

# Empirical Reflections of Female Evilness: Popular Literature in Qing Dynasty China (1644-1912)

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**Abstract:** *Chinese society has often perceived women only as the handmaiden of the paternity mainstream throughout history, thus women, apart from some exceptions, were usually excluded from historical documents. It is within this backdrop, popular literature provided us with a valuable access to this gender group in terms of how they were shaped by the conventional culture, but more importantly, how their behaviour implied a sense of evilness. Different from the punitive discussion of this topic that focused chiefly on the historical female emperors who gave rise to great controversies, this paper attempts to focus on the literati interpretation of ordinary women who were depicted as the embodiment of evilness. Supernatural fictions compiled or composed by these literati witnessed an unprecedented flourishing in the eighteenth century, that recorded many absurd stories about the encounter of mythical evil figures and spirits. Notably, these evil characters were normally portrayed in feminine images that seemed to suggest an underlying nature of women. It is therefore by studying these images of evil spirits that were recorded in popular literature in the eighteenth century, this paper attempts to reveal the way contemporary people viewed and feared about women by imagining a hidden evilness dwelled in them. But instead of perceiving this imagined evilness as simply literary fabrication, this paper further maintained that it was actually empirical reflections of women in traditional societies. Built on which this paper further explores the ideological framework contributed to the formation of these mythical imaginations. Such an enquiry into the nature of the evil women images in literature should hopefully shed light on the discussion of feminine evil that has long been bracketed or depressed by the major stream of gender studies.*

## 1. Introduction

Confucianism, one of the most influential traditions that defined human relationships through moral obligations, emphasized the fundamental ground of creating a rigid social structure in which women were assigned prescribed roles, their appearance in literatures normally were accompanied with metaphorical meanings. Notably, women were largely confined to the domain of the family, defined by their relationships towards their family members. But due to the imbalance between the

two genders, we have only limited number of resources which allow us to penetrate through the thick layer of historical narratives before accessing into the image of women in the history. Chinese society has often perceived women only as the handmaiden of the paternity mainstream throughout history, thus women, apart from some exceptions, were usually excluded from historical documents. Nevertheless, through reading those fragmented icons and texts related to women, we can at least relocate ourselves within a trajectory that offered an ideological interpretation of women. Notably, women were often depicted in an imaginary way as an idealistic image confining to the contemporary social ideology that highlighted the virtue of deference. Nevertheless, behind this superficial layer of interpretation, a latent layer was implied, probably unconsciously, in the literatures in which women were perceived as the embodiment of evil, revealing a vague sense of suppressed fear towards women as the oppose feminine gender against the male one in the patriarchal system. It is within this backdrop, popular literature provided us with a valuable access to this gender group in terms of how they were shaped by conventional culture, but more importantly, how their behaviour implied a sense of evilness. Following this premise, this paper explores the representation of women as the embodiment of evilness through the lens of literati by navigating through the feminine images depicted in supernatural fiction.

Confucian scholars in the seventeenth century onward relied heavily on classical textual criticism to acquire empirical knowledge through phonological study. Extraordinary accounts involving ghosts or demons were not, as normally suggested in this intellectual trajectory, the subjects that should be discussed or mentioned by these scholars.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, different from this punitive understanding, these scholars also showed an unimaginable interest in those supernatural fiction signified by surreal narrative, a corpus of literature that was paradoxical to the idea of empirical knowledge. Such an inherent contradiction does not necessarily complicate our understanding of these scholars. Rather, it provides us with an access to a more comprehensive picture of these scholars as historical actors, multidimensional people who were interwoven with political and societal interpretations. Being part of a greater social structure, these scholars held official positions that required rationality. But on the other hand, they were just normal people surrounded by superstitious beliefs, enthusiasts and dogmatists of portents and symbols, believing in the existence of spiritual beings, underlining the intangible law of fate. By mending all the fragments in historical documents related to these scholars into one single narrative, it

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<sup>1</sup> Confucianism stressed on the inadmissibility of discussing topics in relation to extraordinary subjects among intellectuals. But the idea of extraordinary subjects was not defined as well, as the original reads:「子不語怪力亂神」(the subjects on which the master did not talk were: extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings).

is then quite evident that it is a common practice for them to discuss or compose supernatural fiction. Bizarre stories that embodied transcendental knowledge related to spiritual beings were massively circulated among the literati, serving as an important criterion of defining this scholarly community. In fact, supernatural fiction compiled or composed by these literati witnessed an unprecedented flourishing in the eighteenth century, that recorded many absurd stories about the encounter of mythical evil figures and spirits. Probably what is of most striking is that these supernatural stories contained a large number of evil characters who were portrayed in feminine images that seemed to suggest an underlying nature of women. Similar accounts related to supernatural records permeate in these literatures but have never been collected or discussed by scholars. By collating these fragments, we can learn about the ideology that connected all the literati during the eighteenth century. Furthermore, these accounts, often involving historical figures, can be regarded as additional information that contribute to a more comprehensive picture of historical biographies.

