Introduction

This is a book about seventeenth-century Chinese literature, but the legacy of the stories, poems, and plays I explore in these pages still exerts a strong grip on the contemporary imagination. The 1987 hit Hong Kong film, A Chinese Ghost Story (Qiannü youhun), directed by Ching Siu Tung and produced by Tsui Hark, is a case in point. Loosely based on a seventeenth-century tale from Liaozihai’s Records of the Strange (Liaozhai zhiyi), and a remake of a 1960 Shaw Brothers film, the movie retells the classic Chinese fantasy of sex between a female ghost and a living man.¹ At one extreme, such a union may be fatal, resulting in the man’s debilitation and death; at the other extreme, the sexual power of love may be strong enough to reverse death, resulting in the resurrection or rebirth of the dead woman.

The movie principally recounts the romance between a sweet, hapless tax collector (Leslie Cheung) and a beautiful ghost (Joey Wong), but a prologue portrays the horrific fate that has befallen the other young men before him. The opening shots and soundtrack establish the setting: night at a spooky abandoned temple. The camera follows a leaf-strewn path blown by the wind to a lighted window. Inside sits a handsome young scholar, the traditional protagonist of Chinese romance, studying his books by lamplight. Suddenly the window flies open of its own accord. The scholar looks up and sees a beautiful woman in diaphanous garments performing a swirling dance to the strains of wordless, unearthly music. He is easily seduced. Her chiffon scarf wafts towards him. He picks it up and presses it to his nostrils, breathing in its perfume. As the woman pulls the other end of the scarf, he tumbles toward her, knocking the lamp into a bucket of water. Long strands of the woman’s black hair nearly obscure her face as she places his hand inside the bosom of her robe. One thing inevitably leads to another. In the midst of their lovemaking, his hand accidentally brushes her anklet, which tinkles. Suddenly the scene cuts to a rope of massive bells outside, pealing wildly, and a rapid, low, tracking shot, enhanced by the discordant soundtrack, zips toward the window. Something creepy is coming. The ghost gently pushes the scholar back down on the bed. As his legs thrash, the scene cuts to his face, convulsed with horror at what he sees, and he screams. The climax of his pleasure morphs into death throes as the scene cuts back to the water bucket, where the spent flame of the lamp wick now expires. (See fig. 1.)
What did he see? Only much later does the film reveal the lethal form of the monster that the ghost is enslaved to: a giant tongue that instantly sucks dry all the life fluids of the victim, leaving only a desiccated skeleton.

This prologue owes much to the global conventions of the horror film—the spooky music and controlled point of view to enhance fear and suspense, the primal scream and unseen assailant. The gauzy soft focus of the lovemaking shots would likewise be familiar to any international moviegoer. But the prologue also skillfully draws upon an age-old symbolic code for a Chinese ghost: association with wind, disheveled hair, and the operatic whirling dance. The close-ups of the lantern falling into the water and the extinguishing of the flame make explicit the traditional cosmology underlying the sex-to-death sequence in which the fiery yang force of the living man is engulfed by the damp yin force of the female ghost.

At the end of the movie the tax collector fails in his attempt to revive the ghost, but he succeeds in liberating her from the monster and giving her a proper burial, thereby laying her spirit to rest and facilitating her reincarnation for subsequent sequels.² To the film producers and their audiences, even the premise of a murderous giant tongue must have seemed more plausible than the original ending of the seventeenth-century source tale, in which the hero marries the ghost and takes her into his household. There she becomes a model wife, faithfully serving his mother

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Figure 1 Handsome young scholar studies by lamplight; the ghost performs a swirling dance; the lamp falls into a bucket of water; the ghost makes love to the scholar. From A Chinese Ghost Story (Qiannü youhun), 1987 Hong Kong film.
and bearing him two sons—and all this without even a formal resurrection. Now that sort of ending is totally unacceptable to a modern sensibility, even as fantasy.

