

# ***An Analysis of the Female Ghost Images in Ancient Chinese Novels on the Theme of Romantic Relationship Between Man and Ghost***

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**Abstract:** From Jin to Qing Dynasty of China, there are a large number of novels depicting human-ghost romance. In this literature, female images, femininity and gender relationship patterns reflect the patriarchal values of a specific historical period. Previous research on ancient Chinese female ghost novels often focused on their romantic story with a male human and the awakening consciousness of female, but the research on Character depiction of female ghost was very few. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the relationship between the image shaping of female ghosts and the values of contemporary Chinese ancient patriarchal society, existing in the stories of the ancient Chinese romances novels of Song, Yuan and Ming dynasty. Studies have suggested that the female ghosts in ancient Chinese "human-ghost romance" novels are essentially projections of the male author's ideals, reflecting the phallocentrism of ancient Chinese ghost fiction.

**Keywords:** Human-ghost Romance, Female Ghosts, Image Characterization, Phallocentrism

## **1. Introduction**

Human-ghost romance is a recurring theme in Chinese literature. A large number of stories based on human-ghost romance exist in novels from Jin to the Qing dynasties, often using the "Shu Sheng-female ghost" story pattern. The story in the "Shu Sheng-female ghost" pattern features the romantic experiences of Shu Sheng (a scholar in ancient feudal China who often aimed to participate in imperial examinations) and a female ghost as the main plot. The development of this story theme reached its peak in the Song, Yuan, and Ming Vernacular novels. The female ghosts in Chinese ghost novels are often different from those in traditional Japanese or American ghost novels, which serve the function of "revenge" and "punishment". In contrast, the female ghosts in Chinese ghost novels are less scary and more erotic. They were born not to create an atmosphere of horror, but to carry the sexual fantasies of male writers and male audiences [1].

Past research has shown that these human-ghost romances often reflect four main themes: the pursuit of love; the discipline of males; the awakening of female consciousness; and men's aesthetic standards of femininity [1]. The gender writing shown in these novels, whether in terms of female image, femininity, or gender relationship patterns, reflects the patriarchal values of the specific era in

which they were written. Among them, the image of women is more passive, and the purpose of female characters is often to better cater to certain desires of the male group in that era [2].

The "Shu Sheng-female ghost" model is a common writing pattern in Chinese ghost novels, in which the main story line revolves around the love story of a scholar and a female ghost. The female ghost is often portrayed as a projection of the scholar's (the story's writer) desires. In the past, studies of ancient Chinese novels of human-ghost romance have tended to focus on their unique love themes and the awakening of female consciousness, while few studies have focused on the portrayal of female ghosts in the "Shu Sheng-female ghost" mode. Therefore, this study focuses on stories that reflect the "Shu Sheng-female ghost" model of romance in ancient Chinese novels, with the aim of illuminating the relationship between the portrayal of female ghosts and the values of ancient Chinese patriarchal society. The study analyzes the images of female ghosts in ghost novels to explain the phallocentrism in the "Shu Sheng-female ghost" story model.

## 2. Human-ghost Romance

Human-ghost romance stories have a long history in China. The "Tan Sheng" in the *Lie Yi Zhuan* from the Wei and Jin Dynasties is considered to be the earliest record of human-ghost romance stories in ancient China [3]. In the novel, Tan Sheng is a poor scholar, while the female ghost is a rich girl who dares to break through secular prejudice. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, China entered a phase of great central unification, Taoism and Buddhism developed rapidly, and Romanticism became the mainstream of literature. All these factors contributed to the development of human-ghost romance stories. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, there were 52 stories of human-ghost romance, concentrated in works such as *Guang Yi Ji*, *Tai Ping Guang Ji*. During the Song and Yuan dynasties, the stories of human-ghost romance began to be popularized, mainly concentrated in the works such as *Zuo Yi Ji*, *Qing Zhao Gao Ji*, *Yun Zhai Guang Lu*, *Luo Zhong Ji Yi*, *Yi Jian Zhi*, etc. There are 19 stories involving human-ghost romance. Ming and Qing dynasties is the prosperous period of human-ghost romance, both in quantity and quality have reached the peak. This type of story is mainly concentrated in 63 works, such as *Zi Bu Yu*, *Xiao Dou Peng*, *Ying Chuang Yi Cao* and *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*.

