

# *Female's Tragedy in Chinese Horror: Patriarchal Oppression in the Form of Marriage*

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**Abstract:** Chinese horror, a rapidly developed genre, is closely connected with customs and traditions. Women being the majority of ghosts and villains is a distinct feature of Chinese horror. This phenomenon is closely bonded with the Chinese cultural background, especially the ancient literature pieces and the yin-yang theory. As the sex belonging to yin, women villains contribute to the eeriness of the horror work, and this property also makes women easy victims in the story. The duality of the female victim and villain identity is portrayed in many works featuring female villains, as most of these women figures have tragic marriages and domestic life, and they want revenge. Typical forms of marriage-related suffering are domestic violence, arranged marriage, and posthumous marriage and human sacrifice. Through analyzing the elements above, this paper discusses female tragedy in Chinese horror works and its reflection of reality and showcases how different kinds of marriage-related sufferings of females serve as the manifestations of patriarchal oppression.

**Keywords:** Chinese horror, Women, Game, Culture

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese horror games like *Paranormal HK* and *Paper Bride* are noticed by players globally. The Taiwanese horror movie *Incantation* raised the attention of both Chinese and overseas audiences. Though except for a few outstanding films, the Chinese horror genre hardly produces continuous output globally, and the Chinese horror genre in film often faces market failure compared to its Western equivalent [1], the growth of Chinese horror works in the past three years reflects the expansion and progress of this market.

The genre of Chinese horror, no matter in games or in films, has relatively fixed elements: Folklore offers scenes that trigger fear, like the bridal chamber and ancestral hall; cause-and-effect transmigration is often the underlying logic behind the story; and the haunting sense of eeriness lingered to stimulates the audience psychologically. Another similarity that is hard to ignore appears in Chinese horror films and games—females are the majority among the ghosts and monsters, and even the overwhelming majority [2].

According to cause-and-effect transmigration, all phenomena have a cause, and nothing will happen out of nowhere and out of no reason. Many of the female ghosts and monsters in Chinese horror works turned out to suffer from misfortune before their death, while those misfortunes are

often a result of patriarchal oppression of women—domestic violence, arranged marriage, posthumous marriage, and human sacrifice. For example, in *Paranormal HK*, the dentist's wife was tortured to death after her husband repeatedly pulled out her teeth to heal patients and then used a secret formula to grow them back. In *Paper Bride 2*, the chosen women were locked up and sacrificed as brides to the gods to protect the peace of the village.

This research aims to discuss the different types of marital tragedies of women in Chinese horror and how they work as manifestations of patriarchal oppression. The scale of research mainly concentrates on twenty-first-century Chinese horror films and games but also discussed ancient literature. The components of this study are:

1. analysis of the cultural background of contemporary Chinese horror
2. analysis of the duality of the female victim and villain identity
3. identifications of three types of women's marital tragedies
4. analysis of the marital tragedies as manifestations of patriarchal oppression

## 2. Cultural background of contemporary Chinese horror

Famous ancient literature pieces depicting supernatural figures and events, for example, the *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* [3], are influential to contemporary Chinese horror works. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* is a collection of about 500 short stories written by Songling Pu in the Qing Dynasty. Most of the stories take place in a fanciful world with human beings and fox spirits, ghosts, and monsters. The collection depicts hundreds of female figures that are not human beings but have supernatural powers, some are kind and some are evil. The most classic female images in the book are beautiful and alluring [4]. Some of their charms are deadly, so once human males fall to be engaged in sexual relationships with them, males may suffer from fatigue, weakness, or death. In addition to scaring readers, most of the early Chinese ghost novels served as educational fables. Therefore, in many classic plots, a female ghost presides over seducing a man to have sex, thereby absorbing his yang energy. This kind of story is not only erotic but also punishes men who indulge in lust according to traditional morality. Similarly, Jia Rui in the most famous Chinese novel, *A Dream in Red Mansions* [5], also died of his lust because he couldn't resist having sex with the beauty in a magical mirror, even though the mirror had a warning skull on the opposite side.

However, women's lovesickness is encouraged and romanticized. Women's loves are identified as loyal and continuous, and although women's sexual desire existed, it cannot be too straightforward in the relationship or be dominant, otherwise it will violate feudal morality. In the 16th-century play *The Peony Pavilion* [6], the heroine Du Liniang died of the lovesickness caused by the romantic affair in her dream and was resurrected from the ghost form by her lover years later.

