



Writing about women in ghost stories: subversive representations of ideal femininity in “Nie Xiaoqian” and “Luella Miller”

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Abstract

On the one hand, because of the double historical prejudices from literary criticism against ghost stories and women’s writing, little attention has been paid to investigate the ideals of femininity in women’s ghost stories in nineteenth-century America. This article examines “Luella Miller,” a short story by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, who indirectly but sharply criticized the ideal of femininity in her time by creating an exaggerated example of the cult of feminine fragility. On the other hand, although extensive research has been done on Chinese ghost stories, especially on the ghost heroines in Pu Songling’s *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, there are few studies comparing the Chinese and the American ones. By comparing “Luella Miller” and Pu’s “Nie Xiaoqian,” this article does not primarily aim to list the similarities and differences between the Chinese and the American ideals of femininity, but to provide fresh insights into how both Freeman and Pu capitalized on the literary possibilities of the supernatural, because only in ghost stories they could write about women in ways impossible in “high literature.”

Keywords Ideals of femininity · Ghost stories · Pu Songling · “Nie Xiaoqian” · Mary E. Wilkins Freeman · “Luella Miller”

“The Master did not discuss prodigies, feats of strength, disorderly conduct, or the supernatural” (Confucius 2003, p. 71). By believing so, Confucianism divides the world into the “real,” practical and secular and an opposite otherworld of ghosts and spirits. Devoted to recording and exploring this otherworld, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (聊齋志異, hereafter *Strange Stories*) belongs to a special literary genre. Completed in 1679, *Strange Stories* is a collection of nearly 500 tales of

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the supernatural and is the most prominent of its kind in China. In this collection, supernatural beings such as fox spirits, often assuming human form in the guise of beautiful women, become likable, “humanized” and even integrated into the human family. Although the author, Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), was only an obscure provincial private tutor, *Strange Stories* became an immediate success after its publication and inspired many imitations for centuries. “Nie Xiaoqian” (聶小倩) is one of the most famous stories from this collection. Because most of the ghosts and spirits in this collection are female, including Nie, and their characteristics and struggles for identity are portrayed in such a detailed manner, the ideals of femininity or of “true womanhood” in *Strange Stories* have since been a heavily discussed topic. Many believe that it was the supernatural that offered Pu possibilities to write about these otherwise unapproachable issues.

Over 100 years later, across the Pacific, while the nineteenth century featured its progress in technology and rationality in the United States, spiritualism and fascination for the supernatural still played a significant role in literature. Considering examples like Washington Irving’s *The Sketch Book*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* and Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, many critics argue that the supernatural was inextricably intertwined with the American literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and this popularity can be partly explained by people’s doubts about the stability of the modern world (Briggs 1977; Lundie 1992; Sullivan 1978). While men’s supernatural fictions demonstrated these public anxieties of an increasingly technologized society and the tension between science and spirituality, women’s ghost stories, which had not been as much discussed, focused on the issues that shaped their authors’ private lives. Marriage, motherhood and sexuality were among the main themes (Lundie 1996, pp. 1–10). Many female writers, among them Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930), had enormous success with supernatural writing. Just like the case in China, ghost stories functioned as a safe harbor for American female writers to express dissatisfactions and criticisms because they usually slipped under the critical radar.

Vividly recreating the countryside and recording the dialects of New England, Mary Freeman spent her long and prolific literary career writing about what it meant to be a woman in nineteenth-century America. In a calm and objective style with occasional subtle ironies, Freeman’s female characters were often pictured with rebellion against patriarchal oppression despite their short and bleak lives. Although Freeman was enormously popular in her day and was one of the first women honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, her works have only been rediscovered and discussed by academia in recent years (Lundie 1996, p. 305; Reichardt 1992; Glasser 1996). “Luella Miller” was a short story written by Freeman in 1903, which is frequently reprinted in anthologies but remains almost unexplored by secondary literature.

This article examines the subversive portrayals of the ideal femininity in “Nie Xiaoqian” and “Luella Miller.” In his widely cited *The Fantastic*, Todorov distinguishes three genres: If the reader decides that the laws of reality remain intact and can explain the phenomena described, the work belongs to the *uncanny*. If, on the contrary, the reader decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, the work belongs to the *marvelous*. If the reader hesitates

between the uncanny and the marvelous, the work belongs to the *fantastic* (Todorov 1995, p. 41). Because the ghosts cannot be explained by the normal laws of nature, we might assume that “Nie Xiaoqian” and “Luella Miller” should be the marvelous in Todorov’s terms. However, we shall see that in both cases the boundaries between the world where the laws of nature apply and the world where the laws of nature are violated are ambiguous because the identities of our heroines as ghosts are uncertain and mutable. Moreover, the characters in these two stories often have an almost businesslike attitude toward the supernatural. It does not necessarily mean that these ghosts are not terrifying at all, but it implies that making the reader afraid is not always the authors’ point. Historically, as in *Strange Stories*, horror had almost never been the predominant tone of Chinese ghost stories, whose themes varied from melancholy to romance and even comedy (Huntington 2001, p. 113). In “Luella Miller,” the supernatural was also underplayed by the author, because, as we shall see, Freeman deliberately let go of many opportunities to create fear or mysteriousness. Therefore, we should read between the lines of the supernatural in these stories and try to discover how ghost stories as a unique genre enables the authors to carry out their hidden agendas.

