

The Concept of Afterlife: Transforming Mythology into Fantasy in Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride*

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Abstract

This article analyses the function of mythology in the fantasy genre in Yangsze Choo's novel The Ghost Bride. Since mythology is frequently a source of inspiration for fantasy authors, it is subjected to redefinition and reinterpretation. This article focuses on the main concepts of the Chinese afterlife mythology, namely the underworld, fantastical characters, practices relating to the dead, and the concept of a ghost marriage. The aim is to identify these myths in the novel and relate them to the traditional perception in order to investigate if and how are they reinterpreted and to determine their role in a fantasy novel.

Keywords: Chinese, mythology, afterlife, The Ghost Bride

Introduction

In 1939, J. R. R. Tolkien said that “fantasy remains a human right” (9). Ever since then, his words have been proven relevant by the continuing popularity of the fantasy genre all over the world, spanning subgenres of high fantasy, military fantasy, urban fantasy and dozens of others. Although difficult to define, “the major theorists in the field – Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, Kathryn Hume, W. R. Irwin and Colin Manlove – all agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible” (James and Mendlesohn 1). The impossible, as contrasted with the scientific possibility of science fiction, is one of the major characteristics of fantasy literature. And yet, even the impossible must have solid grounds in reality and reasoning: the existence of magic, non-human beings or different universes must be rationally explained so the reader finds them acceptable. The narrative must therefore pos-

sess logic and become “a story of impossible things and improbable happenings depicted in a realistic narrative by a master craftsman creating verisimilitude, awe and wonder in the reader” (Haider and Vijayan 421).

However, fantasy universes and their stories are not based only on the physical laws of the real world. This genre frequently makes use of cultural phenomena typical of a particular nation, drawn from religion, history, folklore, myths, legends or traditions, and “the structure of fantasy universes includes in particular many references to mythical systems, both those familiar from tradition and those reinvented” (Trzcińska 145). The “real-world fantastical” in the understanding of myths, religion and legends can function as a link between the real, ordinary world and the made-up, fantasy universe. While Greek or Celtic gods are an important part of Western mythology, they become truly real on the pages of fantastic fiction, where they no longer function as imaginary belief systems, but as acting and self-aware beings that directly influence the narrative with their own actions and motives.

Myths as important constituents of the fantasy genre are found in works by Tolkien, Lewis, Paolini and other authors, whether twentieth-century writers or contemporary authors. In order to deal with myths in fantasy literature, we first have to specify the understanding of the concept, which in the simplest definition is “used to designate any collective story that encapsulates a world view and authorizes belief” (Attebery 2). Any system of world views and beliefs is a helpful addition to the fictional world, which needs a certain order and rules. In fiction, “the mythology belonging to pop-cultural narratives also remains a borderline system, expressing content generally regarded as irrational which becomes, however, an important, though largely unconscious, element of the transformation of the life beliefs and attitudes of its recipients” (Trzcińska 152–153). It is the genre of fantasy that rationalizes the irrational concepts and beliefs for the reader.

The relation of mythology to fantasy is the focus of Brian Attebery’s *Stories about Stories* (2014), in which he argues that “fantasy, as a literary form, is a way of reconnecting to traditional myths and the worlds they generate” (9). This reconnection is achieved by innovating the old, not denying it: “the problem for literalists is not that fantasy denies Christian myths but that it rearranges, reframes, and reinterprets them” (Attebery 2). Re-interpretation concerns not only Christian myths, but also myths from various cultures, in some cases linked to specific belief systems, since myths are “the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual” (Bascom 9).

