

# Young People's Ghost Stories in Hong Kong<sup>1</sup>

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HOSTS ARE COMMONLY SAID TO HAUNT PRIMARY AND SECONDARY schools in Hong Kong, as well as in Taiwan and mainland China, and the older the school, the more ghosts there are. In Hong Kong, all students learn of their school's ghosts from older students. Female secondary school students often fear going to the school toilet alone, and avoid the end stall, for fear of ghosts. St. Francis' Canossian College (a secondary school) in Hong Kong, for example, has a headless priest's ghost that resides in the elevator (an old-fashioned elevator that is off-limits to students) and the ghost of a nun in the girl's bathroom. Universities also have stories of haunted places and of ghosts. Ghost stories are typically told at The Chinese University of Hong Kong during orientation programs (known as Orientation Camp or O'Camp) run in August, before the start of the semester. Chinese University is divided into four "colleges" that own dormitories and act as foci for campus social life. Students live in dorms for a week of ice-breaking, networking, and introduction activities. One night, while students talk in small groups under the stars, older students tell the freshmen ghost stories to scare them. In most years, orientation happens to be held during the "ghost month," i.e. the seventh lunar month, when in traditional Chinese popular religion the ghosts are released from hell to wander the world for a month. This adds to the spookiness of the stories. Most students know at least two or three of the more famous stories. The stories are also known outside the university; many Chinese University students have heard the stories before coming to the University. Though ghost stories have long been told by adults to children, these stories told among young people—and

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for young people—seem to be a post-World War II phenomenon. They show the emergence of an autonomous youth culture.

Over 100 stories have been collected for this research; some were collected orally by student helpers, others written up and turned in by students as a class assignment. These stories are very much like American urban legends described by Brunvand (*The Vanishing Hitchhiker; The Baby Train And Other Lusty Urban Legends*) in that some students tell the stories for fun and do not believe the stories, but most still feel they are frightening. Many students interviewed about the stories emphasized that the stories were told by the older students to scare the freshmen, and that men enjoyed the stories while women were more scared. One noted that after telling the stories, the female students needed to be escorted back to their dormitories, giving the males a chance to be with the females. Though some students say the stories are told for fun, many students are so afraid of ghosts that they are reluctant to repeat the stories or to talk about them. As with urban legends (and much Chinese popular religion), these ghost stories are told with the preface that they may or may not be true. Many students believe there is some truth behind the ghost stories (e.g., that a person really did die), even if the stories told on campus are just rumors and elaborations. “Belief” has been critiqued as a Christian term, and it is perhaps not the appropriate term for ghost stories. Still, one can say that belief in ghosts is more important in Hong Kong than in the United States in that many people will readily admit they are very much afraid of ghosts. Most students believe that ghosts really do exist. A simple survey of students’ beliefs demonstrates this. Chinese University students were asked to rank twenty statements on a five-point scale from 1 “strongly agree” to 5 “strongly disagree.” The statement that students most agreed with was “Chinese medicine is effective” (average score of 1.6). The statement “There really are ghosts” scored 2.3, with only 10 of 99 students disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. Students believe in ghosts more than they believe in *qigong* (scoring 2.6) and *feng shui* (2.7).<sup>2</sup>

Still, the ghost stories are not a frequent topic of conversation, and this article’s focus on them should not exaggerate their importance. But as nearly all students know many of the stories, and as the stories are told and passed on and thus relevant to students’ lives, they are a good example of modern ghost stories and tales of the supernatural. These ghost stories are a good example of popular culture that may

seem marginal to what is usually considered “popular religion” in Chinese societies, but it is more important and relevant to students than stories of gods, ghosts, and ancestors told by their grandmothers.

Below are examples of the five most popular stories told. Several are puzzling or even bizarre to many non-Chinese listeners, but most Chinese understand the stories as scary. The analysis that follows will gradually unfold the symbolism of the stories, thereby problematizing the stories for the Chinese reader who might think they are obviously scary, and showing non-Chinese readers why they are scary.

## The Stories

### *Single Braid*

Single Braid Road is located behind the Chung Chi Canteen. Some male students when walking by there at night have seen a girl<sup>3</sup> with beautiful braided hair; when they approached her to get a good look at her they were shocked to discover that she did not have a face, that in front there was another single braid. It is said that this girl was an illegal immigrant from [mainland] China, and that she came with her boyfriend surnamed Lau from the mainland on the train. Because she was afraid that if she went to Kowloon she would be checked [for an ID], she jumped from the train near where the university is today. She jumped first but her hair got stuck in the train door so that her hair and face were ripped off and she died. Her boyfriend saw this and did not dare to jump. He went all the way to Kowloon before getting off the train, entered the city and after getting work, went to find the girl but could not find her. Later people often saw her near there walking to and fro. (See Figure 1)

There are two versions of this story; in one the girl has no face, while in the other she has another braid in front of her face.

