

The Two Faces of the Female Ghost: Female Images and Cultural Expression in Asian Horror Cinema—A Comparative Study of the 1960 Version of A Chinese Ghost Story and Kwaidan

Xiaoxiang Ma

ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of female ghosts in Li Han-hsiang's *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1960) and Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964), analysing the ways in which gendered identities are shaped by cultural, social, and cinematic contexts. Through a comparative study of adaptation strategies from Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and Lafcadio Hearn's retellings of Japanese folklore, the paper highlights divergent portrayals of female agency and power. While the Chinese film reaffirms patriarchal ideals through romantic redemption, the Japanese counterpart offers depictions of vengeful female spirits with greater autonomy, revealing broader tensions surrounding gender, tradition, and national identity in East Asian horror cinema.

Keywords: Female ghosts, East Asian cinema, horror cinema, cultural adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Asian horror cinema often boasts a distinctive aesthetic and narrative style, with portrayals of 'female ghosts' or 'female demons' deeply reflecting gender norms and values shaped by different cultural and social backgrounds. The 1960 version of *A Chinese Ghost Story* (directed by Li Han-hsiang, adapted from Pu Songling's 'Nie Xiaoqian' in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*) and Masaki Kobayashi's 1964 Japanese film *Kwaidan* are two emblematic examples. The former carries a pronounced Chinese cultural tone and the director's nationalist sentiment, while the latter fuses traditional Japanese ghost tales with Buddhist and Shinto elements, presenting female characters with stronger traits of *onryō* (vengeful spirits).

Xiaoxiang Ma is pursuing his PhD at Queen's University, Belfast specializing in Film Studies. Correspondence should be sent to School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland. Email: xma04@qub.ac.uk.

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This paper compares the female identities depicted in ‘Nie Xiaoqian’ from *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1960) and the ‘Kurokami (Black Hair)’ and ‘Yukki-Onna(Snow Woman)’ segments in *Kwaidan*, exploring the underlying cultural, social, and commercial factors. By examining original texts, adaptation strategies, and cinematic techniques, we can better appreciate the multifaceted and profound significance of female character portrayals in East Asian horror films.

I. CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 1960s, Hong Kong’s film censorship was relatively relaxed, with limited official intervention¹, which gave director Li Han-hsiang considerable freedom to create. Drawing on ghostly folklore, romantic elements, and Huangmei opera, he shaped *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1960) into a work with a distinctively Eastern cultural flair.²

Li’s creativity was also influenced by his own nationalist sentiments and the leftist film movement of the time.³ Thus, while retaining the romantic-horror duality found in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, the film incorporates themes of national crisis and identity crisis, adding depth to its fantastical storyline.

However, a society shaped by Confucian values weakened the original satire on feudal customs found in *Strange Tales* and emphasized ‘romance’ and ‘loyalty’ instead. Hence, the ‘love between human and ghost’ was rendered more tender and aligned with mainstream audience tastes. Consequently, *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1960) retained its horror elements but placed greater focus on the conflict between good and evil and on the heroine’s transformation from demon to virtuous woman. This approach matched the market’s interest in national traditions and romantic plots, achieving broad cultural resonance and box-office success.

At the same time, based on the development of the post-war Japanese New Wave cinema movement and its continuity with traditional cultural principles (such as haiku, picture scrolls, noh, kabuki, Shinto, or Zen)⁴,

¹ Shumin Li, *Cold War Shadows: Hong Kong Film Censorship under Geopolitical Influence* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2010)

² Xiao Lu, ‘Hollywood Genre, Cultural Hybridity, and Musical Films in 1950s Hong Kong,’ *Arts* 12, no. 6 (November 2023), p. 237. MDPI

³ Hongjian Wang, *A Chinese Ghost Story: A Hong Kong Comedy Film's Cult Following in Mainland China* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013)

⁴ Tadao Satō, *Currents in Japanese Cinema*. Translated by Gregory Barrett (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1982)

Japanese cinema during the same period also showcased more diverse aesthetic characteristics through the exploration of local folklore and traditional culture.

