latter survives through her “sexual reluctance” and other “not fully feminine” features. Both mothers in *Nightmare* and *Don’t Be Young* die, paying the price for their past marital infidelity, whereas both daughters survive lethal attacks with the help of male saviors: Xiao is rescued by her biological father when she is attacked by her stepbrother, the dwarf, who assumes that she has returned home to usurp his property, and manipulated a series of mysterious events, trying to scare her away; Wang is rescued by her biological father and her boyfriend from the hands of her vengeful legal father who aims to kill her. The comparison between the sensual mother and the pure daughter is explicitly displayed in the penultimate sequence of *Nightmare*, in which we see Xiao, dressed in a white blouse and blue jeans, kneeing down in front of her suicidal mother. Her feelings are ambivalent: in haunting her mother she wanted to teach her a lesson, but

*The Cabin in the Woods* (dir. Drew Goddard, 2012) is a horror film that parodies stereotypes and clichéd gimmicks of the horror cinema, especially slasher films. The film opens with five friends going for a vacation in a remote cabin in the woods, where they, just like those characters in typical slasher films, are attacked and slayed one by one. It later turns out that they are trapped by a mysterious underground facility beneath the cabin, which not only creates various evil figures (monsters, demons, ghosts, vampires, werewolves, zombies, witches, serial killers, and etc., all the images one could see and imagine from the horror cinema), but also manipulates their destinies in the horrific environment. The two survivors eventually get to know through the director (played by Sigourney Weaver) of the facility that every year, worldwide rituals are held to appease the Ancient Ones—malevolent beings living beneath the surface of the earth—and one of them is just under their own facility. The Ancient Ones are kept in perpetual slumber through an annual sacrifice of five young people embodying certain archetypes: the whore, the athlete, the scholar, the fool, and the virgin. The order in which intended victims perish is flexible, so long as the whore dies first and the virgin survives or dies last. The film ends with a giant hand of an Ancient One emerging from beneath the earth and destroying everything, as the two survivors refuse to follow this formula and would rather die with the humanity.

never expected she would commit suicide. Xiao’s “boyish” final-girl style attire and slim figure form a sharp contrast with her mother’s curvaceous body in the sexy purple silk nightdress (see Fig 2.1).

Fig. 2.1 Xiao Li’s boyish attire and slim figure form a sharp contrast with her mother’s curvaceous body in the sexy purple silk nightdress.

In her study of the monstrous mother in horror cinema, Barbara Creed points out that “her perversity is almost always grounded in possessive, dominant behavior towards her offspring, particularly the male child.”  

While Western horror films, such as *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Twisted Nerve* (dir. Roy Boulting, 1968), *Carrie* (dir. Brian De Palma, 1976), *Friday the 13th* (dir. Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), *Braindead* (dir. Peter Jackson, 1992), and *See No Evil* (dir. Gregory Dark, 2006), usually feature a dominating mother, a religious fanatic or a bigot who controls and ruins her child, the

---

194 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 139.

135
mother figure in *Nightmare* and *Don’t Be Young* provides a paradigm opposite to the so-called over-possessive monstrous mother: an undutiful mother, who cares less about her child than she does her own desires. Both daughters in *Nightmare* and *Don’t Be Young* are abandoned: Xiao was sent by her mother to live with someone else after she murdered her husband. In her mother’s words, she lived a hard life at that time and could not afford to raise a child. Wang lost both parents after her mother committed suicide and her father disappeared. We know nothing about their experiences after being separated from their parents, yet from their joy at reuniting with the existent parent (Xiao with her mother, and Wang with her father), we can perceive their yearning for a complete family. From the perspective of a betrayed husband or the perspective of an abandoned child, the mother figure in both movies is undoubtedly a “bad mother,” who refuses to play the role of devoted wife and loving mother that mainstream society prescribes for women.

However, as Sarah Arnold points out, “the Bad Mother is not only a product of the patriarchal imaginary, or a representative of the nightmare unconscious, but also a transgressive figure who resists conformity and assimilation. Her very transgressions often indicate the slipperiness of patriarchy.”

It is necessary to examine the mother figure in the broader social and cultural sphere of the 1990s in China. *Don’t Be Young* does not offer much information about Wang’s mother, except about her tragic suicide. She only lives in the daughter’s nightmares and fragmentary memories and in conversations between the two men with whom she was sexually involved: one loves her,...

---

and the other resents her. *Nightmare*, by contrast, provides a relatively complete and detailed story of the mother figure (Fang Min) in which we not only learn about her past, but also know her present, her career, and her ambitions.

As mentioned previously, Fang’s murder of her husband has a witness—the clinic janitor. In order to fully control this man, Fang not only bore him a son, but also bought the clinic building with her new husband in the reform era and hired the clinic janitor to work for them. When Xiao sees this silent middle-aged man for the first time, Fang simply explains that “he is our doorkeeper, who has been working here for decades. Several years ago, your stepfather inherited some property, and hence bought this house and retained him.” When Xiao expresses astonishment that a clinic would be on the first floor of their private home, Fang proudly explains: “the house is big and has more than enough space. Last year, I retired early and opened this private clinic, since nowadays the state policy allows [us to run our own business].” Although Luo Yan, Fang’s new husband, is designated as a successful entrepreneur (manager of a Sino-foreign joint venture) in *Nightmare*, his business career is never depicted in the film. By contrast, it does give spectators a glimpse of Fang’s clinic, where patients are coming and going, and doctors (including Fang) are busy working. In a certain sense, Fang resembles the “rich peasant” heroine in McGrath’s study of the rural cinema of infidelity, who runs her own small business and whose “liberation of sexual desire through an affair is in some fundamental way tied to an effort to liberate the woman’s entrepreneurial ambitions as
well.”196 Obviously, compared with her sick former husband, Luo is not only Fang’s lover, but also her career partner—they buy the house together and open the clinic, and Luo’s business (a biopharmaceutical company) is closely associated with Fang’s medical business. For example, it is with medicine she gets from Luo’s company that Fang “treats” the janitor’s cut and infects him with the rabies virus, which eventually kills him according to plan (she is worried that he may expose her secret to her daughter someday).

The film’s characterization of Fang as an ambitious woman in terms of both economics and sexuality also recalls, to an extent, the role of the mistress (the psychiatrist) in The Foggy House, who shows intense jealousy of the wife not only because she owns the big house, but also because she steals her lover from her. In the final confrontation sequence of The Foggy House, the psychiatrist even lies down on the ground, in front of the couple, asking the husband to possess her. When the husband refuses her with the excuse that their love has passed, she flies into a rage and forces him to kiss her, and then stabs him to death. Her sexual frustration is parallel with her failed attempt to usurp another person’s property, and her desire for sexual fulfillment can be seen as a libidinal incarnation of her ambition for economic gain.

The emergence of ambitious and sensual female figures in the horror cinema suggests some social and cultural symptoms of the 1990s. On the one hand, while both sexuality and privatization were taboos in the Mao era, the resurgence of those themes reflects the new ideology of the reform era, an ideology that both sanctions individual

196 Jason McGrath, Postsocialist Modernity, 102.
desire and offers enticing new freedoms and the promise of personal fulfillment. As McGrath points out, “with the gradual privatization of the material economy in the 1980s and 1990s, there was an accompanying privatization of the libidinal economy” that is clearly embodied in the cinema of infidelity.\textsuperscript{197} As demonstrated by the interaction between sexual and economic autonomy, sexuality (desire) and privatization (personal fulfillment) are two sides of the same ideological coin. On the other hand, the stereotyped characterization of adulterous mother as “monster,” “whore,” and “sexual transgressor” demonstrates a collective anxiety about the threats to the normative family structure and social ethics caused by “the new market economy and its promises of upward mobility.”\textsuperscript{198}

A similar presentation of female adultery as the origin of disasters appears in Hong Kong Category 3 films of the 1990s.\textsuperscript{199} In Naked Killer (Chiluo gaoyang 赤裸羔羊, dir. Clarence Fok 霍耀良, 1992), the heroine’s stepmother is caught in adultery by the heroine’s father, who later accidently gets killed in the conflict. The heroine kills her stepmother’s adulterer to take revenge for her father. When she is hunted by the adulterer’s bodyguards, she is rescued by a female assassin, who later trains her into a cold-blooded killer. In Run and Kill (Wushu jimi dang’an 乌鼠机密档案, dir. Billy Tang 邓衍成, 1993), a movie that includes what David Bordwell calls “one of the most

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 126.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{199} Hong Kong horror films by and large are categorized as Category 3 films for their graphic depictions of violence and sex, but not all Category 3 films are horror films. Compared with cannibal films such as Ebola Syndrome and The Untold Story II, Naked Killer and Run and Kill are more like violent crime films. So I am using “horror film” in a loose sense here.
famously barbarous scenes in Hong Kong film,” a weak and fat businessman accidently places a hit on his cheating wife, and hence causes an escalating spiral of violence with both the police (who believe him to be the killer) and the gang (who want money for carrying out the hit). *Ebola Syndrome* (Yibola bingdu 伊波拉病毒, dir. Herman Yau 邱礼涛, 1996) also begins with an adultery sequence, in which the male protagonist is caught having sex with his boss’s wife. When the boss is going to punish him, the protagonist rises up against him and kills both the boss and his wife. Then he flees to South Africa, where he again murders his new boss and his wife (owners of a Chinese restaurant) and accidently gets infected with the Ebola virus. He returns to Hong Kong with the disease and brings about a disaster. In *The Untold Story II* (Renrou chashaobao er tianzhu dimie 人肉叉烧包 2 天诛地灭, dir. Yiu-Kuen Ng 吴耀权, 1998), the male protagonist, the owner of a barbecue shop, has to keep silent at his wife’s affairs with other men because he is impotent. His repressed desire and discontent is later unleashed by his wife’s cousin, a girl from the mainland, who seduces him and wants to replace his wife. When restoring his lost confidence on her young body, he does not expect that the girl is also a cannibal killer who will murder his wife one day and barbecue her ribs to sell. Those movies, by and large, feature female infidelity as the origin of disasters.

200 David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 155. This scene concerns a gangster who incinerates the male protagonist’s daughter alive and forces him to watch. The gangster even takes the charred corpse and puts it at the male protagonist’s feet, imitating the little girl’s voice: “Daddy, I’m all dark. Don’t you recognize me?”
Although both the PRC and Hong Kong cinema of the 1990s attribute family tragedies to female infidelity, different social anxieties are projected in those films, thus inviting different kinds of allegorical readings. These Hong Kong films usually do not offer much information about the role of the unfaithful wife, but simply portray them as lascivious women, sexually unfulfilled with their husbands. Different from Nightmare and Don’t Be Young, which never explicitly show any adultery scenes, Hong Kong Category 3 films pay special attention to those scenes and the ensuing confrontations between husbands (who usually accidently witness the sex scene) and adulterers. Usually there are two responses: the husband flies into a rage, tries to defend his dignity as a husband, and then dies in the conflict (Naked Killer and Ebola Syndrome); or chooses to submit to a state of humiliation (Run and Kill and The Untold Story II). If we say women’s excessive sexuality and sexual autonomy in the PRC films can be read as the threats and ethical dangers inherent in the modernization process, then female infidelity in Category 3 films from Hong Kong—a city that has realized its modernization targets—incarnate the social malaise of Hong Kong people about the 1997 handover. The image of the weak, impotent husband, who is scorned by his wife and who loses his life or gets involved into a series of disasters due to his unfaithful wife, best characterizes Hong Kong’s social psyche around 1997: frustrations over political impotence, with no role to play in the making of their own destiny, on the one hand, and profound fear of the uncertain future and “disasters” that might be caused by an authoritarian government, on
the other. I further examine in Chapter 4 how the “1997 anxiety” is embodied in Hong Kong horror cinema of the 1990s.

Love Triangle, Concubine Culture, and Women as Cultural Capital

Similar to what McGrath observes from the cinema of infidelity, in which male infidelity has replaced female adultery as the dominant narrative pattern later in the reform era, the love triangle between an errant husband, a vengeful wife, and an ambitious mistress also becomes the most prominent structural form of the horror cinema of infidelity in the new millennium, in which the sense of the horrific usually derives from how the betrayed wife gets revenge on her unfaithful husband and his mistress, or how an abandoned woman (usually dead) “haunts” her faithless or dissolute lover. In Curiosity Kills the Cat and Deadly Delicious, both male protagonists have extramarital affairs with pretty young girls, and therefore unwittingly get trapped in revenge plots deliberately designed by their wives: one is eventually sent to prison for murdering his mistress, and the other commits suicide. In The Frightening Night and The House that Never Dies, both female protagonists, mistresses of married men, are almost driven mad by mysterious horrific phantoms who later turn out to be manipulations by their love rivals. Protagonists in Email, The Matrimony, The Chrysalis, The Door, and Suffocation are all seemingly haunted by their dead lovers and get lost in hallucinations and illusions that blur
boundaries between past and present. If the theme of infidelity in the horror cinema of the 1990s is still presented in an implicit and restrained fashion, horror movies about infidelity in the new millennium, by contrast, explicitly show a manic world sickened by the pursuit of material wealth and fraught with betrayal and murder, lust and conspiracy, death and traps. The male characters are usually the ones indulging in extramarital affairs (or even worse, promiscuity), while female characters are struggling with their own desires, desperation, and paranoia. Given the importance of the specific social context of those movies, in the following, I first sketch the family and gender issues in contemporary China and analyze the diverse historical, social, and economic factors behind them, before moving to close reading of films, in this section and in the next.

China, of course, has a millennia-old culture of concubinage, in which men were allowed to keep more than one woman as marital partners. Although gender equality was regarded as part of the project of enlightenment and modernization in both the May Fourth Movement and communist revolutionary culture, it was not until 1950, with the

---


202 The marriage system in imperial China was not polygamous (yifu duoqi zhi 一夫多妻制) in a strict sense, but “monogamy plus concubinage” (yifu yiqi duoqie zhi 一夫一妻多妾制). In other words, a man was allowed to have only one official wife (zhengshi 正室), yet he can simultaneously keep numerous concubines (ceshi 側室 or qie 妾). Although both the wife and the concubine are subordinates in the patriarchal family, their titles and statuses are different. The wife is superior to the concubine not only in the households where they live together, but also in the patriarchal legitimacy. Whereas a man could not divorce his wife unless she had committed “seven misconducts for divorce,” he could freely sell, trade in, or give his concubines to others as gifts. Children born by the wife and the concubine are respectively called di 嫡 sons/daughters and shu 庶 sons/daughters, who not only have different statuses in the family, but also in the order of succession. In Tang dynasty, for instance, only when no di offspring is available, a shu son could be considered to be the successor.
promulgation of PRC’s first marriage law, that monogamy was established as the only legal form of marriage nationwide; the concubine system was condemned and outlawed. In the Mao era, gender equality was embodied on the egalitarian character of the Maoist culture of the body, in which gender distinctions of the subjects was by and large erased, and women were usually constructed as masculinized or desexualized figures.

Meanwhile, due to the implementation of the new marriage law and the state’s close scrutiny over people’s intimate lives, the divorce rate was low and extramarital affairs were rare. With the process of China’s economic reforms, especially the marketization after 1989, China has experienced dramatic social changes, including changing family arrangements and social values. The new state ideology rising from the ashes of the June Fourth Incident is a peculiar hybrid that embraces commercialism, consumerism, and materialism, on the one hand, and promotes nationalism and patriotism to reinforce the national cohesion and integration, and legitimize the role of the CCP and the communist regime in the process of China’s modernization, on the other. The new state ideology, together with the new market economy, not only legitimizes entrepreneurial ambitions and provides a promise of upward mobility, but also empowers individuals in their pursuit of personal success and fulfillment.

Paradoxically, the situation of Chinese women has deteriorated instead of improved with China’s economic development and the liberation of material desire over the past two and a half decades. The economic gender inequality is embodied not only in the fact that the proportion of women owning properties (e.g. housing, deposits, vehicles)
is evidently lower than men’s, but also on the decreasing employment rate for working-age women, as well as the growing gender wage gap since the 1990s. Such tough quandaries cause a resurgence of belief in traditional gender roles such as “men belong in public, women belong at home” (nan zhuwai, nü zhunei 男主外，女主内) and “a good marriage is better than a good job” (gan de hao buru jia de hao 干得好不如嫁得好). The number of men and women who think this way, especially who agree on the second saying, has significantly increased over the past decade, according to a nationwide survey. To make matters worse, the state ideology also sanctions and even reinforces such stereotyped gender roles. In 2007, the All-China Women’s Federation (Zhonghua quanguo funü lianhe hui 中华全国妇女联合会), an influential government-funded organization, through the official website of the state-run Xinhua News Agency, conducted a propaganda media campaign on “leftover women” (sheng nü 剩女), a label stigmatizing urban, educated women over the age of 27 who are still single. The barrage of insults from the state (represented by the All-China Women’s Federation) has

\[203\] While China’s urban employment rate for working-age women was 77.4% in 1990, it fell to a new low of 60.8% in 2010. Similarly, while the income of urban Chinese women approximately made 78% of what men did in 1990—roughly the same as in the U.S.—the gender income ratio dropped to only 67% in 2010. Rural women’s situation is even worse: their wages have declined from 81% to 56% of men’s incomes during the same time period. See Research Group of Chinese Women’s Social Status 中国妇女社会地位调查课题组 (on behalf of All-China Women’s Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics), Zhongguo funü shehui diwei gaiguan 中国妇女社会地位概观 [Chinese women’s social status overview] (Beijing: Zhongguo funü chubanshe, 1993); “Dier qi Zhongguo funü shehui diwei chouyang diaocha zhuyao shuju baogao” 第二期中国妇女社会地位抽样调查主要数据报告 [Major data report on the second sample survey on Chinese women’s social status], Funü yanjiu lun cong 妇女研究论丛 [Collection of women’s studies] 5 (2001): 4-12; “Disan qi Zhongguo funü shehui diwei diaocha zhuyao shuju baogao” 第三期中国妇女社会地位抽样调查主要数据报告 [Major data report on the third sample survey on Chinese women’s social status] Funü yanjiu lun cong 6 (2011): 5-15.

\[204\] Ibid.
intensified pressure on those women to abandon their efforts to pursue advanced degrees, and turn their focus to getting married before they “become old, like yellowed pearls” (renlao zhuhuang 人老珠黄), since “women age, they are worth less and less.” While a successful man in the reform era—a member of the new rich—may consider his beautiful mistresses, as McGrath describes, “both emblems of his achievement and rewards for his competitive triumph in the market economy,” countless women may now choose or be forced by circumstances into the social roles of wives, mistresses, or even worse, prostitutes. Therefore, the resurgence of concubine culture can be seen as a monstrosity bred by both the pre-modern patriarchal family system and the new ideology of the reform era.

Although monogamy is still officially regarded as the only legal form of marriage in China, “keeping a second wife” (bao er nai 包二奶) has long been in vogue among the rich and powerful. Different from terms such as “the third person [in marriage]” (disan zhe 第三者) or “petty third” (xiao san 小三), which generally refer to a person involved in extramarital affairs with another married person, “second wife” specifically refers to a long-term mistress of a married man upon whom she depends economically. Those women resemble the role of concubine or mistress (waishi 外室) in traditional China, because men in these relationships usually purchase or rent separate houses (or apartments) for them and provide them with regular allowances. In most cases, the men’s

legal wives do not know of their existence. As some scholars have noted, such a phenomenon has its origin in the early stage of the reform era and was directly influenced by the examples of Hong Kong and Taiwan. When businessmen from Hong Kong and Taiwan came to the mainland in the late 1980s for business opportunities, they often took young women (usually migrant workers) as second wives to satisfy their sexual needs and help to manage their households in the mainland. In the ensuing decades, not only professionals, but salaried workers and truck drivers from Hong Kong and Taiwan who worked regularly in mainland China joined the growing demographics of men who keeping second wives. Soon mainland Chinese men, especially successful entrepreneurs and officials, also adopted the practice. And the composition of second wives is no longer limited to less-educated migrant women but also urban women with higher educational and economic status. One of the most well-known second-wife cases in the 1990s might be the “Murder Case of Ji Ranbing,” in which the wife of a Taiwanese millionaire brutally murdered his mainland mistress Ji Ranbing and her five-month old son in their U.S. apartment. While the wife was accused of murder, many Taiwanese wives spontaneously went to the court to support her, since many of them share the same

frustration with and resentment toward their husbands’ mainland mistresses.209 A similar resentment among Hong Kong wives toward “second wives” is dramatically presented in Fruit Chan’s 陈果 segment of Tales from The Dark I (Mili ye 迷离夜, 2013), a three-segment Hong Kong horror movie. In that story, a rich woman asks a “villain hitter” to beat up her enemies—her daughter-in-law and her husband’s mainland mistress—simultaneously.210

Although “keeping a second wife” has become a common concern and a huge threat to family normality and ethics in the Greater China region,211 the PRC concubine culture is specifically worth noting for its cultural politics of the female body in a highly stratified postsocialist society. As a critic from Asia Times puts it, “with the advent of economic modernization and capitalistic values in China, an undercurrent of sexual liberation and material decadence has also emerged, resulting in the return of concubines


210 The title of Chen’s segment, Jing Zhe 惊蛰 (literally, [the spring thunder] awakens [hibernating] insects), refers to one of the twenty-four solar terms in Chinese culture, which usually occurs on March 5th or 6th. In the Guangdong area of China and Hong Kong, it is popular to perform folk rituals on the day of Jing Zhe, such as making sacrifice to the white tiger god (ji baihu 祭白虎) and “beating the petty person” (da xiaoren 打小人), or hitting villains. It is believed that through hitting or hurting a piece of paper on which appears the villain’s name, date of birth, photo with a symbolic object (e.g. the shoe of clients or the villain hitter) or other religious symbolic weapons (e.g. incense sticks), one can curse one’s enemies and get rid of bad luck.

211 So it is not coincidental that the narrative structure about love triangle and concubine culture is also echoed in Hong Kong horror cinema of the new millennium, although they reflect different social malaise and anxiety from those in PRC horror cinema. In Fruit Chan’s Dumplings (Jiaozi 饺子) from Three...Extremes (Sangeng er 三更 2, 2004), the middle-aged female protagonist, a former TV idol and the wife of a real estate tycoon, has to pin her hopes on magic dumplings made of fresh fetus, with which she recovers youth and beauty and hence wins back her cheating husband. Both heroines in Koma (2004) and Dream Home (Weiduoliya yihao 维多利亚一号, dir. Ho-Cheung Pang 彭浩翔, 2010) are mistresses of successful men who is married or in a relationship.
and an increase in marital infidelity. For the rich and the powerful, keeping extramarital
relations has become fashionable, particularly in officialdom.”212 For officials, it is not
just an issue of private life or social ethics, but is also inevitably intertwined with social
capital, corruption, bribery, and embezzlement. According to a study by Renmin
University, “95% of top Chinese government officials who were detained for corruption
in 2012 had extramarital affairs; the downfall of 60% of those officials was linked to their
mistress’s habits.”213 A popular trope about infidelity, also an unspoken consensus in
Chinese officialdom, is “keeping the domestic red flag from sliding down, while letting
colorful flags fly outside the home” (jiali hongqi budao, waimian caiqi piaopiao 家里红旗不倒，外面彩旗飘飘). Obviously, red flag here refers to the wife and colorful flags
mistresses. Through tactically appropriating Maoist revolutionary discourse, this
complacent analogy not only objectifies the female body, but also indicates a post-
patriarchal attitude that women are cultural capital and practically indispensable
accessories of male accomplishment. In the words of a manager of a state-owned
enterprise, “keeping mistresses is not only for physical needs. It’s more about a symbol of
status. If you don’t have several women, people will look down upon you.”214

Given that corrupt officialdom is still a comparatively forbidden zone in Chinese
cinema, China’s horror cinema of infidelity exclusively centers around the troublesome

212 Stephen Wong, “China’s Concubine Culture is Back,” Asia Times, last modified July 26, 2009,
http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/KG26Ad01.html. (accessed May 1, 2016)
213 Hannah Beech, “China’s Other Women,” Time, last modified October 22, 2015,
http://time.com/4083260/chinas-other-women/. (accessed May 1, 2016)
214 Stephen Wong, “China’s Concubine Culture is Back.”
family lives of the urban middle class, with male protagonists usually marked as successful entrepreneurs.\(^{215}\) Chen Jiaqiao 陈家桥, the male protagonist in *Deadly Delicious*, for instance, is both a successful businessman and a collector of beautiful young women. Coco, Chen’s latest mistress, though often frustrated by his erratic whereabouts and unpredictable moods, does not realize that he is already married. Believing the saying that “a way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” Coco tries to improve her cooking skills with Gu Xiaofan 顾晓繁, a well-known host of a local radio food show, whom she comes across one day. Yet as Chen gets more and more infatuated with her food and body, his health gets worse. It eventually turns out that the female gourmet Coco encounters is not Gu, but Chen’s vengeful wife Yanzi 燕子, who had a miscarriage in a traffic accident when she was distracted by her unwitting discovery of Chen’s affair with Coco. What Yanzi teaches Coco to cook and what she cooks for Chen every day are mutually contradictory food items, which together become inimical to Chen’s health and finally cause a long term consequence of food poisoning.\(^{216}\) One of the most impressive sequences in this film might be the confrontation between Chen and his

---

\(^{215}\) The only exception on screen is a TV drama series *Dwelling Narrowness* (Woju 蜗居, dir. Teng Huatao 滕华涛, 2009), which contains plots about the extramarital affair between a high-ranking official and a white-collar woman. Since this TV drama touches upon some acute social problems, including political corruption, sexual bribery, unaffordable housing, income disparities, class differences, and the like, it was later banned by the SARFT.

\(^{216}\) According to traditional Chinese medicine theory, some food items are actually contradictory (xiang ke 相克) to each other; once a person eats both simultaneously, the contradictory food items will together cause a harmful result to his health. For example, it is believed that crab cannot be eaten with persimmon in the same time, otherwise they will cause vomit and diarrhea. In *Deadly Delicious*, as Chen’s health is getting worse, Yanzi imprisons him at home and continues to feed him with contradictory food items. After several futile attempts to escape her control, Chen realizes that the rest of his life will be incarcerated in his apartment, and hence commits suicide as a form of resistance against Yanzi’s dominance.
wife and mistress. When Yanzi successfully imprisons her sick husband at home, and shows Coco his collection of photos of his mistresses, trophies of his numerous romances, Coco is greatly shocked, while Chen acts as if nothing is wrong (see Fig. 2.2).

Fig. 2.2 Both the wife and the mistress find that Chen Jiaqiao is a collector of pretty young women.

According to Chen’s memos written on the back of the photos, we learn that his marital infidelity begins as early as his first wedding anniversary. On that day, he decides to give himself, in his words, “a present” (a woman) to celebrate the anniversary. As Jieyu Liu points out, “not every Chinese man can take a mistress because it requires money. But once you are rich and powerful, a beautiful young mistress becomes the ultimate status symbol”—also the best gift for a successful man. To Chen, women are

---

217 See Hannah Beech, “China’s Other Women.” Jieyu Liu is the deputy director of the China Institute at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.
no more than an accessory to his achievement, as well as an object that helps him to re-experience the feeling of falling in love. He is always generous in giving gifts to those mistresses, as long as they remain submissive. The exchange between sex (female body) and money (economic capitals) is more than transparent: whenever Chen presents his gifts—an apartment or a necklace—to Coco, we see from her response sincere happiness and deep gratitude. In return, they usually have passionate sex. Despite his bad temper and strange habits (e.g. regularly losing contact with her without explanation), Chen is definitely an attractive marriage candidate for an urban woman, especially in the social environment I described above. So it is not surprising that Coco tries her best, including improving her cooking, to maintain a strong relationship with him. Ironically, the moment she shows her intention of marrying him, Chen loses interest in her, since marriage and love are two different things for him. While he does not mind giving mistresses luxurious presents, he does not take them seriously. The reason he picks up Coco, a flight attendant, as his newest mistress, is simply because he wants to know what a flight attendant looks like after she takes off her professional uniform—an erotic curiosity. The apartment he gives Coco turns out to be a sign of separation: he usually gives mistresses apartments as a kind of compensation when he decides to dump them. In his words, “then nobody owes nobody nothing.” This seemingly fair deal further exemplifies the interchangeability between women and capital: the female is not only the cultural capital of successful and wealthy men, but also commodities that can be discarded or traded in for new ones.
Although the film ends with the tragic death of Chen, which seems to evoke a contemplation on the issue of marital infidelity, the characters and lifestyles presented in this film as a whole show spectators how a successful man looks and acts in contemporary China. Chen’s company, luxury car, luxurious apartment, exquisite lifestyle (emphasized through expensive and dainty food, tea ceremonies, designer clothes such as Burberry, expensive pets such as the Asian arowana, etc.), especially his numerous mistresses and his generous gifts to them, depict the life of China’s new rich, its emerging middle and bourgeois class, in the reform era. As McGrath remarks, “marital infidelity is depicted as an integral part of a lifestyle that is clearly marked as urban, modern, sophisticated, successful, and sometimes featuring an alluring sense of Westernized bohemianism.”

If Chen Jiaqiao can be seen as an incarnation of the “successful personage,” Jiang Zhongtian in Li Shaohong’s *The Door*, by contrast, is a total loser, according to the logic of masculine elites in the reform era. Telling a story about how this pathetic figure struggles in vain in a rapidly changing society and eventually loses everything, *The Door* is not so much a ghost horror movie, as it appears at first glance, but a psychological thriller that explores the disturbed psyche of an individual during China’s social and economic transformation. The film consists of Jiang’s interior monologues, dreams, and delusions, and its fragmentary narrative frequently shifts between past and present. We don’t know much about Jiang’s past, but from the beginning of the film, he

---

is already in a frustrated state: he loses his job, since the publishing company he used to work for goes bankrupt, and he has to enlist help from Hong Yuan 洪原—his old buddy-follower (*mazai* 马仔) from high school, but now a member of the new rich—who just bought the publishing company. What makes matters worse is that Hong apparently harbors a long-unrequited love for Jiang’s girlfriend Wenxin 文馨. The great gap in their current socioeconomic statuses not only evokes Jiang’s psychological imbalance towards Hong, but also gradually drives him into a paranoid state, believing Wenxin will someday cheat of him with Hong. Jiang also suspects that Wenxin has been raped by Li Zuowen 李作文—an old classmate, now a taxi driver—although she denies it. Jiang repeatedly tells Wenxin that the world is full of danger and he is the only one who can protect her. When Wenxin finally cannot stand his over-protection and suspicion any longer, and breaks up with him, Jiang kills her and seals her body in a wall of his apartment so that he can possess her forever (Fig. 2.3).

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 2.3** Fearing losing his girlfriend someday, Jiang kills her and seals her in a wall of his apartment.
Although *The Door* opens with a dedication to Alfred Hitchcock, includes multiple references to his movies, and has resemblance with western horror stories such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat” (1843), it is not a simple copy. As Li Zeng points out, it “creatively uses the male protagonist’s point of view, his voice-over narration, a fragmented narrative structure, and mix of flashbacks and dreams to blur distinctions between illusion and reality, and it gives a poetic sentimentality to the horror of murder.” The film is more than just a thrilling love tragedy with inspirations from both foreign sources and conventional Chinese horror cinema or a portrait of urban youth who struggle with increasing social pressures from work, life, and their peers; it is also an allegory of the politics of gender and the female body in contemporary China. As Dai Jinhua puts it, “in today’s China, capital has evoked and resurged the specter of polygamy. How many women a man can own is proportional to how much power and capital he possesses.”