Conversely, the source tale never describes the monster, an omission that is not explained simply by the predilection for brevity in Classical Chinese narrative. Rather, the literary ghost tradition is, on the whole, singularly uninterested in horror or suspense. Not that there are not exceptions. But the ghost romance exemplifies the tendency of Chinese literature to displace fear back onto the specter, whose timidity and loneliness as an abject creature arouse instead feelings of pity and tenderness in her human benefactor. One need not be a Freudian to detect projection at work here, that “operation whereby qualities, feelings, wishes, or even ‘objects,’ which the subject refuses to recognize or rejects in himself are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing.”

A passage from Shen Fu’s early nineteenth-century memoir, *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* (*Fusheng liujji*) lays bare this logical process. After the death of his beloved wife, Shen Fu, a low-level clerk and artist, determines to remain in their bedchamber on the night when, local custom has it, the soul of the deceased will visit its former abode. He stations a friend outside the door as a precaution and sits up to wait alone, overcome with grief and longing for his wife. Suddenly he notices the candle flame turn green and shrink to the size of a pea, then leap up so high that it almost scorches the ceiling before shrinking back again. Uncanny behavior in a candle or lamp conventionally signals a ghostly presence, and although he ardently hopes for a sight of his wife’s spirit, at this moment he is absolutely terrified. He tries to calm himself, but he cannot keep his limbs from trembling with fright. Just as he is about to call out to his friend, he stops himself: “I further reflected that her soul was so fragile and weak, I was afraid that it would probably be overcome by too strong a yang force in the room. Instead I softly called her name and prayed for her to come, but the room remained silent and nothing appeared. . . .”

At the moment of his greatest fear, dreading to encounter what he most desires, he conquers his own weakness by imputing it to the ghost. Abetting this projection is the gendering of the specter. A shade who is a woman can be imagined as doubly shy and vulnerable; correspondingly, as a man and living being, he becomes doubly powerful and protective. The next morning, he reports, his friend admires his bravery, “not realizing that all the while I had simply been a fool for love.”

Since this episode is, after all, related in an autobiography, the encounter with the candle is the closest he gets to a glimpse of his late wife’s spirit. In fictional tales, however, an uxorious husband is sometimes rewarded with visits from his dead wife’s ghost in which they are able to find anew the pleasure they enjoyed when she was still alive. In such narratives of bereavement, as in the romance, congress between the living and the dead takes the form of sexual union.

Even today the hypersexual female ghost remains a source of fascination in East Asian media, including movies, TV, and novels, much as the vampire does in American and European popular culture. Whereas the sexually predatory vampire can
be either gender, however, the erotic Chinese ghost is generally limited to female figures. This gender asymmetry and its complex roots and significance in Chinese literary history are a major focus of this book.

How is a ghost defined in Chinese writing? The earliest Chinese glossary, the Erya, probably compiled around the third century BCE, offers the following definition: “The character ‘ghost’ (gui) means ‘to return’ (gui).”8 This gloss exhibits a favorite logic of ancient Chinese texts to define a word in terms of a homophone. The problem in this case is that the homophone is itself a complex and ambiguous term. In classical Chinese, gui means, inter alia, to go to, to come back, to rely on, to swear allegiance to, to marry (for a woman), and to die.9 Its most common meaning, however, is to return home, to return to one’s roots or origins. But where is “home” for the dead? The multiple variations on the “ghost means to return” formula in different types of ancient writings show that there was a strong need to counter any ambiguity by specifying the direction of the return—away from the living. The Ritual Canon (Liji) therefore declares: “All living things must die; once dead they must return to the earth: this is what is referred to as a ghost.”10 Or as the Book of Liezi (Liezi) puts it: “When spirit and body separate [in death], each returns to its true [place or nature]. This is therefore what is referred to as a ghost. A ghost means to return, that is, to return to its true home,”11 not to the “false” home to which the deceased clung when still alive, but to his or her “true” origins elsewhere. A ghost is therefore defined as what goes away and does not come back. The apotropaic impulse underlying these statements and, by extension, the need for the living to make sure the dead are well tended and have a proper place to go, were early on articulated in the Zuo Tradition on the Spring and Autumn Annals (Zuozhuan): “If a ghost has somewhere to return to, it will not become a vengeful spirit.”12