Linking mythology and the real world is also a prominent feature in the fantasy novel *The Ghost Bride* by Yangsze Choo, chosen for the analysis here due to its numerous references to Chinese mythology. The author, as a “fourth generation Malaysian of Chinese descent” (“Yschoo” 1), draws ideas primarily from the mythology related to the Chinese belief in the afterlife. Consequently, the reader encounters spirits or ghosts, witnesses rituals such as offerings for the dead, and is shown places which the living cannot visit, such as the courts of hell. The *Kirkus* praised the richness of the Chinese folklore, mores and the supernatural world, and *Publishers Weekly* agreed that the novel depicts the complex world of the Chinese afterlife, which contains ghost cities and servants, and even has its own bureaucracy. With the novel falling into the genre of historical fantasy, the link between reality and fantasy is established with the help of mythology transforming the

impossible to the possible:

Li Lan, the last daughter of a fading businessman in colonial Malaysia pined quietly for Tian Bai, scion to the Lim family's trading empire. That is, until she is offered to the family's dead son, Lim Tian Ching, as a "ghost bride," a woman married to a dead man, a tradition thought to appease vengeful spirits. After a terrifying visitation from her suitor's apparition, she drinks a medium's potion, and her spirit escapes her body, beginning a long, strange journey through the netherworld for this now quite literal ghost bride. (Brantley 1)

These aspects make the novel suitable material for the analysis of myths in the fantasy genre. My aims are therefore to identify myths relating to the afterlife in the storyline and to examine if and how they are reinterpreted in the context of the fantasy genre. This is achieved in three steps: identification of the original myth, comparison of the original myth and the myth as presented in the novel, and finally discussion of the relevance of these myths in the context of the fantasy genre. Consequently, the paper is structured in four parts, each focusing on a specific myth:

- the existence of the underworld,
- the existence of fantastical characters,
- practices relating to the dead,
- ghost marriage.

It is not my aim to present the historical context for any of these or to search for their original occurrence, since there are several prominent works in the field which examine this topic in detail (Birrell). It is also not my aim to prove that the novel is rooted *exclusively* in Chinese culture; quite the contrary, my focus is Chinese mythology only, as well as its reinterpretation. The identified myths are described in a non-fantastical environment outside popular culture, and are then analysed in the context of fantasy, highlighting the changes, appropriations and reconstructions of the myths. As Attebery agrees,

instead of spending much time simply identifying a particular Celtic myth in a work of modern fantasy, we should look at how the fantasist appropriates from, engages with, travesties, and reconstitutes the myth. The modern reuse will never be the same as the original performance. Most myths come down to us stripped of context. The voices, gestures, rituals, and social interactions that once guided interpretation are gone. Fantasy provides new contexts, and thus inevitably new meanings, for myth. Fantasy spins stories about the stories. (3)

The Existence of the Underworld

Chinese mythology is vast, complicated and contains numerous motifs explaining the origin of the world, deities or the afterlife. Beliefs in what happened in the afterlife varied from one historical era to another, yet in general, "the Chinese seem to have seen the afterlife as very similar to the earthly life they lived" (Roberts 2). The religions influencing the concept of the Chinese afterlife are mainly Buddhism, which "brought the concept of

a hell or underworld where all souls must work off their sins before being reentered into life as a reincarnated being” (Roberts 3), Daoism, which “took this idea and modified it so that the afterlife had 10 courts” (Roberts 3), and even Confucianism, although “drawing a line between ‘Confucianism’ and ‘Daoism’ as distinct schools of thought is problematic” (Shusan 107).

As mentioned, a popular belief was that the afterlife was very similar to the ‘earthly life’, so that the social status of the deceased would remain the same, and the social structure and hierarchy would be maintained as in the previous life. This concept of hell, which is closer to the concept of purgatory in Western mythology, served in order to cleanse the souls and prepare them for reincarnation. It was influenced by Buddhism, since in the pre-Buddhist era the afterlife was seen as a simple continuation of earthly life, with non-punitive aspects. In other words, “there is no difference [between death and life], except that the dead are immaterial and the living material” (Nguyen 1). In the later perception, hell or purgatory became a place “ruled by a host of bureaucrats” (Gale 170), where the dead resided and expected their rebirth, passing through the ‘courts of hell’ according to their sins.

