

On Differences Between Chinese and Western Culture as Shown in the Images of Chinese Female Ghosts and Vampires

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Abstract

Both vampires and Chinese female ghosts are imaginary beings from folklore, but they bear different images in literary works. Based on the vision that man is an integral part of nature, Chinese people seek harmony between man and nature, which generates a romantic relationship between man and female ghost in traditional folk tales. For another, the images of vampires have been omnipresent in western literary fictions, whose appearance and image are closely related to Christian doctrine and European humanism. This paper describes the literary image of vampires and Chinese female ghosts respectively, and analyzes the relationship between human and ghosts by comparing the differences between Chinese and western ghosts. It reveals that the differences of human-ghost relationship actually reflect differences between Chinese and Western religious culture and philosophy thoughts.

Keywords

Vampires; Chinese female ghosts; Cultural differences.

1. Introduction

The image of ghosts is an important part of folk culture. Speaking of Chinese ghosts, female ghosts are the most impressive. Among the vast ancient Chinese literary works, Zhiguai fictions (tales of the miraculous), a type of Chinese literature, are the oldest works to describe the existence of the supernatural, rebirth and reincarnation. This genre became mainstream and was produced in great number in the Six Dynasties (220-589AD). And it is worth noticing that the human-ghost love stories run through the history of ancient Chinese literature. When it comes to Western ghosts, the most well-known image is the vampire. Vampires are ghosts ingrained in European folklore, whose image is closely related to Christian doctrine and European humanism. Both Chinese and Western ghosts are born of human beings' imagination about the unknown, and the image of ghosts gradually became the incarnation of human beings. The transformation of ghost image and the human-ghost relationship is imprinted with changes of the times and different religious cultures. The development of the relationship between human and ghost is definitely linked to the social environment and ideological culture in which it is attached to.

In the field of ghost culture study, scholars from both abroad and home show their increasing interest of studying the literary images of ghosts from various perspectives. Scholars discuss the origin of ghosts and the transformation of its image, ghost-human relationship, etc. While researching articles written about the differences between the images of Chinese ghosts and vampires, the writer finds that a few authors focus on the comparison and contrast of plots, writing techniques, characters of ghosts and cultural psychology. For example, in Jiang's *A Glimpse of the Difference Between the Concept of Life and Death in Chinese and Western Man-Ghost Love Stories*, she claims that the human-ghost love stories stem from the custom of ancient posthumous marriage and fertility worship [1]. The differences between their love

stories reflect different ways of pursuing spiritual immortality. However, the writer cannot find much discussion on the religious and philosophical influence on the differences between the images of Chinese ghosts and vampires. This paper aims to reveal the differences between the Chinese and Western ghost images as well as that of the relationship between human and ghost, attempting to explore the underlying reasons for the differences.

2. The Literary Image of Chinese Ghosts and Vampires

In China, there are literary fictions depicting the image of ghosts since the Six Dynasties, most of which fall into the genre Zhiguai. In these fictions, ghosts, spirits, and animals (usually fox or snake) transform into human form, endowed with human traits and emotions. Human-ghost love has been a major theme of ghost fictions in Chinese literature ever since. Vampire is a bloodthirsty monster in western culture. It is a supernatural creature that bears the curse of God in the legend. By drinking the blood of humans or other creatures, it can survive for a long time.

2.1. The Image of Chinese Female Ghosts

Strange Tales from the Liao Zhai Studio, a collection of bizarre stories by Pu Songling of the Qing Dynasty, brings together more than 400 short stories, of which the love stories between beautiful and kind female ghosts and poor scholars impress readers most. Although there are evil spirits and demons in Pu's novels, most of the female ghosts possess the qualities of a wonderful lady—beautiful, enthusiastic, good-natured, considerate or courageous. While falling in love with men, these female ghosts are bold in seeking true love, breaking through the feudal ethics of "killing off the human desire".