Overall, the Chinese character gui has a broader spectrum of meanings than does the English word ghost.13 The richness of the concepts associated with gui and other locutions for the spirits of the dead in Chinese literature will emerge more fully in subsequent chapters. Here a simple overview of the most important usages will suffice. As a noun, gui may denote any denizen of the unseen world, including ancestor, god, demon, or monster, but it is only in pre-Han texts (prior to second century BCE) that gui as a single character and not in a compound may refer to benevolent ancestors or gods.14 Baleful connotations dominate the pseudo-etymology of the graph gui ((gui) provided in Characters Explained (Shuowen jiezi), a Han dictionary of the first century CE: “A gui is what a person returns to. The upper part (gui) pictures the head of a gui; the bottom part contains two radicals: the radical for ‘person’ (gui) and the radical for ‘not in the public good’ (gui). It contains the second radical because the yin stuff (yin qi) of a gui is harmful and therefore goes against the public good.”15 In later expressions, gui therefore also became a derogatory term used as a curse or an insult. When used as an adjective, an early meaning for this character was foreign or distant, but over the centuries it acquired an
array of extended meanings, including “cunning” (in the sense of both crafty and well crafted); “covert,” “stealthy”; “unfathomable,” “mysterious”; and “nonsensical.” Nonetheless, from ancient to modern times, the primary meaning of gui, like the English word “ghost,” has remained the lingering spirits of the dead; this understanding accordingly underlies my own framing of the subject.

Closely related to the concept of the ghost in Chinese thought is the term hun (soul or spirit). Early scholasticism posited the splitting of twin souls mapped onto a yin-yang grid to explain what happened upon death: the hun was a yang soul that flew up to heaven, and the po was a yin soul that descended into the earth. But as Ken Brashier has shown, most Han dynasty sources do not sustain the idea of multiple souls, and hun and po were frequently paired as a compound. Instead the dualism that most mattered and the split that occurred upon death was between body and soul (hun or hun-po). This is emphatically the case in the ghost-story tradition, where the concept of a separate po soul is nonexistent (and the word rarely used except in a poetic context) but where a ghost is frequently represented as a disembodied hun. The notion of dual spaces for the spirits of the dead nonetheless persists in the literary imagination, since a ghost is sometimes represented as earthbound and residing in the tomb or underworld and other times as a weightless and airborne wanderer.

In Chinese literature the soul may split from the body not only upon death, but also in coma or dream when the body is similarly immobilized. As a shadow or reflection of an absent form, a disembodied soul is closely associated with dream, image, and illusion, and comes close to the English word phantom. A major difference, however, is that in the Chinese imagination a disembodied soul may still have a corporeal aspect and even bear children. The term hun appears in many compounds referring to ghosts, youhun (underworld soul), youhun (wandering soul), yuanhun (wronged soul), guhun (lonely soul), but most central to this book is huanhun—the revenant, literally a “returned soul.” In contrast to the verb gui where the direction of return is ambiguous, huan means unequivocally “to come back,” clarifying that the dead soul returns to the here and now to haunt the world of the living.

The revenant developed into one of the great themes of Chinese literature. Although a few fragmentary ghost narratives can be found in early histories such as the Zuo Tradition, the ghost tale proper first emerged in the literary genre of brief “accounts of the strange” (zhiguai), which developed in the fourth and fifth centuries CE during the Six Dynasties. Longer and more elaborate “tales of the marvelous” (chuanqi), often framed around verse, started to be written in the eighth and ninth centuries during the Tang dynasty. These “classical tales,” so called because they were composed in classical rather than vernacular Chinese, continued to be written throughout the centuries. Some of the more famous tales were rewritten in the vernacular and eventually included in the story collections published in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As northern drama (zaju) developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries during the Yuan dynasty, play texts became
another major form of ghost literature. With the flourishing of southern drama (also called chuanqi) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, extant ghost play texts increase exponentially in length and number.