It is common for the fantasy genre to introduce a new world or a universe with sets of rules other than those of the original or the real world. In terms of frame/setting, we often encounter “detailed settings [depicting] another world, often earth, but out-of-time or invisible to most people” (Saricks 267). Alternative universes are commonly used as settings in the works of many fantasy authors, such as Rowling, Gaiman, or Lewis. In case of *The Ghost Bride*, the setting is the world of the dead – the underworld, invisible to the living, perceivable as an alternative universe overlapping with the real world, presented as a vast and unwelcoming place: “The sky was evenly lit, which gave it an artificial air. Yet the overall effect was overpowering. With no landmarks, I had no way of knowing how many miles the grassland stretched out for, but it seemed like a great distance” (Choo 186). The underworld is not altered from the descriptions in Chinese mythology, and it contains the courts of hell/the courts of judgement, the Plains of the Dead: “Ghosts are always leaving when they’re called to the Courts of Hell” (Choo 193). The notions of hell and the underworld are very similar to the descriptions provided by scholars, since “in the Chinese traditions, souls entering hell are purged of their sins and then continue on” (Roberts 2). Similarly, in *The Ghost Bride* hell is closer to the Christian purgatory, and numerous references to the ‘courts of hell’ appear: “But the dwellings come and go as the ghosts move on to the Courts of Judgment” (Choo 186), making hell a temporary place before reincarnation.

Since the main protagonist of the novel enters the underworld unwillingly, there is a recurring theme of disbelief linked to the mythology through the entire novel. The reality of the physical world becomes unachievable, as the character is denied the right to touch physical objects and communicate with the living world. This also corresponds to the traditional perception of ghosts, who can influence the physical world very little. Becoming invisible, immaterial and inaudible in the world of the living, the “the disaster of [my] disembodiment had overshadowed all else” (Choo 106). It is therefore possible to talk about switched realities – the original, real world becomes unachievable, while the alternative world, the underworld, is a temporary reality.

The final acceptance of the switched realities – the physical world for the spiritual world – is preceded by denial, attempts to return to the previous (living) condition, and

attempts to communicate with the physical world. After failing to take control of her dormant body, Li Lan is confronted with the ‘realities’ of Chinese mythology. The realities are no longer only a belief system, but a set of direct influences that affect the narrative. Consequently, the reader encounters a fantasy universe that “includes in particular many references to mythical systems, both those familiar from tradition and those reinvented” (Trzcińska 145).

The boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead is erased. The main character has ties to both – being neither dead nor alive, she simultaneously belongs and does not belong to either. The “illusion of a seamless reality” (Berry 1) is maintained, and the author manages “to completely erase the border between the real world and the fantasy one, so that readers cannot tell when the characters have stepped across the boundary” (Berry 1).

The Existence of Fantastical Characters

Characterization is a crucial part of fantasy novels, and as is often acknowledged, the characters “are not always human” (Saricks 273). A new, fantastical setting calls for unordinary characters, since it is usually not inhabited by humans. In fantasy, unordinary commonly means magical or inhuman characters, frequently elves, dragons or wizards. In *The Ghost Bride*, ghosts and spirits play an important role as characters with their own motives and desires, as well as the inhuman characters drawn from mythology, such as demons and dragons.

Since the Chinese hell was believed to be a continuation of mortal life, the deceased in the underworld were also believed to be “just the continuation of the living; for example, they needed food and possessed various desires” (Nguyen 1). For this reason, the ancestors play a significant role in the afterlife: “the living has the duty to offer and sacrifice to the dead, and they will get the blessing from their ancestor [...] the ancestors enjoy the living’s offerings, and their functions are to reward and to protect the living” (Nguyen 1).

Spirits and ghosts are a significant part of the Chinese mythology. While the ancestors have to be honoured and brought offerings in order to protect the descendants, contrary to protective spirits and guardian spirits, the notion of hateful or vengeful ghosts also appears in the folklore, varying from vicious water ghosts and zombie ghosts to succubae. Roberts defines ghosts as “usually spirits who for some reason did not make it to Heaven” (50), and introduces the term ‘hungry ghosts’, which have to be brought offerings in exchange for peace for the living. The “people’s concern that souls for whom no one cared would become ghosts intent on causing mischief” (Jochim 1) influenced the fear of ghosts and inspired various activities that were supposed to keep the spirit world at bay. Stories about hauntings are common in Chinese folklore, whether “stories of ghosts haunting a house where they once lived, haunting relatives, or appearing to strangers for help” (Mark 1). The ghosts retain the character of the living person, and consequently they carry personal memories and vendettas. Only after resolving its unfinished business on Earth can the ghost move on to the afterlife.