From the 1950s to 1960s, Japanese cinema experienced a golden age. The emergence of the New Wave and domestic humanist thought allowed accomplished directors to develop personal styles within genre films, drawing on folklore and traditional culture to shape cinematic themes⁵. It was in this environment that Masaki Kobayashi released *Kwaidan* in 1964, a work widely regarded as a classic. Adapting Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan*, the film comprises four standalone tales, among which 'The Black Hair' and 'The Snow Woman' are particularly notable.

Although Japan had its own censorship requirements at the time, the primary concern was whether a film violated public morals or disrupted social order; the government did not strictly regulate the use of ghostly folklore. Benefiting from this, Kobayashi employed a richly stylized stage design and distinctive audio-visual techniques in *Kwaidan*, boldly portraying female vengeance and supernatural power. *Kwaidan* left a significant mark both in Japan and abroad, contributing to the subsequent trend of horror films centering on female vengeful spirits.

II. ORIGINAL TEXT AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES

The story 'Nie Xiaoqian' in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* revolves around a female ghost enslaved by a demon to harm men, who eventually escapes that fate under the guidance of the scholar Ning Caichen. Initially, Ning Caichen's family life appears stable, but his wife's chronic illness confines her to bed, leaving household duties unattended. Nie Xiaoqian arrives and takes on the roles of both the wife and Ning's mother, only officially marrying Ning Caichen and bearing children after his wife's death.

In many of Pu Songling's stories, female ghosts or shapeshifting women are depicted as 'Others' whose victims are invariably men, echoing the traditional cautionary view of 'beauty bringing ruin.' Only by handling household chores and fulfilling the duty of bearing children can these supernatural women fully integrate into human society.⁶ This reflects how a woman with an independent identity navigates her entry into her husband's family, and Nie Xiaoqian's tale exemplifies this theme. The first wife's illness and

⁵Aaron Gerow. 'Japanese Film and Television.' in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society*, edited by Victoria Bestor, Theodore Bestor, and Akiko Yamagata, 213-225. London: Routledge, 2011.

⁶Allan Barr, 'Disarming Intruders: Alien Women in *Liaozhai zhiyi*.' *Asian Studies Review* 18, no. 4 (1994): 57-74.

inability to bear children represent the invisible vacancy in the patriarchal household, which Nie Xiaoqian fills, demonstrating a social tendency to assign women firmly to domestic and reproductive roles.

Pu Songling states:

*‘Originally, Ning Caichen’s wife fell ill, and his mother was overwhelmed by the chores. When Nie Xiaoqian came to help, life greatly improved, so she was sincerely grateful. The mother realized Nie Xiaoqian had no ill intention but feared her influence on carrying on the family line. Nie Xiaoqian then said: ‘Children are blessings from Heaven. The young master is fated to have three sons who will bring honor to the family.’’*⁷

Hence, Nie Xiaoqian not only shoulders housework but also takes on the responsibility of continuing the family lineage. Although Ning Caichen’s sickly wife scarcely appears, her condition underscores his dedication to marriage. By story’s end, having passed the imperial exam, Ning Caichen raises three sons with Nie Xiaoqian and another concubine, further emphasizing the relegation of female characters to supporting male achievements and securing patriarchal lineage.

In Li Han-hsiang’s 1960 film adaptation, romantic elements are amplified, and Huangmei opera—a signature of Li’s style—bestows an almost musical-theater quality on the film. Meanwhile, Li omitted the latter half of the original text and excised the roles of Ning Caichen’s wife and mother, aligning the film’s emphasis more closely with contemporary audience taste. To resonate with the era’s socio-political atmosphere, the director incorporates historical background and nationalist themes, elevating the relatively minor character Yan Chixia into a wandering swordsman full of patriotic zeal. Ning Caichen—originally a straightforward, morally upright scholar—also gains lines reflecting patriotic sentiment, mirroring the leftist cinematic context in 1960s Hong Kong. For instance, in the following exchange;

Yan Chixia: ‘Master Ning, in your view, is there any hope for our nation’s restoration?’

