

Culture and Horror: Urban Legends in Asian Contexts

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INTRODUCTION

When we look to the Asian continent, its distinctive fantasy horror elements are often the key to contemporary urban legends. In China itself, even though most people claim not to believe in religion, we find that traditional Taoism and Buddhism still play a significant part in the culture and society, and this influence is implicitly reflected in the urban legends of China's homeland since the founding of the new China. In this interview and analysis, I focus on finding common elements in Chinese urban legends and consider their connections to Asian religions and social taboos.

In the selection process, I collected four representative urban legends, two of which are Personal Experience Narrative and the other two are Fabulate. The majority of the interviewees are concentrated between the ages of 18-25 and come from my close classmates and friends. I will explain my intentions in advance and state that the information is for academic purposes and that their real names will not appear in the article. Due to the epidemic, I was unable to meet with some of the people I interviewed in person. For this reason, I used telephone interviews and focused on recording the tone of the interviewees as they recounted their experiences or retold the stories of others, to ensure that I could achieve similar results as in-person interviews, but in terms of limitations, even though the four interviewees have very different upbringings and environments, they share similar educational backgrounds, which to a certain extent affects and reduces the the diversity of narrative techniques.

In both Personal Experience Narratives, the emotional expressions of the people involved make up a large part of the overall narrative, and the changes in emotion also underline the uncanny nature of the events themselves. The narrators tend to use their original logical thinking to explain the supernatural events they have experienced, and when their own logic contradicts the logic of the events, uneasiness and anxiety arise. Another point worth noting is that the narrator often does not want to appear disconnected from society because he or she has experienced a supernatural event. Since they subconsciously believe that the

supernatural world is separate and opposed to the real world, and that "abnormal" supernatural events are sometimes difficult to talk about, they also want to seek a sense of belonging and commonality from others.

In the two Fabulate articles, this phenomenon is relatively reduced, and replaced by a more distinct cultural projection. Most of the respondents collected supernatural stories from older generations or people close to them, focusing more on the plot of the story than on the emotions and taking a critical view of the story itself. In the stories, we can see how the "ambiguity" in religion has blurred the boundary between the natural and the supernatural, making Asian religions play an important role in culture, folklore and urban legends, in addition to faith itself. And how this ambiguity became part of the social taboo after the government's "de-deification" and atheistic ideology became widespread after the founding of New China.

In conclusion, due to the complex religious systems and cultural roots of Asia, social taboos are reflected in both urban legends and people's attitudes toward them. Cultural influences and similarities can be found in common horror elements. I believe that this connection is worthy of discussion and analysis, and may lead to additional thoughts about the impact of urban legends on modern society.

Disappearing lights

When my friend told me this story on the phone, I could feel the excitement and nervousness in her voice. She told me that it was an experience she had as a child that was so inconceivable that she can still remember it today. Tang was a college student, studying bioengineering. She was more than happy to share this experience with me. Before she opened her mouth, she asked me, "Have you ever seen the Truman Show? I think we might be living in it, who knows."

The story begins with the memory of a winter day when Tang habitually took an afternoon nap after school, which, according to her, rejuvenated and refreshed her. But that day, things were a little different. Tang remembered this well, and it set the stage for her subsequent experiences. She believes her routine, or afternoon nap, has become a habit, meaning she can usually wake up before dark even without an alarm to remind her. But that day, Tang recalls, it was as if her biological clock had gone out of whack, and when she opened her eyes again, she couldn't tell the time, and the curtains hanging over the window revealed an unnaturally bright light, not from the sun or other natural light, but from the building across the street.

When she pulled back the curtains, she was surprised to find that in the building across the street, the windows of every home were open and lit. Remarkably, it was an apartment building with at least dozens, if not hundreds, of homes living in it, and now, the windows of every home were lit. Those lights were like flashing lights, revealing what was going on inside the window and illuminating the other side of the window as well. She turned back to look at the clock on the wall, but found that the time was already twelve o'clock in the night. And when she looked out the window again, all the lights went out, leaving only a few scattered houses still lit, and everything seemed to be back to normal.

