

Why do Japanese Ghosts have No Legs?:
Sexualized Female Ghosts and the Fear of Sexuality

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The biggest difference between Western and Japanese ghosts is that the former possess legs whereas the latter don't. Almost all the traditional pictures of Japanese ghosts are legless and sometimes floating like a smoke. In today's films, the ghosts are played by real actors who have legs, but their silence and lack of materiality are emphasized. A recent example is a Japanese movie, *The Ring*. In this film, the ghost, Sadako appears climbing out of the well, and her legs don't show. Similarly, in other ghost stories, they either appear head-fast clinging to something by their hands, or they silently materialize without a footstep, as if they don't possess legs. On the other hand, if you look at the western versions, the difference is obvious. In the film, *the Others*, featuring Nicole Kidman the footsteps are vital indicator of ghosts. In Harry Potter series, the ghosts are very noisy. Haunted Mansion at Disneyland has many noisy and merry ghosts, in stark contrast to Japanese traditional equivalent, in which horrible looking ghosts quietly materialize with full of grudge and malice. How do these differences come about?

Christianity and the Dead Body

Ghosts resides somewhere between existence and non-existence, life and death, body and non-body. As Mary Shelley's classic gothic, *Frankenstein*, shows, the monstrous resides in this in-between arena, and this arena may be quite differently configured in the West and in Japan. Ghosts in Japan seem to be on a different level of

corporeality. Therefore, we need to deal with the issue of body to analyze ghosts and it requires us to enter into the realm of myth and religion. David Punter maintains that the body in the Western Gothic has “the most immediate connection” “with the Christian myth and the suffering body of Christ on the cross”(50)¹. We can find in *Frankenstein*, for instance, the theme of resurrection:

Frankenstein is about, first, the cannibalisation of the body, the work of the charnel house, and thus about the threat of decay and of what happens after decay. (50)

Here, the body is connected immediately with decay and later with resurrection. However, it is not the case in Japanese culture. This is apparent if one compares the burial customs. In the West, the dead body has traditionally been buried under the ground, and it takes ages for a body to be completely decomposed. Usually we don't get to see the decomposed corpse, so, we would imagine the deceased one is lying under the tomb as if sleeping. The actual decomposition is a protracted one, so is the process of his/her deadness to be established in our imagination. The length of this middle state of a dead body might explain why Western ghosts have such corporeality.

This burial custom provides the ground for Western resurrection myths, because the unclear boundary between death and life sustains the hope that the body might come back from the grave. In this situation, a strong desire for life can be attached to corpses. *Frankenstein* is but one obvious example. The decaying body cultivates the hope for resurrection and human fantasy of ultimate control over life and death.

The Western tradition of death mask and portrays of corpse prove such attraction to dead bodies. As Elisabeth Bronfen extensively analyses in her book, corpse has

¹ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, The Body and the Law* (Palgrave MacMillan, 1998).

accommodated desire of Western humanity, and the Western culture has made the dead body of woman, in particular, an object of gaze and of artistic exploitation.²

Japanese concept of a corpse

However, in Japanese culture, the concept of the corpse is totally different. They are never drawn or made a mask of, and they are rarely photographed. Why is that so? When we think of the reason, Japanese burial custom must be taken into account. The *Tale of Genji* suggests that, at least from the 10th century, cremation has been commonly practiced. Cremation is a clear-cut way to establish the dead-ness, because you can see that the corpse turns into ashes and bones. Before the cremation, the dead body is regarded as meaningless object to be burnt away. It is an empty vessel, from which the spirit is now safely detached. People feel somewhat awkward with the corpse, and they want to cremate it soon after the ritual, which normally takes 2 to 3 days. At the end of the ritual, the family takes the body to crematorium and burns it to pick up the bones afterwards. Only after this process, the dead is safely dead.

In the *Tale of Genji*, for instance, a mother laments, looking down at the corpse of her daughter: “With her before me, I cannot persuade myself that she is dead. At the sight of her ashes I can perhaps accept what has happened.” (6) As this passage shows, dead bodies are something incomprehensible and we feel ill at ease with them. Perhaps this explains why Japan does not have customs of death-masks and portrayal of dead bodies.

These burial customs make a huge difference to how we conceptualize death. In case of cremation culture, the corpse does not decay, as they are cremated before

² Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993).

decaying takes place. The body remains in the middle state between life and death for no more than 3 days, contrary to the corpse in an internment culture, for which it lasts years after years. After cremation, the dead acquires a clean and safe image like its ashes. The shape of the corpse is not maintained, and it becomes unidentifiable and anonymous, entering into a metaphysical world of the dead, which has nothing to do with the reality of the body. Imageries associated with normal death in Japan are white ashes or smoke of cremation, not rotting bodies or skeletons.

Generally speaking, the image of death in Japan is not a horrible one, but something clean and white, because it is regarded as liberation from a world full of misery. There is a particular phrase to call this world we live in, "Ukiyo." It means both "a floating world" and "a sad world," implying that this miserable life is only a temporary one. The concept of a better afterlife might sound similar to the Christian idea, but in Christianity, you have to wait for a long time before resurrected. In Japanese thought, death is an immediate liberation from one's corporeal confinement. The body is not put so much significance as in the Christian culture, because it is only a temporal housing of a spirit. The spirit may return to the world when reincarnated, but it is to a new body, not the same one as Christian resurrection myth suggests. The current body and the current world are slighted in Japanese thought. The less corporeal nature of Japanese ghosts, and why they don't have legs, arising like a smoke, may be thus explained by cremation custom and such a lack of significance attached to a body in Japanese culture.

