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“Are you horrified at the sight of skeletons? And yet we each have such a scary skeleton inside our body, living together with us. What strangers we are to ourselves!”<sup>1</sup>

In Lu Yang's work, *Material World Knight*, the Uterus Warriors in the waiting room (uterus) look at the displayed skeletons and ask the player (us) the questions above.

Although skeletons are in each of our bodies, they are not visible in our daily social interactions with people. The exposure of bones usually means that disease, accidents, and death have befallen the person. It shows the wretchedness of the end of life: The loss of skin, making it difficult to recognize the appearance of the deceased before death; The loss of muscles and organs, making it a supportless structure. This skeleton also shows the similarity between me and it. That is, there is the same structure in my body, and there is the same death in me. In the cultural circle of my upbringing, the skeleton is linked to the female body in a unique form, which I named “Skeleton Beauty.” In this article, I aim to demonstrate and elaborate on how Skeleton Beauty, a schema that is based on the objectification and symbolic representation of the female body, functions as a storytelling schema that bridges literature and art in East Asian

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<sup>1</sup> Lu, *Material World Knight*.

culture. I also aim to provide a framework on how my fellow Chinese feminists and female artists can deconstruct the language and iconology fabricated by patriarchy, Skeleton Beauty as an example, and turn them into our language.

In many works of classical Chinese literature, the Skeleton Beauty is composed of two elements: the "Beauty" and the "Skeleton." Beauty usually serves as the embodiment of temptation, while the Skeleton reveals the ugly truth that is often frightening and difficult to accept, such as the disillusionment of a dream or the exposure of a conspiracy.

## **Beauty and Skeleton**

The literal meaning of Skeleton Beauty can be seen in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Hong Lou Meng). The *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written by Cao Xueqin in Ming dynasty (mid-18th century), is one of the Four Classic Novels in China. In this novel, there is a magic mirror shows up in chapter 10. The *Magic Mirror of the Moon and the Wind*, is a double-sided mirror. The front side of the mirror shows illusion, and the back side of the mirror shows reality. Jia Rui (Chia Jui), a lecherous man, fell in love with his sister-in-law, Wang Xifeng (Phoenix), but was cruelly mocked by her and later fell severely ill. A Taoist master gave him the mirror, claiming it could cure his evil thoughts, but he could only look at the back of the mirror and not the front:

*...He took the mirror in his hand and looked, as the priest had told him to, into the reverse side. He recoiled in horror. A skeleton grinned at him from the mirror! "Did the accursed fellow only want to frighten me?" he cried angrily. "Now I will just look*

*into the forbidden side.” And he turned the mirror and looked into the other side. O marvel! The lovely image of Phoenix met his gaze! She was smiling at him and beckoning him to her with her hand. Blissfully happy, he felt himself drawn, he knew not how, into the mirror by some magic force, and enjoyed with the beloved one the passionate Play of Wind and Cloud. When this was over she led him gently out of the mirror again. He found himself once more lying in his bed, still groaning and moaning from the aftereffects of the delightful experience. Now he turned to the mirror again and looked once more at the other side. Again the horrible skeleton grinned at him, bringing a cold sweat out of his pores. Though still exhausted from the first enjoyment of love, he could not resist the temptation of looking into the forbidden side of the mirror a second time, and again Phoenix beckoned him and smiled at him alluringly and drew him with magic power into the mirror, once more to perform the Play of Wind and Cloud. The experience was repeated four times. When she led him out for the fourth time he suddenly felt himself being seized by two men, who put him in iron chains. “I will follow you! But let me take the mirror with me!” he cried aloud. These were his last words.<sup>2</sup>*

Although Jia Rui is the chapter's protagonist, and the story begins with his perspective, the chapter uses the skeleton beauty narrative to portray the personality of Wang Xifeng. Wang Xifeng, one of the main characters in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, is considered a controversial and prominent figure. She is smart and vigorous, luxurious in appearance but very manipulative. She navigates the intricacies of family

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<sup>2</sup> Cao, *Hung Lou Meng*. Chapter 10.

dynamics and social hierarchies as the true power behind the Jia Family. At the end of her story, she was exhausted from overworking, but her action did not stop her power from collapsing, and she died tragically. The mirror emphasizes her appearance as more than a nameless ordinary beauty, suggesting her complex nature as beautiful and cruel. Jia Rui, a character who can resonate with male readers at the time, serves as a cautionary tale through his tragic death not to indulge in carnal desire.