In Choo’s universe, spirits and ghosts remain and live in the underworld until they are allowed to move on. The belief that they have a life similar to (or the same as) mortals is maintained, e.g. by having the same social status or possessing the same dwellings: “Did

you say that the family mansions correspond to the same areas as they did in life?” (Choo 196) inquires the main character, struggling to understand the principles of the afterlife. Several types of ghosts encounter and influence the main character – mostly in a negative way, since a “warning not to trust ghosts” (Choo 155) is stressed thorough the novel. The ghosts are usually depicted as evil hungry entities seeking to harm the living by draining their energy. The reason for the ghosts tormenting the living is also maintained as believed – by the spirit being restless and having unsettled affairs with the living, e.g. “...if her daughter was not allowed to marry her lover, she would come back to haunt the family” (Choo 69).

In relation to spirits, it is important to mention the possibility of possession appearing in “stories about spiritual possession, ghosts appearing as though they were still living, or ghosts taking revenge on the living” (Mark 1). Spiritual possession can happen to either a living person, or a ghost can take over a dead body, both in order to communicate with the living, execute revenge, etc. In order not to offend or anger the ghosts during the ‘ghost month’ dedicated to them, the beliefs vary from avoiding staying out late, hanging clothes to dry at night or going swimming (Xiaobian 1). Such possession also takes place in the novel, where a vengeful spirit takes over a living body, dislocating the spirit of the rightful owner. Although factors causing offence (such as those listed above) do not play a role, it is again the doing of an evil spirit eager to harm the living, resulting in a theft of a body: “Someone else took my body” (Choo 349).

It is not only the spirits and ghosts who belong to the group of non-human characters. The reader also encounters other traditional mythical Chinese beings, such as demons or dragons. Demons belong to the group of the negative characters, believed to be “servants of the gods, including the ruler of the underworld and its judges, which employed demons to carry out their hellish punishments” (Roberts 29). In the novel, ox-headed demons are depicted as the servants of the bureaucratic and corrupted hell officials, and they are feared for their terrible appearance and evil intentions.

On the other hand, dragons are portrayed in a positive light, which does not necessarily correspond with the traditional view, since dragons “at first, all were helpful and beloved water gods. In later centuries, there were two kinds of dragons, the old friendly dragons and a new breed of terrifying winged serpents of the mountains” (Roberts 32). Roberts also mentions the influence of Buddhism, which caused dragons to be portrayed as negative beings in association with harmful powers. However, Choo rather leans to the earlier perception of dragons, depicting one as “a great dragon, a *loong*, lord of the water and air” (Choo 292). The dragon has virtues, such as wisdom, experience and wit, and stands opposed to the evil ghosts and demons.

Practices Relating to the Dead

With an alternative setting for the narrative, a new set of rules governs the universe. These rules are not necessarily the same as the rules of the physical or real world. Frequently it is magic that governs the fantastic world, or laws taken from a belief system. In this case, it is the practices, traditions and customs relating to the dead which function as the natural laws in the underworld.

Since the concept of the Chinese afterlife is highly complex, there are many rituals to

be observed. Perhaps the most common is ancestor worship, since it “has been practiced in China from ancient times” (Lakos 16). Ancestor worship “is not only practiced at the homes of Chinese families, but also outside their houses, particularly at Chinese temples and tombs” (Tanggok 3). Practices relating to ancestors include burning offerings in the form of food, ‘hell money’, or paper effigies structured as buildings, animals and items, and “there are even small figures representing servants available to go with the paper houses” (Bryant 82-83). The burning serves as a method which “dispatched [offerings] to the other world by flame” (Topley 103).

The rules of the underworld are again drawn from mythology – items can be transferred to the underworld by burning, and ‘hell money’ functions as a currency for the dead. For instance, the main character is advised to burn money for herself so she can use it in the afterlife: “Burn cash for yourself, she [old nurse] had told me” (Choo 78), and consequently Li Lan is able to use the money offering in the afterlife, providing herself with some wealth to help her return to the world of the living. Similarly, offerings play a significant role as they do in the mythology, becoming crucial for the main character to survive since she requires food/shelter/transport, e.g. “this pig must have been a paper funeral effigy” (Choo 222).