The revenant continued to preoccupy the Chinese literary imagination up until the early twentieth century, when the modern vernacular replaced Classical Chinese and the traditional system of literary genres collapsed. The anti-superstition campaigns in the first decades of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) nearly dealt a fatal blow to ghost literature and to ghost operas, at least on the Mainland. In 1961 a new Peking-opera production of the seventeenth-century play Li Huiniang became the target of a political attack for daring to assert that “there’s no harm in speaking of ghosts” (you gui wuhai lun). This anti-ghost campaign, a prelude to the Cultural Revolution, seemingly hammered the final nail in the coffin. But ghosts have a way of returning. The political and economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s in the PRC meant that formerly taboo topics like the occult, geomancy, and sex could once again be addressed in print, and remnants of the old ghost operatic repertory were again performed on stage. Repackaged collections and new compilations of old ghost stories as well as academic studies of ghostlore and ghost literature appeared in mainland bookstores to meet the pent-up demand. As David Wang has demonstrated in his essay “Second Haunting,” in the eighties and nineties some writers, not only in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, but even on the Mainland, began to experiment with new forms of ghost stories. Still, the creative legacy of traditional ghost literature has been most readily apparent in the Hong Kong cinema and other forms of popular media.

The period from roughly 1580 to 1700, that is, the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, with which this book is centrally concerned, should be regarded as the high point of the literary ghost tradition. First, because of the well-documented publishing boom in this period, many older ghost tales and plays were printed, often for the first time, in a variety of accessible compilations that then went through successive reprints and repackaging. Some such editions were hack jobs, but others, such as Mei Dingzuo’s Records of Talented Ghosts (Caigui ji; author’s preface 1605), a compendium of tales with verse attributed to ghosts, were scholarly tours de force. Mei’s compilation is one of the few to maintain an exclusive focus on ghosts, but many tale collections and even some poetry anthologies from the period include subsections on this theme. The publication of earlier ghost literature stimulated the production of new works on this subject. Accordingly, many anthologies, again exemplified by Mei’s Records of Talented Ghosts, include contributions from both past and present.

The history of play texts followed a somewhat parallel trajectory in this period. With the exception of a single collection of libretti, our earliest extant editions of Yuan dynasty plays written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were published during the late Ming, in the late sixteenth century. As a performance genre, northern drama had become obsolete by this period, so many of these plays were
subsequently rewritten and expanded into contemporary southern dramas for performance and publication. The availability of the earlier ghost plays also stimulated the creation of many new southern dramas on the revenant theme that were enthusiastically staged and printed.

Second, ghost literature in this period stands out not only in terms of abundance and circulation but also in terms of quality and sophistication. In particular, this period witnessed the creation of three masterpieces in which the phantom heroine figures prominently: two southern dramas, Tang Xianzu’s *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*), completed in 1598, and Hong Sheng’s *Palace of Lasting Life* (*Changsheng dian*), completed in 1688, and Pu Songling’s collection of tales, *Liaozhai’s Records of the Strange*, written roughly between 1670 and 1700. These works, along with Mei Dingzuo’s *Records of Talented Ghosts*, have inspired the core of my study.

Third, fueling much of the literary energy of the period was the widespread idealization of qing—love, sentiment, desire—as a passion capable of surmounting the gulf between life and death. Qing came to manifest its power above all through the figure of the female revenant, whose quest for love compels her to revisit the human world in search of her beloved and whose undying passion leads to her resurrection or rebirth, usually through the sexual agency of her male partner. One major purpose of this book is to explore how and why this cultural fantasy wielded such extraordinary influence.

Finally, this period witnessed the violent collapse of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and the Manchu conquest that led to the founding of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). These historical events were traumatic not only because of the massive destruction, loss of life, and dislocation involved, but because seemingly overnight a whole world and way of life had vanished. Emotionally, for many, the overthrow of the old dynasty was experienced as a kind of death that demanded mourning. As a figure that embodies absence, melancholy, and the past, the revenant provides a key to the mood of nostalgia and loss that suffuses much of the literature produced in the first decades of Qing rule.