---

219 Jiang’s obsession with Wenxin and his following her every day resembles Scottie’s obsession with Madeleine in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). The reference to *Rear Window* (1954) is obvious in the scene in which Jiang stands at a light rail station, watching his apartment building through a telescope. A wide-angle shot shows people’s activities in their apartments, together with Jiang’s comments on his neighbors. The first-person voice-over narration, as well as the plot of his sealing girlfriend’s body in a wall recall the first-person narrative of the murderer and his solution of hiding his wife’s body in a wall in “The Black Cat.”

220 Li Zeng, “Horror returns to Chinese Cinema.”

221 The setting of the deserted cemetery, the horrifying, ominous atmosphere over the villas, and plots such as Jiang escaping from the mysterious phantom who seizes his scarf and making his way to the path outside the villa, are also deliberate evocations of conventional Chinese horror cinema, especially Hong Kong horror cinema, such as *A Chinese Ghost Story*, which I analyze in Chapter 4.

222 Dai Jinhua, “Dangxia de xingbie xiangxiang zhong, shenke de cunzai zhe ‘duoqi zhi’youling” [In the current gender imagination, the specter of polygamy still haunts], last modified December 15, 2015, http://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1409159?from=groupmessage&isappinstalled=0. (accessed May 5, 2016)
associated with libidinal possibilities: while a man of wealth and influence can own numerous mistresses, a man with economically inferior status may lose his only wife or girlfriend in the love competition.

The contrast between Hong, a successful entrepreneur and an attractive marriage candidate (a role resembling Chen’s role in *Deadly Delicious*), and Jiang, a sensitive loser (both in terms of career and love), is explicitly visualized in a swimming pool sequence. In that sequence, Hong invites his friends, including Jiang and Wenxin, to his new house, located in the center of the central business district (CBD) of the city. Accompanied by Jiang’s interior monologue (“I will not let anyone win you over”), we first see the spectacular image of a façade and a rooftop swimming pool through aerial shots and long shots, then a medium shot of a crowd of people, and finally a close-up shot of Jiang standing alone, isolated from the crowd, like a stranger. Then Hong shows up and dives into the pool, to the sound of the crowd behind him cheering and women excitedly screaming. When Hong gets up from the pool, opening his arms, like a hero, to welcome Jiang, we see an interesting intersection of both a show of Hong’s socioeconomic achievements (through the pool and the cheering crowd in the background) and a display of his masculinity (through his naked upper body) (see Fig. 2.4). When Hong brags about his success (as he bought “the most expensive area of the city, the CBD of CBD”), Jiang, by contrast, smiles reluctantly. Again, we hear his interior monologue addressed to his girlfriend: “did he also brag this way to you?” What obsesses him is not just a discontent about and hatred toward Hong’s newly-achieved upper-class
status, but also a strong sense of anxiety that Wenxin will be attracted to him, a “man favored by today’s society” (dangjin shehui de chong’er 当今社会的宠儿).

Fig. 2.4 Hong’s success contrasts sharply with Jiang’s failure in the swimming pool sequence

In the following sequences, Jiang seems to be living between the reality and dream/fantasy, in which he not only kills Hong, but is also constantly haunted by Hong’s
ghost. When he wakes up from one nightmare, it is not long before he falls into another. In one dream, he visits Hong’s mountainside villa where he hears Wenxin’s laughter and sees her shoes and clothes at an entryway. Flying into a rage over her adultery, Jiang rushes into the bathroom and stabs Hong to death. In another dream, he fights against and eventually kills Li Zuowen, whom he believes raped Wenxin before, but now lives a better life than he (though only a taxi driver, Li is at least employed). If these two revenge dreams are an imagined catharsis of Jiang’s psyche traumatized by social and economic stratification that realize a “symbolic elimination of the physical evidence of his failure,” then the “kidnapping-plus-rape” dream—in which he is kidnapped by Li, locked into a closet, and forced to watch the entire process of Li’s slapping and raping Wenxin—could be seen as a reflection of his wounded (castrated) masculinity in this changing world (see Fig. 2.5). While providing Jiang with a peculiar hybrid of both masochist voyeuristic pleasure and agony of humiliation, the rape scene mirrors his mental impotence in reality. In other words, as a man without power or capital, Jiang is both deprived of his possession of women (cultural capital) and mentally castrated and hence disqualified as a masculine man. He is no longer a subject who has the right to gaze, in Laura Mulvey’s sense, at the woman, but a bystander who can only peek at her having sex with another man. Even in his own fantasy—a world supposed to be under his

---

223 Li Zeng, “Horror returns to Chinese Cinema.”
224 According to Mulvey, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male in the cinema reproduces a structure of male looking and female “to-be-looked-at-ness,” a binary structure that mirrors the asymmetrical gender power relations operative in the real social world. See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”
full control—he can do nothing but peek at the rape scene and eavesdrop on her moans of mixed pain and pleasure in bed.

Fig. 2.5 In one dream/fantasy sequence, Jiang, a mentally castrated man, has to witness Li raping Wenxin, but can do nothing about it.

Tortured by such an anxiety and paranoia, it is more and more difficult for Jiang to cope with this rapidly changing society.\textsuperscript{225} Jiang once asks Hong how he made his

\textsuperscript{225} A similar anxiety and paranoia is presented in \textit{Black Coal, Thin Ice} (Bairi yanhuo 白日焰火, dir. Diao Yinan 刁亦男, 2014), a crime thriller set in a city in Heilongjiang. In that movie, Liang Zhijun 梁志军, a weighman in a coal mine, when facing the threat of being deprived of his wife Wu Zhizhen 吴志贞, chooses to kill and dismember the rich man, who raped and then had an affair with Wu, a laundry worker. By putting his ID card into the victim’s dismembered body parts, Liang fakes his death and escapes punishment by law, since the police believe the victim to be Liang, due to the lack of DNA technology at that time. In the following years, although Liang has been following his “widow” wife and killing any man with whom she’s sexually involved, he is always rejected by her and cannot even hold her hand.
fortune, and Hong says complacently “I do anything except for killing people,” an answer that seems like an unacceptable joke, but might also tell the truth. The great social and economic transformations China has experienced not only smash conventional rules but also destroy social ethics. Yet while other people have all happily joined the tide of the times (symbolized by the cheering crowd in Hong’s swimming pool party), Jiang, as an idealist, is left behind. The film repeatedly shows Jiang wandering in the street or standing by his apartment window, blankly looking at spectacular skyscrapers, bustling department stores, and elevated trains speeding among high rises. While people are coming and going behind him, he just stands there indifferently, locked in his own little world of loss and frustration (see Fig. 2.6). In this world, Wenxin is perhaps the only cultural capital he can possess, and his tiny apartment is probably the only space where he feels safe and in control. So it is not surprising that he eventually chooses killing her and keeping her body in his apartment as a way to permanently possess her, and thus avoid losing his only capital in this cruel reality.

Fig. 2.6 Jiang feels lost and isolated in this rapidly changing society.
**Femme Fatale and Virtuous Woman: The Monstrous-Feminine in the Horror Cinema of Infidelity**

If the contrast between different male figures—the winners (Chen Jiaqiao, Hong Yuan) and the losers (Jiang Zhongtian)—in the reform era is stark, the contrast between different types of mistresses and wives in the horror cinema of infidelity is equally worth noting for its complex allegorical implications in a patriarchal society. As previously mentioned, the binary of femme fatale and virtuous woman, female characters with opposite feminine attributes, has long been a conventional trope in the patriarchal discourse. The binary can appear in the form of what Gilbert and Gubar call the “monster” and the “angel” in the literary tradition, or what Carol Clover calls the “sexual transgressor” and the “final girl” (“whore”/“virgin”) in the cinematic tradition of the horror genre.

In most cases of the cinema of infidelity, the mistress and the wife, two rivals in a love triangle, are usually designated as femme fatale and virtuous woman, respectively: whereas the former represents the lure of beauty, sexuality, and desire, the latter symbolizes chastity, social norms, and ethics. Such a conventional description can be traced back to pre-modern narratives such as Pu Songling’s “The Painted Skin” and its film adaptations. In Pu’s story and Bao Fong’s film, as I examine in the Introduction, the female ghost and the wife represent two distinct sets of female characteristics. Whereas the pretty, seductive female ghost eventually causes the violent death of the male protagonist, it is his submissive and virtuous wife who gets help from an exorcist (a madman or a Taoist priest) and resurrects him. In Gordon Chan’s 2008 remake of this
film, a similar stereotyped contrast is overtly visualized in two film posters: while the mistress is described as a “pretty fox-spirit” (jiuxiao meihu 九霄美狐), the wife is introduced as a “fearless virtuous wife” (yidan zhenqi 义胆贞妻) (see Fig. 2.7). Although the film is set in imperial China, it is still can be read as a metaphor for marriage and family crisis in contemporary China.

Fig. 2.7 The stereotyped contrast between a femme fatale and a virtuous woman is explicitly showed in the character posters of Painted Skin (2008).

Yet before I move into a close reading of Gordon Chan’s Painted Skin, I first examine Daytime Ghost, another horror film about infidelity made in the 1990s, which serves as a good point of comparison with The Painted Skin in terms of the image of femme fatale. In analyzing these two films, I demonstrate how the resurgent concubine culture in the new millennium shapes and eventually transforms the figure of the femme
fatale from a rebellious subject in the 1990s to a submissive object of patriarchal normality in the 2000s.

*Daytime Ghost* is, at first sight, like a Chinese version of *Les Diaboliques* (dir. Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1955), which tells the story of how a woman and her husband’s mistress conspire to murder the husband. The film begins with the affair between He Baigang 何百钢, a tyrannical manager in a big company, and Lu Jiajia 路佳佳, one of his employees. In order to marry Lu without offending his wife’s family, He decides to murder his wife, A Xue 阿雪. However, Lu unexpectedly informs A Xue about his plan, and convinces her that she has not started an affair with him yet. Hurt by He’s betrayal and malicious plan, A Xue agrees to Lu’s suggestion to teach him a lesson. When He sedates A Xue and drowns her in a bathtub, it seems that everything has gone according to their plans. Then He and Lu drive to a seashore and dump A Xue’s body in the sea. But this is not the start of happily ever after, it’s just the start of a nightmare: haunted by the ghost of A Xue, He gradually becomes extremely fatigued, both physically and mentally, and can no longer manage his company; after entrusting his company to Lu, He is eventually driven insane the next day by the ghost of A Xue and burns himself to death. When the police begin to investigate He’s death, A Xue appears and explains everything to the police: the two women just wanted to teach He a lesson about family values, but never expected that he would really commit suicide.

The character of A Xue basically follows the pattern of a virtuous wife. Although she participates in Lu’s plan to take revenge on her faithless and ruthless husband, she
never thinks about divorcing him. Before Lu tells her about He’s plan, she loves the man with all her heart and cannot believe he would have affairs with other women. In her words, “everything is predestined, I will have to stand it even it is intolerable.” When Lu warns her that He is getting tired of her, her first response is “what is he going to do with me? Will he plan to divorce me?” What deserves our attention is not just her passive attitude in dealing with her husband’s infidelity, but the word she uses in her utterance: instead of using lihun 离婚, the standard term for “divorce,” she uses xiu 休, a word that in pre-modern China referred to husbands divorcing their wives; women, not surprisingly, did not have a corresponding right to divorce their husbands. This word selection demonstrates A Xue’s role as a conventional, submissive woman, an incarnation of virtuous wife.

The role of Lu Jiajia, by contrast, is more complex. She meets every definition of a femme fatale: amorous and seductive, on the one hand, and malicious and deadly, on the other. When she is still He’s mistress, there is a scene, filmed in a bathroom, showing her sensually gazing at and touching her naked body (see Fig. 2.8). Given that this scene occurs in the sequence in which she is preparing herself for sex with He, it easily leads the audience to believe that Lu is just a narcissistic woman, who laments her lost youth and the fact that she can only ever be He’s secret mistress.

226 In imperial China, a man could divorce his wife if she had committed any misconduct of the “seven misconducts for divorce” (qichu 七出), namely, not obedient to the parent(s)-in-law, incapable of bearing sons, adultery, jealousy, [having] severe diseases, excessive gossiping, and theft. There were three conditions, known as “three exceptions” (san buqu 三不去) that forbade a man from ever divorcing his wife even if she committed the above seven sins: the wife has no parental family to return to after divorce, the wife has served three years of filial mourning for deceased parent(s)-in-law, and the husband was poor upon marriage but now wealthy.
Yet as the film progresses, it is revealed that from the very beginning Lu’s aim has been He’s company rather than his love or marriage, and He and his wife are no more than tools helping her to realize her ambition: she first “murders” A Xue with He, then manipulates A Xue’s “haunting” to drive He mad. With the help of A Xue’s testimony, she proves her innocence in He’s death, and eventually takes over his business. The film ends with Lu, dressed in a professional suit, walking into the company with a commanding appearance. The moment she appears at the door, all the employees—exclusively male—stand up, silently greeting her and watching her pass through.
Suddenly, Lu stops, turns back, and takes off her sunglasses. With a calm and cool voice, she asks, “Who smoked? It’s the last warning.” This episode, as well as the mise-en-scène of this sequence are obviously deliberate evocations of an early sequence, in which He arrogantly walks through an office room filled with female employees, and demands to know who is wearing the wrong perfume (he only allows lavender fragrance) (see Fig. 2.9). This satirical twist ending not only parodizes He’s patriarchal tyranny in the company, but also, through Lu’s ban of smoking, allegorically suggests a rejection of social norms defined by the patriarchal authority: in the previous sequence in which Lu was interrogated by the police, almost all the police officers were smoking, symbolic of a masculine lifestyle. While Lu perfectly plays her gender role (a gentle, submissive young lady) in the police station and raises no objection to their behavior, her ban of smoking in the company shows her displeasure and hatred toward such practices. While she is not powerful enough to change the entire patriarchal world, she takes her first steps in her own company.
Fig. 2.9 The ending sequence (bottom) parodies an early sequence (top) in terms of both plots and mise-en-scène, except for the switching gender roles.

Lu’s role is therefore not so much that of the conventional seductress from the Chinese literary or cinematic tradition, but a strong-minded, independent figure resembling film noir female characters, who represent a direct attack on traditional womanhood and the nuclear family and who, according to Janey Place, are “not often won over and pacified by love for the hero, as is the strong heroine of the 40s who is significantly less sexual than the film noir woman.”\(^\text{227}\) Compared with virtuous wives such as A Xue, Lu clearly defies the control of men and rejects the institution of the family. She uses all of her cunning and sexual attractiveness to gain her independence,

and hooks the man into a trap with her power and will. Now, if we rethink the bathroom scene, what Lu is gazing at is not just her sexualized body, but herself as a willful woman with strong agency. As Place argues, “the independence which film noir women seek is often visually presented as self-absorbed narcissism: the woman gazes at her own reflection in the mirror, ignoring the man she will use to achieve her goals.”228 The mirror shot actually reflects her self-interest more than it does her devotion to a man: it is precisely after this scene that Lu begins to complain about her illicit relationship with He and threatens to break with him, which eventually pushes He to make up his mind to kill A Xue. In other words, it is the first domino in Lu’s grand scheme.

If we examine Lu’s image in the genealogy of ambitious women (e.g. unfaithful wife in Nightmare, ambitious mistress in The Foggy House) in the 1990s’ horror cinema that I examined in the first section, we can perhaps draw the conclusion that although women’s sexual autonomy and economic ambition at that time was regarded as a threat to the family order and social norms (especially when they play the role of mother), it is also tolerable and positive in some cases. In Daytime Ghost, Lu never gets arrested or receives any punishment, though some police officers have noticed some suspicious details about He’s death. The last shot of this film is a pan shot of the street view outside Lu’s company, which finally freezes as a low-angle shot of a skyscraper, a symbol of urbanization and upward mobility, as well as Lu’s ambition and success (see Fig. 2.10).

---

228 Ibid., 57.
Fig. 2.10 The last scene of *Daytime Ghost* is a low-angle shot of a skyscraper, a symbol of urbanization and upward mobility.

While the 1990s horror cinema shows an ambivalent attitude toward demonic women, the horror cinema in the new millennium, by contrast, usually repeats the traditional stereotype of the monstrous-feminine, which must be eliminated or assimilated into the patriarchal family structure. Chan’s *Painted Skin* is a good example. Different from Pu Songling’s story or Bao Fong’s movie, Chan’s film is reset in the Han dynasty, and Wang Sheng 王生, the male protagonist, this time around becomes a military general, in contrast to the feeble scholar in the original story. The film begins with Wang’s raid on a bandit camp in the desert, where he rescues a pretty girl named Xiaowei.

---

229 This designation might be inspired by Li Han-hsiang’s *The Ghost Story* (Gui jiaochun 鬼叫春, 1979), a soft-core adaptation of Pu’s “The Painted Skin,” in which Scholar Wang was a general in Tang dynasty in his past life.
小唯，who appears to be a victim of sexual violence, but is actually a fox-spirit who feasts on human hearts to maintain her youthful appearance. ²³⁰

Instead of being purely evil or sympathetic, as is the female ghost presented in the two other film adaptations, Xiaowei is a more complex character in Chan’s film. Like all femme fatales, she is both seductive and malicious. Her deadly sexuality is interwoven with her demonic power, which is best exemplified in the seduction sequences in which she flirts with a man and then rips out and eats his heart the next second. As the film progresses, Xiaowei further shows her strong agency and great intelligence as the monstrous-feminine. With her innocent appearance and humble attitude, she easily wins favor from Wang’s soldiers and becomes irresistible to Wang. As Li Zeng asserts, Xiaowei is “both a fetishized object of the male gaze and a woman with strong agency who dominates every scene in which she appears.”²³¹ The moment she sees Wang for the first time, her gaze toward him reveals her nature as a predator who is not only the desired object of the male gaze, but also a desiring subject with strong powers of volition (see Fig. 2.11).

²³⁰ The reason why the female ghost in Pu’s original story has been turned into a fox-spirit will be analyzed in Chapter 4.
²³¹ Li Zeng, “Painted Skin,” 223.
Wang’s wife Peirong 佩蓉, by contrast, is a traditional virtuous woman in a patriarchal society, who usually appears decent, conservative, and submissive, especially in contrast to Xiaowei’s beauty and sexuality. But it is this seemingly passive Peirong who first has suspicions about Xiaowei’s identity after a series of mysterious murders occur in the city in which the victims all have their hearts dug out. While her husband and other soldiers are easily deceived by Xiaowei’s disguise, Peirong maintains her skepticism and enlists the help of Pang Yong 庞勇, a former general in her husband’s army. With the assistance of Xia Bing 夏冰, a young demon hunter, Pang conducts an investigation and then claims that Xiaowei is a demon. Not surprisingly, Wang refuses to believe the accusation, and Xiaowei cunningly attributes this accusation to Peirong’s
jealousy, and asks them to accept her as Wang’s concubine. Yet Wang refuses, as there is only one Mrs. Wang. The personality traits of these three characters—Peirong’s endurance, Xiaowei’s aggressiveness, and Wang’s indecision between the two women—are all well shown in this sequence (see Fig. 2.12). Similar to Lu Jiajia in *Daytime Ghost*, Xiaowei is a calculating character who clearly understands and exploits the weakness of human nature. On the one hand, she sophisticatedly plays a normative gender role in the patriarchal world (just as Lu Jiajia does in the police station), through which she insidiously takes Peirong’s place in Wang’s everyday life (e.g. helping Wang to take off body armor, hosting a banquet as Wang’s woman, etc.). On the other hand, she takes advantage of Peirong’s kindness to trap her in a dilemma: Xiaowei actively shows her true identity to Peirong and threatens to kill everyone unless Peirong offers up her place as Wang’s wife and takes the blame for the murders. Peirong accepts the deal and is turned into a white-haired demon by Xiaowei. Ironically, it is only at this moment that the indecisive hero makes a choice between the two women: he would rather die with Peirong than be with Xiaowei. Astonished by their love, the heartbroken Xiaowei gives up her essence to resurrect the couple and every dead person she has murdered. As a cost, she sacrifices all the powers she cultivated over thousands of years, and her body dissolves into thin air.\(^{232}\)

\(^{232}\) In Chinese mythology and folklore, a supernatural being usually needs to spend hundreds, even thousands of years to produce the essence, which not only represents its magic power and strength, but also helps it to take on human appearance.
Fig. 2.12 Xiaowei attributes Peirong’s accusation to her jealousy, and asks them to accept her as Wang’s concubine. Yet Wang refuses, as there is only one Mrs. Wang.

Although she resembles Lu Jiajia in many respects, Xiaowei is not as rebellious in terms of challenging the patriarchal order and social norms. She is overwhelmingly the focus both in the narrative and in the film frame, but her ambition and desire is not to subvert the patriarchal order, only to take Peirong’s place in the patriarchal family. In
other words, what she is looking for is to “fit into the traditional feminine role.” The ending sequence demonstrates the victory of patriarchy: Xiaowei chooses self-sacrifice, a feminine virtue represented by virtuous women such as Peirong. As Li Zeng points out, “in self-sacrifice/self-destruction, Xiaowei submits to the traditional world, and completes her transformation from the monstrous-feminine to the traditional-feminine. The tear-jerking melodramatic ending reflects the same ideology: the elimination of the excessive ‘other’—the powerful ghostly femme fatale—is necessary for the return of order.”

Given that Wang’s excuse for rejecting Xiaowei as his concubine (“there is only one Mrs. Wang”) does not make any sense in traditional China, when a man was legally allowed to have numerous concubines, but only one wife, Wang’s struggle between Peirong and Xiaowei is more a reflection of men’s dilemma in today’s China rather than a depiction of a chaste gentlemen of the past. On the one hand, the seemingly happy ending of Painted Skin (the monstrous-feminine disappears, and the couple reunite) shows the modern audience what a wayward husband and a wife who discovers his affair

---

233 Li Zeng, “Painted Skin,” 226.
234 Ibid.
235 In fact, in order to better explore the complex love relationships in contemporary China, Gordon Chan even designs as many as four love triangles in this film: Peirong-Wang-Xiaowei, Wang-Peiromg-Pang Yong, Wang-Xiaowei-Xiaoyi 小易 (a lizard-sprit, who harbors an unrequited love for Xiaowei and helps her to get human hearts to maintain her beauty and youth), and Xia Bing-Pang Yong-Peirong. In Chan’s words, “if The Painted Skin wants to attract young people nowadays, it definitely should contain modern elements. As time has gone by, we have new and open-minded views about many things, especially for those new issues about human, gender relationship, love and marriage. So I came up with [the theme of] love.” See Gordon Chan 陈嘉上 and Gao Qiao 高桥, “Huapi li de ‘yao’ yu xiandai aiqing: Chen Jiashang fangtan” 《画皮》里的“妖”与现代爱情：陈嘉上访谈 [The monster in Painted Skin and the modern love: an interview with Gordon Chan], Dazhong dianying 大众电影 17 (2008): 18.
should do: what helps Peirong win back her husband is her patience, tolerance, and endurance, and what helps Wang solve his quandary is his conscience. In other words, *Painted Skin*, just like many comedy melodramas of recent years (e.g. *Lost on Journey*, *Lost in Hong Kong*, and *Goodbye Mr. Loser*), promotes an ideology that the restoration of family order should be realized through the elimination of the femme fatale (the mistress); during the affair, the wife can do nothing but remain virtuous and patiently wait for the return of her husband’s conscience. As Li Zeng remarks, this film seems to convey a regressive and conservative message that “the sexually liberated and desiring woman is the source of moral degeneration and the traditional feminine is the ideal male companion and the family guardian.” On the other hand, as mentioned previously, Wang’s credulity and irrationality cause him to fail to investigate the murder case and protect local residents, including his soldiers, from brutal murder. He not only has betrayed his wife emotionally, but also seems to have lost the determination and insight he needs as a general. Yet with Xiaowei’s self-destruction, all the dead get resurrected, and no one blames Wang for his past errors, because he was bewitched by the monstrous-feminine; fortunately, she is eliminated, and order is restored. This plot recalls Chinese stereotypes about “femme fatales as disaster water that ruins city and state” (*hongyan huoshui, qingcheng qingguo* 红颜祸水, 倾城倾国), a gender bias that attributes the fall

---

236 *Lost on Journey* (Ren zai jiongtu 人在囧途, dir. Raymond Yip, 2010), *Lost in Hong Kong* (Gang jiong 港囧, dir. Xu Zheng 徐峥, 2015), *Goodbye Mr. Loser* (Xialuo te fannao 夏洛特烦恼, dir. Yan Fei 闫非 and Peng Damo 彭大魔, 2015). This theme is also echoed in Teng Huatao’s horror film *The Matrimony*, in which the husband, who is facing the choice between the aggressive ghost and the virtuous wife, finally chooses the latter.

237 Li Zeng, “Painted Skin,” 231.
of a court or a dynasty to one of the emperor’s women. In Jieyu Liu’s words, “the greedy mistress as the enemy of the people has a long tradition in China.”²³⁸ Ironically, such a tradition is also echoed in the officialdom of today’s China, as Hannah Beech puts it, “in order to explain what has led so many cadres astray, the CCP has justified their actions as a kind of casus bella: given how expensive and demanding mistresses are, it’s almost understandable that officials have bilked the government out of billions of dollars. Thus the blame shifts conveniently from the Communist Party to a female third party.”²³⁹

While Xiaowei dies in her transformation from a monstrous femme fatale to a virtuous woman, there is also an interesting contrary example in which a woman secretly realizes her transformation from a virtuous wife to a femme fatale without being perceived and persecuted by the patriarchal society: Zhang Yibai’s Curiosity Kills the Cat (hereafter Curiosity). Similar to Daytime Ghost, which has a lot of intertextuality with Les Diaboliques, Curiosity appears at first glance like a Chinese adaptation of Fatal Attraction (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1987). The story is set in Chongqing 重庆, a major city in Southwest China, and is narrated by four different characters in a Rashomon style. From the eyes of Momo 陌陌, a young girl working in a photography store located in a luxury apartment complex, one of the residents in this building, John 郑重, has an affair with the owner of a nearby nail salon, Sharon 梁晓霞, and Zheng’s elegant wife Rose 冯千羽 apparently lives an unhappy married life and suffers from a series of unknown attacks

²³⁸ Hannah Beech, “China’s Other Women.”
²³⁹ Ibid.
(e.g. someone dumps red paint on her car and greenhouse). The characters of John, Sharon, and Rose obviously resemble roles of Dan (husband), Alex (mistress), and Beth (wife) in *Fatal Attraction*. Then the story is retold from John’s perspective, through which we learn how he gets involved with Sharon, takes her as his mistress, breaks up with her, and begins to suspect that she is the one stalking him and his family. In the second half of the film, the story is respectively retold again from perspectives of a security guard Liu Fendou 刘奋斗 and Rose, and we eventually learn that everything has been deliberately designed by Rose, who discovered John’s affair and takes revenge on both John and Sharon. While attributing all the attacks to Sharon, John’s anger reaches its peak as he finds that his son is kidnapped. He goes directly to Sharon’s nail salon and kills her. It turns out that all the attacks, including the kidnapping, are manipulated by Rose with the help of Liu, who harbors an unrequited love for her. As Sharon dies, John is arrested for murdering Sharon, and Liu commits suicide after being regarded by the police as the kidnapper, and we are left with Rose’s indifferent, expressionless face. This seemingly vulnerable, gentle, virtuous wife is the final winner of the entire game.

Rose’s English name and her interest in rose gardening, as well as her obsession with *The Bible of Roses* about the “Wars of the Roses” (1455-1487) between Lancaster and York, not only alludes to Eileen Chang’s famous metaphor about stereotyped roles of the wife (the white rose) and the mistress (the red rose) in a man’s heart, but also suggests the incompatibility between the wife and the mistress through her failed attempt to graft
the red rose onto the white rose. In Rose’s words, “[a rose should be] either all red, or all white.” Following this stereotyped description of the mistress and the wife, Curiosity specifically forms a sharp contrast between Sharon and Rose: while the former looks like an ambitious, passionate, sensual woman good at flirting, the latter seems to be a restrained, spotless wife who only focuses on her son and rose gardening. The contrast between the two women in terms of both appearance and life styles easily leads the audience to believe that Sharon is a femme fatale whereas Rose is a virtuous wife (see Fig. 2. 13).

240 “There were two women in Zhenbao’s life: one he called his white rose, the other his red rose. One was a spotless wife, the other a passionate mistress. Isn’t that just how the average man describes a chaste widow’s devotion to her husband’s memory—as spotless, and passionate too? Maybe every man has had two such women—at least two. Marry a red rose and eventually she’ll be a mosquito-blood streak smeared on the wall, while the white one is ‘moonlight in front of my bed’. Marry a white rose, and before long she’ll be a grain of sticky rice that’s gotten stuck to your clothes; the red one, by then, is a scarlet beauty mark just over your heart.” See Eileen Chang, “Red Rose, White Rose,” in Love in a Fallen City, trans. Karen S. Kingsbury (New Penguin Books, 2007), 255.
Fig. 2. The sharp contrast between Sharon (top) and Rose (bottom).

However, one of the biggest ironies of Curiosity precisely lies in the floating and shifting roles of the femme fatale and the virtuous woman: whereas Sharon is seen by her man, as well as the audience, as a symbol of the femme fatale who should be eliminated, and Rose is seen as a virtuous wife who should be protected and valued (as John and Momo feel), it turns out that Sharon is a “good woman” who purely and passionately

\[\text{241 The scarlet sofa Sharon is sitting on not only symbolizes her sexuality, but also incarnates her ambition for upward mobility. As she tells John, although this sofa is expensive and cost all her savings, she bought it without hesitation, simply because she likes it. In her words, “in this shabby room, there must be at least one thing belonging to me. I can eat or sleep on it, or do (gan 千) whatever I want to do.” When John teases her with a pun: “Do you just want to fuck (gan 千) [on it]?” Sharon seriously answers: “I want a lot of things. It’s just the beginning.” Ironically, it is also on this sofa that John eventually kills her. The sofa hence becomes a witness of both Sharon’s failures in love and upward mobility.}\]
loves John and never does anything to hurt his interests, whereas Rose is a malicious wife and monstrous mother who does not mind seducing another man or kidnapping her own son in order to realize her revenge. If *Fatal Attraction* can be read as a response to the marriage crisis in the U.S.—it warns faithless men about the potential danger of having affairs and provides a method of reuniting the broken family through fighting against the same enemy (which is actually echoed in Chan’s *Painted Skin*)—*Curiosity* debunks such fairy tales in an inexorable, paranoiac way.

As Dai Jinhua recalls, a Taiwanese scholar named Zhang Xiaohong told her that the most popular tabloid and TV dramas in Taiwan are always stories about “wives and concubines;” and Dai feels it is the same in the mainland, as the commercial success of *Empresses in the Palace* (*Zhenhuan zhuan* 甄嬛传), a 2011 TV drama series about imperial love rivalries (*gongdou* 宫斗) between the emperor’s wife and concubines, demonstrated. In Dai’s opinion, the reason why this TV drama could be commonly accepted and favored by different social strata, especially female spectators, is precisely because “the traditional polygamy structure still exists in the mass psychology.”