Paper effigies in the form of food, dwellings, animals or even humans can be burned and transferred to the world of the dead. However, there are frequent complaints by the characters about the unnaturalness and tastelessness of the offerings, since they are made of paper.

The lack of ancestor worship and offerings to the ancestors may result in the already mentioned ‘hungry ghosts’, since “...without such offerings, the dead were mere paupers in the afterworld, and without descendants or proper burial, they wandered unceasingly as hungry ghosts and were unable to be reborn” (Choo 19).

Funeral rites are also important, as the lack or improper execution of a funeral rite may result in the return of the deceased as a ghost. These rites may be held for a week, and they include a formal invitation to the funeral, a procession, colour symbolism such as a preference for black and white and an avoidance of red, a funeral wake, burning of offerings, and prayer (Taylor). Although funeral rites do not cause spirits to remain among the living in the novel, they have a significance in the following analysed concept of the ghost marriage, where the wedding ceremony is constituted by a combination of wedding and funeral rites.

Ghost Marriage

A very specific belief relating to the spirit world and resulting in an unusual practice is called ‘ghost marriage’. A key theme in Choo’s novel, ghost marriage “takes place at a ceremony or group of ceremonies at which two deceased persons, or more rarely, one living and one deceased person are married” (Topley 97). The reasons for such marriages vary: “matching the deceased, in the hope that the deceased live a happy married life in the netherworld [or] the marriages are arranged so that the deceased bachelors can be buried at their family cemetery” (Xu, Xiao 1), and “a custom that required the marriage of an older brother prior to the marriage of a younger brother also provided impetus for the practice of ghost marriage” (Schwartz 92-93). The satisfaction of the deceased was important, since

the Chinese believed that life continues after death and that this life is very similar to the life the deceased has been living prior to their death. Providing them with a husband/wife was perceived as keeping the ghost happy and avoiding being haunted. Although most commonly conducted between two deceased people, Topley mentions that “occasionally a live girl is taken as wife for the dead man, but I am told that this is rare and the family must be suitably rich to tempt the girl or her family to accept” (98). In such case, the girl would join the groom’s family and take up a vow of celibacy.

Ghost marriage serves as a primary premise of the novel. The main protagonist is offered a proposal for a prominent family’s dead son. The concept of such a marriage is regarded as very unusual: “This practice of arranging the marriage of a dead person was uncommon, usually held in order to placate a spirit. A deceased concubine who had produced a son might be officially married to elevate her status to a wife. Or two lovers who died tragically might be united after death” (Choo 3).

The depiction of the custom does not differ from its description in scholarly texts dealing with the concept of ghost marriage, although the author expresses disdain for the practice, saying that “to marry the living to the dead was a rare and, indeed, dreadful occurrence” (Choo 3). There is also the aspect of the bride’s unwillingness to marry a deceased person, so we cannot speak of reuniting two lovers in marriage even if one of them is deceased.

Ghost marriage serves as a driving force of the novel. The main protagonist struggles to avoid it – successfully – although the attempt becomes a quest that persists throughout the entire narrative. In terms of the storyline, fantasy novels often “involve a quest of some sort” (Saricks 269), and here this quest is prompted by the desire to avoid the dead and return to the world of the living.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the elements of Chinese mythology in the fantasy novel *The Ghost Bride* by Yangsze Choo and interpreted them in the context of the fantasy genre. As stated in the introduction, mythology is a frequent and widely-used source for many authors when creating a fantasy world, and the genre of “fantasy frequently takes a familiar story, legend, or myth and adds a twist, a new way of looking at things that brings it to life again” (Saricks 265). While typically Western mythology is more common than the mythologies of other nations, the vast and complicated system of Chinese beliefs represents a suitable basis for a fictional world as well.