### *Oxtail Soup*

A male and female student lived in Bethlehem Hall in United College. By coincidence, she lived in the room one floor above the boy's.<sup>4</sup> The girl often cooked soup for the boy [and lowered it by string outside his window]. One day they agreed that they would not see each other during the exam period, but the girl continued to cook soup. Later, the boy found out that the girl had died, but every evening the soup was still lowered to him. (See Figure 2)



FIGURE 1. Single braid, as illustrated in the New Asia College 2001 Orientation Camp Booklet. Drawing by FUNG Kar Mun, reproduced with permission.

### *The Lotus Pond*

A couple planned to elope. They planned to meet at 10 P.M. one night by the Lotus Pond. The girl arrived and waited for her boyfriend for a long time but he did not show up. She thought he must have broken his promise and was so angry that she jumped into the pond [and drowned herself]. After that, when a boy passes by the pond at night, he will encounter a girl he does not recognize who will ask him the time. If he answers that it is 10:00, she will pull him into the pond.

### *The Little Finger*

A student often studied in the University Library until it closed. Then he walked back to Chung Chi College. Every time he passed a small park he saw a young girl sitting on a swing. Finally one day he went up to her and started talking with her. From then on, he would talk with her for a while before going back to his hall. Later when he talked with his friends about this, he discovered that the young girl looked like a teacher's daughter who had died in a traffic accident. That girl had lost her little finger. The student was very curious and



FIGURE 2. Oxtail soup being lowered, as illustrated in the New Asia College 2001 Orientation Camp Booklet. Drawing by FUNG Kar Mun, reproduced with permission.

wanted to know whether the girl was missing her little finger. When he found out that the girl did not have a little finger, he was very scared. Later when he went by there in the evenings he did not see the girl again.

### *Room 111*

In room 111 of Grace Tien Hall, a student did a crazy experiment. He wanted to go to another dimension of space. He used an electric wire to coil around his body. The end of the wire was attached to an alarm clock. When the alarm rang, he died immediately of electric shock. His roommate did not know he was dead. He just saw a message left by him the night before which said, "I will come back soon."<sup>5</sup>

### An Analysis of the Stories

These five stories are the most common stories told at Chinese University. They were included among the seven printed in a booklet for new students participating in New Asia College's 2001 orientation,<sup>6</sup> and make up slightly over half (31 of 59) of the stories collected

TABLE 1  
 Percentage of Students Who Know the Most Common Ghost Stories  
 According to Two Surveys

Story	Public area <sup>a</sup>	Class <sup>b</sup>
Single Braid	98%	88%
Room 111	87	65
Oxtail Soup	69	63
Lotus Pond	56	53
Little Finger	42	31

<sup>a</sup>A simple non-random sample of 45 students questioned in public areas on campus, spring 2001.

<sup>b</sup>This was part of the same survey mentioned in note 3.

by two assistants in 1995.<sup>7</sup> Table 1 shows the following percentages of students knowing these stories according to two surveys we have conducted. No other story has over twenty percent recognition.

It is important to stress that the stories are scary to students. When a Westerner first hears of a woman with no face, or a braid where the face is supposed to be, he or she may be puzzled and confused, and may wonder if he/she had misunderstood, but most Westerners will not be afraid. Some might ask if her face was rotting, or if it was a skull, but students say no, it was like the palm of a hand. Also puzzling is the meaning of missing the little finger. The story of the Lotus Pond ghost is easier to understand, though the girl's reaction—killing herself—when the boyfriend misses the appointment, seems extreme. In addition, lowering soup to a boyfriend seems a bit odd, especially as most stories emphasize that they were not seeing each other because they were studying for exams. Students noted this was romantic, but rather than engineer such a system, why not meet in the dorm lobby for 10 minutes? If one does not understand the symbolism of the stories, one tends to examine them literally, which means misinterpreting the stories.

To the surprise of the students in classes, the Oxtail Soup story comes in multiple versions, with the site of the story, the type of the soup, and ending of the story varying according to the teller. Students from different colleges were surprised to find that the story was told for each of the three older colleges (Shaw College was established in 1988 and seems too new to have its own ghost stories). More significantly, the soup varies between oxtail, the most common type, and red bean, or just an unspecified soup. At first sight, oxtail and red bean soup

seem totally different; red bean (or adzuki bean) soup is a starchy sweet dessert while oxtail soup is meat with broth. But red beans are also called *xiangsidou* (in Mandarin), which can be translated as love beans (*xiangsi* meaning love, as in *xiangsiniao*, lovebirds).<sup>8</sup> The reason for this name is, according to some, that the beans are red, shaped like a heart, and sweet. Oxtail soup appears to be a phallic symbol. This may seem far-fetched, and students often reject this interpretation, but confirmation comes from a printed version in the Business Administration orientation booklet for 1992. It names the soup as *ngàuh X tōng* (Cantonese, beef X soup), meaning bull penis soup, a tonic soup for male virility. That the girlfriend is cooking such a soup makes the sexual nature of their relationship clear. The fact that the soup, a key symbol in the story, varies around the symbol of love suggests the story is in fact about love.