Ning Caichen: ‘Our regular army numbers in the millions, and righteous bands led by heroes abound in the tens of millions. How can one say all is lost?’⁸

Such changes heighten the film’s nationalist tone, echoing the resurgence of leftist film culture in the 1960s. Consequently, both Ning Caichen and Yan Chixia gain more distinctive personalities than in the original. Their conflicts with the ghostly realm can be interpreted as allegories for the identity crisis in Hong Kong.

⁷ Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (1880), 124.

⁸ *A Chinese Ghost Story*. Directed by Li Han-hsiang. Hong Kong: Shaw Brothers Studio, 1960.

Meanwhile, the director enriches ‘Grandmother’ (‘laolao’) by depicting her as a forceful maternal figure that subverts the notion of ‘motherhood,’ revealing the tension between matriarchal authority and ‘the household.’ She shows outright hostility to Ning Caichen and Nie Xiaoqian’s private meetings, and in the end accuses Ning Caichen of ‘stealing my servant,’ demonstrating her possessiveness over Nie Xiaoqian—thus bestowing the patriarchal family structure with more complexity.



Figure 1: The ‘LaoLao’ gazed menacingly after defeating Ning Caichen, Still image, A Chinese Ghost Story, 1960.

Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo), who lived in Japan from the late 19th to early 20th century, made significant contributions by collecting, translating, and adapting Japanese ghost stories. In Masaki Kobayashi’s *Kwaidan* (1964), ‘The Black Hair’ adapts Hearn’s story ‘Reconciliation,’ depicting a samurai who abandons his impoverished first wife for a noblewoman, eventually mired in nightmares of guilt. The original tale, titled ‘Reconciliation,’ weaves a romantic theme while leaving the possibility of ghostly vengeance open-ended. In Kobayashi’s version, however, the ex-wife becomes a vengeful spirit whose long hair ensnares the samurai, causing him to age rapidly and die. The adaptation particularly highlights the scene where the samurai’s topknot unravels in fear and his eventual death at the hands of his ex-wife’s black hair. If analyzed through Lacan’s theory of the three orders⁹, this

⁹ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2006)

ending reveals profound aesthetic and cultural implications: first, the unravelling of the samurai's topknot, a symbol of his status as a samurai, transforms it into something akin to a woman's long hair, symbolizing the collapse of his masculine authority and social standing. The ex-wife's black hair, intertwined with her skeletal remains, further emphasizes the samurai's crisis of 'symbolic identity,' rooted in his familial obligations and social status. In Lacanian terms, the undone topknot signifies the collapse of the 'Symbolic Order'; the merging of the black hair with the wife's image reflects the intrusion of the 'Imaginary'; and finally, the vanishing boundary of reality signifies the emergence of the 'Real,' exposing the samurai's ultimate loss of his true self in the face of guilt and his ex-wife's vengeful resentment.



Figure 2: The samurai was terrified by his wife's long hair, leaving his own hair disheveled. Still image, *Kwaidan*, 1964.

Kobayashi's 'The Snow Woman,' adapted from the same Hearn collection, recounts how a young woodcutter, threatened by a yuki-onna in the mountains, survives by making a pact—only to suffer punishment later for breaking it. Though preserving the story's core, the film heightens the drama via stylized sets and symbolic visuals. For instance, the enormous eye in the mountains is read by Stephen Prince as symbolizing pervasive militaristic surveillance in Japan¹⁰, whereas Swarnavel Eswaran interprets it as a Buddhist metaphor of karmic insight¹¹. Considering the yuki-onna's demand that men honor their word, this 'giant eye' can also be seen as both the male gaze on the female's secret and her reciprocal scrutiny of his sincerity, revealing trust (or mistrust) and transcending the standard ghost story.