Compared with the politics of the female body as capital and accessories for successful men (as examined in the previous section), women’s self-identification with the conventional gender roles and their agreement on the patriarchal game rules—such as love rivalries between the wife and the mistress (*qiqie zhengchong* 妻妾争宠), viewing the mistress as the only enemy, yet completely ignoring the husband’s fault—is more

---

242 Dai Jinhua, “Dangxia de xingbie xiangxiang zhong, shenke de cunzai zhe ‘duoqi zhi’youling.”

180
dangerous for women in today’s China. Just as *Curiosity* demonstrates, the confrontation between the wife and the mistress is never just the war between two women (as *Fatal Attraction* or *Painted Skin* show), but a contention between men and women competing for agency and discursive power in the social and cultural sphere of a patriarchal society.

**Conclusion**

As examined in this chapter, the dramatic social and economic changes China has experienced in the past three decades have brought about abundant tensions and contradictions in people’s everyday lives and in their living space. Reconfigurations of space and power in cities have turned family space into a new site of horror. The horror cinema, in this sense, provides what McGrath calls “fable-like narratives of the moral dilemmas confronted by protagonists facing dramatic change in personal economics as well as libidinal possibilities in the reform era.”243 Through a close reading of several horror films on the theme of marital infidelity in the past two decades, this chapter examines how women’s desire and sexual autonomy (represented by unfaithful wives) was presented in both mainland and Hong Kong horror cinema of the 1990s as the origin of family tragedies, and how the issue of male infidelity stands out in the horror cinema in the new millennium, when traditional concubine culture is evoked by the new state ideology in the reform era and “keeping a second wife” has become a common threat to family structures and social ethics in Greater China. This chapter also analyzes how the

---

female body is presented as both cultural capital/accessories of successful men and commodities that can be easily purchased, as well as how the specter of concubine culture shapes and eventually transforms the figure of the femme fatale from a rebellious subject to a submissive object. Yet with the roles of the femme fatale and the virtuous woman constantly shifting, the confrontation between the two also eventually undermines the patriarchal ideology in China today. Therefore, while Rose has to disguise herself as a virtuous woman to achieve her goal, and with the death of the only witness of her crime (the security guard Liu), the dark side of her nature will be hidden forever from the public and her family, the union between the wife and the mistress in Daytime Ghost and Deadly Delicious provides another possibility for the female to struggle out from under the oppression of the patriarchal mechanism.

As McGrath points out, “the trope of adultery, a behavior that embodies both the allure of exhilarating new desires and the ethical dangers inherent in their pursuit, is an ideal vehicle for conveying the ambiguities of the reform era itself.” The swamp of lust, the liberation of desire, betrayal and murder, life and death—these popular themes and recurrent episodes in the horror cinema of infidelity not only echo some of contemporary China’s own problems (such as corruption, worship of money, social unrest, decadence, and morality), but also reveal a pre-modern specter: “the specter of polygamy” that haunts “people’s imagination about family and gender,” as Dai Jinhua puts it. Commenting on Lou Ye’s Mystery (Fucheng mishi 浮城谜事, 2012), a crime film

---

244 Jason McGrath, Postsocialist Modernity, 125.
about the love rivalry between a wife and a mistress, Dai asserts: “Lou Ye has captured a kind of reality in Chinese society: the premodern logic can evoke the authority of the specter of the patriarchy.” The peculiar confluence between global capitalism and China’s pre-modern patriarchal system eventually shapes a new form of patriarchy—capitalist patriarchy—in which all the vulnerable groups, including the female and the loser, are always marginalized in and excluded from society, as I discuss in the next chapter.

---

245 Dai Jinhua, “Dangxia de xingbie xiangxiang zhong, shenke de cunzai zhe ‘duoqi zhi’youling.”
CHAPTER 3: PHANTOM OF THE CITY:
SOCIAL STRATIFICATION, ALIENATION, AND AMBIGUOUS OTHERS

In a beautiful world,
I wish I was special,
But I’m a creep, I’m a weirdo.
What the hell am I doing here?
I don’t belong here.

—Radiohead “Creep” (1992)

Introduction

As the previous chapter has shown, the dramatic social and economic changes China have experienced in the past three decades has brought about abundant tensions and contradictions in people’s everyday lives, including in love, marriage, and family. Along with those economic and social transformations is a state-promoted, collective obsession with what resembles, in many aspects, the “American dream”—“expectations of boundless opportunity and upward mobility, of acceptance and inclusion in a supposedly classless society, the potential for sudden economic transformation and the nirvana of endless consumption.”\(^{246}\) However, just as horror entertainment is the only place that the American dream “is permitted to perish,”\(^{247}\) as David J. Skal asserts, what Chinese horror cinema of the new millennium reveals is a manic world sickened by the pursuit of


\(^{247}\) Ibid., 354.
material wealth and fraught with what Skal describes as “disenfranchisement, exclusion, downward mobility, a struggle-to-the-death world of winners and losers,” and reversed image of family, “a sick joke,” whose “house [is] more likely to offer siege instead of shelter.”

In those movies, we not only see the politics of gender (in which the female is objectified and commodified as cultural capital and accessories of the male, and the monstrous-feminine must be regulated or eliminated to restore the patriarchal order, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter), but also a kind of social Darwinism, according to which, losers in the social and economic stratification such as Jiang Zhongtian in *The Door* and Liu Fendou in *Curiosity Kills the Cat* (hereafter *Curiosity*), are regarded as the “Others” that threaten social harmony, and hence should be excluded and purged from the community of the promising Self. In addition, the urban setting and plots centered around middle class families in those horror movies, not only demonstrate the link between the horror genre and the rise of the bourgeoisie and class conflicts, as scholars such as James Twitchell and Mark Jancovich claim, but also symbolize a collective imagination of and social anxiety about the dramatic urban transformation taking place in mainland China.

While the previous chapter is an examination of Chinese horror cinema from a gender perspective, this chapter is a study from the class perspective, paying special

---

248 Ibid.
attention to the representation of urban space and social stratification in Chinese horror cinema of the new millennium. Through close readings of *The Door, Curiosity*, and *Home Sweet Home* (Guaiwu 怪物, dir. Pou-Soi Cheang 郑保瑞, 2005), the first section of this chapter examines how reconfigurations of space and power turn living space into a site of horror in a time of social and spatial transformations. By exploring the relationship between characters and the urban setting in films such as Li Shaohong’s *Baober in Love* (Lian’ai zhong de baobei 恋爱中的宝贝, 2004) and Guo Hua’s *Variant* (Yizhong 异种, 2015), the second section delineates the politics of the global-urban imagination in contemporary China and analyzes the alienation of urbanization in China. On the one hand, with the perpetual cycle of demolition and construction in China’s urbanization process, there is a growing sense of alienation between people and their living space. The urban fabric that sustains a familiar relationship between space and its dwellers is under constant destruction and disruption to a level that even the native residents are left feeling strangers in their own cities. On the other hand, in an information age fraught with the material tokens and cultural icons of modernity, people are less and less able to communicate; instead, as the privatization of housing offers people more privacy in their living spaces and technology dominates people’s lives, they are increasingly isolated from each other.
Urban Horror: Reconfigurations of Space and Power

As mentioned previously, all the movies examined in chapter 2 have urban settings, among which The Door, Curiosity, and Deadly Delicious coincidentally all set their stories in Chongqing, a major city in Southwest China and one of China’s five National Central Cities. As an epitome of China’s fast modernization, Chongqing is well known not only for its rapid urbanization (e.g. dense skyscrapers, advanced transportation system, etc.) in the past two decades, but also for its special climate and geography. The city is crisscrossed by two rivers and mountains, and is shrouded in mist and cloud all year round. While mist lends a special hazy and mysterious atmosphere to the city, where, as Li Shaohong puts it, “anything can happen, as it is full of suspense,” its unique geography gives the urban space a changeable quality that can appear different depending on one’s location. In Li’s words, “architecture in Chongqing has a unique feature that cannot be seen in any other places: [those hillside buildings] are constructed based on the shape of mountains and have several levels horizontal to the street. Either the fourth floor or the twelfth floor can offer access to the street.” The diversity of the city terrain “makes it easier,” as Li puts it, “for film shooting to create diversity within

---

250 So Chongqing is also known as the “mountain city” (shancheng 山城) and the “fog city” (wudu 雾都).
the frame, and therefore better fit the horrific atmosphere of the film;” it also embodies social stratification in the form of the urban space. Here, the urban environment is portrayed as a stratified space, literally and allegorically, where winners and losers in the social and economic transformations encounter each other and clash.

In *The Door*, Hong Yuan not only owns a big executive office and a luxury apartment with rooftop swimming pool located in the CBD, but also has a private mountainside villa, whereas Jiang Zhongtian lives in a tiny apartment. The space owned by Hong is not only a symbol of his “new rich” identity, but also a display of his superior social position. In the opening sequence, for instance, when Jiang goes to meet Hong to talk about his job, we first see an elevated train passing by, then a close-up shot of a golf club addressing a golf ball that has been teed up. Then the film cuts to Jiang entering the room, whose face almost hit by a flying golf ball. From Jiang’s perspective, we see Hong practicing golf, a game popular among the new rich class, framed against a big wall of picture windows, beyond which a speeding train is passing by (see Fig. 3.1). This POV shot not only tactically associates Hong with the open urban space, the speed of modern transportation, and a privileged lifestyle, but also suggests Hong’s superior position and condescending attitude toward Jiang: throughout their conversation, he continues to take swings, indifferent to that fact that the balls nearly hit Jiang on several occasions.

---

253 Li Shaohong, “Li Shaohong men Chongqing xuan jing, bupa yu Zhang Yimou zhuangche.”
Fig. 3.1 As a winner in the social transformation, Hong leisurely practices golf in his office.

While Hong shows his adaptability to the rapidly changing society and material trappings of modernity, Jiang, by contrast, seems to be incompatible with the modern city. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the film repeatedly shows Jiang wandering in the street or standing by his apartment window, blankly looking at spectacular skyscrapers, bustling department stores, and trains speeding among high rises (see Fig. 3.2). The recurrent image of the high-speed elevated train in these sequences is not just a symbol of modern transportation, but also a symbolic extension of urban space, as well as an icon of modern life style. The rail lines are just like the blood vessels of the city and the trains the blood coursing through them. The high-speed train per se is not only a metaphor of the fast pace of modern life, but also an epitome of a rapidly changing China. Jiang’s inability to fit into this rapidly changing society eventually leads to his tragic death.
In the ending sequence of *The Door*, chased by the police who have found Wenxin’s corpse, Jiang wanders through the crowd near a busy intersection. He walks out onto the street and suddenly stops in the middle where he is hit by a speeding truck. The camera then begins to fluidly shift between first-person POV and objective perspectives: through the former, we see a rotated and reversed world from Jiang’s eyes, whereas through the latter, we see his body flying and somersaulting in the air, and hear his interior monologue: “I have never been so relaxed and it’s so comfortable. Everything is over. Wenxin, I just didn’t want you to leave me.” Accompanied by melodious music, Jiang flies higher and higher, eventually dissolving into the sky (see Fig. 3.3). This surrealistic presentation recalls the heroine’s flying out of the window in *Baober in Love,*
a mystery/thriller movie directed by Li Shaohong. When Baober feels suffocated by her newly decorated “modernized” home, she simply flies out the window and into the sky, in what is apparently a dream/fantasy (see Fig.3.4). Their flying like birds is not only an irony of modern urban life in the concrete jungle where people are in fact no more than “caged birds” (jiniao, 鞘鸟), but also an imagined catharsis of the anxiety that has long tortured them. Not until that moment does Jiang relax for the first time and enjoy the urban landscape: a topsy-turvy world with flashing neon lights all around.

Fig. 3.3 Jiang somersaults in the air and dissolves into the sky in a surrealistic way.
Fig. 3. 4 In her dream/fantasy, Baober flies out of the window and into the sky.

Seen from another perspective, the surrealist ending is the director’s sympathetic (albeit self-deceiving) solution to Jiang’s quandary: isn’t Jiang’s ascent into the sky, where he finally overlooks the whole city, an ironic realization of the upward mobility he fails to achieve in reality? As Li Shaohong’s original plan for Hong Yuan’s office shows, the height of the space one is located in is proportional to the capital and power one possesses: Hong’s office, in her original plan, was supposed to be located in “a luxury high-rise office building that overlooks the city, somewhere like ‘New York New York’ in Chongqing.”254 It was only because that building was still under construction when she was shooting The Door that Li gave up on that plan. The ending of The Door seems to

254 See Li Shaohong’s blog, “Dianying men da jiemi: Hong Yuan beisha xianchang” 电影《门》大揭秘——洪原被杀现场 [The exposure of The Door’s secret: imitating the crime scene of Hong Yuan’s being killed], last modified January 20, 2007, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_49cad4dc010006uq.html. (accessed May 20, 2016). “New York New York” an office building with a height of 228 meters, was the third highest building in Chongqing, when Li was filming The Door.
suggest that it is only in death that upward mobility is achieved, an irony that underlines the notion that upward mobility is no more than a “fantasy” of the neoliberal economy.

A similar projection of social stratification onto space is explicitly portrayed in *Curiosity*. While John and Rose, the upper middle class couple, live in a luxury penthouse with a rooftop greenhouse overlooking the city, Momo and Sharon run their small businesses on the first floor of this apartment complex, and Liu Fendou, the security guard, works and lives in its underground garage. The high-rise apartment building per se becomes the best incarnation of class differences and social stratification in China today, which, to an extent, recalls the spatialization of social stratification in Republican-era films such as *Street Angel* (Malu tianshi 马路天使, dir. Yuan Muzhi 袁牧之, 1937) and *Crows and Sparrows* (Wuya yu maque 乌鸦与麻雀, dir. Zheng Junli 郑君里, 1949), which were made in an era characterized by “class oppression.” 255 Ironically, such a hierarchy in social space has revived in postsocialist China. *Curiosity* repeatedly shows Liu standing in the shadow of the building, thirstily looking up at Rose’s gleaming crystal greenhouse filled with beautiful roses (see Fig. 3.5). To him, the greenhouse is not only a castle where his princess lives, but a symbol of social and economic success. Like hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in the reform era who leave their hometowns to work in big cities for greater opportunity and better lives, Liu comes to Chongqing and gets a job as a security guard. As his name “Fendou” (奋斗, literally means “struggle for

---

255 The opening scene of *Street Angel* is a pan shot of a skyscraper down to the lower depths of society underground. In *Crows and Sparrows*, there is also a hierarchy in the social space of the house.
[success]”) suggests, Liu is an ambitious man who believes in upward mobility and dreams of becoming successful one day in this metropolis. Yet without a clear position in society, he appears detached from the existing social system, belonging neither to rural nor urban society.

![Liu looks thirstily up at Rose’s greenhouse.]

On the one hand, it seems that Liu readily accepts his identity as a security guard and clearly knows the rules for such a job. When Momo asks him whether he has ever been inside any of the apartments, he answers: “I have been in a few times, when I help
to deliver heavy items such as bottled water. We are required to go in and come out quickly without looking around or touching anything. It is a rule for security guards.” He clearly knows the class differences between the apartment residents and working class people like he and Momo, and he warns the girl: “You are too curious. They are them, we are us.” When blamed and humiliated by John, Rose’s husband, for his neglect of duty in protecting Rose’s car, he humbly apologizes over and over again. On the other hand, contrary to his warning for Momo, however, Liu himself is curious about lives of the residents in this luxury apartment building who belong to the rising stratum of the urban bourgeoisie in postsocialist China, especially the life of the mysterious woman Rose. When he comes across her scratching her car and then dumping red paint on it, and then pretending to be scared and hysterical, he chooses to keep silent and take the blame from John. This shared secret between him and Rose pulls them closer together, in a sense, despite the big gap in their economic levels and social statuses. As the film progresses, Liu gets more and more infatuated with Rose and is inevitably drawn into her revenge plot. Their conspiracy against Rose’s husband recalls The Postman Always Rings Twice (dir. Tay Garnett, 1946, hereafter The Postman), a film noir in which a married woman and a drifter fall in love, then conspire to murder her husband. Yet compared with the passionate romance between the heroine and the drifter in The Postman, the relationship between Rose and Liu is more complex. Liu succumbs not only to Rose’s sexual temptation, but also the social status she symbolizes. In other words, his sexual desire for Rose is a kind of libidinal manifestation of his desire for upward social mobility, and this
woman from the upper middle class is the best object on which he can project his intertwined desires and ambitions. Rose, by contrast, regards Liu more like a pawn in her grand scheme, though she is also sexually attracted to him. In one scene, after John is arrested for murdering Sharon, Rose asks Liu to take charge of kidnapping her son to cover her crime; when Liu agrees, he forces her to kiss him. Although appearing resistant at first, she later passionately kisses him back. Yet in most scenes in the film in which Liu wants to get close to her, she responds with ridicule and rejection. The encounter between them is therefore not just a game between an obsessed man and a seductive woman, but a form of class struggle: a confrontation between a member of the lower class struggling to move up and a member of the upper middle class trying to maintain her current status.

In one sequence, Rose asks Liu to dump paint on her rooftop greenhouse, and Liu asks for a thousand yuan as compensation. Such an amount is petty for a rich woman like Rose, yet big money for a security guard like Liu. When Liu carefully counts the bills Rose gives him, she ridicules him (see Fig. 3.6). When he later puts the bills in his pocket and fumbles for something to say, coming up with “[if you] walk along this river, you can arrive at my hometown,” what he gets in return is just Rose’s cold glance and indifference.
Fig. 3.6 Rose hires Liu to dump red paint on her greenhouse, and ridicules Liu’s habit of counting bills.

In another sequence, when Liu notices that Rose has purchased more paint with which to launch another “attack,” he tries to stop her, but fails. Rose would like to pay him two thousand yuan this time and warns him: “Don’t forget, you are just a security guard.” With the elevator door closing in front of him, Liu sees his own image in the mirror-like door—a man dressed in a security guard uniform—which seems to remind him of his identity and the social stratum he belongs to (see Fig. 3.7).
Fig. 3.7 Liu sees himself in the mirror-like elevator door, which reminds him of his identity as a security guard.

However, Rose’s warning does not succeed in restraining Liu; instead, it provokes a strong rebellious attitude and stirs his ambitions to bridge the gap between them. When Rose pays him at the door of her apartment, Liu bursts into her home, where he temporarily indulges in the feeling of being the owner of this luxury apartment and being her husband: he not only asks Rose to make coffee for him (“in a coffee maker,” rather than mere instant coffee) and sits on her bed (gently touching the bed sheet as if it were her skin), but also demands that she change into another dress (simply because he feels the one she is wearing is not pretty) and gazes at her in a mirror as she changes. If the previous deal between them still follows the rules of this stratified society—Rose pays, and he works for her—then Liu’s intruding into a prohibited space undoubtedly represents a transgression of boundaries. Though at first astonished and impatient with Liu’s impertinence, Rose later appears cooperative, even submissive, mostly because she needs his help, but also because his male gaze satisfies her desire and vanity as a woman.
who has been neglected by her own husband for such a long time. However, after she has fulfilled all his wishes, and Liu still lingers in her home, slowly counting bills one by one, Rose can’t help ridiculing his despicable habits and finally driving him out of her home. If the ridicule hints at a kind of class differences (since only poor people need to count such “a little amount of money” bill by bill), her driving him out of her space can be seen as a restoration of the social hierarchy and class normality. Liu flies into a rage and pushes her against the wall, roaring: “You pay me, I work for you! We are equal! Don’t play around with me!” (Fig. 3.8). This statement is rather lame, because the “fair” deal between him and Rose actually suggests a power structure in the employment relationship: while he may think they are equal, to Rose he is no more than a person selling cheap labor, a pawn in her grand scheme. It is not long before Liu eventually realizes this, and commits suicide in desperation.
Fig. 3.8 After temporarily enjoying the feeling of being the owner of this luxury apartment and Rose’s husband, Liu is disillusioned and offended by Rose’s scornful attitude.

The last scene of this pathetic figure is of him standing by the roof’s edge, besieged by the police and abandoned by Rose, desperately overlooking the bustling metropolis shrouded in mist. The film does not directly show him jumping off the building, but suggests it through the responses of the police and the crowd of spectators who had gathered below. Then the camera cuts to a high-rise building through a low-angle shot, in which we see an elevator quickly going up and down. It somehow symbolizes Liu’s fate: his pursuit of upward mobility eventually turns out to be a joke of downward mobility. The last scene in this sequence is an extreme high-angle long shot of the city before a storm, with dark clouds moving in over the entire city, symbolically suggesting a kind of
doomsday. The city is no longer the home of bright dreams; rather, it is a place as dark and terrifying as hell (see Fig. 3.9). Liu’s dream of upward mobility, just like Rose’s greenhouse, turns out in the end to be nothing more than a castle in the air.

Fig. 3.9 Liu commits suicide by jumping off the high-rise building.

Liu’s tragedy demonstrates once again the politics of possession of the female body as examined in the previous chapter: while men with wealth and power can easily
possess numerous women, including women from the lower class, men with economically inferior status, by contrast, are not allowed to covet women, especially those from a higher class. As the film title “Curiosity Kills the Cat” suggests, Liu eventually pays the price for his curiosity and forbidden desire for the world he is not supposed to enter. His sexual frustration parallels his failure to achieve upward mobility in a cruel world. *Curiosity* in this regard is not just a story about men and women, love and betrayal, but an allegory about class differences and social stratifications in contemporary China.

If *Curiosity* implicitly satirizes the “dream of upward mobility” promoted by the new neoliberal ideology through a sentimental love story, *Home Sweet Home* (hereafter *Home*), a Hong Kong-mainland co-produced horror film, explicitly and vehemently displays social stratification and class conflicts. The film begins with a middle-class family—architect Ray, his wife May, and their three-year-old son Zilu—moving into their new home, an apartment they just bought through mortgaged loans. One day, May takes Zilu to a neighbor kid’s birthday party. Just as she turns her attention away for

---

256 The theme of forbidden desire is later echoed in other horror movies such as *Midnight Garage* (Sangeng cheku 三更车库, dir. Zhou Yuwu 周耀武, 2014) and *A Chilling Cosplay* (Zhifu 制服, dir. Wang Guangli 王光利, 2013). In *Midnight Garage*, a security guard, like Liu in *Curiosity*, is infatuated with a female resident of the apartment building he is working in. In order to get her, he manipulates a series of mysterious events and even kills other people. *A Chilling Cosplay* somehow recalls *Carrie* (1976) in terms of the killer’s traumatized adolescence: the serial killer in *A Chilling Cosplay* also suffers humiliations and insults from his classmates that eventually turn him into a psychotic serial killer. As a timid boy from a poor family, the killer attended a top private high school for which his family had spent all their savings. In that school, he dreamed of becoming a rich man some day and harbored an unrequited love for a pretty middle class girl. Yet his hopes and future were ruined by her and her friends, who not only teased and humiliated him, but also falsely accused him of sexual harassment, resulting in his expulsion from school. Similar to Liu’s fate in *Curiosity*, the killer’s sexual frustration is parallel with his loss in the chance for upward mobility. So several years later, he comes back and takes revenge on those ruthless girls.
a brief moment to chat with the new neighbors, Zilu, who is playing outside with the other kids, disappears without a trace. After several futile searches for Zilu in the apartment complex, the police give up and begin to view May as a troublemaker who wastes their time and obstructs their regular work, because she frequently goes to the police station with her new findings from her search and asks for more help. May’s insistence on finding the lurking “monster” who has abducted Zilu also disturbs other residents in the apartment building who feel her paranoid search will turn their building into a well-known “haunted building” thus reducing its resell value in the market. As both the police and neighbors regard her as insane and refuse to offer more help, and Ray is attacked by the mysterious “monster” during an earlier search and falls into a coma, May is forced to continue the search alone. As the film progresses, it turns out that the “monster” is a deformed woman named Yan Hong 阎红, who lived with her family in the location of the apartment complex years ago when it was still a squatters’ area. When the city government tried to reclaim the area, the poor residents, including Yan’s family, initiated a riot against the police, during which Yan’s husband was accidentally killed in an explosion. Though the government successfully cleared out the squatters, Yan would return there with her son, who was later killed by falling debris while looking for food. This barrage of blows eventually drove Yan insane, who abducts Zilu as her own child. As the film’s Chinese title “Guaiwu” (literally, the “monster”) suggests, Yan becomes a monster lurking in every hidden corner of the expansive and labyrinthine compound: air ducts, ventilation shafts, elevator shafts, water tanks, sewers, the garbage center, and the
like (see Fig. 3.10). The film over and over again shows how she deftly crawls through the maze-like air ducts through which she can sneak into any apartment she wishes.

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 3. 10 Yan lurks in every hidden corner of the expansive and labyrinthine compound.

If the working-class characters in *Curiosity*, like Momo, Sharon, and Liu, still own their limited space in the city, Yan in *Home* is a homeless phantom who has been completely deprived of any rights, including the right to have one’s own space. Her deformed appearance and hauntings somehow recall protagonists in *Song at Midnight* and *The White-Haired Girl*, who have been turned into living ghosts by the old society. Given that this film was shot and is set in Hong Kong, its violation of the “human/ghost” trope (“the old society turned human beings into ghosts, whereas the new society turns ghosts into human beings”) and its depiction of the clash between the police and protesters is thus tolerable to Chinese censors. Yet the real-life background to the story is of course nothing new to ordinary mainland audiences, for whom clashes between the
government and residents over demolition of homes is a commonplace occurrence in China’s urbanization. While Yan’s husband is accidently killed in a gas explosion, some people in reality burn themselves to death to protest demolition.\textsuperscript{257}

However, it is not fair to say that Yan’s kidnapping Zilu is an intentional act of revenge on those who have “usurped” her former home, since she mistakes Zilu for her own son, caring for and loving him as a devoted mother. As for May, a middle-class homemaker, she and her husband get a loan of 4.5 million Hong Kong dollars to buy their apartment. As the film’s English title suggests, this typical nuclear family simply dreams of starting a good life in their new “home sweet home,” yet little do they know that they have entered the jaws of hell. The unfortunate experience of this family is almost as pitiable as Yan’s miserable life. If Yan tries to rebuild her past “sweet home” through the possession of Zilu, May also resolutely defends her family. The clash between Yan and May therefore is not just a battle for a child between two mothers, but also a confrontation between different social classes.

As Victoria E. Thompson points out for a different urban context, “as the middle class sought to define its place within a social hierarchy in transition, attention to urban space took on a new dimension.”\textsuperscript{258} Though few Chinese urban residents had private space in the Mao era, usually living in a public housing system and sharing space with


neighbors of their work units (danwei 单位), the housing reform and ensuing privatization and marketization of properties since the 1990s, help to shape the identity of China’s rising urban bourgeoisie. Meanwhile, reconfigurations of space and power also become the source of terror and the origin of abjection, in Julia Kristeva’s sense, because horror films typically involve the violation of boundaries, including the penetration of personal space. As Barry Keith Grant remarks, “one cannot fear the violation of the boudoir’s privacy until one has attained the capital to acquire a room of one’s own.”

Fear of the home—a private heaven that is supposed to be safe and secure—being intruded on by strangers might be one of the most typical bourgeois nightmares, one that has been repeatedly presented in Western horror cinema. While China’s housing reforms have helped many urban residents gain privacy through the acquisition of private property, the private living space can also become a site of horror because it is isolated from familiar forms of social communities.

Although the story in *Home* is set in Hong Kong, mainland audiences, who are mostly urban residents, can easily share the same fears as Hong Kong filmgoers. One of the scariest scenes in the movie occurs when May is nervously looking for the intruder

---

259 According to Kristeva, the abject marks a “primal order” that escapes signification in the symbolic order. This term is used to refer to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by boundary violations and the loss of the distinction between subject and object, or between the self and the other. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.


in her apartment, and Yan suddenly appears from the darkness and grabs her by the throat. With the frame divided into two halves by the two figures, we hear both Yan’s roaring and May’s screaming (see Fig. 3.11). While Liu Fendou’s intrusion into Rose’s home in *Curiosity* is to an extent tolerable because of their “business” relationship, Yan’s sneaking into May’s home and her ensuing attack is shocking and thrilling, with the two individuals from conflicting social strata directly confronting each other in the same space. If we reexamine the beginning of *Home*, we notice that such a confrontation is indicated as early as in the opening credits, in which we see intercutting between the violent past when protesters clashed with the police and the peaceful present when May’s family happily moves into their new home.

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 3.11 The clash between Yan (left) and May (right) is not just a battle for a child between two mothers, but also a confrontation between different social classes.

However, although *Home* forms a stark contrast between May and Yan in terms of their class differences, it also links the two women through a kind of feminist bond.
May is suffering exactly what Yan experienced earlier: losing husband and son, family ruined, driven away by the police, and treated by others as insane. In this regard, May can be seen as Yan’s doppelganger in a patriarchal society. In the final sequence, Yan eventually realizes that Zilu is not her son, who has died long ago, and sees a vision of her dead husband, begging her to let go of their “home” that no longer exists. While May and her son embrace at the end, Yan jumps off the rooftop to her death, wanting to reunite with her family in the afterlife. The film ends with Zilu’s question “Mom, would you abandon me?”, in response to which both May and Yan can be heard saying, “Of course not, not even if you abandon me.” As such, a violent story that involves intense class conflict is turned into a tender fable about family love, especially mother’s love. A mainland advertising poster for the film reads: “[When] an invisible horror is unscrupulously grasping the human heart, does the influence of family love (qingqing 亲情) really have incredible magic power?” (see Fig.3.12). Home seems to suggest that such affection can overcome the horror and resentment inherent in class conflicts.
Fig. 3.12 A poster of *Home* suggests that affection can overcome the horror and resentment inherent in class conflicts.

If the cinematic portrait of the “successful personage” in contemporary China, as McGrath puts it, “hides a reality of growing class differences and income disparities,” then the description of losers in the three movies I have examined above, reveal, by contrast, the other side of the reality of contemporary China. Jiang in *The Door* was at

---

once time a successful person in society, who may have been a top student in school and later got a decent job (as an editor in a publishing company), and Hong, a member of the new rich, used to be his buddy in their youths. Yet Jiang is gradually left behind by the tide of the times and falls into a vulnerable situation. Liu in *Curiosity* is a member of the working class, an ambitious figure who dreams of realizing upward mobility, but he eventually fails in the cruel reality of the market economy. Yan in *Home* also comes from the lower stratum, but she is satisfied with her current family life and has no ambitions for upward mobility. However, her small living space and her humble life are still constantly being squeezed, smashed, and eventually destroyed. Despite different life trajectories, these characters are all losers whose low status is projected, both literally and allegorically, onto their living spaces: Jiang lives in a tiny apartment; Liu lives in an underground garage; and Yan can only lurk in the utility bowels of the apartment complex.

As losers in this society, they are all portrayed as characters with paranoia—Jiang fears losing his girlfriend, Liu is obsessed with Rose and the upward mobility she represents, Yan insists on maintaining a “sweet home” that no longer exists—and have, without exception, committed crimes that violate law and social norms (Jiang kills his girlfriend to permanently possess her, Liu kidnaps Rose’s kid thus causing John’s murder of Sharon, and Yan abducts May’s son and almost kills Ray). In other words, they are pathetic and despicable characters who have been mistreated by a cruel reality and who hurt others as a result. All three films end with the deaths of the loser/ violator and a
restoration of the order. It seems that no matter what these losers try, they can do nothing to change their situations; all their efforts and struggles turn out to be futile. The three characters all commit suicide in an outdoor setting, a wider and more open space compared with their shabby living spaces (Jiang allows himself to be killed in a traffic accident, while Liu and Yan jump off buildings to their deaths). On the one hand, their suicides may be seen to be forms of resistance to authority and normality, because they refuse to surrender when being chased or besieged by the police. On the other hand, the moment when they are finally freed from all the fetters and tortures of reality is ironically also the moment when they are ultimately assimilated or dissolved into society. Their deaths thus seem more symbolic of the social need to eliminate violators than any gesture of rebellion.