Another one of the Four Chinese classics, *Journey to the West* (Xi You Ji), shows the similar nature of Skeleton Beauty. *Journey to the West* is a novel written by Wu Cheng'en in Ming Dynasty (16<sup>th</sup> century). The Lady White Bone, the most well-known demon encountered by the monk and his disciples on their journey, is usually widely circulated in the form of a woman. In order to eat the immortal flesh of the monk, the demon transformed into three different disguises. The first was as a young married woman, the second as an old dame, and the third as an older man, the dame's husband. These three images are commonly viewed as representing marginalized groups in Chinese society. In the three images that she transformed, the author only provided a detailed description of the young woman's appearance in the text:

*Dear monster! She lowered her dark wind into the field of the mountain, and, with one shake of her body, she changed into a girl with a face like the moon and features like flowers...The girl's appearance was something to behold! Ice-white skin hides jadelike bones; Her collar reveals a milk-white bosom. Willow brows gather dark green hues; Almond eyes shine like silver stars. Her features like the moon are*

*coy; Her natural disposition is pure. Her body's like the willow-nested swallow; Her voice's like the woods'singing oriole. A half-opened haitong caressed by the morning sun. A newly bloomed peony displaying her charm. When Idiot saw how pretty she was, his worldly mind was aroused and he could not refrain from babbling. "Lady Bodhisattva!" he cried. "Where are you going?"*<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, this extravagant description of her appearance seems meaningless, but it's the first step of the demon's disguise. She creates a comprehensive alternation of her body, face, gesture, and voice. To leave room for the audience's imagination, the text does not provide concrete descriptions of her appearance. Instead, it connects her body parts with objects that refer to beauty in ancient Chinese society, jade, willow leaves, silver stars, moon, swallow, oriole, a half-opened haitong, and newly bloomed peony, to create the ultimate beauty standard. However, this is just the first step in the monster's disguise, as the extreme, indescribable beauty alone is not enough to attract the highly moral and virtuous monk. In the text, the author writes about the code of ethics placed on women from the mouth of the monk Tripitaka:

*Tripitaka said, "Lady Bodhisattva, your speech is rather improper! The sage classic says, 'While father and mother are alive, one does not travel abroad; or if one does, goes only to a proper destination. 'If your parents are still living, and if they have taken in a husband for you, then your man should have been the one sent to redeem your vow. Why do you walk about the mountain all by yourself? You don't even have*

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<sup>3</sup> Wu, *The Journey to the West, Revised Edition, Volume 2*. Chapter 27.

*an attendant to accompany you. That's not very becoming of a woman!" Smiling broadly, the girl quickly tried to placate him with more clever words.*<sup>4</sup>

The monk seems to be well aware of the sexiness emanating from the girl. The pig (Idiot), a personification of the ultimate form of human desires and animality, is deeply attracted by the girl's beauty, involuntarily praising her as a lady bodhisattva. On the other hand, the monk, as the embodiment of Buddhist morality and norms, is not driven by desire or has any thoughts of breaking the precepts. As a result, he questions her for traveling alone, which is considered a violation of the proper conducts of women. Her response takes advantage of monk's pursuit of the precepts to demonstrate a perfect conduct:

*"Master," she said, "my husband is at the northern fold of this mountain, leading a few workers to plow the fields. This happens to be the lunch I prepared for them to eat. Since now is the busy season of farm work, we have no servants; and as my parents are getting old, I have to run the errand myself. Meeting you three distant travelers is quite by accident, but when I think of my parents' inclination to do good deeds, I would like very much to use this rice as food for monks. If you don't regard this as unworthy of you, please accept this modest offering."*<sup>5</sup>

In this context, the demon's disguise represents an idealized female image in the eyes of a male viewer: she is beautiful but unaware of her sexiness, filial to her parents, and obedient to her husband. At this point, the text reveals the definition of beauty:

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<sup>4</sup> Wu. Chapter 27.