Many female ghosts have beautiful appearances, but what makes their lover stories more fascinating is their charming personality—wise, perseverant, showing empathy towards humans. Nie Xiaoqian, Ying Ning, and Liansuo (female ghosts in Pu' stories) are the typical of them. Nie Xiaoqian is a beautiful female ghost who only lives to the age of 18. After her death, she is buried next to a desolate ancient temple. Unfortunately, she is coerced and harmed by the monster Yecha. Later, Ning caichen, a poor scholar, lives in the temple temporarily. Xiaoqian comes to murder him at the instigation of Yecha, but she is moved by the integrity of Ning Caichen. She tells the truth to help the Ning turn the crisis into safety. He helps her escape from Yecha, and takes her back home. Xiaoqian is hardworking and kind-hearted, and is deeply loved by Ning's family. Because of her long-term contact with living people, Xiaoqian gradually looks like an ordinary person. Ning's family never mentioned her identity. The female ghost Liansuo is a female ghost who loves poetry. She and the poor scholar Yang Yuwei share the same interests and love each other. As a lonely ghost, not caring about any disciplines and scruples, she follows the principle and morality of being a human. Liansuo treats Yang with due respect and she is afraid of hurting him. The love between these female ghosts and humans shed shackles of secularity, which is worth of respect. Obsessed with pursuing true love, these ghosts will never hurt humans. They persist in the principle of being a human, bravely pursuing love, beauty and truth even faced with various pressures.

2.2. The Image of Vampires

The image of the vampire is well known to the West through Jewish and Christian legends, and it is still popular today. After the transformations rendered by the three periods, medieval legends and superstitions, literature of the Industrial Revolution, and diversified modern literature, the images of vampires have undergone a very interesting and thought-provoking transition—from an evil and supernatural being to the incarnation of an ordinary person.

In the early stage of the "vampire" literature, the portrayal of its image often followed in a single way, being savage and ugly and feeding on human blood. These vampires usually have sharp

fangs, claws, pale complexion, messy and long hair, a sly face, and always walk in the dark, afraid of the sun, relying on the blood of living people. In addition to the horrible appearance, they are endowed with amazing super powers, fast speed of action, and self-healing capability. They are immortal, always called the undead. The reason why the early writers or directors describe the vampires like this lies in the origins of the vampire legends.

In the 18th century, the image of "vampire" appeared in romantic literature. During this period, they began to have a fascinating temperament. In 1897, the vampire novel *Dracula*, written by the Irish writer Bram Stoker, was published, and got popular. In addition, his has got gentle appearance, full of charm and betrayed God for love. *Dracula* obfuscates people in terms of biology (he sleeps during the day and ages in reverse after fresh feeds), morality (he subsists on human blood), sexuality and gender (he is often portrayed as effeminate), and nationality (he desires to emigrate from his ancestral home) [2]. In 1973, Anne Rice began to create a series of novels called *Interview with the Vampire* and generated a subversive image of vampire. In Anne's novel, the vampire completely gets rid of the ugly image and turns into a beautiful, intelligent, noble and immortal creature.

As mentioned above, we can see that Chinese female ghosts are the incarnation of human beings from the very beginning. With beautiful appearance, they dare to break through the secular ethics and pursue true love boldly. While the image of the vampire has undergone a major transformation, from the original ferocious creature to the image of charming aristocrats.

3. The Differences Between the image of Ghosts

3.1. Different Origins

There are two main versions of the origin of vampires. The first one has to do with Cain, Adam and Eve's first son, who was cursed by God for killing his brother, and lived on humans' blood. The second version has to do with Judah, who betrayed Jesus and committed suicide. But God could not forgive Judas for betraying his son, and let him become an immortal and lonely vampire after death to punish his sins of betrayal. As Judas became a vampire at night, he could never see the sun.