Cheng Sea-ling has done research on soup in Hong Kong and has shown that soup is an important symbol of domesticity (32–47). Indeed, it is an important part of a Cantonese meal. When students go home for the weekend, they often say that their mother wants them to go home to have some soup. Some student canteens offer free soup during the final exam period. This is intended to help the students, and of course also to show that the university cares about the students.

Note that in the Oxtail Soup story, the couple agreed not to meet during the final exam period, so they could concentrate on their studies. Despite not meeting, the girlfriend makes soup every evening. This is readily understood as a sign of devotion. But the fact that she makes soup, and not sandwiches or dumplings, is significant. Soup is a symbol of domesticity; it is suggesting a married relationship, in which the wife prepares soup for the husband.

Soup itself can have sexual connotations. The expression to *heui yám tōng* (Cantonese: to go drink soup) is a euphemism for seeing a mistress; there is a restaurant chain in Hong Kong called “Ah-Yi Leng Tong” (Cantonese: literally “Number Two’s Good Soup”) that specializes on soups and in its name plays on the connotation of the mistress providing good soup to attract the lover’s visits. Furthermore, the expression *yam tàuh daabm tōng* (Cantonese: “to sip the first soup”) is an expression meaning to be the first to have sexual relations with a virgin. This expression is rather dated nowadays, but it is widely known. Thus, both in her devotion in making soup, and in the fact that it is soup, the story is suggesting that the couple in fact has a sexual

relationship. As in most moral tales and ghost stories, naughty people get their comeuppance. The girl dies as a consequence of her breaking the norm against having sex before marriage.

In another version of the Oxtail Soup story, the boyfriend's roommate drinks the soup that is lowered by the ghost because the boyfriend is not there. The boyfriend returns, and when the roommate tells him he drank the soup as he was not there, the boyfriend tells him this is impossible because he has just come back from the hospital where the girlfriend has just died. In this version, the roommate is also immoral; he is drinking his roommate's soup. The expression "I have drunk your first sip of soup" *Ngòh yih-gìng yám job nèih-ge tàuh daahm tōng* is a mean expression saying that one has had sexual relations with another man's girlfriend. Here, the shock of the story is also focused on the roommate for eating the soup that did not belong to him. In yet another common version, an unsuspecting male student in a subsequent year finds the soup and thinks it is for him. For example, in the version printed for the 1992 Business Administration majors' orientation (mentioned above), the original boyfriend loses interest in the girl, who then commits suicide. She then haunts the unsuspecting boy who moves into the room the next year. The new boy downstairs sees the soup and at first assumes a girl has fallen in love with him (and it is implied that he drinks the soup). Later he begins to wonder who is giving him the soup and goes upstairs to investigate. He knocks on the door, but a neighbor opens and tells him that the room is vacant and that the girl committed suicide the year before. The story ends with the boy being scared and moving out of the dorm.

The girl's suicide in this version now makes sense; she was no longer a virgin, and felt spurned. The suicide of the girl in Lotus Pond is also understood as resulting from the anger of a spurned lover. She was going to elope with her boyfriend but drowned herself in anger and despair when he failed to show up. Suicide would seem an overreaction if it had not been a sexual relationship, but is understandable if it is understood as having involved sex. A few other stories also involve young people who lose their self and commit suicide over love. They send the message that excessive concern with love can lead to problems. The problems mentioned by students include interfering with studies, loss of virginity, even suicide. The story "Room 111" is, conversely, about a smart male student who electrocutes himself, wasting all his potential because he loses himself in his studies. He tries to discover



another dimension, and electrocutes himself in his quixotic scholarly quest. He is going to the opposite extreme: too much study. Interestingly, however, according to some versions of Room 111, the boy's suicide was due to the fact that a girlfriend dumped him. Thus, some students transform Room 111 to fit the pattern of "excess focus on love."

It is important to realize that serial dating is still not very common among Hong Kong students. Even more importantly, parents are generally strongly opposed to their children's dating while they are students. The student role is incompatible with dating; it is viewed as a dangerous distraction that can derail one's studies and career. Many parents are explicitly opposed to their children dating while at university. A letter to the editor of *Varsity* (a Chinese University student magazine) says, "it has been a controversy among both the parents and the teachers: Is dating good or bad for a student who has not yet finished his or her studies?" (Chui 2). The letter tries to be balanced, but reveals a great deal about student attitudes. It states "Immature youthful love may lead to sex" and "Love may make oneself susceptible. Once the love is over, students may become blue so much so that they would even commit suicide" (Chui 2). These stories thus seem to illustrate a danger of dating; the suicides come from excessive concern over love.