<sup>5</sup> Wu. Chapter 27.

her beautiful appearance is abstract and unspeakable, but she must obey the concrete moral standards that society requires from women. The disguise of the White Bone Spirit depicts the ultimate fantasy of women in ancient Chinese society held by men but also warns the audience to be vigilant of such beauty through the revelation of the skeleton. The skeleton occurs at the end of the story. The demon was brutally killed by the monkey each time. Finally, turned into white bones, revealing the end of the story: the three seemingly harmless appearances were a demon transformed from an ancient female corpse.

*There was in front of them a pile of flour-white skeletal bones....Pilgrim said, "She's a demonic and pernicious cadaver, out to seduce and harm people. When she was killed by me, she revealed her true form. You can see for yourself that there's a row of characters on her spine; she's called 'Lady White Bone.'"*<sup>6</sup>

Although the evil character has died, the discussion about her has not ended. In the story, the monk is unable to see through her true identity and believes that his disciple has killed three innocent people. This causes a severe rift in the master-disciple relationship, and the role of the Lady White Bone in the story comes to the surface. She is the embodiment of temptation, the ultimate cause of separations, and represents the internal conflicts in the eighty-one tribulations of Tang Sanzang's journey to the West. In society nowadays, if a woman is considered to be the cause of the breakdown of a relationship, she may also be labeled as the Lady White Bone.

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<sup>6</sup> Wu. Chapter 27.

In the above example, we can see a schema of storytelling: First, the authors show a beautiful woman and describe her appearance as detailed as possible, and thus use the stories they tell to evoke the sympathy of the male protagonist and the reader. Their beautiful appearance, clothing, personality, background, and experiences are all selling points to the reader, highlighting the contrast when disillusioned. A beauty that haunts and tempts the "me" as the Subject, her essence is a pile of white bones. This demonstrates the educational significance of the story, which is to restrain desire and resist temptation. The gender positions of these literary examples are the same, with the trinity of the story's protagonist, the author, and the reader of the time as the Subject, while the skeleton beauty, the object, is a personification of temptation and horror. While this demonstrates male authors' objectification of the female body in East Asian cultures, it also provides a fascinating paradigm in which a skeleton undergoes a thousand years of transformation from a material object into a living "illusion." Although the birth of skeleton beauty was not natural for attracting or disciplining women, the manifestation of this threatening illusion is female. This seems to echo the earliest forms of male objectification of women, according to Beauvoir, that is, men, fearful of the fertile power of women and puzzled by the birth of babies, objectify the female as a neurotic goddess, capable of both creating and taking away life. Human civilization was once in a stage of matriarchal religion for a long time. In the collection of essays, *The Goddess of Gaotang and Venus*, by comparative literature scholar Ye Shuxian, he argues that there is a single goddess,



the Great Mother, was the ultimate form of all goddesses and possibly all gods.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the development of feudal etiquette and the decline of women's status, the original mother goddess, the Great Mother, was subdivided into deities with different functions, and the gender of most of them either “changed from female to male”<sup>8</sup> or was “abstracted into concepts by Confucian culture”<sup>9</sup>. However, Beauvoir dethrones the goddess and suggests that women are not the Subject but the object, even in the matriarchal religious society. She believes that whether it is the omnipotent great mother or the subdivided goddess who controls life and death, these seemingly superhuman figures are objectified by men, who see themselves as the Subject.<sup>10</sup> Men, as a Subject, are fearful and confused about women's reproductive ability. Therefore he creates superhuman objects that are more powerful than himself, both representing women and Nature.