**Modernization, Urbanization, and Alienation**

In his study of Shanghai urban culture in the 1930s and 1940s, Leo Ou-fan Lee analyzes how material emblems of advancing modernity, including architecture, clocks, cinemas, and the like, evoked a great deal of ambivalence and anxiety for urban writers at that time. Yet in his preface to the Chinese edition of the book, Lee sentimentally recalls his impression of Shanghai in 1981, lamenting that “many years after Liberation, Shanghai has become an elderly woman who was well past her prime (renlao zhuhuang de xuniang 人老珠黄的徐娘), when she was a beautiful woman in bloom (fenghua

---

Such a sharp contrast between the past and present probably reveals a truth: the pace of China’s urbanization in the Mao era was relatively slow. Many reasons account for the slow progress of China’s urbanization during that period, but the “household registration” (hukou 户口) system is perhaps the most salient. This system not only divided the entire population into two different kinds of subjects—the rural and the urban—with asymmetric powers, but also placed tight restrictions on rural-urban migration for most of that period. Only with the relaxation of this system in the 1990s, did China speed up its process of urbanization.

As mentioned previously, most family horror movies are set in urban environments that are portrayed, as Yingjin Zhang puts it for another context, “simultaneously the symbol of heaven and hell, the site of civilization and dehumanization, as well as the agent of progress and destruction.” If the gloomy landscape of the city in Liu’s suicide sequence in Curiosity indicates the inherent cruelty of urban life, long takes of spectacular urban landscapes in horror movies such as The Door and A Chilling Cosplay suggest both the lure of the city and the unpredictable fates of characters living in them (see Fig. 3.13).

---


265 Apart from the migration of large numbers of surplus agricultural workers transferring from rural to urban areas in the past three decades, there are also other factors contributing to China’s fast-paced urbanization, such as the “1984 Decision” that broadens the criteria for classifying an area as a city or town.

For characters in those movies, the city is both the place where they can maximize the fulfillment of their ambitions and be rewarded for their competitive drives, and the site of horror where people are wary of each other, spy on each other, and grow isolated from each other. Momo in *Curiosity* indulges in taking candid photos of others, including following John and Sharon and taking photos of their liaisons. The serial killer in *A Chilling Cosplay* observes and follows his victims secretly. In *The Door*, Jiang not only stands at a light rail station, watching his apartment building through a telescope and commenting on his neighbors’ activities, but also keeps alert and suspicious of his surroundings. Whenever someone knocks at the door, he always looks through the peephole before opening it, and during this process his paranoia is amplified by fisheye shots, which distort the corridor and the person standing outside the door (see Fig. 3.20).
The sharp contrast between the majestic urban environment and the smallness of humanity is also recurrent in horror cinema. For instance, in *Curiosity*, when John goes to Sharon’s rented home, entreating her to stop stalking and harassing his family, we see two characters seemingly besieged by numerous skyscrapers in the background. The low-angle long shot makes the two characters appear like prey falling into a black trap, while the skyscrapers are like huge monsters crouching in the gloom, whose lights twinkle like countless tiny eyes (see Fig. 3.14). This allegorical mise-en-scène not only conveys the characters’ frustration and desperation, but also, to an extent, predicts their future fates as prey in Rose’s scheme. In *Deadly Delicious*, after Chen commits suicide, Yanzi puts his corpse on a wheelchair and brings him to a rooftop deck overlooking the city, where she recalls their sweet wedding day. On that day, they ran through the urban concrete jungle, hand in hand, and finally stopped at a deck similar to this one. When she asked Chen whether he loves her, he shouted toward the city, swearing “I love you, you must believe it. And from now on, I will only love you!” (see Fig. 3.14) His vow, redolent of popular romantic phrases like “I’ll love you till the end of the world,” invites the city as a witness: as long as the city exists, their love should last forever. Yet ironically, their love dies when Chen cheats on her and she takes revenge, while the city goes on.
If the above movies depict characters struggling in the urban environment with ambivalence and anxiety, Li Shaohong’s *Baober in Love* (hereafter *Baober*) thoroughly satirizes China’s obsession with modernization and urbanization with a surrealist story. The film is centered around the adventures of a girl named Baober 宝贝, a young woman who grew up in the era of the economic reforms, and tells how she falls in love with the hero and starts a passionate romance with him. In a strict sense, *Baober* should not be categorized as a horror film, but a romantic film—it was first screened for the occasion of Valentine’s Day. Given Li’s fame and the starring cast, the film was expected to be a hit.
that season, but it turned out to be a box office bomb and received mixed critical reviews. Many spectators felt it was too horrific and not at all appropriate for the romantic atmosphere of Valentine’s Day. In a filmgoer’s words, “we thought it would be a relaxed romantic film, as its title and advertisement suggested, yet it felt like a horror movie after watching it, and it ruined my [good] mood!”

The film begins with little Baober’s reading her essay “My Birth” in front of her class. In the essay, she relates that her mother told her she was found in a mound of trash, but she feels herself “might be a little star fallen from the sky.” Her voiceover narration is later accompanied by a fantastic scene, brightened by colorful meteor showers, of a giant trash mound where a baby is lying in the debris. The sweet fantasy is then interrupted by a terrifying black cat, which, through a POV shot from the baby’s eyes, pounces on the baby (as well as the camera). Baober’s memory (or imagination) about her dramatic birth is later superimposed with her traumatic memory of the urban destruction of the old Beijing and the modern rebirth of the new Beijing. A 360-degree pan shot shows how Baober stands in the midst of rubble, witnessing the rapid rebirth of a modernized Beijing—numerous buildings and structures emerged from the earth and rapidly grow up like plants—and screaming in fear (see Fig. 3.15). This display of industrial power with which the urban space is reconstructed and recreated can be seen as an incarnation of China’s global-urban imagination that is the product of its postsocialist neoliberal

---

economic policies. Baober’s fear about it therefore can be read as a resistance to urbanization and industrialization.

Fig. 3. 15 Baober witnesses the modern rebirth of the new Beijing, which becomes one of her traumatic memories.

When Baober grows up, she becomes a quirky girl, who often wanders the city in search of a soulmate. One day, she accidently finds a video tape on the street, through which she gets to know a man named Liu Zhi 刘志, a white-collar man who lives a depressed life with his dominating wife. Although they live in a luxury penthouse and have a perfect life that most people would envy, Liu feels discontent with his life, from his job, to his home, to his wife. In his words, “we like to overlook the city, especially lying in bed and watching the lights of the entire city through windows. As for the
bathroom, there is an artificial beach in it, and toilets come from the Maldives, whose flushing sounds like waves. I have several times seen my wife enjoying it over and over again. My childhood memories and dreams [airplane models] have been thrown by my wife into a 35-by-50-centimeter corner. I guess in two months they will be cleared out from this home and dumped into trash cans, getting squashed and smashed.” Liu’s complaint about those material emblems and cultural icons of modernity, as well as his dreams about flying, lead Baober to believe that she has found her soulmate. After Baober breaks into his home and shows the tape to his wife, Liu is kicked out by his angry wife. Ironically, it seems that he has nowhere to go—his buddy is busy dating, his parents are locked in a cold war and may even divorce, and his one-night-stand partner is a married woman. Eventually, he goes for Baober, with whom he quickly falls in love and starts to live a strange, mysterious life.

As Erin Yu-Tien Huang notices, Baober resembles in many aspects Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Amélie*, a French fantasy and romantic comedy, also an international blockbuster of 2001. Both films begin with the heroines’ traumatized girlhood experiences (Baober witnesses the modern rebirth of Beijing, and Amélie witnesses her mother’s death), and usually show the world from the heroine’s perspective in a girlish manner. After unwittingly finding small items that conceal others’ secrets (Baober gets a video tape that records Liu’s confessions, Amélie discovers an old metal box of childhood memorabilia in the wall of her apartment), both heroines search for their owners and eventually find

---

268 Erin Yu-Tien Huang, “Capital’s Abjects,” 74-81.
them. Both heroines also find contentment in simple pleasures and often let their imaginations roam free. Yet while *Amélie* presents a story about how a girl decides to change the lives of those around her for the better, while struggling with her own isolation, *Baober* is a tragedy about a girl trying, yet failing, to realize her spiritual pursuits in a modern world. While *Amélie* ends with the heroine and the hero living happily ever after, *Baober* ends with Baober’s violent death—she cuts her belly to pull out a fetus that doesn’t exist.

As mentioned in the first section, after Liu and Baober move into their new home—an old empty industrial warehouse—Liu decides to decorate it, as he feels it “too big and too empty, how could it look like a home?” When Baober says that she prefers the empty house, Liu replies “then it should at least have a curtain…sofa, desk, TV set as well. For a home, it must at least have a kitchen, refrigerator, washer, and [we can] install a telephone with fax machine. We haven’t bought a computer desk and most importantly, we need a big bed.” Despite Baober’s objection, Liu hires contractors to remodel the warehouse and decorate it in a modern style, which only reminds Baober of her traumatic childhood experience of Beijing’s modernization. In a paranoid fantasy, Baober flies out of the home and into the sky. The irony of this sequence lies in Liu’s contradictory attitude toward modern life: though in the video tape he seems to loathe those material tokens of modernity as well as the suffocating modern life, he actually cannot escape the specter of modernity. In other words, Liu’s seeming exhaustion with
urban life does not prevent him from desiring the trappings of modernity, which are already an integral part of his everyday life.

By contrast, Baober has a strong aversion to modernization and urbanization and prefers a more primitive life that has not been “polluted” by modern civilization. The film repeatedly shows how she wanders in the city, like a ghost, isolated from the outside world. She may sit in the rubble of a construction site, blankly looking up at the sky (see Fig. 3.16), or lie on the beach with Liu, bathed in silver moonlight. Her body and spirit seem to be detached from this peculiar material world. The reason she loves Liu is because she believes that they had the same dream in their childhoods, a dream about flying. Yet as the film proceeds, it turns out that Liu is not so spiritually in tune with Baober as some other characters she has encountered (such as an old professor who indulges in literature and harbors a lifetime of unrequited love for a woman, or a lonely handicapped boy in a wheelchair who never gives up his dream of playing basketball). While Baober realizes her dream of what Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898-1948), whose essay she reads in the film, describes as “this slice of heaven and earth must belong to me alone” in the empty warehouse, Liu simply ruins her dream through his arbitrary arrangement of decorating the warehouse in a modern way. And Baober would rather sleep on the sidewalk, covered in newspapers, than stay in this comfortable and decorated home.

In the ending sequence of the film, Baober believes that she is pregnant. In a state that may be described as schizophrenic, she keeps washing her body in the bath and moans “I want a clean kid, [so] I want to clean my body.” And it seems that the black cat lurking in the giant trash mound in her memory appears again. In order to protect her baby, Baober tries her best to fight the cat and eventually kills it. In fact, in one of Baober’s early interior monologues, we already see her reference to (and dread of) the cat: “There is a road in my heart. I don’t know where it’s going to, but I keep walking on it. You will meet snakes, or cats on the road. You will be afraid, very afraid. Yet there is also sunshine, the brightest sunshine, over the road. You will stop and let it brighten you,
and bring it to every place, every corner.” According to this fairy-tale and metaphysical style of the film, the recurrent image of the black cat in Baober’s world has ambiguous implications: it may simply refer to the danger hidden in the dark, obstacles on one’s life journey, or perhaps, in the case of Baober, to the threat from normal society for this deviant girl who is abnormal even in her own parents’ eyes (“she has been like this [paranoid] since young: leaving home when she is stimulated”).

However, when Baober’s pregnancy eventually turns out to be a pseudopregnancy, she breaks down and cuts her uterus open to prove the baby’s existence. Baober’s yearning for the baby is, of course, not just a woman’s desire to be a mother. In one of her last conversations with Liu, after learning that her symptoms are no more than a pseudopregnancy, Baober recalls her earlier fantastic experience with Liu on the evening beach in the silver moonlight. Yet she later complains that after that night, “I lost him. Then I got to know that it’s because he doesn’t want to depart from me. Now he is here, in my body, and no one can separate us.” This somniloquy-style confession indicates what the baby means for Baober: a perfect reincarnation of her spiritual pursuits and her soulmate in life, whose role used to be played by Liu. As Nietzsche’s analysis of three metamorphoses of the spirit—the camel, the lion, and the child—suggests, while the camel represents submitting completely to external reality, bearing whatever it must, and the lion embodies the strength of an inner will, “the child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes’.

For the game of creation…a sacred ‘Yes’ is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he
who had been lost to the world now conquers the world.” The baby symbolizes Baober’s hope for the future world, a pure world with a new beginning, where people can really control their lives on self-propelled wheels. Yet Baober’s hope eventually fails, and she in effect kills herself. Liu’s discovery of her death is intercut with shots of her as a child covering her face with a piece of cloth and screaming (see Fig. 3.17). As the image of her masked choking face is intertwined with her ritualized death, the film evidently portrays her death as both a resistance to and a liberation from the suffocating modern life.

Fig. 3. 17 Suffocated by her life, Baober cuts her uterus to prove the existence of the baby, the incarnation of her spiritual pursuit.

---

If the image of the suffocated figure—a symbol of modern people—in Li’s *Baober* is impressive, Guo Hua’s *Variant* further explores the tensions between people and the suffocating modern life through a story of a person being “buried” alive. At first glance, its plot resembles that of *Buried* (dir. Rodrigo Cortés, 2010), in which, the hero, an American truck driver working in Iraq, wakes up to find himself buried alive inside a coffin. With only a lighter and a cell phone, he is facing a race against time to escape this death trap. Ying Jia 应佳, the heroine in *Variant*, is a sales manager of real estate company. One day, having forgotten her cell phone and wallet in the marketing model room of a high-rise apartment building (twin towers) her company is developing, she returns to retrieve them. Yet unexpectedly, the moment she steps into the elevator, the lights go off and the elevator freefalls, accompanied by a horrid thundering noise. When Ying wakes up, she finds herself trapped in the destroyed elevator, and all she has with her is a cracked work phone, a lighter, and a handbag (see Fig. 3.18).
Fig. 3. 18 Similar to Buried, Variant tells a story about a character trapped in a destroyed elevator struggling to escape the claustrophobic death trap with limited props.

As Freud points out, “to some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all.”271 Similar to the hero’s experience in Buried, Ying has to struggle to escape the claustrophobic death trap with limited props. She initially has no idea how she got there, but starts to piece things together as the film progresses. After fixing the broken phone, she tries to call for help, but fails to recall the numbers of her best friend or relatives. When she dials random numbers in contacts stored on her work phone for help, she encounters a ridiculous stream of events: employees in a bank ask her to hold, and then refuse to report her situation to the police, because it is none of their business; a suspicious wife thinks Ying is her husband’s mistress; a man complains that Ying is wasting his time and money, since he is currently in Mauritius and international calls are expensive; a former subordinate of Ying ridicules her present unfortunate

271 Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” 946.
situation and criticizes her for her mean and indifferent attitude toward him in the past, rejecting to help her because he has resigned from the company, etc. When Ying suddenly recalls an important number and dials it, she only gets angry accusations of her past faults from her ex-boyfriend. She also receives some incoming calls: a janitor laid off by her company asks for a second chance; a client informs her that he just learned that the location where the twin towers are being used to be a chemical plant that contaminated the environment; and a call from her boss eventually makes Ying realize that what she has experienced is not just an elevator accident, but a building collapse accident—the twin towers have just collapsed and she is now buried under tons of rubble and debris. To make matters worse, while Ying is waiting to be rescued, she could not expect that conspirators are trying to manipulate her life and death and that a bloody monster is lurking deep in the darkness outside the elevator.

The society presented in Variant is an absurd and desperate world fraught with selfishness and indifference, jealousy and resentment, as well as ambitions and conspiracies. On the one hand, through Ying’s phone conversation, we get a glimpse of China’s bustling social life, with explicit references to serious social issues, such as the worship of money and materialism, class discrimination, the conflict between boss and employees, the greed of real estate companies and their massive profits (the boss’s name Wen Shiyi 文石屹 apparently alludes to Pan Shiyi 潘石屹, one of the most influential real estate developers in China), the unwritten rule of using money to pay off families for the accidental deaths of migrant workers, the prevalence of marital infidelity,
environmental contamination, and the like. On the other hand, the large amount of trivial, absurd, even silly dialogues and Ying’s interior monologues reflect the heroine’s loneliness, isolation, or alienation in this bustling metropolis. Different from the loser figures I examined in the first section, or Baober in Li Shaohong’s film, Ying is a “successful personage” who enjoys her life and has ambitions for the future. As a high-flying career woman, she not only has been accustomed to the fast pace of modern life, but also perfectly plays her social role in this snobbish stratified society: loyal to her company and respectful to her boss and clients, she is also mean and impatient toward her subordinates and to lower class people, and indifferent toward her boyfriend and family. It is only when Ying is trapped in this claustrophobic space and vulnerable that for the first time she becomes introspective and reflects on her life. The barrage of rejections and insults she gets from the phone conversations helps her discover what others really think of her and makes her soberly realize that no matter how successful she has been, she is de facto a loner in this city, where people really don’t know, and have no interest in knowing, each other. Modernization and urbanization both change people’s living space and life styles and imperceptibly influence their mentalities and personalities. In an information age fraught with the material tokens and cultural icons of modernity, people do not improve their ability to, ironically, communicate; instead, they are increasingly isolated from each other. If the collapse of the twin towers recalls the 9/11 attacks in which a symbol of urbanization and the financial might of America—the World Trade Center towers—was attacked by terrorists, thus traumatizing the American psyche, then
the image of a person buried alive under tons of rubble and debris can be seen as the best representation of alienation in the process of urbanization. One of the most touching scenes in the film may be the one in which a cat also trapped in the rubble moves close to the elevator shaft where Ying is lying; Ying stretches her hand out through a crack and gently pets the cat, telling it that she is the last human on earth (Fig. 3. 19).

![Image of Ying and a cat](image.png)

Fig. 3. 19 Lost in loneliness, Ying tells the cat that she is the last human on earth.

Yet the sentimental moment does not last long. Through a POV shot that zooms in on the back of the cat, we see a predator lurking in the darkness suddenly grab the cat. With the cat’s squeal and the predator’s growl, the cat disappears from the frame. As the other English title of this film (Monsters) suggests, what Ying is facing is not just being buried alive in a claustrophobic space, but also an underground struggle with a predator. This twist recalls The Descent (dir. Neil Marshall, 2005), in which a group of explorers trapped in a cave ultimately realize that they are pursued by a strange breed of predators; in order to get out of this hell, they begin to set up each other and even sacrifice each
other to the predators. If *The Descent* is a film exploring the dark side of human nature, *Variant* is an allegory about the dilemmas faced by people in a modernizing world. The film shows how Ying carefully peeks out through a ceiling light hole in the elevator, with the light of her cellphone. The close-up shots of her nervous face, and then paranoid eyes, suggest her dread of the unknown world outside the elevator. Suddenly, an alien-like monster appears from the dark and tries to break into the elevator. This sequence reminds us of those peephole sequences in *The Door*, in which Jiang always looks cautiously through the peephole before opening the door (see Fig. 3.20). For Ying and Jiang, their quandaries probably lie in the fact that although the space they occupy is small and claustrophobic (a broken elevator or a tiny apartment), it is still a relatively safe environment where they can temporarily find relief, a private universe that gives them a sense of power and control in a competitive and hostile world. This is the dilemma of modernity: on the one hand, like Liu Zhi in *Baober*, they may feel suffocated by modern life and dream of escaping it; on the other hand, they have to rely on such a social system (norms, rules, standards, fashions, etc.) to survive. While Freud views the terrifying phantasy of being buried alive no more than a transformation of the phantasy of “intra-uterine existence,” which “was qualified by a certain lasciviousness” and associated with the castration complex,\(^{272}\) to me, the image of claustrophobic space is the best symbolic embodiment of modern society and our entrapment in it.

\(^{272}\) Ibid.
Fig. 3. 20 Protagonists in *The Door* (left) and *Variant* (right) peek at the unknown outside world through the peephole (or quasi-peephole).

If the alien-like monster is still a recognizable enemy, whom Ying spares no effort to defend herself against, the conspiracy from her company is revealed to be a hidden enemy who gives Ying a fatal attack. Instead of reporting the accident to the police or organizing a rescue force to save Ying, her boss tries to conceal the fact that someone is buried under the rubble, because the company is about to go public and a casualty would influence the share price. In his words, “it will take at least two months to clear the rubble, by then it is all set and nothing will influence [the company].” He even persuades Ying that it is good for her, as the higher the share price is, the more profits she can earn. When Ying angrily hits back that by that time she will be dead and the shares useless, he just replies in a calm and cool tone: “You have family and parents. You are the most
loyal employee in our company, so I hope you can understand.” Similar to the hero in
Buried who is abandoned both by his company and the U.S. government (due to the
government policy of not negotiating with terrorists), Ying must face the desperate
realization that no one is coming to rescue her. The rhetoric of authority (Ying’s
company and the U.S. government) in the two films seems to represent solutions that
maximize benefit for the majority in a threatening context, at the expense of an individual’s
life. Yet we have to ask: isn’t it right to sacrifice the minority in order to benefit the
majority? Or, should we ask, is the real “variant/monster” the alien lurking outside or
human beings? Most scenes of Variant are interior scenes shot within the broken
elevator, with just a few exterior scenes of the twin towers made with CGI effect. The
only real exterior scene appears in the opening credits, in which we see a breathtaking
pan shot of a spectacular urban landscape, only it is upside down (see Fig. 3.21). The
dizzying, suffocating panorama of the upside-down city not only suggests the impending
building collapse, but also indicates the overwhelming pressure that comes from
urbanization and modernization.
Whereas *Buried* ends with the hero’s death, *Variant* has a bright, “main melody” (*zhu xuanlì 主旋律*) ending, though the story displays various forms of social unrest and individual paranoia. The brave heroine kills the alien with fire and, with the help of her ex-boyfriend and the janitor, whom she used to look down upon, the company’s conspiracy is revealed to the public. In the end, the company and the boss are punished, and Ying is rescued by the police. The heroine, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, gets a new life through this catastrophic experience: she learns to fight against the dark secrets of the company, appreciate and respect those from lower social statuses, and value her relationships with her boyfriend and parents. A happy ending.
If Baober in *Baober in Love* can be seen as an idealist disenchanted with reality, one who does not care about the external world and only focuses on her spiritual fulfillment, Ying in *Variant* is a realist, a social snob who has greatly benefited from the material world and is sophisticated in her knowledge of social rules and norms. While Baober, a perfectionist, would rather die to resist the suffocating life, Ying, a pragmatist, achieves new compromises with society and becomes a better person in adapting to it: her victory against the dark side of society (the evil company) through an alliance with the state (the police) as well as the working class (the janitor) seems to demonstrate an effective method to build what Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 calls the “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), and hence ignores acute social problems that have been revealed in the film (e.g. income disparities, class differences, the accidental deaths of migrant workers, etc.).274 Despite their differences in characterizations and plot developments, both *Baober* and *Variant* depict the alienation of people living in the urban sphere and provoke reflection on modernity and urbanization.

**Conclusion**

The dread, desire, anxiety, and paranoia displayed in these horror films show China’s obsession with modernization and urbanization, but also an ambivalence toward social and economic transformations. As Victoria E. Thompson points out, in “a period during

---

274 The concept of “socialist harmonious society” was first proposed by former President Hu Jintao. It developed into a key feature of Hu’s signature ideology of the Scientific Development Concept developed in the mid-2000s, being re-introduced by the Hu-Wen Administration during the 2005 National People’s Congress.
which the city was undergoing tremendous upheaval, space functioned as a central category in the creation of middle-class identity.”  

While China’s urban bourgeoisie is rising as a new social stratum as a result of economic transformations, the housing reforms since the 1990s also played a key role in the formation of their identity. The privatization of property, according to Walter Benjamin, satisfies their demands that “the interior be maintained” in their illusions, and empowers them with a superior status through new configurations of space and power. As The Door, Curiosity, and Home show, losers in social stratification are marginalized in or excluded from the certain living spaces; the films thus depict China’s reform era from a social Darwinian perspective.

Meanwhile, as Benjamin puts it, “for the private individual the private environment represents the universe,” urbanization and privatization also lead to the isolation and alienation we find in present-day China. As a result, urban living space becomes in China’s cinema of the new millennium a site of horror. The city is at once a symbol of heaven and hell, a site of civilization and dehumanization, and an agent of progress and destruction.

While losers are easily regarded as recognizable Others, or what Radiohead calls the “creep” and the “weirdo” who don’t belong to this “beautiful” new world, successful personages (such as Liu Zhi in Baober and Ying Jia in Variant) may also get confused sometimes about their identities, as well as the life they have been accustomed to for such

---

277 Ibid.
a long time. While Liu can only record his confessions on video tape, and Ying has no one to talk to but a cat, we may wonder, who is the real Other in this rapidly changing society?
CHAPTER 4: EROTICISM AND EXORCISM: HISTORY, IDENTITY, AND THE POLITICS OF EROTIC GHOST FILMS

Here in the civilized world,
Strange events by far occur
Than in the Country of Cropped Hair;
Before our very eyes
Weirder tales unfold
Than in the Nation of Flying Heads.278

—Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, 1679

**Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I dealt with two significant aspects of Chinese urban horror cinema: the presentation of social stratification and class differences, and the reflection of the sense of alienation in China’s process of modernization and urbanization. My emphasis in discussing these movies stems not only from an understanding that they mirror tensions and contradictions in today’s China, but also from a belief that they can help us to learn about the economic and cultural matrix in which China’s bourgeoisie is rising as a new social stratum, which faces the same kind of terror as Hong Kong audiences in watching Pou-Soi Cheang’s *Home Sweet Home* (hereafter *Home*), a Hong Kong-mainland coproduced horror movie discussed in the previous chapter.

278 Pu Songling, “Author’s Preface” to *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, 455.
*Home* is not, however, just an explicit reflection on the vehement class conflicts between the middle and lower classes; it is also an implicit allegory of Hong Kong’s anxiety about its identity. The deformed woman Yan Hong and her husband are designated as new immigrants who come from mainland in 1994. As a newly arrived working-class family, they reside in a squatters’ area with other poor residents and live a humble and peaceful life. Yet with the government’s decision to reclaim the area and the ensuing clash between the residents and the police, their sweet home is ruined, and Yan becomes a monster lurking in the new apartment complex built on the site of her old home, where she constantly threatens the middle class families living in the complex. The film, though showing abundant sympathy for Yan’s unfortunate experience, ends with her death and the restoration of social order and peace. For mainland audiences, Yan may be just an intruder, an embodiment of the miserable lower class, yet for Hong Kong audiences, Yan may also represent an intruder into the local community, a violator of the boundaries between the Self (Hong Kong) and the Other (mainland) in terms of space and cultural identities.

As the preceding chapters demonstrate, PRC horror cinema is never an isolated industry in terms of production, distribution, and consumption. On the one hand, as a newly revived genre, it constantly gets inspirations, both in terms of themes and formulas, from the more developed horror cinema of the West, Japan, and Hong Kong.

---

279 Similarly, in *The Untold Story II*, a Hong Kong Category 3 film examined in chapter 2, although the cannibalism of the female protagonist, a new immigrant from the mainland, is explained by her miserable and traumatic childhood experience in China, she is eventually eliminated as a cannibalistic demon. And the suffering hero is finally freed from her suffocating dominance.
On the other hand, with the implementation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the ensuing 1997 handover, there are increasingly close connections and interactions between mainland cinema and Hong Kong cinema in terms of film industries, film markets, and star power.\textsuperscript{280} Yet accompanying this process, Hong Kong people also harbor an ambivalent attitude toward mainland China, which is clearly embodied in its horror cinema, as \textit{Home} and the Category 3 movies examined in chapter 2 show. In this chapter, therefore, I further examine the politics of Hong Kong horror cinema—specifically erotic ghost films—in terms of the complex relationship between mainland and Hong Kong.

There are two reasons for my focus on the sub-genre of erotic ghost film. First, as many scholars have noticed, among various supernatural phenomena and spectral images, the ghost—especially the female ghost—remains a dominant figure in Asian horror cinema.\textsuperscript{281} The international success of the \textit{Ringu} cycle and the \textit{Ju-on: The Grudge} cycle at the turn of the millennium spread a new wave of J-horror to Western cinemas,\textsuperscript{282} and

\textsuperscript{280} For example, \textit{Man Behind the Sun} (dir. Mou Dunfei, 1988) examined in chapter 1, \textit{Painted Skin} (dir. Gordon Chan, 2008) in chapter 2, and \textit{Home Sweet Home} in chapter 3, are all coproduced films that released in both Hong Kong and the mainland. And \textit{The House that Never Dies} (dir. Raymond Yip, 2014), a coproduced film, is so far the highest-grossing horror movie in Chinese horror cinema.


\textsuperscript{282} The conception of “J-horror,” or “Japanese horror” does not cover all the horrific films made in Japanese language and by the Japanese film industry. It specifically refers to a group of relatively low-budget horror films, such as the \textit{Ringu} cycle, made in Japan during the late 1990s that largely depended on distribution of DVD and online media rather than traditional theaters. They mostly focus on atmospheric and psychological fear, and tension building (suspense), rather than graphic gore. Inspired by urban legends proliferated through mass media and popular culture, such movies usually involve ghosts and revenants,
initiated an Asian horror fever that quickly spread to other Asian film industries in South Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. For horror aficionados, the vengeful black-haired female ghost in funereal white attire is probably one of the most internationally recognizable figures in Asian horror cinema. Yet apart from this stereotyped image of the female ghost, there is another recurrent image in Asian horror cinema: the amorous female ghost, who is usually beautiful, seductive, sometimes sentimental, and in most cases not too frightening. Late in the last century, as Balmain remarks, “the seductive and sometimes demonic female ghosts, a key archetype of the genre, have transmogrified into frightening and less seductive vengeful ghosts like Sadako in Ring and Kayako in Ju-On: The Grudge.” Since abundant scholarly attention has been paid to vengeful ghost films, I would like to bring special attention to erotic ghost films.

Second, the erotic ghost film has played an important role in interactions between Hong Kong horror cinema and other horror cinemas. If the 1979 public screening of Bao Fong’s The Painted Skin (1966) was the mainland audience’s first encounter with a horror movie, then it was A Chinese Ghost Story (Qiannü youhun 倩女幽魂), a 1987 Hong Kong hit, that “gave many Western viewers their first taste of supernatural thrills—Oriental style,” as Daniel O’Brien puts it. Both films are part of the genealogy of a well-established genre—the Hong Kong erotic ghost film—that dates back at least to

---

283 This stereotyped image is also parodied in The Cabin in the Woods (2012), an American horror film that makes fun of the stereotypes and clichéd gimmicks in the horror cinema.