Tang focuses on her own feelings in the narration, from one hand, she is convinced that this is a real thing that happened, and from the other hand, she tries to find a reasonable explanation for this paranormal phenomenon from a scientific point of view. It is when science cannot explain this event that makes its occurrence confusing and mysterious. Tang told me that she still doesn't understand why, at twelve o'clock that night, nearly a hundred homes in the building across the street turned on their lights unannounced, and that the lights outside her window were brighter than any she had ever seen, nor did she understand that when she looked back again, the lights disappeared as if they had never been there. I had not known Tang for long, but during our time together, she had mentioned more than once her love for science and also for the subject she was studying, and for a while before listening to her tell this story, I had one-sidedly assumed that she was an atheist. But it is undeniable that even though she experienced such a supernatural event when she was young, when she told me the story again, besides being excited, she seemed to be looking at the matter in a dialectical way. Tang says she has always been an agnostic, that one cannot prove the existence of supernatural events, and that our so-called "belief in science" is more of a means of testing and defining the "truth". Therefore, when she goes through the paranormal, the blurring of her perception of truth makes her rethink the boundaries of reality, but essentially, she is still trying to find a truth and an explanation. As Jeannie Thomas's mentions in "The Usefulness of Ghost Stories": "there is a desire for neat academic facts to confirm beliefs about the existence or nonexistence of ghosts."¹

Legends of "light" and "ghost fire" exist around the world, with Asian urban legends often tied to their ancient mythology and interpreted in different ways over time. Ghost fires, or hitodama, are often thought to be associated with cemeteries and the dead, as well as symbolizing the human soul. And in some modern literature, the presence of light is often linked to those things that cannot be explained. In the memorate, the light is like a kind of ghostly fire in the modern world in the form of electronic light, but the essence still maps those phenomena that do not fit the temporal context. It is worth noting that "incongruity" is also an

¹ Goldstein, D., Grider, S., & Thomas, J. Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore.

important element of Asian horror. It can be interpreted as something that occurs on a certain occasion, but logically does not make sense at all. For example, posthumous marriage, an ancient ritual in which an unmarried person is married after death by finding a male/female corpse. The reason why it has become an enduring horror theme in Asian cultures is the uneasiness generated by the sharp contrast between "wedding" and "funeral". In this memorate, it is the incongruity between "midnight" and "strong lights". Through such incongruous contrast, the eeriness and frighteningness of the event is highlighted. This memorate is unique in that the horror it presents is not intuitive and violent, but rather subtle and strange, highlighting the "irrationality" and "incongruity" of things, thus creating a certain degree of unease.

The No. 375 Bus Case

When I asked May about supernatural stories she had experienced, or heard, she thought for a long time and then asked me, "Have you ever heard the story of Beijing Bus No. 375?" May is a student in higher education and her parents are Buddhist, so she is sensitive to paranormal events and was happy to share this story with me.

This story is very famous, May told me, and said that many people of the older generation knew it. She did not experience the story herself, but still could feel the creepiness in the description of the story. She said the story was first published in a Beijing newspaper, and over the years many different versions have been passed around, but the story is much the same. The story took place in 1995, when an old woman boarded the 375 bus in Beijing at the end of the last shift, and there was a young man on board in addition to the driver and conductor. The car continued to move forward, and after about two stops, three people came on board, all dressed up in Qing Dynasty costumes, with long braids, and their faces painted white and ghastly. The car continued to move the old lady and the young man but argued, and because of the quarrel to get out of the bus. The young man did not understand why the old lady had to let him get off the bus, the old lady took a look at the bus that had gone away and sighed and said: boy! I saved your life! The old lady added: You see the three people who got on the bus later, they are not human, they are ghosts! When they came up, I paid attention to see, they simply do not have legs. The next day the car was found overturned in the suburbs of a roadside ditch, the car is still there, the driver and conductor all dead, the body has been badly decomposed, and their necks were all broken. However, there were no three people in ancient costumes.

Even though both before and after hearing the story, May believes that supernatural forces are real and holds her religion, Buddhism, in awe. But May said she does not fully believe the story, she thinks there are some logical gaps in the story, such as how the narrator as the third point of view to know the psychological activities of the people in the car, did he really interview the survivors of the incident? At the same time, however, she felt that the story was very representative and somehow reflected the characteristics of Chinese urban legends since the last century.