Although studies of ancient Chinese ghost novels emerged in both China and the Western world in the early 20th century, studies focusing on the unique theme of human-ghost romance began in the early 21st century. Studies of Jin dynasty ghost novels first found that these novels widely adopted the theme of "human-ghost romance" and shared a common feature: the female protagonist must be a ghost and the male protagonist must be a human; there was never a romance between a male ghost and a woman [4]. Subsequently, a group of Chinese researchers has studied the unique theme of "human-ghost romance", including the image of male and female protagonists, the mode of human-ghost romance stories, and the creative background of human-ghost romance stories.

In the past, studies of ancient Chinese novels of human-ghost romance have tended to focus on the positive love theme behind the portrayal of female ghosts, the awakening of female consciousness, and the unique context of the time period. Little research has been done on the patriarchal ideology behind the portrayal of female ghosts. Even though some scholars have pointed out that these images, which seem to break through feudal rituals, still have limitations because of the male perspective. However, there is still no in-depth analysis for this theme. Therefore, this study focuses on ancient Chinese human-ghost romance novels that reflect the "Shu Sheng-female ghost" model, aiming to reveal the relationship between female ghost images and the values of ancient Chinese patriarchal society. First, the paper will analyze the image of female ghosts in ancient Chinese novels of human-ghost romance in general, followed by an in-depth analysis of the gender-biased portrayal of female ghosts in the "Shu Sheng-female ghost" model. Finally, the paper will address the reasons for this phenomenon and its relationship to patriarchal ideology.

This study is based on 135 "human-ghost romance" stories from the Wei and Jin dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the selection of texts, the study follows the following rules: 1. the male protagonists are mortals and the female protagonists are ghosts; 2. the storylines all involve love relationships between the protagonists; 3. love is the main theme of the stories and the main function of the protagonists, rather than revenge, victimization, rebellion, etc.

### 3. Image Characteristics of Female Ghosts

According to the content of the novels, the characteristics of female ghosts in ancient Chinese human-ghost romance novels can be summarized: female ghosts have superior appearance features; female ghosts have a proactive, flirtatious view of marriage; female ghosts have a high degree of cultural literacy; female ghosts have a strong desire to become mortal people; female ghosts can change or save the male protagonist's life situation.

Female ghosts have superior appearance characteristics than normal people. For example, in *Tong Ren Yu*, "I saw two girls with makeup sitting in the carriage, and they both had the most beautiful faces I had ever seen ". This appearance attractiveness even makes the scholar forget that they are ghost, but also willing to take the risk of unpredictability for the sake of enjoying the immediate pleasure. However, to the extent of beauty, female ghosts are not as extraordinary as fairies. In *Xiao Cui*, for example, the appearance of female ghosts is often praised with comments such as "they look like fairies" [5]. Even if a female ghost is beautiful, she can only receive such comparative praise as "like a fairy". In the eyes of mortal men, the beauty of fairies has a kind of admiration that can be desired but not attained, sought but not desecrated. That is to say, in the presence of fairies, men are unable to perform beyond the capabilities of women, so men lose their desire to conquer women. And in the species hierarchy, female ghosts are lower than humans. Men can easily gain a sense of superiority in the process of contact with these female ghosts.

Female ghosts have a proactive, flirtatious view of love and marriage. Due to the feudal ethics of traditional Confucianism, women in ancient China were always shy of facing their true feelings and were often at a loss for love. However, the female ghosts in Pu Songling's works are not the norm, showing initiative and enthusiasm [6]. Most of these female ghosts are used as a substitute for male sexual needs, which allows scholars to have sex with them without considering the constraints of traditional rites and laws, moral condemnation and the constraints of the real-life environment [5]. These female ghosts seem to pursue love boldly, but in fact, they serve as the function of bringing physical comfort and satisfaction to the male protagonists in the story. The image of a female ghost acts as the carrier of the scholar's ideal, reflecting the desires of this group repressed in the depths of consciousness.