This argument is even more explicit in the story of the Skeleton Beauty. An evil, powerful female ghost can transform into the ideal image for a male audience, which

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<sup>7</sup> Ye, *The Goddess of Gaotang and Venus*. Page 003. Original text: “……原母神是后代一切女神的终极原型，甚至可能是一切神的原始雏形。”

<sup>8</sup> Ye. Page 047. Translated text: “After the establishment of the patriarchal civilization, the gender of the Creator God shifted from female to male, and the feminine chaos inevitably reverse its values, becoming the antithesis of creation and the enemy of the male god.” Original text: “在父权文明确立之后，创世神的性别由女变男，阴性的混沌也难免发生价值逆转，成为创造的对立面，男神的敌人。”

<sup>9</sup> Ye. Page 289. Translated text: “However, this Chinese goddess was not as fortunate as goddesses from other cultures. She could not be passed down through generations in her original form but instead could only hide in the collective unconscious of the nation. One of the reasons for this is that the breeding ground for the goddess of love and beauty, sexual rituals, was suppressed and transformed in the Chinese civilization by the early formation of Confucian moral and etiquette culture…” Original text: “然而中国的这位女神却未能像异域女神们那样幸运，按照其原有面貌留传后世，她只能以隐形和幻化的形式依稀地潜存于民族集体无意识之中。这一方面是因为爱与美之神滋生的直接温床——性爱礼仪活动在华夏文明中受到较早形成的礼教文化的压制和改造……”

<sup>10</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Vol.1 Part 3, Chapter 1. Original text: “Any myth implies a Subject who projects its hopes and fears of a transcendent heaven. Not positing themselves as Subject, women have not created the virile myth that would reflect their projects; they have neither religion nor poetry that belongs to them alone: they still dream through men's dreams.”

is obedient to the virtues of women from her appearances to habits, only to take “something important” from the male character she doesn’t have. In *Journey to the West*, the flesh of the monk is an immortal medicine, so female ghosts and monsters do their best to seduce the monk. In the collection of Chinese classical ghost stories, for example, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai Zhiyi) and *Biographies of the Marvelous* (Liyizhuan), the Subject is generally transformed into an ordinary man rather than a divine figure like the monk. These men do not have the ability to grant immortality like the monk. Still, from the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, the element that all men possess, *Yang*, which means masculine, active energy becomes a treasure that female ghosts eagerly pursue. The short story “Tan Sheng” from the *Biographies of the Marvelous* vividly describes a scene where having intercourse with a man can cause bones to grow flesh:

*She came to Sheng so they could be husband and wife, but told him: “I am not like other people. Never let firelight shine upon me. Only after three years have passed may I be illuminated.” They then lived as man and wife. She’d bore a son, who was already two years old, when, unable to bear it any longer, Sheng waited until she was asleep then stealthily illuminated and examined her. Above her waist grows living flesh, just like any human being, but below her waist were just dry bones.* <sup>11</sup>

In Lian Xiang from the *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* written by Pu Songling in Qing dynasty (1640-1715)), a fox spirit and a female ghost have intercourse with a scholar, causing him to become seriously ill. The two beings accuse each other,

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<sup>11</sup> Li, *Extensive Gleanings from the Era of Great Harmony*. Volume: Liyizhuan

mentioning that the practice of absorbing Yang to replenish Yin and the female ghost's Yin Qi, which means feminine, receptive energy, can damage a man's health.<sup>12</sup> Even if the female ghost has good intentions, having intercourse with her is harmful. This harmful energy towards men has become the biggest sin of women in East Asian culture. If one argues that the image of Wang Xifeng in the magic mirror is not herself, and Lady White Bone in *Journey to the West* is a non-human female, thus not defining women as sinful, then the opening poem of *Golden Lotus* (Jin Ping Mei) directly describes the harm of excessive intercourse with women. This Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) novel is widely known for its bold portrayal of lust, but its central idea is still that indulgence in carnal desire can lead to destruction. In its opening poem, it directly quotes the Tang Dynasty poet Lv Yan's poem:

*Beautiful is this maiden: her tender form gives promise of sweet womanhood,*

*But a two-edged sword lurks between her thighs, whereby destruction comes to foolish men.*