284 Colette Balmain, Introduction to Japanese Horror Film, 89.

On the one hand, since in the Introduction I examine the politics of the “human/ghost” trope in Chinese horror cinema, with examples of some PRC erotic ghost films (the earliest quasi-horror movies in the 1980s that were somehow influenced by Bao Fong’s film), a study of Hong Kong erotic ghost films can serve as a good comparison with mainland horror cinema, and broaden our understanding of Chinese-language horror cinema as a whole in a transnational framework. On the other hand, Hong Kong-mainland co-produced erotic ghost films in the new millennium reflect accommodations post-colonial Hong Kong horror cinema has to make to the mainland market in a global context.

But before proceeding to my discussion of those erotic ghost films, I first sketch the literary genealogy of ghost tales, the source of such films. Records of encounters with supernatural phenomena, especially men’s encounters with seductive female ghosts or fox-spirits, can be traced back as early as in the zhiguai 志怪 (accounts of the strange) anecdotes of the Six Dynasties that later develop into Tang chuanqi 传奇 (tales of the strange and the bizarre), then Song zhiguai stories, and most spectacularly, Ming and Qing biji 笔记 (jottings) of ghosts and phantoms, with Qu You 瞿佑 (1341-1427), Pu Songling (1640-1715), Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1797), and Ji Yun 纪昀 (1724-1805) as conspicuous representative writers of this tradition.\(^{286}\)

\(^{286}\) Representative works of this tradition include Gan Bao’s 干宝 (286-336) Soushen ji 搜神记 [In search of the supernatural; 350 C.E.], Liu Yiqin’s 刘义庆 (403-444) Youming lu 幽明录 [Records of the hidden and the visible world; 403-444], Gushenzi’s 古神子 (Zheng Huangu 郑还古) Boyi zhi 博异志 [Vast records of strange matters], Duan Chengshi’s 段成式 (803-863) Youyang zazu 酉阳杂俎 [Miscellaneous
The most famous and the most important literary source for Chinese erotic ghost films is Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai*, a Qing dynasty collection of supernatural tales, most of which are romantic encounters between men and ghosts or fox-spirits. Such stories not only “create a fantasy world to satisfy the human yearning for love and happiness,” they also project, in John Minford’s words, “the deeply ambivalent attitude of the Chinese male literati towards their women and towards the demands of physical and emotional love.”

The two ghost stories at the heart of this chapter are “The Magic Sword and the Magic Bag” (Nie Xiaoqian 聂小倩, hereafter referred to as “The Magic Sword”) and “The Painted Skin” (Huapi 画皮), the two most popular Liaozhai tales to be adapted for film. Intriguingly, the film adaptations of these two stories occurred at roughly the same time. “The Magic Sword” was adapted in 1960, 1987 (followed by two sequels in 1990 and morsels from Youyang; 803–863], Qu You’s *Jiandeng Xinhua* 剪灯新话 [New stories written while trimming the wick; 1378], Li Changqi’s 李昌祺(1376-1452) *Jiandeng yuhua* 剪灯余话 [More stories written while trimming the wick; 1420], Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异 [Strange tales from a Chinese studio; 1679], Yuanmei’s *Zi buyu* 子不语 [What the Confucius didn’t speak of; 1781], Ji Yun’s *Yuewei caotang biji* 阅微草堂笔记 [Jottings from the thatched cottage of examining the epigrammatic utterances; 1800], and Xuan Ding’s 宣鼎 (1832-1880) *Yeyu qiudeng lu* 夜雨秋灯录 [Writings done in the rainy nights and under the autumn lamp; 1877], to name but a few. For more information about zhiguai tradition, see Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lüe* 中国小说史略 [A brief history of Chinese fiction] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010).


1991), and 2011, while “The Painted Skin” was made into movies in 1966, 1993, and 2008.289

Echoing François Truffaut, Dudley Andrew sees adaptation not as “a monolithic practice to be avoided” but as “an instructive barometer for the age.”290 A comparative case study of film adaptations of traditional erotic ghost stories can help us to better understand the politics of Hong Kong horror cinema at different times. In contextualizing different film adaptations of the same Liaofoo story in their respective historical contexts, as well as engaging in close readings of their intertextuality with other contemporaneous horror movies, this chapter aims to investigate how characters and scenarios of the same story are adopted and reused in different ideological contexts and quite often for specific ideological purposes.

**History and Nostalgia: Li Han-hsiang’s The Enchanting Shadow**

While Bao Fong’s The Painted Skin is the first movie adapted from the Liaofoo story by the same title, Li Han-hsiang’s 李翰祥 The Enchanting Shadow is the first film adaptation of “The Magic Sword.” The Chinese title of this Shaw Brothers movie is Qiannü youhun 倩女幽魂 (literally, the ethereal spirit of a beauty), a variation on the name of a famous thirteenth-century play, Qiannü lihun 倩女离魂 (“the disembodied

289 Besides the above three adaptations, there is another softcore film adaptation of “The Painted Skin,” The Ghost Story (Gui jiaochun 鬼叫春, 1979) directed by Li Han-hsiang 李翰祥, the same director of The Enchanting Shadow.

soul”). It was the first Chinese film to be entered into the Cannes Film Festival, and was also selected as the Hong Kong entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 33rd Academy Awards (see Fig. 4.1).

![Southern Screen cover](image)

Fig. 4.1 It was claimed that “The Enchanting Shadow has entered into competition at the Cannes Film Festival” on the cover of *Southern Screen* (May 1960, No. 27), the official movie magazine of the Shaw Brothers.

In the original *Liaozhai* story, Nie Xiaoqian 聂小倩, the female protagonist, is a beautiful ghost who dies at the age of eighteen. Buried in an old temple in Jinhua 金华, she is later controlled by a demon nearby and has to participate in murders on her behalf. Ning Caichen 宁采臣, the male protagonist, happens to be staying at the same temple,
where he meets the alluring female ghost. Although Nie attempts to prey upon Ning, he resists her seduction. With the help of Yan Chixia 燕赤霞, a swordsman living in the temple, Ning helps Nie to rid herself of the demon’s control and brings her to his home. In the second half of the original story, Nie not only takes on the household chores, but also serves Ning’s mother as a filial daughter-in-law, since Ning’s wife is seriously ill. When his wife dies, Ning and Nie get married. With the help of the magic bag given to him by Yan, the Ning couple defeat the avenging demon from Jinhua and live happily ever after. A few years later, Ning passes the civil service examinations and Nie gives birth to a boy. Ning then gets a concubine, and has one son with her and another with Nie, all of whom go on to become government officials and enjoy good reputation.

Li’s *The Enchanting Shadow* basically follows the original storyline of Pu’s story, but ends with the death of the demon and the reunion of the beloved couple, and hence completely ignores their subsequent married life. The film recounts how a hero saves a beauty; it has nothing to do with their quotidian life after the harrowing adventure. Of course, this abridgement makes the film denser and gives it greater dramatic intensity, though at the same time it suggests a boundary between the fictional fantasy world and the real quotidian world. In the last sequence, a close-up of the demon’s melting body cuts to a close-up of the melting wax drops of a candle; the camera then pulls back, showing a stack of books on a desk, and the book title “Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio” surfaces from the dark. The last shot of Nie and Ning holding hands, staring into each other’s eyes, with the open book as their background, parallels the opening shot of
the movie and reminds the audience what they have seen is just a narrated story rather than history (see Fig. 4.2 and 4.3).

Fig. 4.2 The opening shot of *The Enchanting Shadow*

![Image](image1.jpg)

Fig. 4.3 The ending shot of *The Enchanting Shadow*

![Image](image2.jpg)

Yet from another perspective, Li tries to restore a certain historical authenticity in terms of both details and plot. The story is reset in the Jinhua Temple, a real historical
location, rather than an anonymous temple in Jinhua, as the original story has it. The historical background of the story is intentionally set during the Ming-Qing transition period, the reason for which is best explained by a comment from Yan: “when a country is about to perish, demons will appear” (guo zhi jiang wang, bi chu yao nie 国之将亡，必出妖孽). The reason Ning has to rest at Jinhua Temple is that local inns have all been occupied by the army and refugees. The plot of local people’s strange responses to Ning’s decision to rest in the haunted temple pays obvious tribute to Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror (dir F. W. Murnau, 1922), in which the locals become frightened by Thomas Hutter’s mere mention of Orlok’s name. Ning and Yan are no longer simply introduced as people from Zhejiang province and Shanxi province, respectively. Rather, they are designated as anti-Qing survivors of the Ming Dynasty. When Ning encounters Yan for the first time, the latter is dancing with his sword, singing a heroic battle song, whose lyrics and tune, to some extent, resemble the lyric poem “Red Is the River” (man jiang hong 满江红) by Yue Fei 岳飞 (1103-1142), a famous anti-Jin general in the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279).291

---

291 Lyric poem (ci 词) is a poetic form using a set of poetic meters derived from a base set of certain patterns, in fixed-rhythm, fixed-tone, and variable line-length formal types, or model examples. The rhythmic and tonal pattern of the ci are based on certain, definitive musical song tunes, some of which have been passed down generation by generation. The tune of “Red Is the River” was collected by Peking University Music Research Society (Beijing daxue yinyue yanjiu hui 北京大学音乐研究会) and published on its Music Magazine (Yinyue zazhi 音乐杂志, founded in March 1920), a music-related periodical. In 1925, Yang Yinliu 杨荫浏 (1899-1984) first sang Yue Fei’s lyric poem to this tune, which soon became popular in the Republican period. A video of this song is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6g13qympm4.
A similar “poetry-reciting” scenario takes place when Ning encounters Nie for the first time.²⁹² Attracted by the zither music he hears from a neighbor’s courtyard, Ning stops by Nie’s house, where she is reciting a sentimental lyric poem about her loneliness, especially in contrast with the beautiful garden scenery. It sounds like an ordinary “boudoir complaint” (guiyuan 闺怨) poem. However, given the special historical setting of the story, Nie’s lament such as “red chambers and painted pavilions are there every year, yet the change in the beautiful face is regrettable” is politically allusive. For audiences familiar with Chinese history and classical poetry, it easily recalls the final lyric poem by Li Yu 李煜 (937-978), the last emperor of Southern Tang (937-975), entitled “Lady Yu, the Royal Beauty” (yu meiren 虞美人), because it includes a sentence almost exactly the same as Nie’s lament—“carved railings and jade steps may still as ever be there, though changed are the beautiful faces.”²⁹³

Judith Zeitlin divides traditional Chinese ghost stories into two types: the human mortality ghost tale and the historical ghost story. The former is about individual mortality, while the latter is about a traumatic historical event that is “usually of a political nature, especially dynastic fall and conquest,” and is greatly influenced by “the

²⁹² The two “poetry-reciting” scenarios do not exist in the original story, but are newly added by the film adaptation.
²⁹³ The two sentences are similar in terms of both form (words selection, syntax) and connotations. One puts permanent architectures “red chambers and painted pavilions” (zhulou huage 朱楼画阁) in a comparison with the changed “beautiful face” (huarong 花容, literally, flowerlike face), while the other sets “carved railings and jade steps” (diaolan yuqi 雕栏玉砌) in contrast with changed “beautiful face” (zhuyan 朱颜, literally, rosy face).
Nie’s poem is in this sense a combination of both a “boudoir complaint” and a “lament for the past.” As such, the original mortality ghost story is reshaped into a “historical ghost story.”

This sense of history is further conveyed in Ning’s conversation with Yan, after he has enjoyed the latter’s battle song and accompanying sword dancing. An obvious regret and frustration runs through their conversation about the chaotic world, turbulent days, and China’s perilous fate. It might reflect Hong Kongers’ nostalgia for the past and their lost homelands. Like other famous retreats in earlier times, between 1945 and 1950, millions of Chinese left their homes for Hong Kong to escape from the political and economic turmoil on the mainland. Yet as Lingchei Letty Chen points out, since the people of Hong Kong came from different areas and there was never “a sizable indigenous population” to begin with, at that time “there was never a local Chinese collective identity that the British colonial government had to wrestle with.” Rather, most Hong Kong people at that time still viewed their hometowns in the mainland as their roots and saw Hong Kong merely as a temporary refuge. They considered themselves “Chinese” in a cultural sense regardless of whether they adhered to a different political ideology than that espoused on the mainland. In other words, Hong Kongers at

294 Judith T. Zeitlin “The Return of the Palace Lady: The Historical Ghost Story and Dynastic Fall,” in Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation from the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond, eds. David Derwei Wang and Shang Wei (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 151-152.
295 For example, the Song court retreated south of the Yangtze and established their capital at Lin’an (now Hangzhou) after the Jingkang Incident (1127); and the Ming court retreated to southern China following the Ming dynasty’s collapse in 1644.
that time identified closely with mainland China and their conception and expression of self-identity was associated with the history of China and Han ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{297} 

As Melissa Brown puts it, “Han ethnic identity and Chinese national identity are conflated by people within China... The association of Han culture with Chinese national identity derives from a historic narrative of unfolding which links China as a political entity (\textit{zhongguo}) and Han (or Hua or Xia, as it was sometimes called) \textit{wenhua} (culture, civilization, education).”\textsuperscript{298} While mainland China has long played the role of the center and the authority in the classical discourse of Chinese civilization, Hong Kong, by contrast, was a historically marginalized area in terms of both geography and culture. Throughout its history, before it became a British colony in 1842, the area of Hong Kong was governed by different counties in the Lingnan 岭南 region—a marginal region far from the “Central Plains” (zhongyuan 中原)—which often served as place of exile (\textit{liufang} 流放) for prisoners. In the later 19\textsuperscript{th} century and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Hong Kong gradually became a major entrepôt thanks to its free port status, attracting new immigrants from both China and Europe alike. Yet as Leo Ou-fan Lee points out, with the wave of “southern movement” (\textit{nanxia} 南下) after the Second World War, “Hong Kong’s commercial and cultural elite underwent what might be called a process of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{297} Another good example of this “complex of Han ethnic identity” is Jin Yong’s \textit{鹿鼎记} works, also Hong Kong bestsellers throughout the first three decades after 1949. Jin’s novels are usually set in those chaotic periods, say, Song dynasty, Yuan dynasty, and Ming-Qing transition period, when the so-called Han civilization was threatened by rival minority regimes (e.g. Jurchens, Mongols, and Manchus). Not until \textit{The Deer and the Cauldron} (Lu ding ji 鹿鼎记; 1969-1972), Jin’s last novel, did Jin expunge this pro-Han Chinese stance from his works.

\end{footnotesize}
‘Shanghaiization’: it was no longer a city to visit or to take a vacation but a place to stay... But in spite of this obvious ‘Shanghaiization,’ Hong Kong in the 1950s remained a poor copy of the fabled metropolis.”

So it is not surprising that the mainland both becomes the desired object of Hong Kong’s nostalgia and represents the historical subject/authority of China.

This authority figure in The Enchanting Shadow is embodied in swordsman Yan, a kind of father/brother figure. Although Yan is only introduced as a supporting character in the original story, in the film he is the key figure who helps Ning beat the demon and solve Nie’s predicament. In The Enchanting Shadow, Yan is not only a reclusive swordman with a certain supernatural power, but also a Ming loyalist and a patriot. As a kind elder who is superior to Ning in terms of both intelligence and strength, it is not surprising that Yan is the object of Ning’s admiration. Yet it is notable that what Yan and Ning mean by the Central Plains, the geographic symbol of orthodox Chinese civilization, the object of their nostalgia, figuratively has nothing to do with mainland China after 1949. Rather, The Enchanting Shadow’s insistence on “Han Chinese” identity implicitly hints at strong attachment to the China of the Republican period, when the KMT ruled.

In his conversation with Yan, Ning criticizes the Qing army’s occupation of the Central Plains, their brutal massacres in Yangzhou 扬州 and Jiading 嘉定, and treason by Ming generals such as Wu Sangui 吴三桂 (1612-1678) and Hong Chengchou 洪承畴.

---

299 Leo Ou-fan Lee, Shanghai Modern, 330.
(1593-1665). While Yan asks Ning whether there is hope of recovering the lost territory, Ning replies that apart from the regular army and tens of millions of guerrilla forces, Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong 郑成功 1624-1662) and his forces in Taiwan are definitely the biggest hope for recovery of the lost homeland. For audiences in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian countries in the 1960s, the analogy between the Ming-Qing transition and the CCP’s defeat of the KMT regime in China was more than transparent. Ning’s belief in Koxinga’s ability to recapture the lost territory easily reminds the audience of KMT-controlled Taiwan and Chiang Kai-shek’s 蒋介石 (1887-1975) “counterattack to recover mainland China (fangong dalu 反攻大陆).”

In fact, though the film was selected as Hong Kong’s entry for the 13th Cannes Film Festival, it was viewed as a representative work of the Republic of China, because France and the PRC did not establish ambassadorial level diplomatic relations until 1964. As a review in *Ta Kung Pao*, a pro-PRC newspaper, at the time pointed out, the conversation between Yan and Ning is irrelevant to the original story, and it was no more than a strategy to qualify the film as a representative work of the cinema of so-called “Free China” on the global film festival circuit.

---

300 Guerrilla forces may refer to remaining Nationalist forces in mainland China that continued to wage an insurgency in southwestern China throughout the 1950s. Traitors such as Wu Sangui and Hong Chengchou may refer to Nationalist generals Fu Zuoyi 傅作义 and Deng Baoshan 邓宝珊 who surrendered the large and strategic garrison around Beiping to Communist forces during the final stages of the Chinese Civil War.

301 It was claimed that “The Enchanting Shadow has entered into competition at the Cannes Film Festival as the first Chinese color feature film” in *Nanguo dianying 南国电影* [Southern screen], May 1960, No. 27, 21.

This ambivalent attitude toward mainland China characterizes the complex nature of Hong Kong cinema and Hong Kong people’s self-perception in the 1960s. As Benedict Anderson suggested with his notion of “imagined community,” identities must be negotiated through individuals’ interaction with the social and cultural context in which they live. Hong Kong as a “quasi-nation” is also socially constructed and imagined by its people, who perceive themselves as part of that group.303 Throughout the Cold War era, Hong Kong, as a dividing line between the socialist and capitalist camps, a stage for the political rivalry between the Communist mainland and Nationalist Taiwan, as well as a city balanced between Chinese identity and being a subordinate colony to the U.K., negotiates with different powers to gradually construct its own identity.

As a result, Hong Kong cinema had to maintain a subtle balance between the political left and the right (zuoyou fengyuan 左右逢源) during the Cold War.304 The finances and organizations of Great Wall (Changcheng 长城) Pictures, Phoenix (Feng Huang) Motion Picture, and Sun Luen (Xinlian 新联) Film Company, were connected to the mainland.305 According to Lu Dun, the Central Committee of the CCP both directly invested in and led the Sun Luen Film Company, because “China has been besieged by

---

303 The term “quasi-nation” is borrowed from Yingchi Chu. See Yingchi Chu, Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
304 See Lee Pui Tak 李培德, “Zuoyou keyi fengyuan: lengzhan shiqi de Xianggang dianying jie” 左右可以逢源——冷战时期的香港电影界 [Between the leftist and the rightist: Hong Kong cinema in the Cold War], in Lengzhan yu Xianggang dianying 冷战与香港电影 [The Cold War and Hong Kong cinema], ed. Wong Ain-ling and Lee Pui Tak (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009), 83-97.
305 See Wong Ain-ling ed., Xianggang yingren koushu lishi congshu 2: lixiang niandai—changcheng, fenghuang de rizi. These studios later merged to form Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd in 1982, a Hong Kong-based, China state-owned film company. Its portfolio ranges from co-productions to distribution, as well as TV series and operating a Hong Kong studio and theater.
imperialist countries ever since Liberation, and Hong Kong is the only opening. So it is necessary to invest in Hong Kong cinema to express our ideas through this channel.”

It is not surprising that their direction was greatly influenced by PRC cultural policies and some of their films were selected to be screened in Beijing. Although not until 1979 was Bao Fong’s *The Painted Skin* publicly screened in the mainland, it was shown for some high-ranking CCP officials in Zhongnanhai as early as 1966. The film was highly praised by Vice Premier Chen Yi (1901-1972) for being “aesthetical, thoughtful, and educational.”

While leftist studios were more closely associated with CCP and the mainland, rightist studios such as the Shaw Brothers tended to maintain a political affinity with KMT and Taiwan. When the CCP defeated the KMT and gained sovereignty in 1949, China severed relations with the West and basically stopped the supply of Mandarin films to overseas Chinese communities. Since overseas distribution of Chinese-language films was tightly controlled by leftist studios, the Shaw Brothers reorganized its facilities in Hong Kong to “ensure steady supply of Chinese-language films to its sprawling distribution circuit and open new markets beyond Southeast Asia.”

---


307 See Bao Fong’s interview in *Xianggang yingren koushu lishi congshu 2: lixiang niandai—changcheng, fenghuang de rizi* 香港影人口述历史丛书之二: 历史年代—长成，风华的日记, 110.

Taiwan and other Chinese communities across the world quickly made the Shaw Brothers the biggest “factory” for overseas Chinese to indulge in nostalgic dreams.

In the 1950s and the 1960s, the Shaw Brothers produced a considerable number of Mandarin-language period films and opera films, which were particularly popular in Taiwan. Through those movies, spectators re-experienced a glorious, “idealized” imperial China, coped with homesickness, and relieved their nostalgia for China and cultural anxiety. As Poshek Fu remarks, “embedded in a familiar aesthetic of popular stories and folk music (notably Huangmei opera), these characters and settings contributed to the constructing of a China that was at once idealized and ahistorical (and thereby unchanging). This imagined changeless China held enormous appeal to ethnic Chinese audiences around the world. They found in Shaw Brothers films a China forever in the midst of all the political turmoil and personal displacements and with which they could continue to identify despite their life in the diaspora.”

Since his period films are “especially splendid and magnificent” and some were the highest-grossing blockbusters of his time, Li Han-hsiang plays a major role in the “reconstruction of China dreams of the Shaw Brothers Studio.” Like other period films produced by the Shaw Brothers,

---

309 Ibid., 14.
310 Representative works of Shaw Brothers historical period films and opera films include Diau Charn of Three Kingdoms (Diaochan 貂蝉, dir. Li Han-hsiang, 1958), The Kingdom and the Beauty (Jiangshan meiren 江山美人, dir. Li Han-hsiang, 1959), The Magnificent Concubine (Yang guiwei 杨贵妃, dir. Li Han-hsiang, 1962), Love Eterne (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 梁山伯与祝英台, dir. Li Han-hsiang, 1963), Empress Wu (Wu Zetian 武则天, dir. Li Han-hsiang, 1963), The Grand Substitution (Wangu liufang 万古流芳, dir. Yan Jun 严俊, 1965), to name but a few.
311 Poshek Fu, China Forever, 13-14.
312 Shi Qi 石琪, “Shaoshi yingcheng de hongguo meng yu Xianggang qing” 邵氏影城的“中国梦”与“香港情” [Shaw movie town’s “China dream” and “Hong Kong sentiments”], in Shaoshi dianying
The Enchanting Shadow provided a form of catharsis for the collective obsession with the lost China, and suggested a possibility of identity construction through the cultural heritage of the Republic of China that was being preserved in Taiwan. Taiwan therefore was not only the target market of Shaw Brothers Mandarin movies (since it had the second largest Mandarin-speaking population in the world at that time), but was also the “the capital of a global struggle to preserve Chinese civilization from the ravages of Chinese Communism,” and hence the source of both cultural imagination and political legitimacy for Shaw Brothers’ “national cinema.”

As Stephen Teo puts it, “ghost films exactly embody the allegory of the Cold War, since ghost stories take place in a ruthless wonderland, fraught with negative energies and emotions such as failure, death, sorrow, misery and fear.” Given the specific ideological message and cultural subtexts in The Enchanting Shadow, it is not surprising that the film was well received in Taiwan, and greatly influenced Taiwan erotic ghost films over the next decade.

chutan 郭氏电影初探 [The Shaw screen: a preliminary study], ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003), 34.
313 Poshek Fu, China Forever, 14.
314 Stephen Teo 张建德, “Liaozhai lingyi yu lengzhan dianying” 聊斋灵异与冷战电影 [Liaozhai supernatural and Cold War movies], in Lengzhan yu Xianggang dianying, 237.
315 See “Fang Le Di tan Qiannü youhun” 访乐蒂谈倩女幽魂 [An interview of Le Di on The Enchanting Shadow], Gongshang ribao 工商日报, August 5, 1960, 12, and “Qiannü youhun ji maizuo” 倩女幽魂极卖座 [The Enchanting Shadow is a hit], Gongshang ribao 工商日报, August 27, 1960, 11.
316 For example, Song Cunshou’s 宋存寿 Ghost of the Mirror (1974), an erotic ghost film made in Taiwan, can be seen both as a variation of and a sequel to The Enchanting Shadow. Not only its Chinese title (“Gujing youhun” 古镜幽魂, literally, the ethereal spirit of an ancient mirror) is deliberately borrowed from the Chinese title of The Enchanting Shadow (“Qiannü youhun” 倩女幽魂, literally, the ethereal spirit of a beauty), but also its mise-en-scène, plot development, and characterization all pay obvious tributes to The Enchanting Shadow.
Utopia and Dystopia: A Chinese Ghost Story Trilogy and King Hu’s The Painted Skin

If we say Li Han-hsiang’s The Enchanting Shadow is an elegant film fraught with sentiment and nostalgia, then the 1987 A Chinese Ghost Story is more a revival of Li’s erotic ghost film with a special dynamic cinematic flair. The film was directed by Tony Ching Siu-tung and produced by Tsui Hark, although it is usually regarded as one of Tsui Hark’s representative works (as a producer, Tsui was well-known for imposing his own vision on the directors he hired).317

Retaining the basic storyline, characterization (Ning as a tax collector, demon as a Tree Demon), and mise-en-scène (town, temple, pagoda, Nie’s boudoir, forest, etc.) of The Enchanting Shadow, this supernatural fantasy recounts Ning Caichen’s (Leslie Cheung) adventure as a traveling tax collector. While taking shelter in an abandoned temple, Ning meets and falls in love with a beautiful woman named Nie Xiaoqian (Joey Wong), who turns out to be a ghost. Their supernatural affair is complicated by an evil Tree Demon. Aided by a fierce Taoist swordsman Yan Chixia (Wu Ma), the trusty male protagonist descends into hell to fight for the ghost he loves.

317 As Terence Chang 张家振, a Hong Kong and American film producer, recalls, “Tsui was good with comical scenes and situations while Ching was very imaginative with action scenes. Tsui grew up watching and was fascinated by Shaw Brothers period action films, whereas Ching literally trained in that world. They complemented each other and were tied together by their shared romantic vision.” See Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, City on Fire: Hong Kong Cinema (London/New York: Verso, 1999), 100. Although Ching was credited as director of A Chinese Ghost Story trilogy, Tsui shot and edited many of the dramatic scenes. Stephen Teo refers to Tsui as the “auteur” of A Chinese Ghost Story and its sequels, rather than Ching. See Stephen Teo, Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions (London: British Film Institute, 1997), 227. David Bordwell also remarks, “it is also true that Tsui sees his collaborators as assistants. ‘Ideas come easy to me’: so easy that he can’t direct all the films he dreams up. Once he has got financing for a project, he controls his productions by overseeing brainstorming sessions and creating a ‘production diary’ detailing how the ideas should be carried out.” See David Bordwell, Planet Hong Kong, 136-137.
Released in Hong Kong on July 18, 1987, *A Chinese Ghost Story* grossed over HK $18.831 million. It is listed by the Hong Kong Film Archives as one of “100 Must-See Hong Kong Movies,” and was a favorite at the 24th Golden Horse Film Festival and the 7th Hong Kong Film Festival.\(^{318}\) It not only “gave many Western viewers their first taste of supernatural thrills—Oriental style,”\(^{319}\) but also won numerous awards at European fantasy film festivals.\(^{320}\) Two sequels followed in 1990 and 1991, which respectively grossed over HK$20.784 million and HK$15 million at the box office. The great commercial success of the *A Chinese Ghost Story* trilogy in Hong Kong and other parts of East Asia initiated a flurry of imitations and rip-offs, most of which follow the *Chinese Ghost Story* formula, usually with a man, one or two exorcist(s), a beautiful enslaved spirit and her demon controller.\(^{321}\)

Compared with *The Enchanting Shadow*, the temporal setting for *A Chinese Ghost Story* cannot be easily located in a specific historical period. The Ming-Qing transition background of the former film is changed in the latter into a vague “chaotic

---

\(^{318}\) *A Chinese Ghost Story* received eight nominations at the 24th Golden Horse Festival (1987) and won four awards including Best Supporting Actor (Wu Ma), Best Adapted Screenplay (Kai-Chi Yuen), Best Film Editing, and Best Costume Make Up Design (Shirley Chan), and received twelve nominations at the 7th Hong Kong Film Awards (1988) and won three awards including Best Art Direction (Kenneth Yee), Best Original Film Score (Lok Man-tai, James Wong), and Best Original Film Song.


\(^{320}\) Awards include Special Jury Award at the Avoriaz Fantastic Film Festival (France; 1988), the Best Director at the Fantafestival (Italy; 1988), and Best Film Award at the Fantasporto Film Festival (Portugal; 1988).

world” (luanshi 乱世), which could refer to any turbulent time in Chinese history when thieves, robbers, and bandits infest the county, and the people live in misery. The setting is redefined as a fictional desolate temple. Historical labels for characters, such as “survivors of the Ming,” are removed. Ning is merely a tax collector, and Yan a reclusive Taoist. Although there is a certain historical continuity within the trilogy, the absence of historical information reflects an attempt to evade real history. Just like most fairy tale stories, A Chinese Ghost Story takes place “once upon a time, in a land far, far away...” Costumes, make up, actions, and speech are all extremely exaggerated, in a way that David Bordwell describes as “all too extravagant, too gratuitously wild.”

In contrast, the human-ghost relationship in The Enchanting Shadow is built on a realistic and everyday-life basis. Different from Li Han-hsiang’s other historical period films, which are famous for their magnificence, The Enchanting Shadow is known for its “grace and elegance.” The ghost and the demon in The Enchanting Shadow appear like decent gentry women. In contrast with the flying ghosts and the ugly bisexual Tree Demon in A Chinese Ghost Story, the female ghost in Li’s film plays the zither and recite poems, and the Tree Demon (laolao 姥姥), who looks like an ordinary old lady, plays

---

322 This comment first appeared as a charge from a New York Times reviewer on an early Hong Kong martial arts film. See Roger Greenspan, “Five Fingers of Death,” New York Times, March 22, 1973, 54. Yet to David Bordwell, it is more like “a badge of honor” for Hong Kong cinema, which best captures the common characteristic features of Hong Kong cinema nowadays. Bordwell even uses this expression as the title for chapter one of his Planet Hong Kong, 1-25.

323 Wong Ain-ling, “Emei doushou, jiayuan tuitang: Li Hanxiang de wenyipian” 娥眉抖擞 家园颓唐——李翰祥的文艺片 [Women in charge, men in exile], in Fenghuaxueyue Li Hanxiang 风花雪月李翰祥 [Li Han-hsiang, storyteller] ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2007), 26.
cards with other old women/ghosts (see Fig. 4.4 and 4.5). When the Tree Demon sees Ning Caichen for the first time in Nie Xiaoqian’s boudoir, she flies into a rage, as every grandmother would do in imperial China, criticizing Ning’s inappropriate manner and asking him to leave at once. Neither the ghost nor the demon shows any awesome demonic power before their true identities are revealed.