According to Brodmann, the vampire has been used as a scapegoat for occurrences of various diseases such as the plague and psychiatric maladies [3]. A plague ravaged Europe in the 14th century, when people buried patients before they died for fear of infection. These patients struggled before they died, that is why people saw "corpse" being alive, bleeding, and wounding. "Vampires" were quickly spread in Europe and brought people great misery at that time. The vampire superstition began since then, and developed during the Middle Ages, causing fear to people. With the development of times and the rise of romanticism, the image of vampires has entered literary works.

The first reason for the origin of Chinese ghosts is that people have faith in the immortality of spirit. In ancient times, people did not know much biology knowledge about their own bodies. Inspired by the scenes in the dream, people then developed a concept that their minds and feelings are not generated from their physical activity, but a unique activity that falls among the body and leaves the body when the person dies [4]. The soul lives in the body when a person is alive, and it will continue to exist after death, transforming into the "ghost". The custom of posthumous marriage is another factor of man-ghost love stories. In Chinese culture it is very shameful to be the parents of an unwed daughter, and unmarried girls are often shunned from society. Ghost marriages were often performed for the sake of progeny. People assumed that ghost marriage for men would let the family's lineage carry on. This custom of ghost marriage evolved into human ghost love stories. In addition, the prevalence of man-ghost stories is also related to the phenomenon of grave robbery at the time. When the female ghosts have to part with the human, they will take the initiative to give the men a love token. It is a beautiful lie that

thefts made up to sell the properties in tombs [5]. In addition, the internal furnishings of the tomb and the external environment leave quite a lot of room for imagination of the human-ghost love stories. The tomb was regarded as another world that exists underground, reinforcing the existence of ghosts at that time.

3.2. Different Attitudes Toward Lovers

Although there is love in the world of vampires, this kind of love is more of a blood-dependency relationship and a kind of abuse of love. To some degree, a vampire lover is selfish and sinful as he or she must subsist on blood. In the relationship with lovers, no matter how great and deep the love of the vampire, he or she cannot resist the temptation of blood, even for his so-called long-lasting love, until the lover is also dragged into the eternal darkness. This kind of love is not true love, but a mindset of satisfying one's own desires. Just as Count Dracula's love for Mina, love is precious but cannot resist the vampire's instinct. Under the author's description, vampires have animal desires that are satisfied by the act of bloodsucking. In April 1819, with the publication of John Polidori's novel *The Vampire*, the vampire was transformed from a simple demonic image into a noble man that tempted women. A man-ghost love craze was triggered then.

Though many female ghosts once live in the dark or are controlled by some evil spirits, and serve the devil and hurt humans, most of them are resolved to beat their way back to respectability. Once they receive help from humans, they quickly give up evil and return to good. Nie Xiaoqian is a typical of them. Under the control of the evil spirits, Xiaoqian has to obtain blood for the evil spirits. Moved by Ning Caichen's kindness and with the help of him, Xiaoqian finally escapes from the evil spirits, and gets married with Ning in the end. The female ghosts are not a perfect beautification of women in reality, instead, they make mistakes, and have evil thoughts as well. Besides, the lovers of the female ghosts have sympathy for them and do everything possible to help the female ghosts return to the good. Their love is based on equality as they tend to think about each other.

Many female ghosts in Pu's collection of human-ghost love stories boldly hunger for true love. Sometimes they can even die for the beloved one, and most of their lovers have the same deep feelings for them either. It is a relationship based on equality. Contrasting with vampires' lovers who live in the darkness out of love, the female ghosts in Chinese fictions try every effort to return to the real world to be with the lover. They not only do not hurt their lover, but also give up their own interests when they have to make a choice, such as sacrificing their lives to save the lovers or giving up the opportunity to reincarnate.

4. The Underlying Reasons For the Differences

4.1. Against Christian doctrine & the Influence of Humanism

During the 14th century, when there was plague everywhere, the terrible scene makes people think that these dead people who are buried alive are resurrected and would attack other living people. People believed that the spread of disease was from God's punishment for human beings and that these dying people were the "vampires" described by church.