Ritual Necessitated

In Japan, the short space that separates life and death conditions a proper ritual

and cremation to be performed. They are very significant in making the death safe and clean. Then, what if the ceremony is not correctly, or at all, performed? This introduces the site for Japanese ghosts. The murdered, the abandoned, the neglected, and the suicide whose body is not found, these victims of “horrible death” turn into ghosts in Japanese stories. Sadako in *The Ring* is a murdered victim discarded into a well. Okiku, the famous female ghost in a story called *Bancho-Sarayashiki*, is also tortured to death and thrown into a well. Oiwa in *Yotsuya-Kaidan* is betrayed by her husband and murdered. When the dead body is not recovered, or when the family has not performed a proper ceremony to give peace to the victim’s mind, the dead body cannot enter into a better world, and comes to haunt us. In a myth of one temple in Kyoto, a girl died after maltreated by her master. The master buried her body without carrying a proper ritual, and told her parents a lie that she had eloped. One day her parents saw the same dream in which their daughter asks them to perform a proper funeral for her.

Indeed, the fear of such horrible death, and of becoming haunting spirit, is still strong in today’s Japan. In everyday conversation, people talk about their concern whether their children carry out a proper funeral for them and take care of their tomb or not. It is a matter of great importance to them, since it determines their destiny after death, whether to be a holy Buddha or to be a horrible haunting spirit.

A contemporary Japanese writer, Banana Yoshimoto writes a lyrical short story called “Moonlight Shadow”[1988] and it is about the importance of the ritual. In this story, the heroine goes up to a bridge over a big river everyday after losing her lover in a car accident. She meets his apparition three times over the bridge. During the third encounter, she waves him goodbye and the apparition disappears forever. In a

Japanese phrase, a better afterlife is also called “the other side of the river.” And this story describes the process of a necessary ceremony the heroine has to perform in order for her lover to enter into a better world.

It also shows that the ritual is necessary for the heroine herself in order to break away from too much attachment to her lover, which not only hinders him from going into a better world, but also prevents her to start a new life. Too much attachment to a relationship, especially a sexual relationship, has been condemned in Buddhist tradition, and this story demonstrates how to disconnect the unnecessary and unholy attachment.

Female Grudge

Too much of the attachment might be the keyword to analyse the Japanese ghosts, because it is women who were considered in Buddhism more susceptible to such fault of unnecessary and unholy attachment to relationships. Women have been regarded as more sexual and therefore less sacred, and they cannot become Buddha after death, instead they have to reincarnate into men first. Hence Japanese ghosts are mostly female. By the tenth century when the *Tale of Genji* was written, Japan was heavily influenced by Buddhism and Confucian imported from Chinese continent, and obedience of women to men was the norm. In the *Tale of Genji*, heroines are again and again told not to have grudge or to be angry even when they are mistreated by their lover. Women’s attachment to male lovers is especially condemned as sinful.

It seems female ghosts are the product of the oppression imposed by patriarchal system of Buddhism and Confucian. They might have been used by the religious authority as the sign of women’s weakness, their unholy nature, their wicked sexuality.

Put differently, by creating sexualized female ghosts, the patriarchal society has transferred onto women's body its fear of sexuality, in an attempt to control it. As analyzed by David Punter, women's body, with its sexuality and reproductive capacity, has always threatened male society, and to oppress, blame and control women's body has been the vital task of patriarchal men. A traditional Gothic tale, *The Monk*, by Matthew Lewis, for instance, demonstrates such transference of blame onto a woman, when the high-ranking monk, Ambrosio blames a woman for his fall into a state of sexual criminal. Sigmund Freud's analysis of the totemic culture is also appropriate, as the sin of patricide was transferred onto women who became their taboo. I believe a similar formation is working in Japanese ghost stories, many of them are the stories of sexual relationship between man and woman. When the heroine becomes a ghost, the horror of the sexuality which is so intense as to bring about terrible murder is successfully transferred onto the grotesque body of woman.

Female Ghosts as Mediator

As I have mentioned, the ritual and cremation to make death official and purified is very significant in Japan. When the ritual is not properly performed, the death becomes horrible, unclean and black. Interestingly, the ceremony to make death safe and white was performed by male monks, while it was female mediums who contacted the victims of the "horrible death". By letting female medium deal with the "horrible death," male monks had only to do with the safe white death.

In fact, not only the female mediums, but female ghosts themselves function as a mediator against horror of abnormal death. As if to signify the pain and torture of the "horrible death," female ghosts often have disfigured face or body too horrible to look at.

For instance, Oiwa was poisoned and her face was swollen up like an ugly rock. Ghosts in popular pictures often have cuts, bruises and trickling blood. By letting women become the sole receptacle of the pain of horrible death, patriarchal society might have tried to sanitize itself. The image of female ghosts, therefore, with their disfigured body and painful bruise is the symbol of fear for the horrible death, especially the one resulted from sexuality, in male-centred Japan.

Ghosts Talk Back

But, if you think of the patriarchal system, female ghosts can also be the symbol of a resistant woman, because, by becoming ghosts, they violate the rule of conduct. In this period of Japan, women were not supposed to talk back to men, since it was regarded as impolite and unfeminine. But in the figure of ghosts, they can blame the inflictor of pain, and say that they have a grudge against him straight to his face. In the *Tale of Genji*, though the silent heroines cannot say a blaming word to Genji, Lady Rokujo managed to do that, and through her ghost, the possessed ladies also can express their anger. Lady Rokujo's ghost functions as the only outlet, through which women talk back to Genji unanimously. Together they become the ally to fight back the unfair society.

Japanese sexualized female ghosts with bruised body can be translated into an expression of women's unspoken words, about their sufferings and frustration under the severe oppression, and especially about the society's neglect and despise of their female sexual bodies.