Fig. 4.4 Different settings of Nie Xiaoqian’s boudoir in The Enchanting Shadow (1960; top) and A Chinese Ghost Story (1987; bottom).

324 The spectator may also notice that the love token between the man and the ghost, a traditional Chinese painting of the mandarin ducks, in The Enchanting Shadow, is replaced by a Japanese Ukiyo-e-style painting of a girl washing her hair in A Chinese Ghost Story.
In her study of ghosts and gender in seventeenth-century Chinese literature, Zeitlin uses *A Chinese Ghost Story* as a typical presentation of traditional fictional narratives of the female ghost. The ghost culture in *A Chinese Ghost Story* is not, however, the traditional secular ghost culture as seen in *The Enchanting Shadow*. Rather, it presents an exaggerated, caricatured ghost culture, a “quintessential merger of the traditional Chinese ghost story with the Hong Kong pop sensibility,” as critic Barbara Scharres puts it. The film pilfers tasty morsels of various pop film culture, ranging from Hollywood-style horror and Japanese-style attire to Hong Kong martial arts action and comedy, and tosses them into a high-speed blender. The classic story of star-crossed lovers is repackaged as a highly entertaining pop culture mishmash.

---

The different versions of this ghost-cum-love story not only reflect different filmmakers’ aesthetic preferences and the changing popular culture of their time, but also reveal Hong Kong people’s views of history and their self-identity in the 1980s and the 1990s. The conscious avoidance of historical information, the exaggerated performance and defamiliarized scenes, as well as the apolitical characterization of the protagonists, as I demonstrate in the following, turn *A Chinese Ghost Story* trilogy into implicit allegories of Chinese history and reality. As Li Zhuotao, a Hong Kong film critic summarized in 1988, “Hong Kong is a city without a sense of history... For the elder generation, Hong Kong is merely a place to escape from turmoil, a borrowed place living on borrowed time, not to mention a sense of belonging. For the new generation who was born and grew up here, a strong indigenous awareness is present, but they are more alienated from China... The old history is suppressed consciously or unconsciously, yet a new historical consciousness has not arisen normally.” Li’s argument is undoubtedly reminiscent of Richard Hughes’ concept of “Hong Kong, borrowed place, borrowed time.” This self-awareness of Hong Kong’s spatio-temporal instability is intertwined with the anxiety about the 1997 handover, resulting in an almost schizophrenic split of Hong Kong’s self-identity: identified neither with China nor Britain. In this regard, China (mainland) and its history are no longer the center, but the Other against which the new generation constructs its own identity.

327 See Li Zhuotao’s 李焯桃 preface to *Xianggang dianying yu shehui bianqian* 香港电影与社会变迁 [Hong Kong cinema and social changes], a special issue for the 12th Hong Kong International Film Festival (1988), ed. Li Zhuotao (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1996), 9.
This change is reflected in the change of the authority figure in the movie. Yan is no longer a serious father/brother figure, restrained and sophisticated, who from their first meeting Ning believes in and thoroughly admires. Rather, in *A Chinese Ghost Story*, Ning does not believe Yan’s warning and mistakes him for a notorious murderer. Yan is a very emotional man this time around, easily touched by Ning’s theory of love.

The authority figure in *A Chinese Ghost Story II* is more complicated and worth discussion. The film recounts Ning’s new adventures after the end of the first film. When Ning returns to his hometown, he finds it has fallen on desperate times, becoming a living hell, with rampant corruption, banditry, and cannibalism. Soon Ning is mistaken for a murderer and put in jail, where he meets Master Zhuge Wolong 诸葛卧龙, a renowned scholar. The latter tactically saves Ning’s life and helps him to escape from jail. When Ning stops for the night in an abandoned villa, he is attacked by a group of people. While Ning mistakes Windy (Qingfeng 青风), the leader of the attackers, for Nie, his lost love, Windy and her sister Moon (Yuechi 月池) also mistake Ning for Master Zhuge because he carries Zhuge’s name-engraved pendant. Later Ning learns that the sisters are there to save their father, Minister Fu, who was framed for a crime and is now being transported to the capital. Together with Autumn (Zhiqiu yiye 知秋一叶), a Taoist monk he encountered on the way, Ning helps the sisters defeat a giant demon and an imperial convoy led by General Zuo (Zuo qianhu 左千户). The sisters are reunited with their

---

329 The name of Master Zhuge Wolong is obviously a parody of Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 (181-234) and his nickname Wolong 卧龙, literally, the sleeping dragon.
father—a seemingly perfect happy ending. Yet the story does not end here. Before long, the Imperial Priest arrives with his entourage and recaptures Minister Fu, Moon, and Autumn. Ning and Windy escape to seek help from Yan Chixia. And not surprisingly, Ning and his friends win the ultimate battle against the forces of evil.

Considering that this film was produced and released in 1990, just one year after the Tiananmen Square protests and its crackdown, we need to go back to the context to fully appreciate the politics at play here. As Lang Tian points out, “the democratic movement in 1989 essentially changed many people in Hong Kong, [who had to face] a future they do not voluntarily accept yet cannot change, as well as a seemingly impending deadline that they are not sure of.” The crackdown on the protests not only strengthened the stereotyped impression of the PRC as a tyrannical regime, but also worsened the public anxiety about the looming Communist takeover of Hong Kong and triggered a mass emigration in the 1990s. The fear of communism stirred during the tumult of the Cultural Revolution and Hong Kong leftist riots in the 1960s and fueled by a disillusionment with the communist Utopia, was exponentially enhanced by the tragic ending of the democracy movement in 1989. Yet this overt rejection of the communist government does not necessarily imply an aversion for the mainland and its people.

---

330 Lang Tian 朗天, *Hou jiuqi yu Xianggang dianying* 后九七与香港电影 [Post-1997 and Hong Kong cinema] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Critics Society, 2003), 105.
331 In 1990, the outflow of people reached a peak of 62,000 people or about 1% of the population. Canada, Australia, and the United States were the primary destinations.
332 Instigated by the Cultural Revolution on the mainland, Hong Kong leftists called for massive strikes and organized demonstrations, while the police stormed many of the leftists’ strongholds and placed their active leaders under arrest. These riots became still more violent when the leftists resorted to terrorist attacks, planting fake and real bombs in the city and murdering some journalists who voiced their opposition to the violence.
China and the Communist regime are viewed as two separate categories. In a Hong Kong critic’s words, “a cultural identification is not equal to an unconditional political belief.” In 1989, about 1.5 million Hong Kong people participated in local street demonstrations “against the Beijing government’s human rights violations.” The famous slogan “Chinese do not fight against Chinese” (Zhongguo ren buda Zhongguo ren 中国人不打中国人) best captures their aspirations in this political movement.

The opening theme song of A Chinese Ghost Story II is in this sense full of political connotations. As James Wong (Huang Zhan 黄霑), who wrote the lyrics for the song, admitted, “Tsui Hark’s films are frequently peppered with such political innuendoes. Hardly anyone knew that the lyrics of The Dao of Humanity, the theme for A Chinese Ghost Story II (1990) alludes to the June 4th Incident. We’re oddballs who don’t care if the audience grasps the hidden messages, as long as we let off some steam. ‘Why is the way home turned into a path of no return?’ After June 4th, we felt there was no turning back, and that it was ‘a raging sea of blood.’ Yet these words remain in tune with the story.”

---


334 Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, City on Fire, 15.


336 James Wong 黄霑, “Ai hen Xu Ke” 爱恨徐克 [I love him and I hate him: James Wong on composing for a truly creative mind], ed. Ho Wai-leng 卫灵, in Jianxiao jianghu: Xu Ke yu Xianggang dianying 剑啸江湖: 徐克与香港电影 [The swordsman and his jiang hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong film], ed. Sam Ho 何思颖 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002), 124-25.
With obvious tributes to Akira Kurosawa’s *Yojimbo* (The Bodyguard; 1961), *A Chinese Ghost Story II* shows the spectator a chaotic, desperate town where banditry and cannibalism are common occurrences, and the people live in misery. To make matters worse, this hellish town is not an exception, but an epitome of the whole society. In Master Zhuge Wolong’s words, “life is a prison.” As a renowned scholar and the first authority figure to appear in the film, Zhuge makes an impressive complaint about the literary inquisition:

> When I wrote about my travels, I was accused of revealing state secrets. I wrote about history, but was accused of criticizing the present. I annotated military treatises, and was accused of planning rebellions! So I wrote about fairy tales, then I was accused of promoting superstitions! Finally, I started to write a biography. Then the man was arrested, accused of being a rebel and we were both sentenced to life imprisonment. Don’t you agree I was destined to be imprisoned?

Ironically, this authority figure, though admired by the public, is not recognizable and irreplaceable. When other people mistake Ning for Master Zhuge, they believe him to have the ability to foretell the future and that his every casual utterance should be carefully studied and interpreted. After his poem about Mandarin ducks—a love token between him and Nie in *A Chinese Ghost Story*—coincidentally provides some clues to the rescue of Minister Fu, Ning becomes the object of respect and adoration. The hilarious misunderstanding sequence ridicules the absurdity that an authority figure can fabricated from nothing. Ning’s adherents claim that they should not only listen to his words, but also think about them and pass them down from generation to generation. This hilarious
idolatry is undoubtedly a parody of the cult of Mao and its iconic emblem—the so-called “Little Red Book”—in the Cultural Revolution.337

Ching Siu-tung admitted in an interview that the June Fourth Incident directly influenced A Chinese Ghost Story II.338 Lin Hui, a Hong Kong critic, even bitterly points out that if we view this movie as a text about the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, it is pretty easy to match CCP leaders, student leaders, and Hong Kong people with characters in the film.339 Master Zhuge’s fate refers to the fate of intellectuals involved in the movement at that time, and the rescue of Minster Fu probably alludes, as Lang Tian notes, to Operation Yellowbird (huangque xingdong 黄雀行动), a Hong Kong-based operation to help Chinese dissidents escape arrest after the Tiananmen Square massacre.340

The characterization of General Zuo is also interesting. As a loyal military man, he alone cannot intervene in the internal battles within the imperial court; he can only follow orders. Although sympathetic to the plight of Minster Fu, Zuo speaks out in defense of the court: “Usually it’s difficult to separate the truth from malicious gossip.”

337 As the Cultural Revolution unfolded, Mao became a regular presence in the day-to-day affairs of the people. The “Little Red Book,” formally titled Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong (Mao Zedong yulu 毛泽东语录), was compiled by Lin Biao and first published in January 1964. Like a contemporary version of Confucius’ Analects, Quotations was a collection of observations, witticisms and advice. The book and quotes from it became a symbol of individual loyalty to Mao and his ideas. Study of Quotations took place in thousands of schools, factories, military units, work groups and peasant collectives.
340 Lang Tian, Hou jiuqi yu Xianggang dianying, 168.
Yet his faith is shaken when he discovers that all the court officials are puppets who are, literally, spineless (see Fig. 4.6). Attentive spectators may notice that the first three puppet officials General Zuo addresses are Mandarin Jiang, Mandarin Yang, and Mandarin Li. For those who experienced the June Fourth Incident, it is more than clear that those puppet officials allude to the core leadership who quashed the protests in 1989, the CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin 江泽民, President Yang Shangkun 杨尚昆, and Premier Li Peng 李鹏. General Zuo’s change from an apolitical military man to a warrior fighting against evil is intriguing. Does General Zuo symbolize the role of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in this movement? Are those military men as loyal to the government as General Zuo to the court? Did they ever face any moral dilemma when they implemented martial law on behalf of the Party?
The greatest villain in the film—also, at first sight, the greatest authority—is the Imperial Priest (guoshi 国师) who takes de facto control of the country. Making his first appearance in the movie as a merciful sage, the Imperial Priest complains: “Too many people can’t tell the difference between good and evil in the world today. They don’t
understand the difficult position of the Imperial Court.” Yet he is finally revealed to be a
demon, the main culprit behind the chaos. In the final battle, the demon first shows his
true form as a levitating golden Buddha, then a giant centipede. According to the
screenwriters of *A Chinese Ghost Story II*, after the June Fourth Incident, Tsui Hark
“wanted to add tank scenes” to his films. The reason the Imperial Priest’s real identity is
revealed to be a centipede is that the screenwriters “wanted the giant insect to look like a
tank.”

Besides thrilling fighting scenes, what impresses the spectator most might be the
conversation between the fake Buddha and the protagonists (see Fig. 4.7):

Fake Buddha: Namo Land of Ultimate Bliss, the Amitabha Buddha is present.
Yan Chixia: You’ve got a lot of guts impersonating the Buddha!
Autumn: You’re a despicable demon! You’re going to start believing your own lie!
Ning Caichen: Your pretence is useless, I’m going to reveal your true self to the
world!
Fake Buddha: People are ignorant, [so] they need somebody to lead them. I
understand the sufferings of the people, so I’ve given you a living Buddha to
worship and follow. To my surprise, you guys refuse to realize your error. You
should feel ashamed before the grace of heaven.
Ning Caichen: You think people were put on earth to serve as your lackeys. You are
the one who should feel ashamed before the grace of heaven.
Fake Buddha: The masses like to worship idols. Why do you set yourselves against
the masses?
Yan Chixia: I spit on you! You’ve wormed your way in, because the masses are
ignorant! One wouldn’t choose to worship a demon! You’re cheating!
Fake Buddha: The Buddha’s power is limitless. If you don’t follow my light, death
will be your only path!

---

341 See interviews of Liu Damu 刘大木 and Keeto Lam 林纪陶 about “The A Chinese Ghost Story Series—
The Separate Ways of Man and Ghost, the Shadow of June 4th,” in “Bianju de miusi: si ge xilie” 编剧的缪
思——四个系列 [The one and the many: scriptwriters on scriptwriting], *Jianxiao jianghu: Xu Ke yu
Xianggang dianying*, 210-212.
This conversation reminds us of the lyrics for the opening theme song “Monsters and demons all boast about their merits, yet as the wind blows strong gusts and the thunder rumbles, ghosts are wailing and howling between heaven and earth.” The fake Buddha’s authority comes from the emperor’s credulity and is fueled by the fanaticism of the ignorant masses. The triumph over the demon hence is also a victory against idolatry and authoritarianism, as well as disillusionment with the illusory Utopia, the so-called “Namo Land of Ultimate Bliss.”

If we take the background music of this conversation into consideration, what the fake Buddha and the collective idolatry refer to is quite transparent. The music is a variation of an excerpt from “The Internationale,” the most recognizable and popular song of the socialist movement since the late 19th century. The cooperation between
Autumn and Yan in the battle against the demon can thus be read as a political allegory of Hong Kong’s support for the Beijing student demonstrations. When Autumn tries to introduce himself in the final battle, Yan simply replies: “At this moment who cares about sects? We’re all fighting the same enemy!” The demon is eventually annihilated, yet Autumn, a wandering Taoist monk who used to be an apolitical ghostbuster, loses his body and disappears forever. As Lin Hui points out, “the Taoist monk starring Jackie Cheung reflects the self-awareness of Hong Kong people after 1989. After repeated hesitation, choice, and change, he is totally lost.”

At the end of the film, Ning and Yan have a conversation about memory and hope. Yan says that people are forgetful—no matter what you’ve done, you’ll forget it really quickly. Ning asks whether it is good or bad to be forgetful, and whether they should still have expectations. This fear of memory loss, as Lang Tian puts it, “is a cultural commonality between the post-97 culture and the post-89 culture... What post-89 marks is an insistence on memory and a self-mockery/satire of memory loss and having no choice.” Then Windy reappears in time to leave her arranged marriage for Ning, and Yan banters with Ning: “And you said you’ve lost hope!” As such, the film tactically demonstrates the existence of hope through the fulfillment of love.

*A Chinese Ghost Story III* is almost a retread of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, though this time around, the swordsman Yan Chixia and the tax collector Ning Caichen characters are replaced by a Buddhist abbot and his disciple Shifang 十方. The film sets

---

342 Lin Hui, “Renjian dao yu liusi gangren shenfen qingyi jie.”
the action one hundred years after the original film, ignoring the events of *A Chinese
Ghost Story II*. The two monks are traveling through a small town to transport a golden
statue of Buddha, and local bandits thwart their journey. While taking shelter at the
haunted Lanruo Temple, Shifang encounters Xiaozhuo (Joey Wang), a female ghost
controlled by the awakened Tree Demon. Compared with the *Ghost Story II*, *Ghost Story
III* puts less emphasis on conflicts in terms of politics and ideology; instead, it implies a
strong sense of fatalism in the ups and downs in history. While the female ghost asks the
young monk whether he feels deprived being a monk, the two have an interesting talk
about fate and choice:

Monk: Deprived? I never had anything to lose.
Ghost: Why are you a monk if it’s such a hard work?
Monk: The first person I set eyes on was Master. My first clothes were monk’s
robes. What else can I be except a monk? Do I have a choice?
Ghost: You’re grown up, now you can choose.
Monk: I’ve been with Master for years. He’s family. Why’d my parents leave me in
a monastery? I’d like to know what my parents look like. So that if I ever met them,
I could avoid them.
Ghost: Your life is better than mine was. At least you have a Master.
Monk: Were you an orphan too?
Ghost: No. I was sold as soon as I was born. Whoever bought me became my
parents. Finally, a rich man took me as his second wife, I was murdered by his
concubine and buried here... That’s the first time I’ve told this story. I was lying.
Monk: I’m glad it’s a lie. If it were true it would be tragic. So in comparison, you’re
free now. Not being sold again and again.

Both the monk and the female ghost were abandoned by their parents, and they don’t
have any choice in or control over their fates. As involuntary participants drifting through
historical upheavals, their hapless fates can be read as an allegory of Hong Kong’s
history in the past century. As the male protagonist in *Demons from a Thousand Years*
(1990), another Hong Kong erotic ghost film, pessimistically puts it: “I say Hong Kong has no more future, because it can’t decide its own fate.” As the 1997 handover approached, Hong Kong people were torn by a phenomenon called “the 1997 complex,” a mixture of happiness over colonial Britain’s departure and anxiety over what could happen under the Chinese rulers who ordered the army attack on protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Many in Hong Kong feared that they would see Chinese soldiers in their midst one day. In other words, Hong Kongers felt frustrations over their political impotence, with no role to play in the making of their own destiny.

Because of this fatalism, the changes in the authority figure in the film is worth our attention. First, the Master is not as invincible as Yan is in the first two films. In his confrontation with the Tree Demon, he fails because the golden statue of Buddha is broken and has lost its power. Without help from the younger generation, he would be doomed to fail. In other words, the Master, though experienced, is no longer the overwhelming power and authority in the battle against evil. It is Shifang who absorbs the sun’s rays, becomes the incarnation of Buddha, and eventually kills the demon. With Shifang’s central role, the film seems to be an allegory about deconstructing/overthrowing the father figure.

Second, the Jacky Cheung character who claims to be “Yan Chixia” readily reminds spectators of Autumn (also played by Jacky Cheung) in A Chinese Ghost Story II. Yet this time around he is not a chivalric Taoist priest, but a money-grabbing mercenary. And there is indeed a certain link between the real Yan Chixia and the
copycat Yan Chixia: the latter met the former and wished to be his disciple, but was refused. After Yan died, the mercenary buried him and adopted his name. Different from other idealistic authority figures in *A Chinese Ghost Story* trilogy, he believes that one also needs to make money while doing good deeds, because only with money can one do whatever one wants. This realistic position is also reflected at the end of the film. When the two monks continue their journey, Shifang asks: “The demon said there is no heaven, is that true?” Instead of having an in-depth discussion (as Yan Chixia and Ning Caichen do in the ending sequences of the first two films of the trilogy), the Master simply replies: “Stop talking and do something.” Different from the ideological and cultural collisions explicitly shown in *A Chinese Ghost Story II*, this concluding remark suggests a simple remedy for pessimistic fatalism: whether Utopia exists or not, whatever the future holds, just be a down-to-earth person and work toward what lies clearly ahead.

Sam Ho attributes Tsui Hark’s commercial and critical success with the *A Chinese Ghost Story* trilogy and the *Swordsman* series to his experimentation with injecting western technology into Chinese mythology. Yet even more important, as Ho also points out, is Tsui’s success in “using this marriage to express contemporary Hong Kong concerns, like the impending Reunification and the June Fourth Incident... The late 80s

---

344 *The Swordsman* saga is also an iconic work of Tsui Hark in the 1990s, including *The Swordsman* (Xiaobao jianghu 笑傲江湖, dir. King Hu, 1990), *Swordsman II: The Legend of the Swordsman* (Xiaobao jianghu zhi dongfang bubai 笑傲江湖之东方不败, dir. Ching Siu-tung, 1992), and *Swordsman III: The East Is Red* (Dongfang bubai zhi fengyun zaiqi 东方不败之风云再起, dir. Ching Siu-tung and Raymond Lee 李惠民, 1993).
and early 90s was a time when Hong Kong experienced at once supreme confidence in itself and profound fear of its future.\textsuperscript{345}

This profound fear of the uncertain future as well as an antipathy toward the communist regime are also embodied in King Hu’s 胡金铨 The Painted Skin (Huapi zhi yinyang fawang 画皮之阴阳法王, 1993), an imitation, at least at first glance, of A Chinese Ghost Story.\textsuperscript{346} As the second serious film adaptation of ‘The Painted Skin,’\textsuperscript{347} in the first thirty minutes of the film, the plot follows the original Liaozhai story, in which a scholar Wang (Adam Cheng) encounters a beautiful woman named You Feng 尤枫 (also starring Joey Wong) on his way home, who later turns out to be a ghost under disguised by ‘‘painted skin.’’ The scholar enlists the help of two Taoist priests for protection, but the female ghost still breaks into his bedroom. From this point on, the film deviates from the original story and follows the formula of A Chinese Ghost Story. Instead of gouging out the scholar’s heart, the ghost just confesses that all she wants is to escape the clutches of an evil Yin-Yang King (yinyang fawang 阴阳法王), a faceless, powerful spirit-king who shuttles with ease between the mortal and spirit worlds. As the Yin-Yang King proudly claims: “I have strong magic power with 1000 years’ practice.

\textsuperscript{345}Sam Ho 何思颖, Jianxiao jianghu: Xu Ke yu Xianggang dianying, xi.
\textsuperscript{346} The movie’s cast includes Joey Wong as the female ghost, and Wu Ma and Liu Xun, actors who, respectively, played the Yan Chixia role and the Buddhist abbot roles in A Chinese Ghost Story trilogy, as the exorcist Taoist priests. It not only reflects an intentional leverage of star power to attract audience, but also suggests King Hu’s ambition to list this movie into the same genealogy of the A Chinese Ghost Story series. However, probably due to its slow pace and dated special effects, or audiences’ exhaustion with this type of movie, The Painted Skin turned out to be a box office bomb, grossing only HK $1,315,857.
\textsuperscript{347} Before King Hu’s The Painted Skin, Li Han-hsiang’s The Ghost Story is also a movie inspired by The Painted Skin. Yet given that it is more like a softcore comedy, it will not be examined in this chapter.
I’m half man/half ghost, half godly/half divine, half Taoist/half Buddhist. In this yin/yang boundary, I proclaim myself master.” Outside the borders of any single realm, no deities can control him, and he is able to control the destinies of some recently deceased souls.

This newly created fictional character is a combination of the Tree Demon role in A Chinese Ghost Story and the Imperial Priest role in A Chinese Ghost Story II. Every time the Yin-Yang King appears, a fetish cult performs a ritual in which all the ghosts kneel down, singing in chorus: “Long, long live the king, we pledge loyalty, Your Majesty. Your Majesty, your favor has exceeded our parents” (see Fig. 4.8).
Fig. 4.8 The fetish cult ritual in *The Painted Skin* (1993).

For audiences familiar with modern Chinese history, this idolatrous practice is obviously a parody of the Mao cult during the Cultural Revolution. The ghosts’ paean easily reminds audiences of the popular slogans, some derived from imperial practice, that were ubiquitous in the Mao era, such as “Long live Chairman Mao! Long, long live!”
“Our Party is greater than heaven and earth. Chairman Mao loves the people more than parents love their children.”

Attentive spectators may also notice that in the showdown sequence, the costume worn by the Yin-Yang King, who has possessed Wang’s body, obviously imitates that of Dongfang Bubai (东方不败, literally “the east is invincible”) in *Swordsman II: The Legend of the Swordsman* (1992), a martial arts film inspired by Jin Yong’s *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* (Xiaoao jianghu 笑傲江湖) (see Fig. 4.9).

---

348 The first sentence “Long live Chairman Mao! Long, long live!” is part of the daily routines and activities of Mao cult during the Cultural Revolution, which usually begins with people’s best wishes for Chairman Mao and his deputy Lin Biao, then followed by singing *The East Is Red* (Dongfang hong 东方红) in chorus, a song that was the de facto anthem of Mao and CCP, and ends with the collective learning of Mao’s “Little Red Book.” The second sentence is from “Chairman Mao Loves the People, More than Parents Love Their Children” (*Dieqin niangqin buru Mao zhuxi qin* 爹亲娘亲不如毛主席亲), a popular song during the Cultural Revolution. A video of this song is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRcQULWkcQ

349 Like *A Chinese Ghost Story* trilogy, although the *Swordsman* series—*The Swordsman* (Xiao’ao jianghu 笑傲江湖, dir. King Hu, 1990), *Swordsman II: The Legend of the Swordsman* (Xiao’ao jianghu zhi dongfang bubai 笑傲江湖之东方不败, dir. Ching Siu-tung, 1992), and *Swordsman III: The East Is Red* (Dongfang bubai zhi fengyun zaiqi 东方不败之风云再起, dir. Ching Siu-tung and Raymond Lee 李惠民, 1993)—were not directed but produced by Tsui Hark, they were usually regarded as Tsui Hark’s representative works in the 1990s. Given that *The Swordsman*, the first movie in this series, was actually directed by King Hu, it is plausible to argue that Hu was quite familiar with this story and the image of Dongfang Bubai.
Fig. 4.9 The role of the Yin-Yang King in The Painted Skin (top) resembles the role of Dongfang Bubai, the leader of the Sun Moon Holy Cult, in Swordsman II (bottom), in terms of both costume and personality.

The remarkable resemblance between these two characters is not coincidental, since the Swordsman series is a de facto parody of Chinese politics and history. In Tsui’s words, Swordsman is “a brilliant allegory with contemporary relevance loaded with subtle parallels to relations between Hong Kong and China, and pointed allusion to real-life figures.”

Dongfang Bubai, the deputy in the Sun Moon Holy Cult (riyue shenjiao 日月

---

350 Sam Ho and Ho Wai-leng, “Xu Ke fuzi zidao: san ge fangwen” 徐克夫子自道——三个访问 [Tsui Hark on Tsui Hark: three Hong Kong film archive interviews], in Jianxiao jianghu: Xu Ke yu Xianggang dianying, 182.
神教), not only ousts the leader (Ren Woxing 任我行) from power through a scheme, but also promotes a cult of personality similar to that of the Yin-Yang King in The Painted Skin. In Jin Yong’s original story, even kids in the Sun Moon Holy Cult have been thoroughly brainwashed and believe that “one cannot eat well nor sleep well without reading ‘leader’s precious quotes’ (jiaozhu baoxun 教主宝训). Reading them will improve one’s martial arts skills and fill one with energy to fight the enemy.” As Jin admits, the years he wrote this novel was “the time when the political struggle within the CCP in the Cultural Revolution had already got into full swing. Those in power and those who rebel resorted to every conceivable means, thus acutely reflecting the dark side of human nature...Yet this novel does not intentionally allude to the Cultural Revolution. Rather, it attempts to depict some common phenomena in political life throughout the three-thousand-year history of China.” The novel not only vividly portrays the image of the arrogant tyrant (e.g. Dongfang Bubai, Ren Woxing) and the ignorant masses, but also sketches various figures (e.g. the hypocrite Yue Buqun 岳不群, the villain Zuo Lengchan 左冷禅) and their different choices in the political arena, which is represented in the novel by the so-called jianghu 江湖 (“Rivers and Lakes”). As John Christopher

351 Similar to Ning Caichen’s adventure in A Chinese Ghost Story II (Ning’s adherents claim that they should not only listen to his words, but also think about his every word and pass it down from generation to generation), the so-called “leader’s precious quotes” is obviously a parody of the cult of Mao’s “Little Red Book” in the Cultural Revolution.

352 The Smiling, Proud Wanderer was first serialized on Ming Pao from April 20, 1967 to October 12, 1969, the same time when the Cultural Revolution movement had broken out in Beijing and quickly spread throughout the country. Jin Yong’s comments on this novel see Jin Yong, “Postscript” in Xiao ao jiang hu 笑傲江湖 [The Smiling, Proud Wanderer] (IV) (Hong Kong: Ming Ho Publications Corporation Limited 明河社出版有限公司, 1994), 1690.

280
Hamm points out, this novel “casts the Rivers and Lakes as a comprehensive metaphor for the political arena” and offers a vision of reclusion “as an alternative to the dystopia of political life.”

Likewise, on some moral or karmic scale, King Hu’s *The Painted Skin* can also be understood as a metaphor for Chinese society and politics. Besides the Yin-Yang King and Wang, the movie depicts various characters in a society interwoven by complex social networks and imbued with unspoken rules (*qian guize*). Wang’s wife, for instance, is both a submissive subject and loyal executor of such rules. When You Feng asks him whether his wife would mind if he brings her home, Wang simply replies that since she has failed to bear him a son, the decision is his to make. Ironically, the reason why Wang’s wife unwittingly discovers You’s identity as a ghost is also related to concubinage: she peeps on You as she is bathing to check whether she is fertile. Sun Desheng 孙得胜, Yin-Yang King’s smarmy flunky, is a role symbolic of people living under the tyrannical reign of a fanatic cult. While the Yin-Yang King promises that those who wish to quit the cult are free to go, Sun immediately replies that all the ghosts are willing to follow the king to enjoy the freedom to move between the mortal and spirit worlds. This answer evidently pleases the King. It later turns out that the King’s promise was no more than a strategy to flush out dissidents. As for the two dissidents who chose to escape his control, one has to hide and the other is captured and put into the magic water pot to be eliminated from the cycle of reincarnation. This tricky process can be read

---

as a parody of the Hundred Flowers Movement and the subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign in the Mao era.\(^{354}\) Sun’s wit is also embodied in his response to Yin-Yang King’s plight. When the King tries, but fails, to rape Wang’s wife, Sun calms the irate King with a respecteable excuse for his impotence: “Yin and yang can’t alternate.”\(^ {355}\) As the King’s henchman, Sun is later sent to chase after You Feng and the two Taoist priests, who are wandering around trying to find the secluded High Priest (taiyi shangren 太乙上人). Sun first asks them for bribes and, when the poor priests cough up a paltry sum, he gives them the cold shoulder. The confrontation between the righteous Taoists and the evil ghosts turns into an absurd farce about bribery.