Figure 3: The gaze on the characters' actions and the audience's eyes runs throughout the entire story of the Snow Woman, Still image, Kwaidan, 1964.

The handling of the straw sandals at the ending accentuates the *yuki-onna*'s complexity: when she departs, the woodcutter sets her sandals in the snow, and though they get covered, one footprint remains, underscoring that she is at once pitiless and sympathetic. Compared to the 'redeemed heroine' pattern seen in 'Nie Xiaoqian,' the stories of 'The Black Hair' and 'The Snow Woman' highlight the female spirits' vengeful impulses. With striking sets, sparse soundtrack, and a bold depiction of female ghosts, Kobayashi grants women greater agency and power, reflecting Japan's *onryō* tradition while using intense cinematic imagery to explore gender power dynamics.

III. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN FEMALE IDENTITY PORTRAYALS

¹⁰ Stephen Prince, *A Dream of Resistance: The Cinema of Kobayashi Masaki* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017)

¹¹ Swarnavel Eswaran, 'Masaki Kobayashi's Kwaidan: Horror, History, and Culture.' *Journal of East Asian Film Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 127-145.

The 1960 version of *A Chinese Ghost Story* broadly follows the original structure: Nie Xiaoqian's attempts to join Ning Caichen's family fail until she secures official permission. Though the film states her initial aim is to kill him for his life force, the plot soon reveals she admires Ning Caichen after he visits her dwelling, thus shifting the agency and dominance toward Ning Caichen. Additionally, the film repeatedly shows Nie Xiaoqian, dressed as a wealthy lady, entering Ning Caichen's ramshackle abode, imbuing their relationship with a 'class-transcending' romantic aura, especially given his lower social status. This approach resonates with patriarchal heroic tropes, where a male savior ultimately redeems a love story.



Figure 4: The stark contrast between Nie Xiaoqian's luxurious attire and Ning Caichen's dilapidated dwelling is highly pronounced. Still image, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, 1960.

Moreover, the gender lines are neatly divided: Nie Xiaoqian's side is entirely female, while Ning Caichen's side is entirely male, further emphasizing his heroic act of rescuing her from the ghostly den. For most of the film, Nie Xiaoqian is passive forced to kill, begging in vain for the demon to spare Ning Caichen, etc. Her lone act of initiative is aiding Ning Caichen in eluding 'Laolao,' thereby achieving her own return to life. This action underscores that women in the film rely significantly on men's protection and cannot independently claim freedom.

In contrast, 'Laolao,' as the primary antagonist, is portrayed as an overbearing 'Other.' Her overt hostility and manipulative control reinforce her symbolic role as a threat. Beyond the emotional bond between Ning Caichen and Nie Xiaoqian, other male-female interactions in the film are characterized by stark opposition. For example, the dynamic between Nie Xiaoqian and the lecherous scholar depicts her as a female demon and him as a lustful victim, while the relationship between Yan Chixia and Laolao reflects the struggle between an exorcist and a ghost. This life-and-death antagonism emphasizes the central roles of Ning Caichen and Yan Chixia as saviors and mediators, while rendering the actions and motivations of female characters shallow and dependent. The complexity of female characters is confined to their reactions to male characters. The primary actions of female ghosts such as Nie Xiaoqian and Laolao—including their interactions with Ning Caichen and their antagonism with Yan Chixia—ultimately subordinate their identities to the heroic male figures, leaving no room for their own growth or transformation. This approach not only limits the developmental space for female characters but also undermines their agency within the narrative. Overall, the 1960 *A Chinese Ghost Story* accentuates a patriarchal perspective on gender power while presenting a classic, male-centered heroic storyline.