The difference in social responsibilities of men and women was distinct in Chinese ancient society. Men in the middle and upper classes were expected to study and gain fame and contribute to the country, while men in the lower class also needed to have the skill to earn the bread and support the family. However, the first priority of all women was to take care of their husbands and take care of their children. Therefore, marriage and domestic life were regarded as the most prioritized event in women's lives, or even the only event. The social ideal for men was "cultivating the self, raising a family, governing the country, and pacifying the world" in the *Book of Rites*, one of the Five Classics of Confucianism, while that for women is "obedience to father before marriage, husband after marriage, and son after husband's death". This difference is the visible embodiment of the patriarchal society's oppression of the potential and freedom of women. Gao [7] observed that:

Confucianism seems to have assigned three roles to a Chinese woman: the sexual object and possession of the man, the child-bearing tool to carry on her husband's family name, and the servant to the whole family.

Many women in Chinese horror films, especially villains, have unfortunate pasts, and these pasts are almost always related to marriage because marriage is their inescapable fate and lifelong main course. This phenomenon in fictive worlds reflects the tragedy of women in feudal society in reality.

### 3. The duality of the female victim and villain identity

In Chinese horror films, female characters often assume the dual roles of victim and villain. They generally appear in a terrifying and grim image, and then as the story progresses, their tragic life experiences are revealed. Hu Tingting found in 2021 that this dual identity is not only common in Chinese horror works, but also in Chinese crime films [8].

In Western horror movies, monstrous feminine are portrayed as innately evil, and their horrific power is connected with their reproductive functions. This trend appears in Japanese works as well: The heroine of the famous Japanese manga series, Tomie Kawakami, can reproduce endlessly with the cells of her body to achieve immortality. However, reproductive-related horrific abilities are rare in female villains in Chinese horror works. Instead, grudges and curses are the more common means for them to attack and trigger fear.

The duality of female victim and villain identity is related to the yin-yang theory. Yin and yang theory is a widely accepted philosophical theory in China. Simply saying, many opposite concepts have Yin and Yang properties. Yin is the symbol of femaleness, darkness, coldness, and earth. Yang, on the contrary, is the symbol of maleness, light, warmth, and sky. Robin Wang suggested in his 2005 paper that “throughout Chinese history, many forms of inhumane treatment were meted out to women in the name of this theory” [9]. Women belong to yin, the same category that darkness, evil, resentment, and coldness belong to, so they are more likely to become the choice to arouse the audience's emotions in horror films. Imagine on a cold night, a woman with long straight hair appears on the screen. Even if there is no movement, the "yin energy" in the scene will make the audience or player feel the eeriness. At the same time, yin also symbolizes weakness and powerlessness. Women appear to be more vulnerable to harm and thus easily become victims in horror works. In *Paranormal HK*, the male character played by the player did not become the object of the female ghost's choice of possession, but the female colleague Jiahui was possessed by the evil spirit immediately after they step in to the cursed area. In this game, all the characters who appear in person to bring a sense of horror to the player are all women. The yin nature of women also makes the attack methods of female villains in Chinese horror not direct and powerful. They don't overwhelm their prey with absolute power like Michael Myers in *Halloween*, but hurt them through the sinisteress that seeps into every pore.

### 4. Three Types of Women's Marital Tragedies

Almost all of the tragedies suffered by female figures in Chinese horror works are related to the misfortune of their marriage and family life. I will analyze the three most typical forms: domestic violence, arranged marriage, and posthumous marriage, and human sacrifice.

#### 4.1. Domestic Violence

Some female villains in Chinese horror have been subjected to violence in family life. As a result, their unwillingness and resentment turn them into ghosts to kill. Different kinds of domestic violence include physical violence, emotional abuse, and murder by the husband. As mentioned before, the wife of Dentist He, the first female ghost to appear in *Paranormal HK*, suffered from domestic violence. Her teeth were forcibly pulled out by her husband to treat patients and then regenerated with his ancestral secret recipe. The cycle repeated until she died. In *Dumplings*, an outdated actress Ai Jingjing ages, and thus her husband has sex with other women. She is willing to eat dumplings made

by babies to maintain her beauty and youth. Due to the extreme pursuit of beauty, love, and loyalty, the heroine embarks on a road of no return. The best dumpling in the movie is made by a five-month-old dead baby whose mother is a girl raped by her own father. In *A Wicked Ghost*, the husband of famous Cantonese opera actress Chu Renmei plots to kill her in order to get married with another woman. After learning the truth, Chu Renmei's soul turns into a ghost, killing sixty-six people in the village within three days, yet the resentment has not been appeased. These women characters develop deep resentment over the betrayal of their husbands, who are the closest to them or even the master of their life, considering one of the three cardinal guides of the federal society is "husband guides wife".