The role of High Priest also deserves our attention for the sophistication with which he applies unspoken rules. When the two Taoist priests and You Feng finally find him in a secluded house near a peach tree grove, High Priest first pretends to be an ordinary fruit grower, then refuses to help You Feng to get rid of the Yin-Yang King, because it is none of his business. Different from those devoted exorcists (such as Yan Chixia, Autumn, and the Buddhist monks in \textit{A Chinese Ghost Story} trilogy or the Taoist priest in Bao Fong’s \textit{The Painted Skin}), the exorcist authority in this movie is indifferent

\(^{354}\) Mao Zedong launched the “Hundred Flowers Campaign” (baihua qifang, baijia zhengming 百花齐放，百家争鸣, literally, let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend) in April 1956, encouraging people, especially intellectuals, to openly express their opinions of the communist regime. However, as the campaign progressed, Mao gradually felt threatened by dissidents and abruptly changed course. The crackdown continued through 1957 as an “Anti-Rightist Movement” (fanyou yundong 反右运动) against those who were critical of the regime and its ideology. Many believe that the whole purpose of the Campaign was to flush out dissidents, the so-called “entice the snakes out of their caves” (yinshe chudong 引蛇出洞).

\(^{355}\) This “impotence” detail also alludes to the figure of Dongfang Bubai, who castrated himself to fulfill the prerequisite for learning the skills in a martial arts manual known as the \textit{Sunflower Manual} (Kuihua baodian 葵花宝典).
and self-centered. Not until he hits on the idea that by rescuing You Feng and overpowering the Yin-Yang King he could “fill up the power of pure yin and pure yang” to become immortal, does he give a hand to the priests and the female ghost. Yet before he begins his mission, he first visits Yama, the ruler of hell, because the Yin-Yang King is half man/half ghost and half Taoist/half Buddhist, and “we Taoists mustn’t attend the Buddhist area.” After asking Yama two questions—whether (and how) he can solve the problem of the Yin-Yang King—and getting a positive response, High Priest finally declares war against Yin-Yang King.

King Hu paid as much attention as Li Han-hsiang to details of costumes, settings, and etiquette in terms of their historical authenticity, which makes The Painted Skin stylistically different from its counterparts in the erotic ghost movie fever of the late 1980s and 1990s. Yet different from the worlds in all the erotic ghost movies I have examined so far, where the confrontation between good and evil is clear and indisputable, the world in Hu’s movie is not a place where black and white are sharply contrasted, and where good and evil are absolutely incompatible. Rather, it is a society supported and limited by various reciprocal social networks, complex interpersonal relationships, and the moral obligations to maintain such a relationship. Whether ghost or exorcist, all in the film are obedient subordinates of these social relationships and unspoken rules. As David Bordwell notes, “Hu used the Mandarin movie as an occasion to explore China’s tragic history of state corruption. In a genre that spun out plots of private revenge and family loyalty, he elaborated political intrigues, complete with bluffing, disguise, and shifting
alliances.” In contrast with the *A Chinese Ghost Story* series, which are in director Ching’s words, movies “about conflict against the authorities, about how governments are very corrupt and the people always suffer as a result,” Hu’s *The Painted Skin* is more restrained and pessimistic, because his characters never realize they are suffering from a corrupt state.

The film ends with the restoration of order, the Yin-Yang King and his cult are eliminated, and the female ghost disappears—an apparent perfect ending. Yet does it suggest a victory against idolatry and authoritarianism? Audiences may recall a detail that High Priest once tells the two Taoist priests: because people have recently followed the emperor in believing in Taoism, many have come for peach wood sticks (*taomu zhang* 桃木杖) or stolen them. A Taoist priest even jokes that peach wood sticks can be sold whenever peaches are not sellable. What the superior favors will always be excessively embraced by his subordinates. Ironically, it seems that nobody, not even the Taoist priests who represent the force of justice, feels there is anything wrong with this phenomenon. The human world is no better than Yin-Yang King’s ghostly world. At the end of the movie, High Priest’s peach tree grove, a symbolic utopian world, is burned into ashes as the cost of eliminating the enemy. *The Painted Skin* is in this sense a story about utopia.

---

356 David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong*, 255.
358 In Chinese folk culture, peach wood sticks are believed to have the power to keep demons away, and peach wood swords are usually used as weapons to exorcise demons during Taoist exorcism.
359 Given the special allegorical meaning of peach blossom forest in Chinese culture since Tao Yuanming’s 陶渊明 (365-427) *The Peach Blossom Spring* (*Taohua yuan ji* 桃花源记), the peach blossom forest in this
and dystopia, in which the female ghost seeking freedom has no place to go; she can only perish, along with the peach grove, in the fire.\footnote{The ending sequence of the movie hints that Wang’s newborn son is the reincarnation of You Feng, who is suggested by High Priest to name after Feng.}

**Betrayal and Return: Remakes of The Painted Skin and A Chinese Ghost Story in the New Millennium**

Both *The Painted Skin* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* were remade in the 21st century. The former remake was directed by Gordon Chan in 2008, and the latter by Wilson Yip 叶伟信 in 2011.\footnote{Yip’s *A Chinese Ghost Story* claims in its closing credits to be a movie dedicated to the memory of actor-musician Leslie Cheung, and its theme song and costume design also pay obvious tribute to Cheung’s role in *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987).} Many similarities can be found between the two remakes. First, both are co-produced and distributed by Hong Kong and mainland film companies. Gordon Chan and Wilson Yip are directors from Hong Kong, and both films adopted a mixed cast and crew from the mainland and Hong Kong.\footnote{Golden Sun Films (Hong Kong) 泰吉影业 (香港) 公司 is the Hong Kong film production company for both films. The two films also share some crew members: Lan Ketsarinh 蓝凯莎玲, for instance, is on the list of co-producers of both movies, and Arthur Wong 黄岳泰 is the cinematographer for both films. Intriguingly, Wilson Yip, the director of the remake of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, was once a candidate for directing the remake of *The Painted Skin*. However, shortly after Andy Chin 钱永强, a co-director held a press conference in Shanghai to announce the filming of *The Painted Skin*, he found that his script would not be able to get the pre-shooting approval from the PRC’s film censorship committee, because the script is “too scary, too fantastic, and not realistic.” If the film was targeted only at Hong Kong audiences, Chin’s script definitely works. Yet for film investors, it is too risky to give up the mainland market. As Gordon Chan said, “nobody in Hong Kong would invest in such a movie that will only be shown in Hong Kong.” So investors of *The Painted Skin* enlisted Gordon Chan, who was going to be the chairman of Hong Kong Film Awards board of directors, and who was more experienced with China’s censorship. See Wan Jing, “Buyao gao kongbu zhuyi: dianying huapi de bianqian.”} This mode of co-production became quite common after the mainland film market was opened to Hong Kong in the 1990s.
Second, in contrast to their predecessors, both films resemble fantasy films more than erotic ghost films. The female characters—Xiaowei in *Painted Skin* and Xiaoqian 小倩 in *A Chinese Ghost Story*—in both films are fox-sprites not ghosts, a change that is primarily due to the filmmakers’ strategy of avoiding trouble with the Chinese censors, who generally disapprove of the spectral. Compared with a ghost, who plays an important role in Chinese folk culture, a fox-spirit is more like a fairy-tale creature or one of the imaginative characters from fantasy movies like *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings*, or a mermaid in Andersen’s fairy tales, who are distant from people’s everyday lives and hence less associated with superstition. Indeed, Yip’s movie has an alternative English title—*A Chinese Fairy Tale*, which better reflects the content of the film. Compared with *The Enchanting Shadow* and the *A Chinese Ghost Story* trilogy, the appearance and acts of demons in this remake are resemble female vampires in a Hollywood fantasy film, and the fighting scenes are like battles between vampire hunters and vampires. As Darren Wee puts it, “while Yip’s remake is in the same spirit as the original so to speak, it seems

363 The ghost culture has a long tradition in China, which is associated with Chinese funeral customs, such as burning paper money for the dead on Qingming 清明 or the ghost festival (*zhongyuan jie* 中元节/ *yulan pen jie* 盂兰盆节 on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month), and the rituals of “seven weeks of mourning” upon the death of a person. For example, it is believed that on the “first seven” (*touqi* 头七) of the 49 days, which refers to the seventh day after death, the soul of the dead will go back home to recall everything in the past on this very day, before setting foot on the road to the lower world, drinking the water of Lethe (*wang chuan* 忘川) and forgetting everything about the former lives. The family members of the dead shall prepare a meal for the soul before it comes back and shy away by going to bed with lights off. This is to avoid sentimental moments of the soul, who might linger in this world and delay reincarnation. Despite the government’s objection, those rituals are still implemented in mainland China, especially in rural areas. Compared with animal-sprites and other fairy-tale style creatures, the ghost is more closely related to people’s everyday lives. That is why both *Harry Potter* series and *The Lord of the Rings* series were publicly shown in the mainland, and *Twilight* series were shown selectively in the mainland, whereas Asian ghost horror movies are never publicly showed in mainland theatres. I will analyze the censorship against the ghost below.
to be targeted at a younger audience brought up on Hollywood movies, perhaps he hopes the film will be Hong Kong’s answer to *Twilight.*”

Similarly, Gordon Chan admitted that the reason why he made Xiaowei a fox-spirit is because this identity is more fictional than a ghost, and will not lead people to believe in her existence in reality, “hence the pressure from censorship would be less.”

As mentioned in the Introduction, since the communist takeover of mainland China in 1949, film has long served as a powerful tool for social inclusion, mass education, and, most important, political propaganda and ideological edification. In the socialist period prior to the 1980s, film genres in Chinese cinema, as Shuyu Kong contends, “were officially defined and authorized for propaganda and pedagogical purposes,” since it was the government who financially supported and institutionally monitored the production and distribution of movies. Unfortunately, the horror genre, as well as the formulas that constitute its essence, as Josephine Woll puts it in her study of Russian horror cinema, “contradict almost every major tenet of Marxist historical materialism ... of socialist realist dogma.” So it is not surprising that this genre was banned in the Mao era for its inappropriate themes and contents. Among various images in horror films, ghosts in particular, as a pre-modern folk concept, are by nature at odds with the materialist faith of communism and with the doctrine of an “enlightened”

---


365 Wan Jing, “Buyao gao kongbu zhuyi: dianying huapi de bianqian.”

366 Shuyu Kong, “Genre Film, Media Corporations, and the Commercialisation of the Chinese Film Industry,” 228.

modern socialist state that seeks to educate its people into modern and rational citizens.

Manfred Wong 文隽, a Hong Kong filmmaker, once described the PRC’s censorship of the ghost in the following way:

In Hong Kong, it doesn’t matter what films you make, like haunting in a church, shooting guns, or gangsters (guhuo zai 古惑仔), because Hong Kong people all know that “film is just film” and nobody would take it seriously. However, the mainland censorship differs from Hong Kong’s, as censors are more concerned about [film’s] great influence on audiences in rural areas. Several years ago I asked some officials why we are not allowed to make films about ghosts, why we are not allowed to make horror [movies]. Then an official said, “Manfred Wong, you don’t understand. We have a population over one billion, of which nine hundred million are living in rural areas. They are quite simple and they would believe in ghosts [if you put them on the screen]. So we need to beware of it, as we can’t let them believe [in ghosts].” He gave me such an answer and I accepted it.”

Wong’s description of Hong Kong filmgoers applies to horror aficionados of any modern society that has long been disabused of superstitious beliefs, because it is, as Laikwan Pang argues, “not normally expected that the audiences who find these films so entertaining are themselves believers in the supernatural, or encounter such terror in their

---

368 The Young and Dangers (Guhuo zai 古惑仔) series is one of the most famous Hong Kong film series. They are centered on a group of young gangsters in their twenties. In David Bordwell’s words, “they are also triads. Resplendent in dragon tattoos, they run loan-sharking and car-parking rackets, scrap with other youngsters, stand loyally by their superiors, avenge their slain lovers, and commit murder on orders. They are upwardly mobile members of Hong Kong’s most enduring service sector.” See Planet Hong Kong, 26.

369 See Manfred Wong’s interview “My Heart Know the Autumn of Both Places” (xinzhì liàngdi qiū 心知两地秋) in “Real Talk” (feichang dao 非常道), a talk show of Phoenix New Media Limited (NYSE: FENG) on August 7, 2014. The online link of this talk was last modified on October 11, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZeRZdrYG0rA. (accessed October 12, 2015). As a famous Hong Kong filmmaker, Manfred Wong came to mainland to pursue a new career in 1991. He is not only the co-screenwriter of many Hong Kong hits including the Young and Dangerous series, but also the co-screenwriter of several Hong Kong/mainland co-produced horror movies, including Blood Stained Shoes (2012), The House That Never Dies (2014), and Phantom of the Theatre (Mogong meiying 魔宮魅影, dir. Raymond Yip, 2016). He also served as the chairman of Hong Kong Film Awards board of directors from 2005 to 2007. All of these experiences make Wong a sophisticated filmmaker familiar with various unspoken rules in both Hong Kong and PRC cultural worlds.
everyday lives.” The official’s reply to Manfred Wong justifies China’s censorship of ghost-themed movies by drawing attention to uneducated peasant audiences who are hard to disabuse of superstitious belief, especially the existence of ghosts. Given that films with superstitious themes can potentially lead audiences away from enlightenment values, it might seem natural for a “modern” government to ban such films.

However, this explanation intentionally conceals some truth. As examined in the Introduction, the allegorical interpretation of the ghost as well as the binary “human/ghost” trope, has long been a remarkable and controversial discourse in Chinese culture. Representations of the ghost, as Pang notes, could “become instruments of political satire, vehicles for wild imaginations, channels for escapism, allegories of sexual freedom or simply exalted literary or artistic expressions in their own right,” and hence “might be encoded and decoded in ways over which the state has no control.” The ban of the play Li Huiniang in the 1960s suggests that the government was especially wary of vengeful-ghost-themed stories, as they might promote a principle that “ghosts do humanity no harm,” which is ideologically perilous and politically threatening. This case also helps us to understand why ghosts were excluded from cinema in the Mao era, since film, compared with drama, is a medium of greater visual impact and greater power for social mobilization. Although in the 1980s and 1990s a heightened interest in ghosts

371 Ibid., 474, 461.
372 Although ghosts in vengeful-ghost stories take revenge on human beings, in most cases they only haunt or kill those who have abused or murdered them before, yet do other humans no harm. In other words, they, like those marvel heroes, are messengers of justice in a loose sense. In Maggie Greene’s words, Li Huiniang is actually “a ghostly Bodhisattva.” See Maggie Greene, “A Ghostly Bodhisattva and the Price of Vengeance.”
and hauntings appeared in the Chinese cultural and literary arena, and cinema also witnessed a revival of horror, the ghost is still a comparatively taboo subject in the film industry.\(^{373}\) The few ghost-themed films made are all adapted from classical stories, and their ghosts are clearly presented as fictional characters from a pre-modern era who usually served as a metaphor for social injustice.\(^{374}\) This relatively ghost-tolerant policy, however, was tightened up in the new century. In May 2007 and February 2008, the General Administration of Press and Publication (xinwen chuban zongshu 新闻出版总署, hereafter GAPP), an administrative unit whose duty overlaps with that of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (guojia xinwen chuban guangdian zongju 国家新闻出版广电总局, hereafter SARFT),\(^{375}\) successively issued two notices: “Notice of Investigating and Prohibiting Horror Publications like Death Note” (hereafter 2007 Notice) and “Notice of Investigating and Prohibiting Audiovisual Materials of ‘Horror


\[^{374}\] In line with the restraint on the historical setting of ghost films is a widespread rumor on the Chinese internet that the SARFT “forbids animals to cultivate into spirits after the founding of the PRC” (jianguì hòu dòngwù bùxù xiùlián chéngjìng 建国后动物不许修炼成精). Ma Boyong 马伯庸, a famous writer and blogger, even wrote a spoof of A Chinese Ghost Story set after 1949, in which a fox-spirit falls in love with an official demon hunter sent by the government. See “Wang chuan guangdian xingui ‘jinzhi dongwu chengjing’ shi shenme yisi” 网传广电新规 “禁止动物成精” 是什么意思 [What is the meaning of “forbidding animals to cultivate into spirits”, the internet-based so-called new regulation of the SARFT], last modified December 4, 2014, http://news.cnhnb.com/news/detail/9180. (accessed January 10, 2016)

\[^{375}\] In fact, the GAPP has been merged with the SARFT to form the General Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (guojia xinwen chuban guangbo dianying dianshi zongju 国家新闻出版广播电影电视总局) since 2013.
and Spiritualist Genres’” (hereafter 2008 Notice).\(^{376}\) According to both notices, but especially the 2008 Notice, any literary works and audiovisual materials featuring characters modeled after ghosts, monsters, and other non-human forms, and containing scary, creepy, surrealistic plots might be defined as malicious works for readers and spectators, especially the young generation, and hence be banned.\(^{377}\) Pang attributes the 2007 Notice to the government’s concern about young people’s hatred of society, and the 2008 Notice to the PRC’s preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics with a “sanitized” cultural sphere.\(^{378}\) I agree with her conclusions, and would like to add one more motivation for the 2008 Notice: the 17th National Congress of the CCP in 2007. It was at this congress that the “Scientific Development Concept,” President Hu Jintao’s signature policy doctrine, was enshrined into the Party Constitution. This concept not only explains the official objection to the supernatural, but also aims to create a “socialist harmonious society” through egalitarian wealth distribution and concern for the country’s less well-off. In other words, enlightenment, in terms of exorcising society of superstitions, is

\[^{376}\textit{Death Note} (2006)\text{ series and the popular Japanese manga of the same name tell the story of Light Yagami, a high-school student, who accidently obtains a notebook of the God of Death and discovers that whoever has their name written on it will die. Light then begins his plan to build a new world, where only people he deems morally fit to live remain. He becomes known as Kira to the public, a word derived from the Japanese pronunciation of the word “killer,” because he eliminates “evil” people with the death notebook. When pirated copies of this movie series and manga series began to circulate in China, many ordinary notebooks were packaged by sellers as “death notebooks” to be sold to \textit{Death Note} aficionados, who wrote in them the names of people they hated and wished to die.\]


\[^{378}\text{Pang, “The State Against Ghosts,” 471-72.}\]
Ideologically associated with postsocialist economic development and social stability. This congress was referred to in the 2008 Notice as a guide for increasing the overall awareness of and enhancing social responsibility.

In addition to the PRC’s anti-superstition censorship, the second reason for this ghost-to-fox-spirit identity switch is because the image of female ghosts and the image of fox-spirits in *Liaozhai* stories are, as Li Zeng remarks, “often interchangeable.”\(^{379}\) As manifestations of men’s erotic fantasies, female ghosts and fox-spirits can both take on human appearance. They are usually depicted as beautiful, sensual, and seductive women who embody the power of feminine beauty and sexuality, on the one hand, and represent positive female personality traits that men appreciate, such as unconditional love and loyalty, on the other hand. A female ghost and a fox-spirit may even be love rivals in a love triangle and feel jealousy toward each other, as for example in the story “Lotus Fragrance.”\(^{380}\)

The final reason for the shift to fox-spirit (*huli jing* 狐狸精) is that the term, with its connotation of femme fatale in Chinese culture, best captures the essence of the personality traits of the female protagonist, who is set in a love triangle in both Chan’s *Painted Skin* and Yip’s *A Chinese Ghost Story*. “Betrayal and return” of the key role (the

\(^{379}\) Li Zeng, “*Painted Skin,*” 222.

\(^{380}\) This story per se is not so different from another *Liaozhai* story “Xiao Xie”—the original story for the film *Ghost Sisters* (1985) examined in the Introduction—in which two female ghosts fall in love at the same time with a scholar. Both stories end with the happy assertion that love conquers death: two women successfully reincarnate and enjoy happy polygamous marital life with the scholar. See Pu Songling, “Lotus Fragrance” (*Lianxiang* 蓮香), in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, trans. John Minford (London: Penguin, 2006), 211-228.
focus of contention) in the love triangle hence becomes the third similarity, also a prominent theme, of these two movies, as I discuss in the following.

Dudley Andrew categorizes the various relations between a film adaptation and the original literary text into two main types: “borrowing” and “intersecting.” The first mode “employs, more or less extensively, the material, idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful text,” and the audience is “expected to enjoy basking in a certain pre-established presence and to call up new or especially powerful aspects of a cherished work.” 381 “Intersecting,” by contrast, “presents the otherness and distinctiveness of the original text, initiating a dialectical interplay between the aesthetic forms of one period with the cinematic forms of our own period.” 382

Whereas Bao Fong’s The Painted Skin, as examined in the Introduction, is more in the “borrowing” mode, Gordon Chan’s adaptation, just like King Hu’s, can serve as a good example of the mode of “intersecting,” which can be interpreted from different perspectives: the confrontation between human and demon, confusion about one’s identity, the oscillation between desire and reason, the power of love and hatred, the choice between morality and mortality, the issue of fidelity/infidelity in marriage, the gender hierarchy and patriarchal discourses, and so forth. In chapter 2, “The Horror Cinema of Infidelity,” I examined Chan’s Painted Skin from a feminist perspective, in which Xiaowei, the mysterious girl (the role of the female ghost in the original Liaozhai story) Wang rescued from the bandits, and Peirong, Wang’s wife, are presented in a

381 Dudley Andrew, Concepts in Film Theory, 98.
382 Ibid., 100.
conventional mode of the dichotomy of “femme fatale” and “virtuous woman.” In this chapter, however, I mainly focus on this film’s obsession with identity loss and cannibalism, which actually echoes the anxiety about identity in some Hong Kong horror films around 1997.

As mentioned earlier in chapter 2, the climax of this film comes as Xiaowei secretly shows her true identity to Peirong and threatens to kill everyone unless she offers up her place as Wang’s wife and takes the blame for the murders. This newly added “identity switch” plot—in which Xiaowei takes on Peirong’s role as wife, and Peirong takes on Xiaowei’s role as demon—is intriguing on two levels. First, it distinguishes Xiaowei from the female ghost roles in other adaptations of “The Painted Skin.” In King Hu’s film, since the couple is childless, it is not difficult for Wang to persuade his wife to accept You Feng (the ghost) as his concubine so as to produce an heir. You Feng accepts Wang’s suggestion submissively, since all she needs is a shelter to escape Yin-Yang King’s control rather than a man’s love. Meiniang 梅娘, the ghost in Bao Fong’s movie, however, shows intense jealousy of Wang’s wife. After failing to incite Wang to murder her, the ghost frames the wife for adultery thus causing Wang to angrily kick her out of home. Compared with You Feng and Meiniang, Xiaowei is a more calculating character who clearly understands and exploits the weakness of human nature. On the one hand, she sophisticatedly plays a normative gender role in the patriarchal world, through which she insidiously takes Peirong’s place in Wang’s everyday life (e.g. helping Wang take off body armor, hosting a banquet as Wang’s woman, etc.). On the other hand, she takes
advantage of Peirong’s kindness to trap her in a dilemma: to let everyone die or accept her suggestion to switch identities. Once Peirong chooses the latter, not only will she lose her physical body and become a demon (yao 妖), but her identity as Wang’s wife and as a human being will end (see Fig. 4.10).

Fig. 4.10 Xiaowei suggests an identity switch between her and Peirong.

The inner tension and fear caused by Xiaowei’s malicious suggestion is the second layer I would like to highlight. The concern over losing one’s identity is not new in Hong Kong horror cinema. In addition to frustration over the inability to decide the political fate of Hong Kong, anxiety about the uncertain future, and the post-1989 hostility to the communist regime, as I have examined in A Chinese Ghost Story trilogy and King Hu’s The Painted Skin, an obsession with cannibalism and identity loss also
runs through Hong Kong horror movies made around 1997, such as *The Untold Story* (1993), *Ebola Syndrome* (1996), *Intruder* (1997), and *The Untold Story II* (1998).³⁸³

To me, these movies are not only “grim embodiments of a dark social reality affecting Hong Kong society in the last decade of the twentieth century,” as Tony Williams puts it,³⁸⁴ but also reflections of the social malaise of Hong Kong people about the 1997 handover. In *The Untold Story*, the protagonist (Anthony Wong) slaughters the family of a restaurant owner and chops them up to make steam buns. Claiming to be the new owner of the restaurant, no one doubts his identity or cares about the disappearance of the former owner’s family, until some dismembered bodies are accidentally discovered. A similar plot occurs in *Ebola Syndrome*. In this story, set in South Africa, the protagonist (also played by Anthony Wong) murders the owner of a Chinese restaurant and his wife and makes hamburgers with their flesh. Using the restaurant owner’s passport, he returns to Hong Kong, where he spreads the Ebola virus with which he was infected in South Africa. Before the outbreak of the epidemic, nobody realizes that he is an identity thief. While the identity crisis is interwoven with sensational cannibalistic stories in these two movies, *Intruder* directly renders this anxiety through a story of a serial-killer couple, whose roles resemble the character Martin Asher in *Taking Lives* (dir. D. J. Caruso, 2004). In order to obtain a Hong Kong identity, the couple, two fugitive

³⁸³ *The Untold Story* (Baxian fandian zhi renrou chashao bao 八仙饭店之人肉叉烧包, dir. Herman Yau, 1993), *Ebola Syndrome* (Yibola bingdu 伊波拉病毒, dir. Herman Yau, 1996), *Intruder* (Kongbu ji 恐怖鸡, dir. Kan-Cheung Tsang 曾瑾昌, 1997) and *The Untold Story II* (Renrou chashaobao er tianzhu dimie 人肉叉烧包2天诛地灭, dir. Yiu-Kuen Ng 吴耀权, 1998) all belong to Hong Kong Category 3 films, which are known for graphic representations of sex and violence.

³⁸⁴ Tony Williams, “Hong Kong Social Horror: Tragedy and Farce in Category 3,” in *Horror International*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 203.
criminals from the mainland, intentionally trap, torture, and finally slay their victims while also gathering all the information and materials they need to assume their identities.

Yet their plan eventually fails due to the wife’s carelessness in a moment of weakness: she allows the daughter of one victim to escape; the little girl gets rescued, and the couple are once again wanted by the police. The film ends with the wife’s apology to her husband during their getaway: “Sorry for the moment that I was softhearted. I was not cruel enough before. But it does not matter, as I will do better next time.” Her promise comes true, when her doppelganger appears in *The Untold Story II*. In this film, A Feng 阿凤, a woman from the mainland, not only successfully seduces her cousin’s husband, the owner of a barbecue shop, but also murders her cousin and grills her ribs to sell in the shop. She takes her place as the boss’s wife and successfully becomes a Hong Kong resident. The scariest moment of this movie must be the scene in which A Feng grills her cousin’s ribs; she grills them in a leisurely manner, smiling all the while as if they are the yummiest food in the world. The shot of Xiaowei feasting on sliced heart in *Painted Skin* resembles the shot of A Feng tasting the human ribs. Xiaowei’s custom of eating human hearts in this sense is not only a symbolic “castration” of the male, but also a part of the genealogy of cannibalism in Hong Kong horror cinema established by Tsui Hark’s *We’re Going to Eat You* (1980) (see Fig. 4.1).

As a representative work of Hong Kong New Wave cinema, Tsui Hark’s *We’re Going to Eat You* (Diyu wumen 地狱无门), a cannibalistic story set in the Republican period, for the first time visualizes what Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) calls “cannibalism,” literally and allegorically, on the Chinese screen. What shocks spectators the most may not be the protagonist’s adventure on the cannibalistic island, but the ironic, pessimistic ending of the film: when the protagonist successfully escapes from the island with A Lian 阿莲,
As David J. Skal points out, “cannibalism, after all, represents the most primal kind of assimilation and inclusion imaginable.” The fear of cannibalism in Hong Kong horror cinema, in this sense, can be read as an allegory of Hong Kong’s anxiety about a young resident on the island, A Lian offers what she feels is the best reward for his kindness—a bloody beating human heart. It echoes the poignant plea to “save the children” in Lu Xun’s “Dairy of A Madman” (Kuangren riji 狂人日记).

identity loss. A decade after the retrocession of Hong Kong to the mainland, it seems that this anxiety has intensified instead of eased. While business and trade have benefited from a closer relationship with mainland China since the handover, Beijing’s stance on electoral reform has become a major issue for Hong Kong protesters.\footnote{As many as half a million Hong Kong people poured into city streets in 2003 and 2004 to demand transition to universal suffrage and full-scale direct elections.} Meanwhile, as mainland tourists have poured into Hong Kong since 2003, the gaping cultural differences between mainlanders and Hong Kong residents in terms of belief, habits, and lifestyles, as well as their competitions for resources (e.g. hospital beds, infant formula, schools, etc.) have led to abundant conflicts and tensions between the two communities.\footnote{The mainland relaxed travel rules after the devastating SARS viral epidemic whacked Hong Kong’s economy. In 2006, 13.6 million mainlanders came to Hong Kong, half of its tourists, which have led to numerous conflicts and tensions between local residents and mainlanders. Take competition for hospital beds for example. Similar to America’s citizenship policy, babies born in the territory of Hong Kong automatically get Hong Kong passports, and hence have the right to live and work there, and enjoy other rights as Hong Kong citizens. Many mainland couples therefore choose to go to Hong Kong to give birth to their babies. The years after handover already saw increasing numbers of Chinese women giving birth in Hong Kong, and the competition for hospital beds has become fiercer as Beijing relaxed travel rules beginning in 2003. In 2010, about half of the babies born in Hong Kong had mainland Chinese parents. The large influx of visiting pregnant women from the mainland caused a shortage of hospital resources, resulting in much criticism of visiting pregnant women and their anchor babies (shuangfei yinger 双非婴儿).} Cannibalism thus becomes an allegory for China’s nibbling away at Hong Kong, like Xiaowei who elegantly eats the hearts of residents and aims to become the social hostess of her town. Ironically, nobody sees the truth, and even comrades of those murdered soldiers choose to believe this seemingly harmless girl. Should Hong Kong residents, like the ignorant town people in Painted Skin, beware of the danger of being nibbled away by a malicious Other? Should Hong Kong people maintain a distinct identity apart from that of mainland China? It is not surprising that in February 2012 a
full-page advertisement, calling for a stop to mainland “locusts,” appeared in Hong Kong’s Apple Daily (pingguo ribao 苹果日报), a local tabloid-style newspaper known for its pro-democracy and anti-government editorial stance, also Hong Kong’s second best-selling newspaper (see Fig. 4.12).389 The analogy between mainlanders and locusts echoes the cannibalism in Painted Skin, because the image of locusts is always associated with disasters caused by their voracious eating habits.