*No head falls to that sword: its work is done in secret.*

*Yet it drains the very marrow from men's bones.*<sup>13</sup>

## **Beauty and Corpse**

In the above text, I briefly mentioned the patriarchal society's transformation of goddesses. In the earliest record of ancient Chinese mythology, *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*, the Wushan goddess was a figure represent love and aesthetics, which is

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<sup>12</sup> Pu, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. Chapter: Lotus fragrance

<sup>13</sup> Lanling, *Golden Lotus Volume 1: Jin Ping Mei*. Page1

the closest notion to a goddess in charge of love and aesthetics. She was mentioned in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* from the Pre-Qin Period (third century BC to second century AD) as the daughter of the Chinese creation god:

又东二百里，曰姑嫖之山。帝女死焉，其名曰女尸，化为蓂草，其叶胥成，其华黄，其实如菟丘，服之媚于人。<sup>14</sup>

The translated text is: Two hundred miles further east, there is the mountain of Gūrú. The emperor's daughter died there, and her name was 'female corpse.' She transformed into Yao grass. Its leaves are luxuriant, its flowers are yellow, and its fruit is like a bush. Wearing it charms people.

The Wushan goddess is the common subject in poems across thousands of years mentioned by different poet when they discuss about beauty and sexuality. The poem *Gaotang Fu* by Poet Song Yu from the late Warring States Period (481/403 BCE - 221 BCE) have pioneered the abstract description of female beauty in Chinese literature, depict the story of the emperor's journey to the Wushan goddess's territory and their romantic encounters in his dream. The work has created a new paradigm for describing female beauty and have had a lasting impact on the development of Chinese literature. The high-frequency words "Mount Wu"<sup>15</sup> and "cloud and rain"<sup>16</sup> found in the poem are still used today as poetic expressions for sexual activity in literature. It is worth noting that the Wushan goddess was not considered an

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<sup>14</sup> *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Vol.5 Classic of the Central Mountains, chapter 7

<sup>15</sup> Song, "Gaotang Fu." Translate Text: "I reside on the sunny side of Mount Wu, surrounded by hills. In the morning, I am the clouds; in the evening, I am the rain." Original Text: "妾在巫山之阳，高丘之阻，旦为朝云，暮为行雨。"

<sup>16</sup> Song.

embodiment of love and beauty during her lifetime, but rather played the role after becoming a female corpse. In the records of the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the places where the goddess was buried after her death turned into her realms of love and sexuality. This laid the foundation for the necrophilia theme in ancient Chinese literature. In the context of traditional Chinese culture, the objectification of women may be traced back to the objectification of female corpses, but female corpses do not necessarily equate to skeletons. In Chinese mythology and folklore, there are indeed many stories about love between humans and the deceased and encounters with ghosts, but the appearance of a skeleton is not always present.

This means that when the coffin of a woman is opened, her body could be a set of white bones or could be a corpse that has never decayed, forever preserving its youthfulness. *The Peony Pavilion*, a classical play written by Tang Xianzu from the Ming dynasty(1598), describes how the male protagonist Liu Xucai finds the tomb of the female protagonist Li Jiaoniang, who has already passed away, opens her coffin, and finds that her body still retains her beauty and temperament. The male protagonist is attracted by her beauty and tries to save her soul and bring her back to the world of the living:

*Ahem, the Miss is still here. Her exotic fragrance and delicate posture remain the same. My goodness, look at the dust and debris on the front of her body. Even the tiny insects are gone in the crooked places. There are four brightly-colored and beautiful wooden boards, nourishing her delicate body on the half bed of the yellow springs,*

*and her five-colored swallow support is still here... (The heroine opens her eyes and sighs) (Jing) The Miss has opened her eyes. (The protagonist) Heaven has opened its eyes. Miss, oh!* <sup>17</sup>