By concentrating on this historical period, I intend to move beyond the typological approach often adopted in previous studies of ghosts in Chinese literature, which emphasizes the classification and persistence of certain general patterns rather than the significance of drawing on this tradition at a particular time and in a particular literary context. These classificatory efforts derive in part from the desire to impose some sweeping order and unity on the gigantic corpus of Chinese ghost stories and from the tacit recognition of the enormous influence that oral storytelling and folklore have played in shaping the literary ghost tradition. There is some early evidence that ghosts (*lingguai*) were one kind of subject matter that professional storytellers in thirteenth-century Hangzhou, the capital of the Southern Song, could specialize in. But far more important was the practice of casual storytelling among friends, household members, or chance acquaintances. Many collections or individual tales refer to this oral context by including the names of informants or by describing the circumstances in which the story was told. At one extreme, this information is
a literary convention meant mainly to enhance the impression of a tale's veracity; at the other, the attention to the storytelling context and the historical identity of each teller and listener grows so pronounced that the lengthy discussions of the tales often overshadow the tales themselves.

Ji Yun’s late eighteenth-century collection, *Jottings from the Thatched Cottage of Careful Reading* (*Yuewei caotang biji*; henceforth *Jottings from the Thatched Cottage*), which is the primary example of the second extreme, includes one ghost tale that brilliantly debunks the trustworthiness of any oral storytelling frame.24 A traveler falls in one evening with a group of strangers in a tavern, one of whom proposes telling ghost stories. The group takes turns spinning weirder and weirder tales until one of the men boasts that he has one that tops them all. The story he tells consists of a set of nested ghost narratives, each told as a story within a story by a successive interlocutor. The entire tale ends when one by one, in reverse order, the traveler discovers that each interlocutor in the chain of nested stories is actually a ghost, including the teller who began it, whereupon the entire group of strangers in the tavern vanishes like smoke.25

The practice of casual storytelling cut across class lines and was one way in which an oral folklore of ghosts was transmitted through time and space. But all the tales purporting to have been heard in such fashion were written down in Classical Chinese by elite authors for their own purposes. These authors had no interest in capturing the spoken quality of the stories they retold or any stake in authenticating the manner in which a narrative was recounted. The only case I have found in which the actual process of telling a ghost story is portrayed in detail occurs in a set of plays where the whole thing is staged as a comic hoax. In the scene an old flower seller, whom the audience knows has been hired for the purpose of deception, spins a long yarn about a haunted garden to frighten the hero into believing that his lover is really a ghost so that he will leave her and go sit for the civil service examinations.26

My book therefore examines the elite production of ghost literature in the seventeenth century and the complex set of concerns that the subject allowed men of letters to address. My working assumption is that it is impossible to peel off the layers of literary processing to arrive at some “popular” original version of a tale or the events described in it. When sources permit, and more than one written version of a tale from a short period of time exists, I have attempted to take into account the oral circulation of the story. I have not tried to ascertain which one is more “authentic” but rather to determine the varying meanings, aims, and context of each version.

Concentrating on a well-defined period also allows me to explore the interrelationship between different artistic genres, mainly narrative, drama, and poetry, in representing the ghost. When apparitions of the dead in Chinese cultural history have been studied as a literary or imaginative problem, attention has usually been confined to the ghost story, or, to a lesser extent, to ghost drama; scholarship in the one area has tended to work in generic isolation from the other. No one has addressed what is probably the most remarkable feature of the Chinese literary
ghost tradition: the phenomenon of verse attributed to ghost writers—that is, by authors actually reputed to be spirits of the deceased—and the importance of lyric poetry in developing a ghostly aesthetics and image code.

This book deals extensively with all three genres, which are closely intermeshed in the representation of the ghost, especially in the Ming-Qing period. Verse is embedded and contextualized as “ghost-written” in tales or anecdotes, which provide a narrative frame; conversely, exchanges or displays of poetry set a ghostly mood and are often central to the action in stories. Tales furnish the core plotlines for plays; conversely, theater practices may have influenced the portrayals of ghosts in narrative. The poetic tradition provides the building blocks for the lyrics to the arias sung in plays, which contributed to the theatrical effect of a ghost on stage.