The stories of the little finger and single braid are also about love; in each story, young men are interested in beautiful women who turn out to be ghosts. This is a common theme in Chinese literature and movies; the scholar seduced by ghosts or fox spirits (see for example Yuan, and the movie *A Chinese Ghost Story* {*Qiannu youhun*} directed by Tsui Hark and Ching Siu-Tung, which was based on a story by Pu Songling [1640–1715]). The stories are typical of urban legends in that people behave in ways that are good for the story but totally unnatural or even illogical; students agree that no male student would ever approach a beautiful female student and strike up a conversation, even in broad daylight. The idea that one would approach a girl in the dark is risible. And yet these are two of the most famous and popular ghost stories on campus. Clearly, the moral that students take from this is not only to avoid those areas of campus where the ghosts are said to haunt (though this is the lesson most students will state). Deep down, the message of the story is also about the dangers of the opposite sex, and indeed the danger of sex. The stories, as is true of most ghost stories, take place in the dark, symbolizing fear of the unknown (the world outside the

family), of death (the *yin* world of the dead as opposed to *yang* of the living), and of sex: nighttime is, of course, the time when lovers meet and go to secluded spots offered by the campus' extensive greenery.

The stories of the little finger and single braid are also similar and notable for including blood: the girl in single braid had her face ripped off when falling off the train, and the girl in "Little Finger" had an accident in which her little finger (or in other versions her hand) went missing (see Figure 3). The lack of a face is not uncommon in ghost stories; Harrell (113) notes that female ghosts seen by men often do not show their face. The lack of face may be part of what makes the woman a ghost; like Chinese zombies, who move by jumping because they are two dimensional and thus cannot walk, the lack of face makes the girl an obvious ghost.<sup>9</sup> The lack of the little finger could also be a reason why the girl is a ghost; because the body is not whole, as a Chinese funeral requires, the spirit cannot rest. But another meaning of these bloody stories is that the girls are deflowered.<sup>10</sup> In one version of "Single Braid," the girl is coming from China to visit her boyfriend who is a student at Chinese University; her "loss of face" suggests she lost her virginity as well as her life. The 2001 New Asia orientation



FIGURE 3. Little finger, as illustrated in the New Asia College 2001 Orientation Camp Booklet. Drawing by FUNG Kar Mun, reproduced with permission.

program booklet illustration of “Little Finger” (see Figure 3) shows a girl holding a bloody little finger in her bloody hand; not only does the finger appear to be a phallic symbol, but significantly, blood has dripped onto the crotch area of her skirt, making an obvious link between the blood of an accidental severing of the finger and deflowering.

Other stories besides the ones discussed above also have clear sexual themes. There are several stories about floating heads scaring students. In some, the heads float outside the dorm windows. In others, the heads pass through walls and lick a toe. The foot has traditionally been an object of sexual fantasy,<sup>11</sup> so sucking on the student's toe is equivalent to being seduced by a ghost. The stories thus express desire that is being thwarted by a cultural resistance—the duty to study.

### Ghosts or Folk Tales?

Some readers may suspect that these are not “true” ghosts but are merely folk tales, but this distinction is not valid. The stories might seem mere folk tales because of the social interpretation suggested above, which makes the category of “ghost” collapse into social and psychological forces. The idea that the ghosts in these tales are somehow different is also suggested by the comparison with urban legends, which some might feel are not truly about the supernatural. Some students, when presented with the above interpretation, disagree with it saying they are “just stories.” Others, however, including some scholars, have taken such stories to be “true” ghost stories, even using the stories to try to discover the underlying true universal (i.e., non-cultural) nature of ghosts (see Emmons). A recent series of books in Chinese by the author with the pen name Daoyijushi also treats the ghosts as “true” and explains them as due to problems of fengshui (*Xianggang xueyuan qi busiyi shijian*, *Xianggang xueyuan qi busiyi shijian* 2).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, these stories follow the pattern of other Chinese ghost stories. Harrell (102–03) distinguishes four kinds of situations in which people encounter ghosts in Taiwan; this yields, sociologically speaking, four kinds of ghosts. One kind is “ghosts propitiated as part of mass celebrations [e.g. *pudu*] [that] represent anomalies in the larger social order” (Harrell 102). The beggars and poor people who grab candies tossed in the crowd of a *pudu* ceremony represent the ghosts of the spirit world, or illness and bad luck in an abstract sense. Ghosts of a

second kind that are “propitiated as a result of childhood illnesses [e.g. the Taiwanese *chhiong-tiu*] represent the randomness of misfortune” (Harrell 102–03). Typically, a small offering is laid on the ground in the direction from which the ghost is believed to have attacked, asking it to go away. Ghosts of a third kind, sometimes called “family ghosts,” are ghosts of specific family members causing domestic or health problems because they are angry. They can be male or female, though it is often the spirit of a female who has no place for its spirit to rest because it died before marriage. Spirit marriages are often arranged to resolve this crisis in the domestic order. The fourth kind is the ghosts that are actually seen; they represent repressed fears (Harrell 102–03). Harrell collected reports of actual sightings, but in collecting Chinese University ghost stories, no one has been found who personally claimed to have seen a ghost. The stories that come closest to being first person sightings are stories of “feeling strange” and “like being watched” (two cases). Most of the stories are of events that happened in an unspecified past to other people. The Chinese University ghost stories seem to fit Harrell’s fourth type and to represent the repressed fears, stemming in this case from the contradiction between love/dating and studying, except that they are not personally seen. But as they follow the pattern of Chinese ghost stories, it is difficult to separate them from other ghost stories and dismiss them as folk tales, a different kind of phenomenon. They are clearly part of popular culture, and as real and legitimate as other ghost stories collected by anthropologists and others in villages. They just happen to be collected in a university in a modern global city.