Since the aim of this article is to identify and analyse the reinterpretation of Chinese mythology in the selected novel, I have focused on four major points, addressed in the respective sections:

- the existence of the underworld,
- the existence of fantastical characters,
- practices relating to the dead,
- ghost marriage.

The existence of the underworld serves as a fantastical setting of the narrative. As is often the case in the fantasy genre, this world is parallel and/or invisible, commonly unreach-

able by ordinary humans. Based on the Chinese concept of hell, the underworld functions by a different set of rules than the real world, and yet struggles to copy the real world, even including the social structure of its inhabitants. The reinterpretation happens on a very low level – the underworld is depicted as a place very similar to the traditional belief about it found in literature. However, the detailed description adds to rather than reinterprets the concept, making it deep and developed, providing a fantastical setting for the story.

A fantastical world is generally inhabited by specific, frequently inhuman beings. These, in Choo's universe, are spirits, ghosts, demons and dragons. While with spirits, ghosts and demons the author leans towards a negative portrayal, a dragon is depicted (according to earlier beliefs) as a positive godlike character. Again, the reinterpretation is mild and does not happen by completely reinventing the myths, but rather by in-depth characterization. Consequently, mythological evil creatures such as hungry ghosts remain evil on the pages of the book and become alive by having a personality, history, motives, etc. Similarly, the dragon maintains the generally positive virtues ascribed to him, but is given a fictional personality. Again, in fantasy texts the characters typically lean either to the good or the evil side, and are "clearly defined as good or bad" (Saricks 267), since the genre is a "genre of contrasts—good and bad, light and dark" (Saricks 269).

The practices related to the dead function as a set of rules in a fantasy universe. Similarly to a system of magical rules, or rules in a different, non-human world, they are unique to the world and do not function outside of it. The notion of currency for the dead, the method of burning effigies and the continuation of the mortal life in the afterlife are introduced; all these aspects are taken from Chinese mythology unchanged. They give the fantastical world new limits and possibilities which are unattainable in reality. They are derived from the fictional setting, the underworld, and they shape it together with the characters.

The concluding section of this paper introduces the concept of ghost marriage as a main focus of the novel. Ghost marriage has been documented as a rare practice which occurs more commonly between two deceased persons. However, Choo opted for the rarer occurrence of marrying the dead to the living, giving the plot a driving force and creating an ultimate quest for the protagonist – to avoid becoming a ghost bride and to return to the world of the living. The reinterpretation is more significant: while sources claim that ghost marriage is often practiced to reunite lovers, or for other reasons such as material benefits, Choo adds a negative aspect. Such wedlock is perceived as unnatural and undesirable by the bride, prompting her to refuse it despite the material benefits offered by the groom's family.

Since "modern fantasy draws on a number of traditional narrative genres – sacred and secular [including] Asian religious traditions" (Attebery 2), the aim of this paper was to show how the selected novel draws from Chinese afterlife mythology. Four major points were addressed, which were drawn from traditional Chinese beliefs in the afterlife. The reinterpretation, however, remains subtle. There is no changing bad into good, and as has been mentioned before, the typically negative characters remain negative while the positive characters remain positive. Reinterpretation remains on the level of in-depth description and detailed characterization. Choo does not reinterpret specific legends or narratives, so we cannot speak of a retelling (which is frequently a topic of the fantasy genre).

Nevertheless, mythology plays a crucial role in the novel, since fantasy's "popular theme involves retellings of myths or fairy tales" (Saricks 270). Mythology creates a fan-

tastical universe together with its own set of rules, practices and specific characters. The universe might be unknown and intriguing to readers who are unfamiliar with the topic, introducing them to the mythological realia of a less well-known culture. Consequently, I agree that “introducing legends from unconventional sources broadens the fantasy field in one direction” (Berry 1) and “incorporating elements of the fantastic borrowed from non-Western mythic traditions [may] challenge readers to find new patterns, new motivations, and new outcomes in the master narratives” (Attebery 173). It would be interesting to investigate whether this trend of using Chinese mythological elements in the fantasy genre reoccurs in other novels too, and whether the fictionalization of myths leans towards the original portrayal of a given myth, or whether authors take more liberty in reinterpretation.

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