#### 4.2. Arranged Marriage

Arranged marriages are generally brokered by parents or matchmakers, and young people have no choice for their spouses. Arranged marriages were very popular in feudal China. It largely destroyed women's happiness because their whole life would revolve around a man who, by not voluntarily selecting, can have all sorts of mismatches. Men also have the potential to be unhappy in arranged marriages. However, they have a legitimate right to be married with multiple wives and, unlike women, family is not the only important thing in their lives.

In the movie *Get in the Dark*, Xiao Lian and A Sheng fell in love freely and made a pledge to be married without their parents' approval. However, Xiao Lian was bound by an arranged marriage and had to marry a rich man, and she soon died of illness. Heartbroken A Sheng entrusted her soul to the paper doll and regarded the paper doll as his wife.

Tragedy resulted from arranged marriages is also very common in non-horror Chinese stories. The most famous love tragedy *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* tells the story of a brave young couple who could not fall in love freely due to the engagement of the girl. Both of them committed suicide and turned into butterflies in the end.

#### 4.3. Posthumous Marriage and Human Sacrifice

Posthumous marriage refers to a marriage in which at least one of the two individuals engaged has died. It is a Chinese folk custom and is often used as the theme or element of horror movies.

In *The House That Never Dies*, to prevent Huo Lianqi from freely marrying his lover Lu Dieyu, who is a geisha, the Huo family forced Lu Dieyu to marry the dead brother of Huo Lianqi and locked her in the basement for seven years. In the movie, posthumous marriage is hard to resist. Even if the husband is dead, the heroine's personal freedom and emotional relationship are still bound by this involuntary marriage.

Marriage with a god is a common excuse of human sacrifice. The village in *Paper Bride 2* has a tradition of living sacrifices. The chosen women are called paper brides, and they will be married to Zangzun—the funeral god—when they reach the right age. These paper brides have been brainwashed since childhood to believe that it is an honor to serve the Zangzun. In fact, there have been incidents in Chinese history where young women were sacrificed to gods as brides to pray for peace. Hebo, the god of the Yellow River, was worshiped as the object of human sacrifice. Animals and young females who are destined to become Hebo's wives were drowned in the river to be delivered to him [10].

### 5. The manifestations of patriarchal oppression

Today, China is still not a fully gender-equal society. Zheyu Li stated that China is a masculine country through his calculation [2]. The fact that women's marriage tragedies are so common in horror films also reflects the prevalence and depth of women's misfortune in ancient Chinese society.

Ancient China was a typical agricultural society with a social structure of men farming and women weaving for production efficiency. Manual labor's requirement gave men a physiological advantage, which translates into a higher socioeconomic status, so a patriarchal society gradually takes shape.

The three female's marriage tragedies in Chinese horror we are discussing today are all manifestations of the patriarchal society's oppression of women. The tragedies stem from two common elements: the loss of choice and the inability to escape. The occurrence of domestic violence is mostly accompanied by women's tolerance, rather than leaving: the dentist's wife in *Paranormal HK* endured for her child, and she kept cooking for the child even after she turned into a ghost; Ai Jingjing in *Dumplings* faced her husband's infidelity chose to forcibly change her appearance and reverse her age. Arranged marriages deprive women of the right to choose a spouse, and after marriage, they endure the pain of involuntary marriage because of the moral requirement of loyalty. Posthumous marriage and Human sacrifice are also similar to an arranged marriage, except that what women lose is often their life.

Both the loss of choice and the inability to escape are caused by two social facts. First, women are not encouraged or allowed to work. They had no financial means, depending on their parents and husbands, and their only job was to take care of the children and family. Therefore, women didn't have the material capital to get out of the tragedy of marriage. Second, the requirements of society teach women to be loyal, submissive, and obedient wives and mothers since they were born, so it was difficult for them to generate the independent will to get out of marital restrictions. The oppression of women in a patriarchal society is on both material and spiritual levels, hence it's deeply rooted. Therefore, women figures in Chinese horror often present the tragic situation of being deeply hurt by marriage and domestic life.

## 6. Conclusion

Chinese horror works have the obvious phenomenon that the villains are mostly female, and according to cause-and-effect transmigration, these female villains commit evil and kill because of the misfortune they suffered. Women are both villains and victims in the horror story. Many of the misfortunes they suffered revolve around marriage and domestic life and can be roughly divided into three types: domestic violence, arranged marriage, posthumous marriage and human sacrifice. All of these misfortunes are the manifestation of the oppression of women by the patriarchal society.

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