## Ghosts and Gender

Harrell (102) notes, “In most cases . . . they [ghosts representing repressed fears] tend to be of the opposite gender to the observer.” Harrell found that most of the observers were male, so most ghosts were female. The question therefore arises: why are four of the ghosts in the most popular ghost stories (described above) female? The older stories of floating heads are of unspecified gender, and in the story Room 111, it was a male student who committed suicide, but his ghost was not seen again, though the note saying “I will come back soon” creates the fear that he will return. Thus, the stories of visible

ghosts are all female. Though many students say the stories are told to scare the female students, the stories are about female ghosts that scare and (potentially) hurt male students. Harrell (113) notes the theme of sexual threat in encounters between living men and female ghosts (citing Wolf 146), including the insatiable sexual demands of spirit brides and evil fox spirits that seduce men to their ruin. He argues that from the perspective of men in a patrilocal and patrilineal order, all women represent a threat because they are outsiders who lead to the family's breakup (Harrell 113). Furthermore, if females die violent deaths, they often need to find another person to replace them before their soul can be freed to be reincarnated. Women who die unmarried can become ghosts if they are not properly prayed for. Spirit marriages—where the ghost marries a living man—can assure the dead women are cared for. In fact, the ghosts are often trying to solve these problems and arrange marriages themselves when they seduce men. “And herein lies the allure of such tales—the ghostly maiden is often seeking nothing else but simply love, a stable relationship, marriage” (*Illuminated Lantern*).

The Chinese University stories are of vengeful ghosts as all four females died unjustly or prematurely. In that sense, the stories are also warning to girls of what can happen if they are not chaste. They are moral tales about the vulnerability of women. But the ghosts also represent the power of women, which is why they frighten men. The female ghosts are not vulnerable but seductresses who scare the male students. They represent repressed fears. University students are often in a co-educational setting for the first time in their life, and those who live on campus are living away from home for the first time in their life. Thus, in students' increased interaction with the opposite sex and in their increased independence, there is more opportunity for the contradiction between the ideals of love and study to emerge. The stories thus combine some of the features of the third and fourth types ghosts described by Harrell: they are vengeful spirits of the prematurely dead, and they also represent repressed fears.

## Dating

The symbolism of the stories is very clear: they reflect the tension between students' responsibility to study and their interest in sex and dating. All good stories have multiple meanings, but the theme of the conflict between love and being a good student is at the core of these

stories. Understanding this theme helps explain many of the features of the stories that at first glance, to an outsider, may appear difficult to understand.

Ethnographic data can also confirm this interpretation. Many students say that parents disapprove of their dating. Often parents will not openly state such a rule, hoping the issue will not arise, but it is understood. Dating is not socially approved until students are economically established and ready for marriage. Dating is not viewed as a way to learn about the opposite sex, as it is in the United States, but as a way to find a spouse. It is therefore pointless to date—to seek a spouse—while one is economically dependent.

In certain ways, students also see themselves as dependents while they are students. Nearly all students go home for the weekend rather than stay in campus dorms. Due to lack of dorm space, only forty percent of students can live in dorms at Chinese University (a higher proportion than for other Hong Kong universities), and places are highly sought after. Despite the high degree of crowding in family apartments in Hong Kong, and the fact that students from crowded homes and distant locations have priority for dormitory space, the dorms are empty on Saturday night, and even Friday and Sunday nights there are few residents. Students say they go home for the better food (especially their mother's soup, as mentioned above) and to have their laundry done. Many students have said that they would rather not stay home Saturday night, but their parents ask or require them to return home. Even in their dress and personal behavior, they do not seek to assert their adulthood. For example, students do not smoke in public on the campus of the Chinese University.<sup>13</sup> Students do smoke, and some male students smoke in their dorm rooms, but they do not let their peers and teachers see them smoking. Very few female students wear any make-up at school. On the other hand, when department photographs are taken in January for graduating seniors, most female students have their hair done and are fully made up, marking a rite of passage out of university and into adulthood.

Many students will not allow their peers to know that they are dating. Students will sometimes tease a couple at department events and parties; students have blurted out during introductions of first year students that "Ah Hon has a girlfriend!" which is followed by oohs and giggles from other students. Students have explained that not all students are teased; couples that are teased tend to be those that try to

keep their relationship secret by, for example, not sitting at the same table at parties or unlocking their hands when seen by peers. These students will be teased with hoots and catcalls that seem very childish to North Americans. Students are not sexually naive, but they take public presentation of their dating relationships more seriously. They hesitate to make their dating public to their peers and teachers, and so try to hide their relationship. In addition, serial dating is not very common, so public knowledge of dating is interpreted as a serious relationship. Unless one is sure of the relationship, it is best to be discreet.