It is, therefore, by studying these images of evil spirits that were recorded in popular literature in the eighteenth century, this paper attempts to reveal the way contemporary people viewed and feared about women by imagining a hidden evilness dwelled in them. But instead of perceiving this imagined evilness as simply literary fabrication, this paper further maintained that it was actually empirical reflections of women in traditional societies. Built on which this paper further explores the ideological framework that contributed to the formation of these mythical imaginations. Such an enquiry into the nature of the evil women images in literature should hopefully shed light on the discussion of feminine evil that has long been bracketed or depressed by the major stream of gender studies.

## 2. Evil Women in Supernatural Fiction

Beginning in the eighteenth century, a large corpus of supernatural literature was recorded or composed by literati. Let us start by conducting a preliminary clarification of the nature of these texts. Supernatural literature was definitely not the product of the eighteenth century, but that of a much earlier epoch. Such a literary form began in the medieval period, probably around the fourth century, under a general atmosphere of metaphysics. Centuries later, around the seventh century, this literary form witnessed another wave of romance novels. Notably, these supernatural fiction followed an analogous pattern reminiscent of historical records that clearly stated the date the event took place, the location in which the evil spirits or figures were witnessed. Not only the presence of material evidence was iterated through the literature, near all these records were written in both a biographical type and a testimonial tone, involving a large number of segments that can be seen as the

intertextual foundation in reading the official historical documents. Such a style should be perceived as the representation of the ideology shared by all scholars of their times, from which we can read that women were no longer depicted in an idealistic way but reimagined as evil figures that unveiled a communal fear in the society towards the feminine.

Foremost in this list of evil feminine images is phantom. Normally, these images were recorded in two diverged settings. Firstly, they were portrayed as gorgeous women in erotogenic outfits, driven by the desire of revenge, spitefully inducing the protagonists into fatal traps at midnight, waiting for their reincarnation through possessing another body. Now, let us read the typical setting in which these phantoms were manifested. Chinese excerpts are included in this paper for those who can read the original text, together with a translated version rendered and provided by the author:

燈上片時，陰風颯然，一女子容色絕世，遍身衣履甚華，手執紅紗燈，  
從戶外入，向劉直撲。——《馬盼盼》

Right after the light was lit up, a blast of chilly wind began to sough, then a woman of exceeding beauty emerged, body covering with gorgeous clothes, carrying a red gauze lantern in her hand, strolling and pouncing towards him from the outside.

Befalling in the night, these chthonic scenes often contained the element of a gorgeous woman coming from the outside, enticing or inviting the protagonist through using their beauty. Excerpted below is another example:

女子持燈來，年可十七八，貌殊美，招至其家，飲以茶，為縛其馬於柱，  
願與同宿。——《旱魃》

Carrying a lantern, a woman, aged around seventeen or eighteen, looked extremely beautiful, arrived and invited him to her home, served him with tea, tied his horse to the pillar, and expressed her wish of staying overnight with him.

Sometimes involving sexual intercourse, these romantic affairs were perilous in nature as the intention of seduction only stemmed from the hatred of the evil women against all living beings. Of course, as the witness of the supernatural events, the protagonists in these literature were finally able to foresee the traps by regaining their

consciousness even after being confused at the beginning. Probably, a dichotomy lied between these descriptions that praised the traits of dexterity and gallantry that were gained through sober assessment against sensual connivance. Now, we should examine one articulate example for the argument:

夜半，有女子冉冉來，頸拖紅帛，向蔡伏拜，結繩於梁，伸頸就之。蔡無怖色。女子再掛一繩，招蔡。蔡曳一足就之。女子曰：君誤矣。蔡笑曰：汝誤才有今日，我勿誤也。鬼大哭，伏地再拜去。——《蔡書生》

During midnight, a woman with a red silk on her neck slowly arrived. She kowtowed to him, threw a piece of silk cloth over the beam, thus hung herself. Seeing that he showed no fear, the woman then threw another piece of silk cloth over the beam, asking him to imitate. But he only put his foot into the loop. The woman said: you have made a mistake. He laughed: it was you who made a mistake before but not me. Crying out loud, the woman kowtowed again then left.

But only a small number of texts mentioned the reason accounted for the evil phantoms to take revenge or petition. From a preliminary observation, it seems that these deceased women were put to unjust or uneasy death with their bodies discarded by their spouses who usually premeditated their death. Since they were not mourned by anyone, their unreconciled feelings grew into a sense of enmity towards all sentient beings rather than just their family members or relatives. It furthers a moral agenda that reflected the social problems related to family relations among ordinary people.