The case of dramatic literature’s relationship to oral and popular culture during the seventeenth century raises a separate set of methodological problems. Plays were performed in a variety of venues and occasions, particularly on religious festivals and at ritual events. The full scope of what today is loosely called ghost opera (gui xi), which would include the Buddhist Mulian plays performed at the annual “Ghost Festival” and masked exorcist drama (nuo xi), lies outside the scope of the present study. Instead, although the issue of ritual is important to my analysis, I focus on play texts mainly composed during the seventeenth century while simultaneously foregrounding the specific performing context favored by the late Ming and early Qing elite, that of productions staged at banquets in private homes.

Historicizing the production and consumption of ghost literature is also necessary to counter the abiding influence of nineteenth-century sinologists such as de Groot or Doré, who, as Christian missionaries, read ghost stories indiscriminately as repositories of timeless religious beliefs or “superstitions” of the Chinese.27 In their wake, many scholars have continued to mine this rich corpus as primary source material for popular beliefs about the afterlife, although a much more nuanced approach is now the norm.28 For those committed to the modernist view of ghosts as backward superstition, an alternative strategy has been to rehabilitate this literature as social satire or political allegory whose supernatural content can therefore be dismissed as an expedient fiction. It is true that a distinct strain of ghost literature, particularly in the Qing, did exploit the bureaucratic image of the other world primarily to pillory the foibles of this one.29 The problem has been the indiscriminate use of this interpretation to explain away the entirety of ghost literature simply as “fiction,” here understood as the reverse of “belief.” Even in sophisticated studies of individual works, debate over the literary value of ghosts has often continued to center on whether their presence should be taken as a fictional device and rhetorical embellishment or as a sign of an author’s true belief in the supernatural.30

Belief as a category of scholarly inquiry has rightly come under attack by a number of anthropologists and historians. For example, Byron Good has argued that the adoption of “belief” as an unexamined analytic category in anthropology is partly the result of modern Christian biases mistakenly projected onto other cultures and colonialist assumptions of Western science’s superiority over indigenous ways of
explaining the natural world. In a somewhat related vein, anthropologist James L. Watson has proposed that the notion of a belief system is unimportant in Chinese death ritual; practice instead is what counts. In his study of ghosts in the deeply Christian Middle Ages, the social historian Jean-Claude Schmitt suggests moving from the use of “belief” as a passive noun to “believe” as an active verb in order to show the constant dialectical process of affirmation and contestation involved. Most important, he objects to seeing a belief in ghosts as something reified and immutable that exists for the historian of past cultures apart from the sources that he or she is using and their distinct “form of enunciation.”

My point of departure therefore is to shift the discussion of ghosts in Chinese literature from the question of belief or fictuality to the issue of representation and to explore the complex meanings, both literal and figurative, of these representations. What are the literary conventions for portraying ghosts? How and why do they change over time, in different genres, and in different contexts? After all, a ghost is by definition an otherworldly creature, invisible, inchoate, and intangible. A specter is always an image, culturally and historically constructed, and it therefore forces us to consider what it means to represent something in a given period and context.

This emphasis on representation does not mean that I treat the literary field as divorced from larger social concerns of the relations between the living and the dead. It would likewise be impossible for a study of ghosts to ignore the importance that death culture has wielded over the course of Chinese history. Evidence of the weight accorded to posthumous matters is everywhere—in the complex and detailed prescriptions of degrees of mourning in the ritual canons, in the elaborateness of funerals and below-ground tomb architecture, in the variety of elegiac genres for commemorating the departed, in the maintenance of posthumous offerings in everyday life that was an integral part of ancestral worship, and in the elaboration of an underworld purgatory and rites to redeem trapped souls that were major contributions in the Chinese synthesis of Buddhism.

The richness and quantity of ghost stories, poems, and plays in the Chinese literary record is clearly bound up with this highly developed mortuary imagination. The literary ghost tradition amply substantiates two important points that Watson makes about Chinese death ritual: (1) the exchange between living and dead is seen as continuing after death rather than being severed by it, and (2) “the notion of gender, a cultural construct, survives in the Chinese afterlife.” Nonetheless, as is common in much ghostlore across the world, the apparition of the dead in Chinese literature is always an anomaly, the sign of something gone wrong, whether with the death itself, with the mortuary ritual or burial, or with the mourning process of the survivors. From the point of view of Chinese religion, in Meir Shahar and Robert Weller’s words, “ghosts are usually the departed souls of people who died prematurely, leaving no descendant kin behind to provide for them in the netherworld.” The demise of a young unmarried woman by definition disrupted the patrilineal, patrilocal structure of the normative Chinese kinship
system. Not truly belonging to her natal family, she had no proper burial place, and without a husband and children, she had no one obligated to look after her posthumous worship. This problem in the kinship and ritual structure of society provides one explanation for why the female revenant returns so often in ghost literature.