As mentioned above, the ghost stories are typically told during orientation. Two other orientation activities are also about love and sex. Some groups, on a night other than the night of ghost stories, will tell "love stories." These are tales of a secret crush or first kiss that are perhaps embarrassing but that serve to create a stronger bond within the small group. Another common activity is the telling of dirty jokes (e.g., "What soft drink is named after a part of the male anatomy? 7-Up."). Senior students (including females) tell the jokes to shock the first year students; the boys laugh and the girls blush. These sexually frank activities, though innocent compared with sexual activity on many North American campuses (see e.g., Moffatt), help mark a boundary between secondary school and university life. But when the August 2002 orientation activities included sexually explicit chants during a competition between the university's constituent colleges, the press and parents were shocked and charged the university with being negligent in providing proper moral guidance to students.<sup>14</sup> Students are interested in love and use sex to mark their coming of age, but parents, society, and the university still view them as pre-adults.

Confucian morality also discouraged romantic love. "Under the social convention dictated by the Confucian doctrine, no romantic love should end in formal marriage, and romantic love was discouraged even as a theme in literature, for it could not lead to an ethically approved climax" (Yang 57). Ghost stories allowed romantic love both because the ghost, not being human, could violate morality, but also because marriage was impossible. "At the climax of the story the woman evaporated into thin air. Thus a love story with ghosts and spirits provided all the romantic thrill forbidden by the Confucian tradition of marriage and yet violated none of the basic social conventions" (Yang 57). Two stories, *Single Braid* and *Little Finger*, similarly illustrate the impossibility of love for students; the male student

discovers that his love interest is in fact a ghost. The Oxtail Soup and Lotus Pond stories create female ghosts because the women have violated traditional norms against romantic love, as well as norms of chastity.

### The Stories' Deep Structure

The stories are similar in style and function to the urban legends told by teenagers in the United States. Jan Brunvand's analysis of American stories such as "The Hook" and "The Babysitter and the Man Upstairs" applies equally well to Chinese University stories:

One consistent theme in these teenage horrors is that as the adolescent moves out from home into the larger world, the world's dangers may close in on him or her. Therefore, although the immediate purpose of many of these legends is to produce a good scare, they also serve to deliver a warning: Watch out! This could happen to you! Furthermore, the horror tales often contain thinly-disguised sexual themes which are, perhaps, implicit in the nature of such plot situations as parking in a lovers' lane or baby-sitting (playing house) in a strange home. These sexual elements furnish both a measure of further entertainment and definite cautionary notices about the world's actual dangers. Thus, from the teenagers' own major fears, concerns, and experiences, spring their favorite "true" oral stories. (Brunvand *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* 47–48)

What is different in the Chinese University stories is that (1) ghosts and not slashers or killers are the main scary characters in the stories, and (2) the danger of dating is the major theme of the stories. They show that reconciling the duty to be a good student and interest in the opposite sex is the major dilemma facing students as they begin to leave the home and to become independent at university. Talking about the ghosts allows them to talk about this dilemma that is important and is causing anxiety.

When this hypothesis is presented to Chinese University students, many do not accept it, a few of them strenuously. Some argue that the stories do not require interpretation because "they are just stories" (meaning that they should be taken at face value). Many find it interesting to discover so many sexual allusions in the stories, but do not accept that the stories are *about* sex.

Students are reluctant to accept the hypothesis for two reasons. First, the stories, in their minds, have nothing to do with dating or love, so



the interpretation is not convincing. Finding so many sexual symbols in the stories is surprising to them, but not persuasive. They are not conscious of this sexual meaning when they hear the stories. One student wrote of an early draft of this article, "your paper provides sufficient argument and data, but is too surprising and not convincing to me." Secondly, they resist the implication that love is such a major issue for them. They are not supposed to be thinking about love and sex, so deny that the stories are about love and sex. Nevertheless, one professor who graduated from Chinese University in the 1970s was convinced by this interpretation and was surprised this meaning had never occurred to him. It seems that to some students, the subject is so fraught with tension that even admitting that ghost stories are spawned by this tension is difficult. The same thing happens when students read Evans' analysis of a social panic that occurred in November 1992 (267–96). Evans convincingly shows how political tensions surrounding the handover of Hong Kong to China led many in Hong Kong to discuss whether there was a ghost in a television advertisement. Students, who remember the incident well, cannot accept Evans' analysis, preferring to believe the timing of the ghost panic at the same time as the Sino-British row over the handover was just a coincidence. Indeed, the ghosts emerge as subjects in the Chinese University stories because it is so difficult to speak about the ethical tension between dating and duty to study. An attempt to talk about it, to remove the veil, is therefore viewed as nonsense, or an amusing over-interpretation at best.