In comparison, female characters in *Kwaidan* display greater multidimensionality. The female ghosts in 'The Black Hair' and 'The Snow Woman' often seek revenge as a means of justice or emotional catharsis. In 'The Black Hair,' the recurring image of the ex-wife grooming her long black hair underscores two aspects: on one hand, the hair is her solitary lingering presence in the mortal world; on the other, its continuous growth symbolizes deepening longing and resentment. Such treatment gives her final vengeance stronger emotional resonance. Additionally, in both Chinese and Japanese traditions, the concept of 'Jie fa (hair-bound spouses)'¹² enhances the symbolic weight of the samurai's entanglement in his ex-wife's hair.

Meanwhile, in 'The Snow Woman,' the *yuki-onna* transcends the usual ghostly depiction of women as powerless. She decides men's fates: she spares the handsome young woodcutter's life while mercilessly freezing an older man. In the final act, though she attempts to join a human family, she ultimately leaves when

¹² It refers to binding the couple's hair together, symbolizing their lifelong commitment in ancient China.

her husband breaks his promise. The ending balances the ‘otherness’ of her spirit and familial relations. She does not lose her agency due to motherhood, and at the same time, her children help mitigate the conflict with her husband, unlike the more absolute male-female opposition in *A Chinese Ghost Story*. This approach not only broadens the character’s complexity but gives the film’s themes added depth.

Additionally, though the two films differ in how they depict women’s social positions, both show female characters seizing male vitality to assert power. In *A Chinese Ghost Story*, a lecherous scholar dies after Nie Xiaoqian feeds on his blood; in ‘The Black Hair’ and ‘The Snow Woman,’ men similarly face threats or destruction at the hands of female spirits. Interestingly, all three stories align with Freud’s concept of male ‘castration anxiety,’ referring to men’s deep-seated fear of losing their genitals and the symbolic authority associated with them, while simultaneously embedding deeper layers of cultural significance.¹³



Figure 5: The lustful scholar's foot is pierced by Nie Xiaoqian, causing him to bleed to death, symbolizing the loss of vital energy. Still image, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, 1960.

In *A Chinese Ghost Story*, the scholar’s death is only briefly depicted, functioning primarily to highlight Ning Caichen and Yan Chixia’s virtuous character. Their moral uprightness aligns with the patriarchal ethos of self-control—akin to China’s ‘abstaining from women’ tradition that preserves masculine integrity. By contrast, the samurai in ‘The Black Hair’ meets a more symbolically laden end. From the viewpoint of Lacan’s tripartite theory, his falling topknot signifies the breakdown of the Symbolic; the merging of his wife’s hair with her

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1927).

image indicates the Imaginary's invasion, unearthing deeply repressed remorse and dread; and his blurred boundary between reality and illusion, culminating in old age and death, corresponds to the Real's emergence—revealing his inability to reconcile guilt with reality.

In 'The Snow Woman,' the *yuki-onna* treats the elderly and young woodcutter differently: she swiftly drains the elder's life in a cold, curt manner, but subjects the younger man to seductive gazes and ominous smiles, demonstrating her initiative and power. The younger man is paralysed, symbolising her dominance during their encounter. She is not simply a menacing presence, but an intruder guided by her own will.

IV: CONCLUSION

In these two divergent Asian horror films—*A Chinese Ghost Story* (1960) and *Kwaidan*—the depiction of female ghosts or monstrous women reveals marked cultural contrasts. On one hand, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, shaped by a Chinese setting and a romantic plot, underscores patriarchal heroism and the female's passive 'redemption.' On the other hand, *Kwaidan*, merging Japanese ghost-lore with Buddhist reflections, casts female ghosts as potent avengers possessing stronger autonomy and vengeance.

Taken together, both works continue their respective cultural imaginations of 'female ghosts' while adapting them under various market and social conditions. Their heroines' positions, agency, and challenges to societal order differ significantly, yet both fuse horror and romance to present the complex ways in which women's identities and emotions unfold in an Asian context. Centering on these 'female ghosts,' they not only mirror divergent socio-political systems and value structures but also shed light on how East Asian cinema wrestles with issues of gender, power, and tradition through modern transformations.

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