Following clues that still existed on the Internet, I searched for other versions of the story. In the more detailed version, some people listed the normal route the bus should travel, found and eventually found that the overturned location simply does not match; others said that the oil in the tank at the time was not enough to support the bus traveled so far; there are even rumors that when found, the inside of the tank are blood. But no matter which version, all try to highlight the whole incident as incredible, and all involve three key words: "the last bus", "Qing Dynasty people" and "dead people".

Since the founding of New China, the horror elements of the Qing dynasty have been in abundance. Whether it's the depiction of Qing Dynasty zombies or the appearance of ghosts in stories, the last feudal dynasty in Chinese history has continued its influence in an eerie form. As Darryl Catherine describes in his book "Heirs Through Fear: Indian Curses, Accursed Indian Lands, and White Christian Sovereignty in America," the American The Chinese seem to have similar feelings about the Qing Dynasty². The founding of the new China and the atheistic beliefs espoused by its government have completely separated post-1949 China from its predecessors, with the former departing from supernatural beliefs and the latter retaining all the mysteries, mysteries, and unexplained culture. As a result, the Republic of China and the Qing Dynasty are the most likely to appear in horror stories than ghosts from other eras. The Chinese fear of the Qing Dynasty may consist of many factors. The first is its status as the "last feudal dynasty," as in the last train, the word "last" is often associated in Chinese culture with "reluctance" and "regret." "regret". As in the case of the "last Indian" in American culture, this nostalgic involvement with the old times often makes the subject of the story pathetic, and this pity and pathetic eventually turns into anger, thus taking revenge on the new times. The second point is that the development of technology has allowed people to glimpse the late Qing Dynasty through photographs or impact records. The Qing Dynasty is also the only ancient Chinese dynasty that can be captured by the camera. Photographic images of the numbness, poverty and gloom of the late Qing inhabitants provided the fodder for urban legends. In an

² Catherine, D. V. Heirs through Fear. Nova Religio

earlier version of the story I found, the "ghost in Qing costume" becomes "two murderers carrying a dead man. This also shows how a relatively realistic criminal case can be turned into a widespread urban legend by adding, or changing, specific elements.

Calling Voice

This memorate comes from Yan, a young Asian woman. During my interview, she brought up this experience of her own. She was a little excited and a little timid. Her family is not religious, and she feels unsure about her attitude toward the paranormal: "I'm not sure... I keep thinking that maybe I'm wrong, or maybe they can all have realistic explanations, but somehow I, and everyone around me, we all seem to experience similar unbelievable things."

This particular story happened when she was still in elementary school. She was walking with her friend and they had to cross a square that was connected to the sidewalk by a few steps. Yan said that she and her friend landed almost simultaneously, but the moment their feet hit the stairs, they both heard a man's voice calling their names. Yan heard her name, and her friend heard her name. That is to say, at the same time, they both heard someone calling their names in their own minds. After realizing this, Yan said they were terrified and rushed to the sidewalk, and the voice in their heads did not reappear.

What Yan couldn't understand was how she and her friend could hear voices calling out their respective names at the same time. When telling me this story, she emphasized that it was not the only strange thing she encountered that day. According to her recollection, after running to the sidewalk, she saw a disabled rat on the side of the road while two other people were looking around the rat. She found that scene very eerie, especially after combining it with the supernatural event she had just experienced. This experience somehow deepened her understanding of supernatural forces, and Yan told me that she seems to be surrounded by a particularly large number of people who encounter similar strange events. Another memorate came from her male friend:

Yan said she found the story much scarier than what she herself had experienced. It happened in the underground garage of her friend's house. A woman in a blue dress was walking in front of him, and she seemed to be pregnant and limping. Yan's friend was stunned at that moment, as there was only one road after the turn, and he had no idea why the lady in the blue dress had disappeared. But what was even more bizarre was that a year later, he saw the lady again in the same garage, still wearing the blue dress, pregnant, walking with a limp, and then after turning the corner, she disappeared into the garage.

Yan focuses on details of the story, such as the timing, the mouse, and the color of the pregnant woman's dress, when recounting her experience and that of her friend. These details add a certain degree of credibility to the story, and highlight the supernatural and uncanny nature of the story. In sharing these things with me, I could feel that she showed a sense of seeking common ground when she learned that my purpose was to find material for her thesis, in addition to telling the story itself. The realization that what was happening around her was not just a figment of her imagination, that someone cared or was interested in these experiences made her feel that she was not alone.