Female ghosts have a high degree of cultural literacy. For example, in the story *Xiao Xie*, the writer focuses on two smart, beautiful and attractive female ghosts, Xiao Xie and Qiu Rong. They meet with Tao Sheng, and they let Tao Sheng teach them poetry to please him. "A few months later, both Qiu Rong and Xiao Xie were able to write poems and sometimes chant them to each other." The love relationship between the protagonists is based on the literacy of the female ghosts. Zheng found that some of the female ghosts in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* have an elegant temperament and considerable literacy; they have talent, emotion and wisdom; they can write and sing well; they are good at poetry; they are sensitive and elegant, and thus win the love of the scholar. Since the lower-class women in feudal society were deprived of education, it was difficult to find educated women. Therefore, scholars were thirsty for confidantes and longed to make their talents appreciated and valued by women. However, this longing is difficult to realize in reality. Therefore, the author of the novel uses these literate and talented female ghosts as a support for the ideal women, and ghosts become ideal characters.

Female ghosts have a strong desire to become mortal people. Zhou found that female ghosts are mostly weak: they cannot see the light, are afraid of people, have a strong inferiority complex, but

are concerned with the vivid life of the human world and long to be transformed back into mortals [7]. The only way to become human again is to combine with men and be saved by them as the weak. Therefore, male characters have a special value and significance in the plot of the novel, as they are the only hope for female ghosts to become mortal again. Masculine worship becomes an important feature of female ghost characterization in such novels [8]. Li found that in a large number of storylines, female ghosts gain the approval of the male family by changing their ghostly identity [9]. These female ghost characters drop out from the identity of female ghosts and gradually change the original temperament in themselves in terms of consciousness. They slowly transform into female characters approved by patriarchal rules. In *Nie Xiao Qian*, for example, the virtuous Nie Xiaoqian, after falling in love with Ning Caichen, comes to his house but is not accepted by his mother. However, she still manages the household and is filial to Ning Caichen's mother, eventually impressing her with her actions; in *Lu Wu Bing*, the humble and mediocre Lu Wubing is willing to be a concubine and is accepted by her virtues. These plots promote traditional Confucian ethics and morals, which require women to be filial and virtuous. By changing their identity as "female ghosts" to that of traditional Chinese women as "virtuous wives and mothers," they gain acceptance in the patriarchal world.

Female ghosts have a strong desire to become mortal people; female ghosts can change or save the male protagonist's life situation. Yan has pointed out that "the male and female protagonists in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* are actually the personification of two different narrative functions-reality and fantasy [4]. Here, the men mostly represent the real existence of loneliness and poverty, while the women represent the fantasy function of bringing about a change and salvation of the real existence". The female ghosts in these stories have good virtues. They are filial and obedient to their husband's parents, they run the household, and some of them have children. When they meet or fall in love with the male protagonist, the female ghosts are no longer vibrant and dynamic, but become submissive, obedient, and virtuous women; Zhou found that the female ghosts in the human-ghost romance stories are often born into wealthy families and change the scholar's predicament, even take concubines for the scholar [7]. The large number of polygamous ideal marriages in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* is mostly intended to satisfy male sexual fantasies. These stories are, to a large extent, the catharsis of the poor, solitary scholar's instincts, or the loser's fantasies of self-worth and power, and of rapid change in his situation. In the traditional "Shu Sheng-female ghost" model of human-ghost romance stories, the down-and-out scholar is helped by a beautiful female ghost, who instantly gains the fame and fortune he has been striving for. All their desires, which are difficult to fulfill in reality, are fulfilled by the female ghosts. These stories express the desire of the poor scholar for a confidante under the male discourse. They use them to give expression to male sexual physiological and psychological desires [5].