Ever since Arthur Wolf’s influential ethnography of Taiwan in the 1960s, anthropologists and historians of Chinese religion have been particularly concerned with delineating the boundaries between gods, ghosts, and ancestors. The literary tradition mainly supports Wolf’s pithy contention that “ghosts are strangers, other people’s ancestors,” in that very few stories center on a person’s encounter with his or her deceased ancestors or other close kin. The main exception is the apparition of a dead wife to her husband, and even here it is significant that there is no generational difference and that affinal ties rather than blood relations are involved.

In the complex history of the Chinese celestial pantheon, most gods are portrayed as occupying bureaucratic posts, and Arthur Wolf was by no means alone in observing that the hierarchical structure of the divine world offered a mirror image of officialdom in this world, with despised ghosts at the very bottom. (The literary subgenre of the ghost satire mentioned earlier is predicated on this symmetry.) But more recently scholars have emphasized that reified bureaucratic authority was not the only source of power for Chinese divinity, and that the boundary between god and ghost was actually very porous. “Many gods,” argue Shahar and Weller, “share the kind of premature and violent deaths, often by suicide, that typify malevolent ghosts,” and “draw upon the power of the margins, of death, and of the outside.” The ghostly origins of female deities are particularly pronounced because so many of them began as unmarried women who died untimely deaths.

The female revenant in ghost literature clearly draws on the posthumous superhuman power of the disenfranchised. Despite the supposed fragility of such a disembodied soul, the impression is most often of her self-determination and initiative in contrast to living women and her dominance over her male partner. Death is what empowers her and frees her to act upon her own desires. Even in A Chinese Ghost Story, the beautiful ghost in the film, though pretending to be helpless, repeatedly rescues her human lover from the other demons in the temple. In short, the phantom is always the heroine of her own story; in any eventual resurrection or rebirth, she is always in large measure also the agent of her own liberation and redemption.

This book consists of four chapters and a coda. Each chapter focuses on one or more interconnected themes, which are often enunciated in certain genres. As I have emphasized so far, the interrelationship between love and death, sexuality, fertility, and disease is a fundamental concern of the ghost romance; accordingly, this set of corporeal issues, particularly as explored in the classical tale, is the subject of Chapter 1 (“The Ghost’s Body”). But ghost literature is also an important place for probing the subjective experience of death and for testing the cultural notion of literary immortality that authorship promised. Here lyric poetry, as framed within tale and anecdote, is key and serves as the basis for Chapter 2 (“The Ghost’s Voice”).
This chapter excavates the foundational Six Dynasties and Tang texts that shaped the Ming and Qing production of ghost poetry, showing how this earlier tradition remained “alive” in the seventeenth century by being continually read and rewritten. The return of the past in the present, particularly in the political context of a new dynasty confronting an old one, is another major theme in ghost literature. Inspired by poetic meditations on the past, but revitalized by integration with the narrative romance, this type of ghostly encounter works through the memory of traumatic historical events and constitutes the heart of Chapter 3 (“Ghosts and Historical Time”). Imagining a ghost in the person of an actor in the context of a play sheds light on fundamental aspects of the theatrical experience. The dramatization of the ghost romance, particularly the elaboration of the phantom heroine (hun dan) role and the emphasis on staging doubles, is the focus of Chapter 4 (“Ghosts and Theatricality”). A final coda reads the ghost scenes in the historical drama Palace of Lasting Life (Changsheng dian) as a prism that refracts the major themes developed in the previous four chapters—the female corpse revived through sexual love, the imagination of mortality through the creation of a ghostly poetic voice, the mourning of the historical past by the present, and the theatricality of the split between body and soul—but which also transcends them.