The Peony Pavilion is a rare play that opens from a female perspective, and the first 19 acts of the 55-act play describe the brief life of the female protagonist. She was born into a family that followed Confucianism. In her enlightenment through the study of Confucian culture, she experienced the concept of love after reading a particular chapter and constantly dreaming of a man. Unable to meet her lover in reality, her longing quickly became a sickness, leading to her tragic demise as a virgin. However, her body has been waiting for her lover so that it does not decay, even welcoming him with a splendid scene at the moment he finds her coffin. The idea that pure and innocent women can retain their youthfulness even after death is a common theme. In ancient Chinese literature, an undecayed female corpse does not necessarily always symbolize purity. Instead, it more often suggests a particular state of the corpse, indicating that its owner's power or spirit still exists in the physical world, preventing the body from decaying. In Western countries, there are stories like Snow White, where a pure maiden is poisoned to death but remains youthful, only needing a true love's kiss to revive. In the context of Chinese Literature, the undecayed body could benefit from positive protagonists. Because of their beauty and purity, their death can be reversed, yet the corpses cannot revive themselves. Instead, they await redemption and rescue from the male protagonist.

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<sup>17</sup> Tang, *The Peony Pavilion*.

## Corpse and Skeleton

There are also female ghosts that are antagonists. The appearance of a skeleton represents materiality. When a deceased woman wanders the physical world as a female ghost, her spirit and energy still linger, preventing her corpse from decaying into a skeleton. The appearance of a skeleton, in turn, represents her material nature. In “Mudan Deng Ji” from the *New Tales for Trimming the Lamp*, the female ghost, who is in love with the male protagonist, Qiao Sheng, appears as a skeleton adorned with makeup in the eyes of an elderly neighbor.<sup>18</sup> The skeleton here is a metaphor for revealing the ugly truth. The beauty is actually a ghost. After Qiao Sheng has intercourse with her, he is dragged into the coffin by her and dies. When the neighbor discovers their bodies in her coffin, he finds that the female ghost's corpse shows no signs of decay, and her appearance is as if she were still alive, while Qiao Sheng's corpse shows he has been dead for a long time.<sup>19</sup> This shows a strong contrast between the states of the ghost and Qiao Sheng. The ghost, because she took the Yang energy from the male protagonist, her dead body restored and remained in the appearance as if she is still alive.

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<sup>18</sup> Zhai, *New Tales for Trimming the Lamp*. Vol2, Chapter Mudan Deng Ji. Translated Text: “After half a month, the old neighbor became suspicious. He peeped through a hole in the wall and saw a pale skeleton sitting next to the gentleman under the lamp, which greatly shocked him.”. Original Text: “如是者将半月, 邻翁疑焉, 穴壁窥之, 则见一粉骷髅与生并坐于灯下, 大骇。”

<sup>19</sup> Zhai. Translated Text: “The old neighbor was confused by the gentleman's absence and searched for him in the nearby area. Eventually, he arrived at a room in a temple where a coffin was placed. He saw the missing gentleman's clothing sticking out from the coffin. He asked the monk to open the coffin, only to find that he had been dead for a long time. Inside the coffin, he lay face-to-face with a woman's corpse, which still looked as if she were alive.”. Original Text: “邻翁怪其不归, 远近寻问, 及至寺中停柩之室, 见生之衣裾微露于柩外, 请于寺僧而发之, 死已久矣, 与女之尸俯仰卧于内, 女貌如生焉。”

This demonstrates that in literary creations, the alternation between a female corpse and a skeleton represents different meanings in the same story.

In Chinese philosophy, the authors of the ghost stories will try putting educational significance in their stories. Under the mutual influence and integration of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, a diverse range of Chinese literature has bloomed. Both Buddhism and Taoism have directly explained the symbolic meaning of skeleton in traditional Chinese imagery. Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) had a conversation with a skeleton in his dream. From the mouth of the skeleton, Zhuangzi reveals the ultimate pursuit of Taoist philosophy – free from effort and free of doubts. The skeleton said: “The dead have no lord over them, no servants below them. There is none of the work associated with the four seasons, so we live as if our springs and autumns were like Heaven and Earth, unending. Make no mistake, a king facing south could not be happier.”<sup>20</sup> In the realm of death, the deceased have no social distinctions, no exploration of cause and effect, and no discrimination between gender.