#### **4. The Fictional "Scholar- Female Ghost" Model and the Realistic Gender Bias**

Sun found that in the stories of human-ghost romance during the Wei and Jin dynasties, the male protagonist is often a lonely scholar, while the female ghost is often a woman of great elegance who was full of grievances during her lifetime [2]. The male protagonist must be a man and the female protagonist must be a ghost. Fu argues that female ghosts in human-ghost romance stories are the best portrayed female characters with the best endings [10]. Yan, Zhang, and Zheng have shown that female ghosts embody the best qualities of women in general, which are often characterized by three traits: talented, beautiful and kind [4,11,12]. Many of the female ghosts portrayed in human-ghost romance stories are very different from the traditional women of the time. These mind-independent female figures are a reflection of female consciousness and a satire and denial of the feudal society that bound women. Xiao, on the other hand, argues that behind the female ghost images, there are still male psychological overtones that do not reflect true female consciousness and female liberation [5]. These female ghosts appear to be free to pursue love, but they exist to highlight male character

traits. Their existence compensates for the dignity of men, the loss of masculinity. Xu and Li also point out that human-ghost romance novels do not completely transcend out of their historical era and are necessarily limited by the perceptions of the times as well [13,14].

The novels of human-ghost romance themselves are linked to reality on the one hand and to the surreal on the other. Most of the works of human-ghost romance are about the love between an scholar and a noble woman ghost, which is a reflection of the background of the story's creation [2]. Both the image study of the male and female protagonists and the mode of creation of the human-ghost romance reflect the context of the novel's creation. Sun and Xiao argue that this reflects the extremely strict social hierarchy during the Wei and Jin dynasties [2,5]. At that time, the nobility strictly forbade intermarriage between nobles and commoners in order to maintain the purity of bloodline and the continuity of power. Therefore, it was difficult for scholars from humble backgrounds to associate with the daughters of the nobility and, therefore, to change their status by marriage. In order to escape from the mental pain, female ghosts were used as a substitute for male psychosexuality. They enable the scholars to associate with them without regard to the constraints of tradition, moral condemnation and the constraints of real-life circumstances.

## 5. The Image of Female Ghosts: The Creator's Spirituality

The two images of "Shu Sheng" and "female ghost" are common characterizations in human-ghost romance stories. This setting not only has a specific cultural meaning, but also reflects the realistic desires of the creator. Many researchers have noticed this unique "Shu Sheng-female ghost" pattern in human-ghost romance stories. According to Jiang and Gu, the female ghosts in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* mostly prefer to associate with and comfort the poor scholar [15,16]. Sun, Fu, and Zhou all suggest that the male protagonist and the creator (Shu Sheng) in human-ghost romance stories are very close to each other [2,7,10]. Zheng argues that the author uses the female ghost as a repository for the ideal woman and uses the ghost to create an ideal character and depict an ideal life [12]. The main male character in the story is actually the author's own reflection. The image of the lonely scholar in the story is a projection and symbol of the author's own condition.

According to Johnson, the mystery of artistic creation lies in the satisfaction of the individual artist's unsatisfied desires [17]. The work of art itself is a substitute for these highly unsatisfied desires. He believed that people, unsatisfied in the real world, compensate from imaginary or fictional worlds such as dreams. Out of curiosity about the unknown and dissatisfaction with the status, people create many imaginative stories. The female ghosts in ancient Chinese ghost novels are often good-looking, flirtatious, and talented, making them the ideal female figures for the Shu Sheng community. This is also largely a projection of the author's unsuccessful career [9]. The main male character is actually a reflection of the author himself, and the image of the lonely scholar in the story is a projection and symbol of the author's self-constitution.

Since the Song Dynasty, the imperial examination system in ancient China has been open to all, regardless of origin, rich or poor. This not only broadened the base of talent selection, but also gave intellectuals in the lower and middle classes the opportunity to move up the social ladder. The imperial examinations strictly bound the thoughts and words of intellectuals not only in terms of content but also in terms of form. The vast majority of scholars were losers in the imperial examinations and disappointed in life. This is a knot in the hearts of Chinese intellectuals that is difficult to untie [7]. The discrepancy between the value of pursuing fame and glory and the ruthless reality brought great pain to the scholars. As a result, the literary works created by the scholars naturally became a kind of spiritual sustenance. Therefore, most of the male protagonists of ancient novels about human ghosts and romance were poor scholars. Take Pu Songling, the author of *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*, as an example. The talented and ambitious Pu Songling wasted half of his life in the imperial examination but failed to achieve his ambition, and this mentality of not achieving success



was naturally compensated in the creation of *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*. Therefore, the sharp conflict between his self-perception and the real situation makes Pu Songling eager to be recognized. The unrecognized and unrealized self-worth in his career makes him put this longing in his books, attempting to comfort his soul with the warmth of female ghosts.