389 Netizens on the Hong Kong Golden Forum (Gaodeng 高登) and Baby Kingdom (qinzi wangguo 亲子王国), two popular local internet forums, raised more than HK$100,000 for the advertisement in less than a week. See “Babai ren juankuan wuri chou shiwan, gaodeng xiazhou dengbao cu jie shuangfei” 800 人捐款五日筹十万 高登下周登报促截 “双非” [800 donors raised HK$100,000 in five days, Golden forum will publish an advertisement on newspaper to call for a stop to “anchor babies” (shuang fei yinger 双非婴儿) in Hong Kong], Pingguo ribao 苹果日报, January 27, 2012. http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20120127/16018621. (accessed January 4, 2016)
Similar to the male protagonist in *The Untold Story II*, a subject symbolizing Hong Kong, Wang in *Painted Skin*, the focus of contention in his love triangle with Xiaowei and Peirong, can also be read as the incarnation of Hong Kong. Xiaowei’s desire to take Peirong’s place is as strong as A Feng’s desire to stay in Hong Kong, and she might have succeeded if Wang was as weak-minded as the barbecue shop owner in *The Untold Story II*. However, we have to ask, is Wang really a determined person? Admittedly, he never stops loving Peirong, but at the same time he obviously cannot resist Xiaowei’s appeal. On the one hand, he refuses Xiaowei’s request for her to be his concubine, because “there is only one Mrs. Wang.” On the other hand, he can’t stop dreaming of Xiaowei’s naked body and imagining their passionate sex in his dreams. What obsesses Wang more than the demon in front of him is the demon in his heart (*xinmo* 心魔), who entices him to betray his wife and accept Xiaowei. As the story unfolds, bewitched by the fox-sprit’s beauty and sexuality, Wang gradually loses his objectivity and rationality. When Xiaowei is accused of being a demon, he immediately stands by her and looks at his wife accusingly as if she is the real troublemaker. Not until Peirong has been turned into a demon and commits suicide in front of him, does Wang escape the ambivalent trap and eventually make a choice between the two women: after vengefully stabbing Xiaowei in her shoulder and confessing his love for her, Wang commits suicide following his demonized wife to death. As mentioned previously, if Wang can be seen as a symbol of the dilemma of Hong Kong, Peirong the local identity, and Xiaowei the assimilation from the mainland (a Chinese identity in the broader sense),
then Wang’s paradoxical behavior in the ending sequence—stabbing Xiaowei and confessing his love for her simultaneously—can be read as Hong Kong’s ambivalence toward the mainland. On the one hand, it seems that he succumbs to Xiaowei’s temptation and somehow falls in love with her; on the other hand, he cannot give up Peirong, who has become part of his own life for so many years. And it is intriguing that Wang himself is clearly aware of the fact that the two women cannot co-exist, so he rejects Xiaowei’s request to be his concubine with an explanation that “there is only one Mrs. Wang,” an excuse that is seemingly at odds with the patriarchal family system and concubine culture in imperial China, but that allegorically suggests a truth that a distinct Hong Kong identity cannot co-exist with assimilation from the mainland. Although Wang oscillates between the two women throughout the film, he makes a choice between the two women (two identities), when he finally realizes that his indecision only leads to the tragic death of Peirong—a symbolic loss of Hong Kong’s identity. Through Wang’s paradoxical attitude towards Xiaowei as well as his ritualized “return” to the old love, *Painted Skin* figuratively reveals Hong Kong’s oscillation between desire for and anxiety toward the mainland.

The final shot of *Painted Skin* is of a white fox resting in the desert with a lizard, who are clearly the animal forms of Xiaowei and Xiaoyi. As a lizard-sprit who harbors an unrequited love for Xiaowei, Xiaoyi not only kills people to get their hearts for Xiaowei, but also attempts to convince her over and over again that a demon should not be with a human being. The last shot seems to verify his beliefs. The fox-spirit who has betrayed
her identity as a demon, returns to her own community, which also suggests the failure of her “identity switch.”

While Chan’s *Painted Skin* tells a story of how a demon cannot be with a human, Yip’s *A Chinese Ghost Story*, by contrast, seems to tell a story in which a romance occurs between a demon and a human. The film presents an interesting twist on other versions of this story: Yan Chixia, the exorcist, is revealed to be the main love interest for Xiaoqian. As a professional demon hunter, a figure similar to Dr. Van Helsing in Western culture, Yan is sent by his master to kill Xiaoqian, a fox-spirit controlled by the Tree Demon. Yet the two fall in love. In desperation Yan stabs her head with a magic dagger to temporarily make her forget their relationship. Meanwhile, a battle between the Tree Demon camp and the professional monster hunters breaks out. Without his magic dagger, Yan is obviously powerless and his resulting hesitation leads to the death of three fellow demon hunters.

As the film progresses, Yan encounters Xiaoqian again, yet she has fallen in love with Ning Caichen, a craftsman sent by the government to help local town people search for water, a character who symbolizes officialdom and ideological edification. In the sequence in which Ning enters the local mountain town, he is first abducted and mistreated by townspeople as a stranger, yet the moment when Ning shows his official identity, he immediately wins their respect and trust; and at the end of the film, with Ning successfully fulfilling his official mission, water is released and the town regains its
vigor; the townspeople begin to live a more civilized life with the improvements to the village’s natural environment.

Again, similar to the allegorical reading of the love triangle in Chan’s *Painted Skin*, the love triangle in this film can also be read allegorically: if Xiaoqian, the focus of contention in the love triangle is the embodiment of Hong Kong, then Ning, who is sent by the government, is the Other (the mainland), and Yan, by contrast, becomes a more human figure, akin to the Self (Hong Kong). Different from his helper role in *The Enchanting Shadow* (1960) and *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), Yan becomes the protagonist and a love rival of Ning in this film. The reference to Yan’s master and his fellow demon hunters also fills in some missing information about Yan’s background. He is no longer a lonely hermit without love and desire, but an ordinary man with emotions and weaknesses.\(^{390}\)

Although Yan has betrayed his group and is viewed as a traitor and loser by his fellows, he eventually fulfills his mission as a demon hunter, annihilating the Tree Demon at the expense of his own life. Xiaoqian also betrays Yan’s love, falling in love with another man. Yet as soon as the magic dagger is pulled out from her brain, memories of their forbidden love are evoked. Facing the choice between the new love/bright future and old love/faded past, Xiaoqian chooses the latter and chooses to perish together with Yan in the collapsing Lanruo Temple. The film is thus also a story

\(^{390}\) A similar change on the role of the exorcist can be found in Chan’s *Painted Skin*, in which the Taoist priest is made into an inexperienced female demon hunter (Xia Bing) with no ambitions, who later falls in love with a warrior (Pang Yong). In the showdown sequence, it is precisely because of her love for Pang that she finally draws out her magic sword to fight the enemy.
about betrayal and return. As Yan says, “Everything in this world needs us to make a choice.” If Yan, the old love, symbolizes a Hong Kong identity, Ning, the new love, represents the assimilation of mainland. And Xiaoqian’s quandary between the two men tactically implies the current dilemma of Hong Kong people: should they follow the past, or pursue the future? How to make the right choice?

Conclusion

Through a close analysis of different films based on or inspired by “The Magic Sword” and “The Painted Skin,” this chapter outlines a brief history of film adaptations of these two Liaozhai stories that are closely associated with issues of national and cultural identity in Hong Kong, as well as in mainland China.

While Bao Fong’s The Painted Skin presents a moralistic story of exorcism, which was later adopted by mainland audiences to reaffirm the political human/ghost trope, Li Han-hsiang’s The Enchanting Shadow shows spectators a classical and elegant “lost country” in a nostalgic manner. Both films reflect Hong Kong cinema’s ambivalent attitude during the Cold War, when it sought to maintain a subtle balance between the left and the right. Bao’s movie was screened in the mainland, first for some high-ranking officials in 1966, then for mass audiences in 1979. Li’s film, by contrast, suggests a possibility for identity construction through its filiations with the cultural heritage of the Republic of China, and legitimizes itself as part of Shaw Brothers’ “national cinema” through its affinity with the KMT and Taiwan.
A Chinese Ghost Story trilogy from the later 1980s and early 1990s can be read as a series of political allegories about the relationship between the mainland and Hong Kong in the wake of the June Fourth Incident of 1989. Through A Chinese Ghost Story and its two sequels, Tsui and Ching not only revived The Enchanting Shadow with a special dynamic cinematic flair, but also delineated social malaises such as the frustration over political impotence about the fate of Hong Kong, anxiety about an uncertain future, and the post-1989 hostility to the communist regime. A Chinese Ghost Story II, specifically, provides spectators a glimpse of what Adam Lowenstein calls the “allegorical moment” of the June Fourth Incident, which is, like the Cultural Revolution, a forbidden zone and a subject of collective oblivion in the cultural sphere and public discourses in mainland China.

Similarly, King Hu’s The Painted Skin is a political allegory, in which the original story is merely adapted into a “pre-credit sequence.” Besides parodies of the Mao cult in the Cultural Revolution, Hu depicts various characters in a society interwoven by complex social networks and imbued with unspoken rules, where black and white are not sharply contrasted, and good and evil are not absolutely incompatible. Compared with other erotic ghost films, this film is more restrained and pessimistic.

Both The Painted Skin and A Chinese Ghost Story were remade in the new century. Female ghosts in both films are turned into fox-spirits involved in love triangles. This character change not only reflects the filmmakers’ self-censorship of an ideological taboo, but also highlights the personality trait of the female protagonist as a femme fatale.
Though attracted by new love (Xiaowei in *Painted Skin*, Ning in *A Chinese Ghost Story*), both focuses of contention in the love triangles (Wang in *Painted Skin* and Xiaoqian in *A Chinese Ghost Story*) choose to perish with their old love (Peirong in *Painted Skin*, Yan in *A Chinese Ghost Story*) after a temporary “betrayal,” which figuratively reveals oscillation in Hong Kong, which went through numerous ups and downs in the ten years after the 1997 handover, between desire for and anxiety about mainland China.

Jacques Derrida asserts that a masterpiece always moves “in the manner of a ghost” and “it inhabits without residing, without ever confining itself to the numerous versions of this passage.”

Echoing Derrida’s stance on the relationship between a masterpiece and its translation, Dai Jinhua contends, “undoubtedly, the film/TV adaptations of masterpieces is the most powerful form of ‘translation’ in the 20th century: they interpret the literary language through a filmic language, on the one hand, and they are devices attempting to capture the ‘haunting ghost’ of the memory with cultural logics of different times, on the other hand.”

Different adaptations of “The Magic Sword” and “The Painted Skin” present different cultural politics of Hong Kong at different times, in which eroticism is strategically interwoven with exorcism and deployed in different ideological contexts and often for specific ideological purposes. They also serve as the best example of defining Other and Self in terms of history and identity for Hong Kong:

---

mainland China might be presented as the desired object in nostalgia at one time, and be
demonized as the Other who threatens Self’s distinct identity at another time.
CONCLUSION

In *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*, David J. Skal juxtaposes Regan’s reign with Stephen King’s bestsellers in a cynical tone as follows:

> Although Ronald Regan was widely touted as the Great Communicator of the century’s penultimate decade, the title more fairly belongs to the novelist Stephen King, who, in numbers and dollars, emerged as the most successful storyteller in human history. By day, Regan told people stories about their social prospects they wanted to hear. By night, King told very different stories people didn’t want to hear directly, but would devour if presented in the veiled images of vampires, werewolves, rabid dogs, demonic automobiles, geeky outsiders with vengeful psychic abilities, and the omnipresent favorite, the walking, rotting dead.\(^{393}\)

Skal’s argument, though about the U.S. in the 1980s, also captures, to some extent, the soul of postsocialist China: on the one hand, with the end of the New Era in 1989, China witnessed in the ensuing decades an embrace of commercialism and the profit motive, as well as a state-promoted, collective obsession with what resembles, in many aspects, the American dream, especially its neoliberal fantasies of personal success and upward mobility. On the other hand, along with the dramatic social and economic changes China has experienced since the 1990s, have arisen increasingly acute social problems, such as the resurgence of gender inequality, social stratification, class differences, environmental contamination, and deterioration of conventional social values and ethics. These issues,

together with their accompanying anxieties, provide a hotbed of the revival of horror cinema.

The return of the horror genre is therefore a consequence of both market reforms and the social malaise and anxieties engendered in the radical social and economic transformations of this period. This dissertation focuses on the manner in which horror films from the 1990s to the present have provided a mechanism through which people can negotiate transformations in the social and economic structure of China. After analyzing multiple issues in a large number of films in the framework of the Self/Other dichotomy from different perspectives of history, gender, class, and identity, it is difficult to offer a general conclusion for what I have discussed in this dissertation. Rather, I would like to provide some tentative specific conclusions. First, given China’s specific social context, Chinese horror cinema is by and large influenced by censorship and the state ideology, and is usually characterized by what Li Zeng calls an “aesthetic of restraint.” While constantly getting inspirations, both in terms of themes and formulas, from the more developed horror cinema of the West, Japan, and Hong Kong, PRC’s horror films specifically need to deal with ideologically correct themes (such as following the “human/ghost” trope) and present violence and horror with visual and aural restraint.

Second, the PRC’s horror cinema, in a certain sense, can be viewed as a continuity of Republican-era cinema: The Lonely Ghost’s metacinematic feature is redolent of Song at Midnight (1937), and Curiosity’s reflection of reconfigurations of space and power echoes the opening scene of Street Angel (1937). The resemblance
between the Republican-era cinema and postsocialist cinema mirrors China’s fast-paced urbanization as well as increasing social stratification and class differences. While losers in the social and economic transformations are marginalized in and excluded from the living space and public discourses, the seeming winner—the successful personage—may also suffer from a sense of alienation in this “beautiful new world.”

Third, the traumatic historical memory presented in the horror cinema usually evokes the specter of past turbulence. The Second Sino-Japanese War, the Cultural Revolution, and the June Fourth Incident are names associated with specific places and occurrences, yet they are also wounds in the fabric of culture and history that go through perpetual redefinitions and representations by the state ideology and in public discourses. Horror films about those wounds offer instances of what Adam Lowenstein calls “allegorical collision,” collisions that “challenge the power of national narratives to regulate the meaning of collective trauma.”394 In contrast with the memory of China’s War of Resistance against Japan that has been promoted by the government and treated in numerous films, historical memories and traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution and the June Fourth Incident have been officially repressed and neglected. Yet the repressed past is actually the specter of the Other that has long been haunting us and a lingering shadow of the Self. Just as The Lonely Ghost suggests, a society that intentionally and selectively forgets its past will not go far.

---

394 Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 177.
Fourth, the female body and its sexuality is often the site where social and cultural conflicts are addressed and negotiated. The dichotomy of the femme fatale and virtuous woman can appear in the form of what Gilbert and Gubar call the “monster” and the “angel” in the literary tradition, or what Carol Clover calls the “sexual transgressor” and the “final girl” (“whore”/“virgin”) in the cinematic tradition of the horror genre. The emergence of ambitious and sensual female figures in the horror cinema of the 1990s suggests some social and cultural symptoms at that time. While both sexuality and privatization were taboos in the Mao era, the resurgence of those themes reflects the new ideology of the reform era, an ideology that both sanctions individual desire and offers enticing new freedoms and the promise of person fulfilment, as well as a collective anxiety about the threats to the normative family structure and social ethics caused by the market economy. As horror films of the new millennium show, with the resurgence of gender inequality in China, the female is not only presented as cultural capital of successful and wealthy men, but also the Other that needs to be regulated in patriarchal society.

Fifth, with the implementation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 and the ensuing 1997 handover, there are increasingly close connections and interactions between mainland cinema and Hong Kong cinema in terms of film industries, film markets, and star power. Yet accompanying this process, Hong Kong people also harbor an ambivalent attitude toward mainland China, which is clearly embodied in its horror cinema. While the first three chapters in this dissertation mainly center around the PRC’s
horror cinema, a study of Hong Kong erotic ghost films in the last chapter serves as a good comparison with mainland horror cinema, and broadens our understanding of Chinese-language horror cinema as a whole in a transnational framework. While PRC filmmakers mostly use erotic ghost movies, as examined in the Introduction, to reiterate the conventional human/ghost trope as social allegories, Hong Kong filmmakers apply erotic ghost films as the best example of defining Other and Self in terms of history and identity for Hong Kong: mainland China might be presented as the desired object in nostalgia at one time, and be demonized as the Other who threatens Self’s distinct identity at another time.

Last but not least. As demonstrated in this dissertation, the boundary between the Other and the Self is usually ambiguous, and sometimes even interchangeable. In this complicated social and cultural matrix, the Self/Other dichotomies, just like genre in Rick Altman’s study, experience ongoing changes and are frequently redefined by various active social agents: the government, media, school, family, men, women, nation, citizen, and so forth, who may achieve compromises sometimes or collide with each other. It is in this regard that we can understand the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of horror cinema in postsocialist China.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. “Guanyu jiananguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi” 关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议 [Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People’s Republic of China]. https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm. (accessed May 1, 2016)

——. Document No. 14, “Yao jianli dui yingshipian de shencha dingji zhidu, dui zhongxiaoxuesheng buyi guankan de yingshi zuopin zuochu mingque guiding” 要建立对影视片的审查定级制度，对中小学生不宜观看的影视作品作出明确规定 [Announcement of the implementation of film censorship and exhibition rating system on some films], 1988.


Dan Renping 单仁平. “‘Wenge’ yi bei chedi fouding” “文革” 已被彻底否定 [The Cultural Revolution has already been completely repudiated]. Huanqiu shibao 环球时报 [Global times], May 17, 2016.


“Dishi fangying shi’ gaiming huigui wangluo, tucao yijiu lanpian men chandou ba” “第10放映室” 改名回归网络 吐槽依旧烂片们颤抖吧 [“The 10th Screening Room” has been renamed and returned to the internet, which mocks bad films as usual; be trembling, flops!]. Last modified January 2, 2014. http://media.people.com.cn/n/2014/0102/c40606-23999752.html. (accessed April 8, 2016)


General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) 新闻出版总署. “Guanyu chachu ‘siwang biji’ deng kongbu lei chubanwu de tongzhi” 关于查处<死亡笔记


Ho, Sam 何思颖, ed. *Jianxiao jianghu: Xu Ke yu Xianggang dianying 剑啸江湖: 徐克与香港电影* [The swordsman and his jiang hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong film]. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002.

——, ed. “Bianju de miusi: si ge xilie” 编剧的缪思——四个系列 [The one and the many: scriptwriters on scriptwriting]. In *Jianxiao jianghu: Xu Ke yu Xianggang dianying 剑啸江湖: 徐克与香港电影* [The swordsman and his jiang hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong film], edited by Sam Ho, 197-217. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002.

Ho, Sam 何思颖 and Ho Wai-leng 卫灵. “Xu Ke fuzi zidao: san ge fangwen” 徐克夫子自道——三个访问 [Tsui Hark on Tsui Hark: three Hong Kong film archive interviews]. In *Jianxiao jianghu: Xu Ke yu Xianggang dianying 剑啸江湖: 徐克与香港电影* [The swordsman and his jiang hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong film], edited by Sam Ho, 150-195. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002.


Hu Bugui 胡不鬼. “Zhuanfang jingdian kongbu pian heilou guhun daoyan Liang Ming: dangnian meiyou Zhang Yimou pai bucheng” 专访经典恐怖片《黑楼孤魂》导演梁明：当年没有张艺谋拍不成 [An interview with Liang Ming, the director of the classic horror film *The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion*: the film would not have been possible without Zhang Yimou’s support]. Last modified September 19, 2008. http://i.mtime.com/753159/blog/1456574/. (accessed March 5, 2016)


Li Zhuotao 李焯桃. *Xianggang dianying yu shehui bianqian* 香港电影与社会变迁 [Hong Kong cinema and social changes], a special issue for the 12th Hong Kong International Film Festival (1988). Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1996.


Nanguo dianying 南国电影 [Southern screen], May 1960, No. 27.


“Qiannü youhun ji maizuo” 倩女幽魂极卖座 [The Enchanting Shadow is a hit]. Gongshang ribao 工商日报, August 27, 1960.

Ren Ping 任平. “Yishi weijian shi weile genghao qianjin” 以史为鉴是为了更好前进 [Summing up and absorbing the lessons of history in order to use it as a mirror to better advance]. Renmin ribao 人民日报 [People’s daily], May 17, 2016.

327


328


——. “We-women and They-women: Imagining mistresses across the Hong Kong-China border.” In Rethinking and Recasting Citizenship: Social Exclusion and Marginality in Chinese Societies, edited by May Tam, Ku Hok-bun, and Travis Kong, 109-130. Hong Kong: Centre for Social Policy Studies, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 2005.


——, ed. Fenghuaxueyue Li Hanxiang 风花雪月李翰祥 [Li Han-hsiang, storyteller]. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2007.

Wong, James 黄霑. “Ai hen Xu Ke” 爱恨徐克 [I love him and I hate him: James Wong on composing for a truly creative mind]. In Jianxiao jianghu: Xu Ke yu Xianggang dianying 剑啸江湖: 徐克与香港电影 [The swordsman and his jiang hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong film], edited by Sam Ho 何思颖, 116-127. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2002.


Zeitlin, Judith T. “The Return of the Palace Lady: The Historical Ghost Story and Dynastic Fall.” In Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation from the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond, edited by David Der-wei Wang and Shang Wei, 151-199. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005.


Appendix: Filography

Mainland China:

Song at Midnight (Yeban gesheng 夜半歌声, dir. Ma-xu Weibang 马徐维邦, 1937)

The Bell Rings in an Ancient Temple (Gucha zhongsheng 古刹钟声, dir. Zhu Wenshun 朱文顺, 1958)

Murder Case in No. 405 (405 mousha an 405 谋杀案, dir. Shen Yaoting 沈耀庭, 1980)


Mysterious Buddha (Shenmi de da fu 神秘的大佛, dir. Zhang Huaxun 张华勋, 1980)

Ghost (Youling 幽灵, dir. Chen Fangqian 陈方千, 1980)

The Phantom (Qianyin 潜影, dir. Guo Baochang 郭宝昌 and Huang Ling 黄玲, 1981)

A Mysterious Case in the Forest (Linzhong mi’an 林中谜案, dir. Xu Weijie 徐伟杰, 1984)

Ghost Sisters (Guimei 鬼妹, dir. Sun Yuanxun 孙元勋, 1985)

Song at Midnight (Yeban gesheng 夜班歌声, dir. Yang Yanjin 杨延晋, 1985)

Murder on the White Fog Street (Baiwu jie xiongsha an 白雾街凶杀案, dir. Sun Sha 孙沙, 1985)

The Living Corpse in the Ravine (Shengu shibian 深谷尸变, dir. Hao Weiguang 郝伟光, 1985)

Two O’clock at Midnight (Wuye liangdian 午夜两点, dir. Bao Zhifang 鲍芝芳, 1987)
Death of a Model Girl (Nü mote zhi si 女模特之死, dir. Guangbudao Erji 广布道尔基, 1987)

The Case of the Silver Snake (Yinshe mousha an 银蛇谋杀案, dir. Li Shaohong 李少红, 1988)

The Horror Night (Kongbu ye 恐怖夜, dir. Mao Yuqing 毛玉勤, 1988)

The Head in the Haunted House (Xiong zhai meiren tou 凶宅美人头, dir. Hu Qingshi 胡庆士 and Liu Yichuan 刘邑川, 1989)

The Lonely Ghost in the Dark Mansion (Heilou guhun 黑楼孤魂, dir. Liang Ming 梁明 and Mu Deyuan 穆德远, 1989)

Death is Approaching (Siqi linjin 死期临近, dir. Xie Hong 谢洪, 1989)

Hell and Heaven (Diyu tiantang 地狱天堂, dir. Yang Yanjin, 1989)

The Night Robbery (Yedao zhenfei mu 夜盗珍妃墓, dir. Cai Yuanyuan 蔡元元, 1989)

The Mystery of St. Paul Hospital (Shengbaoluo yiyuan zhimi 圣保罗医院之谜, dir. Mi Jiashan 米家山, 1990)

Ghost in a Wild Inn (Yedian youling 野店幽灵, dir. He Misheng 贺米生, 1990)

Inside an Old Grave (Gumu huangzhai 古墓荒斋, dir. Xie Tieli 谢铁骊, 1991)

The Poisonous Kiss (Duwen 毒吻, dir. Chen Xingzhong 陈兴中, 1992)

The Lie Detector (Cehuang qi 测谎器, dir. Zhou Xiaowen 周晓文, 1993)

Nightmare in the Ghost City (Guicheng xiongmen 鬼城凶梦, dir. Li Qimin 李启民, 1993)

The Foggy House (Wuzhai 雾宅, dir. Huang Jianzhong 黄健中, 1994)

Don’t be Young (Weiqing shaonü 危情少女, dir. Lou Ye 娄烨, 1994)

Daytime Ghost (Bairi nügui 白日女鬼, dir. Zhao Wenxin 赵文炘, 1994)
Legacy with Smell of Blood (Qingren de xue tebie hong 情人的血特别红, dir. Zhan Junke 占俊科, 1994),

The Bronze Devil (Qingtong kuangmo 青铜狂魔, dir. Gu Jing 顾晶, 1994)

Cameraman (Shan ling xiongmeng 闪灵凶猛, dir. A Gan 阿甘, 2001)

Ghosts (Xiongzhai youling 凶宅幽灵, dir. A Gan 甘, 2002)


Baobei in Love (Lian’ai zhong de baobei 恋爱中的宝贝, dir. Li Shaohong, 2004)

Suffocation (Zhixi 窒息, dir, Zhang Bingjian 张秉坚, 2005)

Ghost Inside (Yi shen yi gui 疑神疑鬼, dir. Herman Yau 邱礼涛, 2005)

Seven Nights (Qi ye 七夜, dir. Zhang Jing 张静, 2005)

Curiosity Kills the Cat (Haoqi haisi mao 好奇害死猫, dir. Zhang Yibai 张一白, 2006)

The Door (Men 门, dir. Li Shaohong, 2007)

The Matrimony (Xinzhong yougui 心中有鬼, dir. Teng Huatao 滕华涛, 2007)

Email (Xinxiang 信箱, dir. Zhang Fanfan 张番番, 2007)

Help (Jiu wo 救我, dir. Zhang Qi 张琦, 2008)

Deadly Delicious (Shuangshi ji 双食记, dir. Zhao Tianyu 赵天宇, 2008)

The Deserted Inn (Huangcun kezhan 荒村客栈, dir. Zhang Jing 张静, 2010)

The Frightening Night (Ye jinghun 夜惊魂, dir. Xu Bin 许斌, 2011)

No. 32, B District (Biqu sanshier hao B 区 32 号, dir. Lü Jianmin 吕建民, 2011)

Mysterious Island (Gudao jinghun 孤岛惊魂, dir. Zhong Jichang 钟继昌, 2011)
 Lost in Panic Cruise (Mishi zhi bu ke kao’an 密室之不可靠岸, dir. Zhang Fanfan, 2011)

To Forgive (Cha wu ci ren 查无此人, dir. Zhu Minjiang 朱敏江, 2012)

The Chrysalis (Nü yong zhi renpi jiayi 女蛹之人皮嫁衣, dir. Qiu Chuji 丘处机, 2013)

A Chilling Cosplay (Zhifu 制服, dir. Wang Guangli 王光利, 2013)

Black Coal, Thin Ice (Bairi yanhuo 白日焰火, dir. Diao Yinan 刁亦男, 2014)

Midnight Garage (Sangeng cheku 三更车库, dir. Zhou Yaowu 周耀武, 2014)

The Great Hypnotist (Cuimian dashi 催眠大师, dir. Leste Chen 陈正道, 2014)

Variant (Yizhong 异种, dir. Guo Hua 过华, 2015)

Hong Kong:

The Enchanting Shadow (Qiannü youhun 倩女幽魂, Li Han-hsiang 李翰祥, 1960)

The Painted Skin (Hua pi 画皮, dir. Bao Fong 鲍方, 1966)

A Chinese Ghost Story (Qiannü youhun 倩女幽魂, dir. Ching Siu-tung 程小东, 1987)

Golden Swallow (Jin yanzi 金燕子, dir. Sing-Pui O 柯星沛, 1988)

Picture of a Nymph (Huazhong xian 画中仙, dir. Wu Ma 午马, 1988)

A Chinese Ghost Story II (Qiannü youhun er renjian dao 倩女幽魂 II 人间道, dir. Ching Siu-tung, 1990)

Saga of the Phoenix (A xiu luo 阿修罗, dir. Nam Nai Choi 蓝乃才 and Sze Yu Lau 刘仕裕, 1990)

Demons from a Thousand Years (Qiannian nüyao 千年女妖, dir. Patrick Yeung 郑永潮, 1990)
A Chinese Ghost Story III (Qiannü youhun san dao dao 倩女幽魂 III 道道道, dir. Ching Siu-tung, 1991)

An Eternal Combat (Tiandi xuan men 天地玄门, dir. Thomas Yip 叶成康, 1991)

A Chinese Legend (Zhui ri 追日, dir. Hung Chuen Lau 刘鸿泉, 1991)

Fox Legend (Ling hu 灵狐, dir. Wu Ma, 1991)

Man behind the Sun 2: Laboratory of the Devil (Qisanyao sharen gongchang 731 杀人工厂, dir. Godfrey Ho 何志强, 1992)

Naked Killer (Hong Kong; Chiluo gaoyang 赤裸羔羊, dir. Clarence Fok 霍耀良, 1992)

Run and Kill (Hong Kong; Wushu jimi dang’an 乌鼠机密档案, dir. Billy Tang 邓衍成, 1993)

The Untold Story (Hong Kong; Baxian fandian zhi renrou chashao bao 八仙饭店之人肉叉烧包, dir. Herman Yau 邱礼涛, 1993)

The Painted Skin (Huapi zhi yinyang fawang 画皮之阴阳法王, dir. King Hu 胡金铨, 1993)

Man behind the Sun 3: A Narrow Escape (Siwang lieche 死亡列车, dir. Godfrey Ho, 1994)

Black Sun: The Nanking Massacre (Hei taiyang: Nanjiing da tusha 黑太阳：南京大屠杀, dir. Mou Dunfei 牟敦芾, 1995)

Ebola Syndrome (Hong Kong; Yibola bingdu 伊波拉病毒, dir. Herman Yau, 1996)

Intruder (Kongbu ji 恐怖鸡, dir. Kan-Cheung Tsang 曾瑾昌, 1997)

The Untold Story II (Hong Kong; Renrou chashaobao er Tianzhu dimie 人肉叉烧包 2 天诛地灭, dir. Yiu-Kuen Ng 吴耀权, 1998)

Inner Sense (Yidu kongjian 异度空间, dir. Chi-Leung Law 罗志良, 2002)

The Eye (Jiangui 见鬼, dir. Pang Brothers 彭发/彭顺, 2002)
The Death Curse (Guzhai xinhuanghuang 古宅心慌慌, dir. Pou-Soi Cheang 郑保瑞, 2003)

The Eye II (Jiangui 2 见鬼 2/ Shiyue jingqinq 十月惊情, dir. Pang Brothers, 2004)


Dumplings (Jiaozi 饺子, dir. Fruit Chan 陈果) from Three...Extremes (Sangeng er 三更 2, 2004)

Dream Home (Weiduoliya yihao 维多利亚一号, dir. Ho-Cheung Pang 彭浩翔, 2010)

Tales from the Dark: Part 1 (Mili ye 迷离夜, dir. Simon Yam 任达华/ Chi-ngai Lee 李志毅/ Fruit Chan, 2013)

Mainland-Hong Kong co-produced Films:

Man Behind the Sun (Hei taiyang qisanyao 黑太阳 731, dir. Mou Dunfei, 1988)

Home Sweet Home (Guaiwu 怪物, dir. Pou-Soi Cheang 郑保瑞, 2005)

The Curse of Lola (Zuzhou 诅咒, dir. Li Hong 李虹, 2005)

Painted Skin (Huapi 画皮, dir. Gordon Chan 陈嘉上, 2008)

A Chinese Ghost Story (Qiannü youhun 倩女幽魂, Wilson Yip 叶伟信, 2011)

Blood Stained Shoes (Xiuhua xie 绣花鞋, dir. Raymond Yip 叶伟民, 2012)

Nightmare (Qing yan 青魇, dir. Herman Yau, 2012)

The House That Never Dies (Jingcheng bashiyi hao 京城 81 号, dir. Raymond Yip, 2014)

Phantom of the Theatre (Mogong meiying 魔宫魅影, dir. Raymond Yip, 2016)