Preliminarily speaking, all of the above discussions account for the fact that there was an overriding gender orientation rooted in the lay communities where ordinary people imposed a sense of moral obligation on women by discrediting their beauty as certain inherited sin. It should be also noted that on one account, men were placed in a higher hierarchical structure than women:

且汝身為男子，上有老母，此身關係甚大，何得學婦女之見羞忿輕生。——《常熟程生》

Furthermore, you are a man, you have an elderly mother, your body does matter, so for what reasons you behave like a woman who kills herself only because of shame or wrath.

In short, by reading the above excerpts, it is evident that in these eighteenth-century supernatural stories, beautiful women were normally perceived as evil spirits which aimed at confusing and seducing ordinary people through their charms. It certainly presented a general picture of the *zeitgeist*, especially the way women were interpreted or envisioned. But instead of perceiving this imagined evilness as simply literary fabrication, this paper further maintained that it was actually the empirical reflection of women in traditional societies. Beauty, in this sense, seemed to be considered as the representation of misconduct, parallel to the notion of evilness, the origin of societal or political chaos, that was used to criticize the historic era.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explores the concept of evilness in women by studying those evil embodiments and representations as presented in the supernatural literature composed or compiled by literati scholars in the eighteenth century. Chinese culture has a long trajectory of injecting a sense of evilness into the very idea of femininity, but the remarks on the evilness of women in literature were often underrated by scholars who were prepared to understand the topic of evil women chiefly through political lens that focused chiefly on those renowned female emperors who gave rise to great historical controversies.<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense, these records were rejected by historians who held a presumption that these descriptions had limited value in historical accounts as they were merely fabricated mythical fiction. Likewise, scholars of gender studies overlooked these materials simply because they were hardly factual evidence that can be used for discussion. Consequently, these records of evil women in popular literature were nearly left untrodden. Nevertheless, regardless of whether these materials were actually collected or composed by the literati, their presence itself already sounds important in a multidimensional interrelated discourse of demonstrating the ideology of the time. It offers not only a more vivid picture of the interest and practice among literati who were enthusiastic about supernatural records, but also an access to the interpretation of women in the eighteenth century. Following this trajectory, this paper explores the evil in supernatural literature as represented by lay women who transformed into evil spirits or figures after their death.

Supernatural literature became prevalent in the medieval period, stretching for more than four centuries from the fourth to the eighth century. Nevertheless, only in the eighteenth century, women started to take a crucial role in supernatural literature,

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<sup>2</sup> Zetian, the first woman emperor in the oriental history during the eighth century, was criticized for her political hegemony. See Timothy Barrett (2008). Cixi, the dowager empress in the nineteenth century, was blamed for her sinful acts contributed directly to the fall of the last empire, leading to the invasion of the western armies. See Jung Chang (2013).

by whom evil spirits were encountered or exemplified. Notably, covering a wide range of themes such as filial piety, marriage, mortuary, sexuality and mortality, these stories relied heavily on women to construct the narratives. Such a phenomenon signposted that women might have experienced an implicit change in their social status during this period as they were no longer totally silenced or excluded by the mainstream, but rather ensured with a sense of subjectivity, serving as the main characters commonly delineated and introduced in these texts. Even though these women showed a sense of resistance against their male counterparts, their identities were still illuminated only as part of their family structure, particularly as spouses.

Given all the varieties of themes and topics, one of the most significant narratives that connected nearly all supernatural literature was the depiction of the abnormal beauty of the evil women. Even more pertinently, these women, often presented with outfit of gorgeous red clothes, appeared to possess great beauty, erogenous body and face that could be used to attract their male counterparts. Such a narrative implied a collective imaginary of glorified and idealized feminine figures in which women were reinvented and reclarified through a patriarchal perspective. It further stimulated a sense of sexual desire that fully matched and arrayed the fantasy of men, through which the concept of sexuality in the eighteenth century can be fully unveiled. Likewise, those glamorous, sexually attractive evil women were used to contrast with the rationality of men, especially their dexterity and gallantry that seemed to be praised in these texts. Following this line of interpretation, these supernatural stories might have a provenance in the lay stratum as popular texts that were created to restraint the act of women.

Furthermore, following the trajectory of moral criticism, these stories of evil women can also be interpreted as the counterexamples of both genders. Firstly, it seemed to embody a sense of value judgement against women, especially their act of seducing men. Secondly, since the only reason behind the emergence of these evil women was resulted from the evil act conducted by men, these stories also presented as an exposure of the sins of masculinity. It rejected any act of discarding or murdering wives by setting up moral regulations through using literary sarcasm.

Finally, beyond presenting as simply moral criticism, these depictions of evil women should also be read as the empirical reflections of women in traditional societies. Notably, from the perspective of men, women in these supernatural stories were perceived as mysterious entities, connected to evilness as unapproachable individuals.

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