The scholar, who has a low status in real society and lives in poverty and loneliness, is respected in the presence of female ghosts [18]. Therefore, the female ghosts in ancient Chinese novels of human-ghost romance essentially embody the scholar's desire for women [19]. In the traditional patriarchal cultural interpretations and regulations, one of the signs of masculine value is the ability to gain the favor of women. Especially when women are very beautiful and attractive, this confirmation of value is stronger, and men feel more satisfaction in their minds. Therefore, in ancient Chinese society, when a man was depressed, he always showed the psychological orientation of trying to seek the lost value of himself from his relationship with women [20]. This embodies the schematic feminine identity psychology of the scholar who wishes to obtain physical satisfaction and spiritual solace from women, which is a typical manifestation of heliocentrism. This psychology dehumanizes and instrumentalizes women. As can be seen, the female ghosts in ancient Chinese novels of human-ghost romance are essentially projections of the ideals of the scholars' community, reflecting the love fantasies of male authors and male readers. Thus, even if the image of the female ghost pursuing love is free, this freedom belongs to a patriarchal ideology, reflecting the male centrism in the creation of ancient Chinese ghost novels.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper focuses on the relationship between the image of female ghosts and the values of ancient Chinese patriarchal society in Chinese human-ghost romance novels, which feature a "female ghost-Shu Sheng" romance. The results show that female ghosts in ancient Chinese "human-ghost romance" novels have five characteristics: they have superior appearance characteristics but low species rank, so men can easily gain a sense of superiority in contact with these female ghosts; they have a proactive, flirtatious view of marriage, which allows scholars to give vent to their sexuality without regard to the constraints of the real-life environment; they have a high quality of cultural literacy, which can satisfy the scholar's desire for appreciation and confirmation of value; they have a strong desire to become mortal again, who change their ghost identity to win the acceptance of the secular patriarchal world; they are able to change or save the male protagonist's life situation, satisfying the scholar's fantasy of quickly changing his own despondent situation.

At the same time, this paper also finds that most of the works of human-ghost romance novels are about the love between poor scholars and the ghost of noble women, following the "Shu Sheng-female ghost" pattern, which is a reflection of the background of the novels. In ancient China, the strict imperial examination system discouraged the scholarly class from advancing in official careers, hence the literary works created by scholars could be regarded as a spiritual sustenance. As a result, most of the male protagonists in Chinese human-ghost romance novels were poor scholars who failed to step into the official career, while female ghosts were treated as a substitute for male psychosexual venting, allowing scholars to enjoy sex with them without regard to the constraints of the real-life environment, or to achieve self-value.

In addition, this paper argues that the images of female ghosts in ancient Chinese human-ghost romance novels are essentially a projection of the ideals of the scholarly community, reflecting their desire for females. The male character is recognized by the female ghost character, thus receiving affirmation and confirmation of value, as well as physical satisfaction and spiritual solace. This creative device dehumanizes and instrumentalizes the female characters, reflecting phallocentrism in the creation of ancient human-ghost romance novels.

This study complements the area of patriarchal ideology embodied in the portrayal of female ghosts by pointing out that these images of female ghosts that seem to break through feudal rituals still have the limitations of a masculine perspective and still reflect male-centrism in a patriarchal society. However, there are still shortcomings in this study. In terms of text selection, this dissertation takes 135 "human-ghost romance" stories from the Wei and Jin dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties as its object of study, and summarizes the general characteristics of these stories and the causes of their characteristics. However, although the Wei and Jin dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties were generally in the context of patriarchal society and feudal rule, the time span was large. As a result, the political environment and social and cultural landscape changed considerably in each period, and this study does not include these changes in its scope of discussion. In addition, the ruling policies, the guiding ideology of the regime, and the social and cultural climate of different periods may have an impact on the creative mindset of the authors of human-ghost romance stories, and this area still has great research value.

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