Buddhist philosophy, on the other hand, focuses on the relationship between corpses and skeletons, which are directly referenced in the didactic quotes at the beginning or end of the ghost stories. According to religious studies scholar Eric M. Greene in his book *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*, White Bone Contemplation is a meditation technique that requires practitioners to directly imagine their flesh rotting away, being consumed by insects and animals, and eventually turning into a skeleton. This helps practitioners reach a state of realization of “bodily impurity: analysis of (1) one’s own

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<sup>20</sup> Zhuang, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*. Chapter 18 Perfect Happiness



body as comprised of thirty-two or thirty-six impurities (aśuci) such as hair, blood, bones, and the organs, or (2) the foul (aśubha) nature of external bodies through the contemplation of a decaying corpse.”<sup>21</sup>

Here, the skeleton is directly linked to the ultimate truth described in the sutra “*What has form is not truly great. Only what has no form is real.*”<sup>22</sup>. The skin, flesh, social identity, and gender of living beings are all considered inauthentic and foul. But in the above example of Chinese classical literature, a beautiful appearance and a high social status are objectified to the extreme during a woman's lifetime desired by men. It was so desired that after their death, in the illusionary texts that male author weaved, they need to remain their beauty and luxury. However, in the cruel nature law, when death comes, the appearance and social status that only the living possess decompose in the coffin with the flesh. The woman's intention to reveal her bones, along with the exposure of the bones, strikes the audience's gaze and thoughts. Her intention is influenced by the ultimate objectification of her dead body but by returning to the materiality of her, a skeleton, she may be her Subject and create her myth.

Some may think that searching for women's agency in art and literature materials rooted in a patriarchal society is like finding a needle in a haystack, but what is wrong with seeking the language of women in one's own culture? Alternatively, as an East Asian feminist, why should we read about the male-gazed image of women within a patriarchal system?

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<sup>21</sup> Greene, *The Secrets of Buddhist Meditation*. Page 27

<sup>22</sup> Pine, *The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom Text and Commentaries Translated from Sanskrit and Chinese*. Chapter 10

1. The cultural heritage materials I mentioned are all part of mainstream Chinese literature, such as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Journey to the West*, *The Peony Pavilion*, and *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. These works, including in compulsory education textbooks and readings, are inevitable in our literary experience. However, as feminists, we cannot dismiss these texts simply stating that the feudal system caused gender inequality because they are deeply rooted in our cultural traditions and artistic expressions. Instead, we should strive to deconstruct these texts in ways that serve our artistic languages and promote a deeper understanding of gender dynamics within our culture.
2. While these texts primarily focus on the male-gazed image of females, they still feature women as their main subjects. By deconstructing these texts through a feminist perspective, we can approach our own culture with new understandings. Undoubtedly, works on creating literature written from a female perspective by women authors are essential, as is the restoration of the reputation of classical female authors. However, we don't need to treat women portrayed under the male gaze as outcasts to be shunned. Instead, we can empower these women by subverting the discipline intended by male authors and offering interpretations using feminist perspectives.
3. As an East Asian feminist, when reading these texts, I am impressed by the author's skillful narrative and rhetorical techniques. At the same time, I am aware that due to historical constraints, few works by female authors have

been widely circulated, leading me to be overly optimistic about the abstract concept of the independent woman in the new era. When engaging in artistic activities, I may feel embarrassed to reference an author who depicted women from a male perspective, as the image might seem "stereotypical." However, the reality is that China's pre-socialist history is not and should not be exclusively patriarchal. By deconstructing these texts, we can expand the scope of feminist artistic language to the entire five thousand years of Chinese history.

In conclusion, by examining the relationship between the beauty, the female corpse, and the skeleton, we can thoroughly analyze the objectification of women's bodies in Chinese patriarchal society. As living women, we do not need to place ourselves within the patriarchal myths of the three elements. As feminists, we can create our own narratives through female authors and female readers. We can challenge the traditional narratives, reclaim our agency, and reshape the portrayal of women in literature and society. Because each of us has a facade to interact with society, the beauty, and we have the skeleton inside us reminding us of our materiality and mortality. In the end, we will die and become the female corpse.

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