The origin of vampires is related to the story of Christianity. The ancestor of vampires is Cain in legends. God preferred Abel's tribute and did not look at Cain's, so Cain was angry and killed Abel. God punished Cain for making a living on blood, and thus Cain's descendants became the first generation of vampires. Therefore, the image of vampire helps promote the doctrine of Christianity and love, for vampires existing as the opposite of Christianity. The elimination of vampires is also inseparable from Christianity. In *Dracula*, Jonathan and Mina are constantly praying for God and seeking God's guidance and help. The cross and holy water are the most sacred weapons to defeat vampires. Christianity needs this negative image to preach the

teachings, and love is the foundation of Christian doctrine. Without the great love of Jesus' salvation, the world will be loaded with ridiculous selfishness. Vampires do not believe in God, so they can never understand true love.

The European Renaissance, which began in the late 14th century, brought a humanistic spirit to westerners. The core of the spirit of humanism is to emphasize the value of human beings, to oppose religious teachings, and to oppose theology. The image of a vampire is a person who violates religious doctrine and is not recognized by the church. It reflects a rebellious spirit that emphasizes individual will and refuses to be bound by the power of God, which fits the core of humanistic thinking. The continuous development of this kind of thinking reflects the awareness of human self-consciousness. Vampires are no longer sinners in the eyes of the humanists. Instead, they are more willing to beautify it, make it stronger, and even fight against God.

4.2. The Influence of Traditional Chinese Religious Thoughts

First, the teachings of Buddhism have been vividly reflected in the ghost world. Yama, King of Hell, judges the good and evil by a person's life. The good guys will begin a new life in a new body, while the bad guys will be punished and even go down the 18 layers of hell. In Buddhist thoughts, Karma is the spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of an individual (cause) influence the future of that individual (effect). Most of the stories create a positive image of female ghosts, so they can reincarnate or return to life in the end. Buddhists believe that ghosts are only suffering souls. If they can be influenced by Buddhism and do good deeds, ghosts will eventually get rid of evils.

Second, Confucianism has influenced all aspects of Chinese people's ideology for thousands of years. Confucianism as the mainstay of traditional Chinese culture, focuses on the cultivation of virtue and maintenance of ethics. Some of the basic Confucian ethical concepts and practices include ren (humaneness), yi (righteousness), and li (propriety) and zhi (wisdom). Among them, "Yi" is the upholding of righteousness and the moral disposition to do good. "Li" is a system of ritual norms and propriety that determines how a person should properly act in everyday life according to the law of Heaven. Even the two adults have affection for each other, they should keep their emotions tightly reined in. "Li" encourages the consenting adults to refrain from lust. Furthermore, influenced by Confucianism, women should be obedient to their fathers when they are unmarried, and obey their husbands after getting married, and follow their sons when husbands died. What's worse, women were deprived of the right to education, the right to express themselves and even the freedom of marriage. With the restraint of Confucianism, women must be cautious, follow the rules, and suppress emotions. Women had a low status in ancient time and women were subordinate to men. These cheerful and sincere female ghosts, however, take the initiative to pursue love. They attempt to escape from the shackles of Confucianism on women and advocate freedom, which is one of the reasons for the prevalence of human-ghost love stories.

5. Conclusion

In general, many of the Chinese female ghosts bear the qualities of Chinese traditional women who are kind, hardworking, and considerate. The concept of reincarnation in Buddhism and the teaching of the causal cycle give birth to the female ghosts. Confucianism advocates benevolence, righteousness, and wisdom, which is reflected in the personality of female ghosts. They follow the social code and are willing to sacrifice for lovers. Unlike Chinese female ghosts, the image of vampires is contrary to the tenet of Christianity. The love of vampires is out of self-satisfaction of bloodsucking. No matter how the image of vampire evolves, their love is motivated by the inner demands, emphasizing the value of human beings, opposing religious teachings. This is highly consistent with the spirit of humanism and is an excellent

interpretation of the human spirit in the field of literary creation. The prevalence of humanism pushes forward people's pursuit of freedom and equality.

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