As mentioned in class, three out of five people in China believe in the existence of one or more paranormal phenomena, a much higher probability than the percentage of people who believe in religion³. Yan does not believe in religion, but she does believe in the supernatural. Yan does not believe in religion, but she believes in the existence of the supernatural and unconsciously draws a connection between the supernatural events she experiences or hears and religion. The elements of "calling names" and "animals" in the story can be traced back to the realm of Taoism. Just as the Japanese Shinto religion believes that "the name is the shortest incantation," the calling of names in Taoism often represents an act of "contract" and "invocation. I speculate that this influence stems from the mysterious and inaccessible nature of Taoism in China. Unlike American Christianity, even though Taoism is widely known among the people as a native Chinese religion, access to its conversions is not easy. I could not find any information on how to join Taoism in the official Chinese Taoist Association⁴. Its widespread recognition and mystical overlay of conversion places it in a zone between the natural and the supernatural. It is neither totally taboo nor totally un-taboo, and it acts as a neutralizing agent, which might be the reason for why people classify things in society that cannot be explained by nature as religious.

Shoes in the Toilet

I asked Cynthia the question for this interview in the cab: Have you ever experienced or heard of any paranormal stories? Cynthia is an international student studying in the UK, majoring in computer science, and also enjoys writing. I have known her for a long time, and she showed no apprehension or reluctance when talking about it, and was even very interested in the subject of my writing, considering herself an agnostic and therefore willing to explore all the unknown.

³ A discussion on the classification method of urban legends

⁴ China Taoist Association

Cynthia told me that their high school is a residential school, so the building is usually occupied until late at night. Lights out is usually at 10:00 p.m. After that, all the students have to go back to the dormitory building from the school building. It happened right before lights out, when most of the students had already left, and the building was extremely quiet, which made Cynthia's classmates, who were going to the bathroom, a bit scared. So, to make herself less scared, she chose to go to the restroom in the building with another friend. One of them went into the restroom while the other stood at the door. The two could hear each other. When Cynthia's friend was in the bathroom, she could see a pair of leather shoes through the doorway of the cubicle, and she thought someone had come in. Not a moment later, the pair of leather shoes were gone. But when she came out and asked her friend standing at the door about it, her friend was surprised to say she hadn't noticed anyone entering the bathroom.

In the narrative of the story, background padding plays a big role. The progressive background is explaining the story and looking for a reasonable logic to increase the credibility of the story. Cynthia believes that the story is true because it was told to her by her friend herself, and she believes that there is no need to lie to her. As for the attitude of supernatural power, Cynthia does not think it would be a shameful thing to admit its existence, but at the same time she is not sure if the story is really related to "supernatural power". She says it could be a prank by her friends or one of them could be mistaken, and it's impossible to draw any accurate conclusions from this vague information alone. Therefore, she believes that the supernatural forces in the story are still an unknown item.

But it is undeniable that the story does convey a sense of unease in some way. The sudden appearance and disappearance of the shoes create a sense of contradiction that is creepy. In the analysis of horror elements, it involves some classic horror scenes such as "public toilets" and "shoes". As in the well-known movie "The Shining", one of the scariest scenes takes place in the bathroom. And Jeannie Thomas, discussing the cultural impact of ghost stories, specifically mentions the importance of the bathroom: "We are at our most vulnerable in the bathroom, and our cultural taboos about dirt, and the body, make the bathroom an easier place for horror stories to happen."⁵ And in this story, the taboo is not only about the bathroom, but also about the time "before lights out". The anxiety about "breaking the rules" may be another factor contributing to this supernatural event, as the people involved are aware that they should not stay in the building anymore.

And the portrayal of shoes is often another common element in Asian urban legends. It is generally women's shoes that appear most often, and I speculate that this is related to the

⁵ Goldstein, D., Grider, S., & Thomas, J. Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore.

culture of taboo against women's feet in Asian culture. In the ancient traditions associated with China and Japan, a woman's bare feet are no different than her bare body, so the association of bare feet through shoes forms a cultural taboo that is thus mapped onto urban legends. But in this story, the shoes serve more as a metaphor for the presence of someone who has been here. This ghost-like person has left a silent imprint, conveying fear and unease by creating this illusory sense of mystery.

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