An anthropologist (who must remain nameless) once said that even intellectuals do not know their culture's deep structure, and the more strongly they deny a hypothesis, the more sure one can be that the hypothesis touches on a fundamental cultural opposition. Lévi-Strauss (273) made perhaps the infamous statement that conscious models are often poor explanations of social phenomena because "they are not intended to explain the phenomena but to perpetuate them." Evans (293) suggests he saw the structure of the ghost in the television advertisement precisely because he is a foreigner. This position has led to considerable criticism, including the charge of condescension (Herzfeld 196). Most anthropologists seek to write works that their informants will agree with. This research suggests, however, that at least in some cases, Lévi-Strauss was right. The discussion of ghosts and magical phenomena seem designed to both express the conflict between

desire (love) and study, providing a way of speaking about something important, and at the same time to distract students from the social and psychological tensions that cause the ghosts in the first place. Those who are not students, however, can see these tensions more clearly thanks to the ghost stories.

## Ghosts and Reality

Telling ghost stories is a common part of youth culture in Hong Kong. The stories are passed on from generation to generation of students. The ghosts in these stories are also, as shown, closely related to the ghosts of popular religion. Chinese popular religion is very broad and diverse, leading even to disagreements over whether it should be considered a singular or multiple religions (see, e.g., Wolf; Freedman; Bell). It may be more useful to view ghosts and ghost stories as part of the cosmology (see, e.g., Herzfeld), as thus telling us about a people's worldview. Ghost stories are also told at other universities in mainland China and Taiwan, and from the little information known, they seem to also relate to the growing independence of young people and their leaving home. Ghosts represent the dangers of the outside world. This analysis illustrates the value of focusing on meaning not as an independent cultural realm of symbols but as interacting with social life and the common-sense world (Asad 250–51).

The ghosts in the Hong Kong stories are very real, but in a cultural sense. They change students' emotions and behavior. The analysis assumes they are imaginary, or not materially real. They are not real in the sense that students fear them to be, and therefore are not what they seem to be. They are the expression of unobservable realities in terms of imaginary but concrete phenomena (Leach 42), visible in the mind but not in the flesh. Though not all cultures distinguish between the natural and the supernatural, this distinction is very useful analytically for identifying things that are culturally real but not materially so (Bosco). Still, this perspective does not allow us to see through representations of reality to the reality itself because reality is neither entirely material nor entirely culturally created.

Paradoxically, however, while the stories are culturally real, the interpretation provided here demystifies the stories and robs them of their emotional power. Though the interpretation is convincing to many teachers in Hong Kong, and, hopefully to readers, students

strongly resist the interpretation, leading to questions on cultural interpretation and the nature of anthropological explanations.

The ghosts in these ghost stories can be examined in terms of four theoretical perspectives. One, based on Tylor and Frazer's theories, would say the students are simply wrong about these spirits, that they are not real. But the ghosts are definitely real in a cultural sense, even if many students express some doubt and skepticism. The ghosts are alive in students' thoughts, they affect their behavior, and they have been around for at least three decades. Claiming they are not "real" is not helpful. A second perspective is the functionalist perspective, which suggests that the stories serve the purpose of teaching values, and in this case of educating students to the dangers of premarital sex. This may be an aspect of the stories, but it must be remembered that the stories are told by students themselves. They are not promoted by teachers or parents, and are told in an informal setting by senior students to freshmen. Instead, a third approach that asks "What do these stories mean?" is actually more productive. With this approach, one comes to see why the students like to tell the stories. The stories express the tension and contradiction of the students' situation: interested in dating because of biology (those "raging hormones") and modern movies, but worried about the possible consequences (including the fear of disapproval if they are known to be dating).

A fourth perspective, the occultist view, would claim the ghosts actually exist, or might exist. This position has few serious scholars as adherents, but some anthropologists who strongly value the point of view of the native come close to this position.<sup>15</sup> It is, however, difficult to reconcile physical theories provided by science with the occultist theories that are culturally specific. But scholars who emphasize this occultist view are right that functional and interpretive theories devalue the reality of ghosts and magic. And that is in part why students are resistant to the interpretation offered; they see the interpretations as explaining away something that is emotionally quite real.

## Conclusion

This article has offered a symbolic and psychoanalytic explanation of Chinese University students' ghost stories that offers a revealing explanation for the ghost stories. This does not prove there are no supernatural forces or spirits. Indeed, one cannot prove there are no

supernatural forces or spirits. This hypothesis “does not entitle us to affirm categorically that there are *no* spiritual forces save those that well up from man’s subconscious.” That is why “the anthropologist’s encounter with the supernatural . . . [is] destined to remain ambiguous and inconclusive” (Lewis 22). This is why scholars need to listen to tales of supernatural phenomena with open minds and a respectful stance, even if they are skeptical. One cannot prove there are only us humans down here (as Weston LaBarre put it), even though the cultural hypothesis seems to suggest that. And it should not be surprising that informants will resist this cultural interpretation.

Some scholars of religion, magic, and sorcery have argued that it is incorrect to impose enlightenment theories on non-Western religions. Some have argued that it is essential to begin research with the assumption that spirits do exist (see, e.g., Goodman 1988). This article illustrates that while assuming the viewpoint of informants is a useful research strategy, it is not always necessary or desirable to maintain that strategy during analysis. This research began with the opposite assumption, that is, that the spirits did not in fact exist, and asked why it was that students told such stories. Variations in the stories were not errors in the telling but, as structuralism has shown, hints of the core symbolism of the story. The widespread rejection of the interpretation by students suggests that the informant-centered (or “emic”) approach often advocated by anthropologists is not always possible, and that a universalistic perspective can add additional insights. In addition, this shows that at least in the case of the Chinese University ghosts, the ghosts are cultural—not material—beings, and the interpretation offered here shows the advantage of interpreting and explaining them at the cultural level.

#### NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Hong Kong Anthropological Society, at the Department of Anthropology of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and as a paper in the session “Reassessing the Category ‘Supernatural’” at the 100th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC. I wish to thank Wong Ngai Lui, Tse Yee Wan, So Wan Suen, Viki Li, and Rebecca Ma for research assistance.
2. This is based on a nonrandom survey of belief in the supernatural in January 2003, in which ninety-nine of 110 questionnaires were returned. The survey was handed out on the first day of the class “Magic, Myth and the Supernatural.” The same questionnaire has been run for four years and the results have been similar, giving some confidence in these results, though obviously this was not a random sample. Even though the sample is selecting for students

- interested in the subject (since they attend the first lecture of the course), they fill the questionnaire at the very start of the first class, before even receiving the copy of the syllabus (though some see the syllabus on-line). I believe the questionnaire gives a good general idea of student attitudes.
3. In Hong Kong students' English usage, "woman" is reserved for married women; girl is appropriate for any young unmarried female. This is not merely a preservation of old, pre-feminist usage; it is a translation from Chinese terms. Thus, the stories normally mention "girls" and "boys" instead of young women and young men, but they mean university-student-age persons.
  4. Actually, Bethlehem Hall is divided into male and female sides, so it is impossible for the girl's room to be directly above the boyfriend's.
  5. I interviewed a person who had close knowledge of this incident, and the outline of the story is historically correct. The suicide happened in about 1990 and involved a student who was in love with a girl, but she thought they were just friends. The girl and their mutual friends had no idea he was so besotted. He did this "experiment" when she began dating a student and he became jealous. The note was to the girl. In none of the other stories have I been able to find any information on any incident behind the story.
  6. The other stories are the "Ghost Bus" (which is new since it was not part of the 1995 collection), and a warning about a sculpture in front of the University Library (that anyone who walks under the sculpture's arch will not graduate).
  7. One story that was popular in 1995 was of the "Red Embroidered Shoes" that knocked on doors and ran down the halls of several square shaped dorms on campus. The story was collected in eight versions. This story was also known in public housing estates, and seems to have faded in popularity. Most of the other stories were collected in single versions and did not have many details. For example, one story said that the ghost of Chien Mu, founder of New Asia College, was seen near the New Asia Library at night on the anniversary of his death.
  8. The name *xiangsidou* actually refers to *Arbus precatorius*, an inedible bean, not to the edible azuki or *Ormosia* beans (I wish to thank Tan Chee Beng for pointing this out). But the two types of bean are often not distinguished. The well-known Tang poem *Xiangsi* by Wang Wei refers to the *xiangsi* bean as *bongdou* ("red bean") (see Wang Wei). Two students volunteered the name "*xiangsidou*" when speaking of red beans in interviews, and additional interviews show that there is some confusion or cognitive overlap between these two beans in students' minds.
  9. James Watson (1997 personal communication) pointed this out.
  10. Greg Acciaoli and Gordon Mathews first suggested this; personal communication 29 October 2001.
  11. Choi Po King offered this insight to the author.
  12. These books are named "Seven Mysterious Events" using a Japanese term that has been popularized by comic books featuring the young detective Jin Tianyi. These are Japanese comics translated into Chinese, and his adventures begin with seven mysteries, which is common in Japanese schools. These books about Hong Kong universities, however, are a mixture of traditional *fengshui* and illustrations inspired by Hollywood and Hong Kong ghost movies. It also has a playful edge to it; the colophon lists the publisher as "Elvis Presley" and the producers as "Jokes Workshop" (*xiaoxiaobua gongzuofang*). Cheung Yuk Man first pointed out the books and explained the connection to comics to the author.
  13. Smoking is now illegal in all buildings on campus, but there has not been a need to publicize the new rules since students do not smoke openly on campus.
  14. There was also the issue of sexual harassment, as many female students were pressured into participating in chants that they felt were vulgar and demeaning, but the primary issue in the

press was of students being led astray, and the lack of university supervision, a very Confucian way of framing the issue that highlights the view of students as still children.

15. Greenwood, for example, claims that magic "is a force that cannot be empirically identified or measured. If magic and magicians' otherworlds are seen as irrational or as identified as solely due to individual psychology or as figments of the imagination, . . . then this devalues the reality of magic for the practitioners themselves . . . . At the heart of the issue is the co-existence of two incompatible physical theories, one of which is seen to be superior to the other because, since the Enlightenment, the magical has been progressively devalued by the rise of rationalism" (Greenwood 13). The same argument could be used for ghosts; though ghosts cannot be empirically identified or measured, claiming they are imaginary or based on psychological forces devalues them.

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