“Nie Xiaoqian”: the free pursuit of love and the transformation from ghost to woman

In the “Author’s own record,” the preface of *Strange Stories*, Pu Songling wrote: “I referred my non-success in this life to the influence of a destiny surviving from the last. I have been tossed hither and thither in the direction of the ruling wind, like a flower falling in filthy places. [...] Yet I only succeed in writing a book with solitude and anger. I thus commit my thoughts to writings; how pitiable I am! Alas!” (Pu 1880, pp. xxi–xxii. Translation modified) “Solitude and anger” is the name of an essay by Han Fei, a philosopher of the third century BCE. In this essay, Han Fei lamented the immoral and unfair behaviors of the age in general and the corruption of officials in particular. He was cast in prison by the intrigues of a rival minister and was forced to commit suicide (Pu 1880, p. xxii, Giles’ footnote). By alluding to this essay, Pu implicitly stated his overplot of social criticism behind the obvious literary motive of simply venting his anger and frustration as an unsuccessful scholar to write a book about the supernatural.

Among the various topics of Pu’s social criticism, his subversive representations of ideal femininity at that time have drawn the most attention from modern scholars. In his female ghosts, Pu created, in the words of Marlon Hom, “a unique type of feminine image whose actions are in total contradiction to the conventional image of mortal women” (Hom 1979, p. 274). Pu’s heroines are most commonly described with “defiant”, “rebellious” and “indifferent to traditional morality” (Barr 1989, p. 501). In the following story, we shall see a special example.

In “Nie Xiaoqian,” a folktale-inspired story by Pu, a man named Ning Caichen found an unknown lady in his inn room, discovered that she was going to bewitch him and drove her away sternly. The next day, another traveler was killed and his servant the night after. Then the young lady, Nie Xiaoqian, appeared to Ning again

and told him that she had fallen in love with him for his virtue and perseverance against the seduction of sex and money. She confessed that she was indeed a ghost and had killed the traveler and his servant, but she was forced by a demon to bewitch people by her beauty. To help her get out of the evil control, Ning reburied Nie in her hometown. Nie then wanted to marry Ning, but Ning's mother had little faith in ghosts and disapproved of their marriage. Nie then suggested that she could also serve as her daughter, if not daughter-in-law, and Ning's mother agreed. She looked after Ning's mother day and night, endeavoring to please her in every way. Ning's mother gradually became fond of her, but she still worried that if a ghost could give birth to children. Nie reassured her by saying that Ning would have three sons, all of whom would become distinguished men. Ning's mother finally blessed their marriage and Nie's prophesy came true (Pu 1880, pp. 124–135).

At first glance, Nie Xiaoqian is by no means a good example of Pu's defiant heroines. On the contrary, she complies with the female ideal as an obedient daughter-in-law and a "child-bearing machine." Indeed, having been raised as a Confucian scholar, Pu cannot be expected to break with every tradition at his time, which will be discussed later. The unconventional behavior of Nie that we want to analyze now is her independent pursuit of love. By commending Nie and describing vividly her happiness as a result of this pursuit, Pu indirectly advocated "free love" for women in this story. While in the modern sense, when people seek "free love," they want their personal relationships to be freed from many matters, such as state regulation or church interference, the concept of "free love" in Chinese history is exclusively connected with "love marriage," where the individuals love each other before they get married, as opposed to arranged marriage. This aspect is also what the classical *History of Chinese Literature* by You Guo'en emphasizes when mentioning *Strange Stories*: "One of the main themes of this work is love. [...] It is strongly against the traditional rules of etiquette. [...] The young men and women in this work are able to fall in love freely and get married freely, a stark contrast with traditional marriages" (You 1978, p. 328).

After Ning had seriously resisted her seduction with self-discipline, Nie came back the other day and openly expressed her admiration to him, "I have seen many men, but none with a steel cold heart like yours. You are an upright man, and I will not attempt to deceive you" (Pu 1880, p. 127). Because in seventeenth-century China, women who did not maintain a proper distance with men were frowned upon, let alone taking initiative to approach them, Nie definitely crossed a line here. When Ning's mother was not sure if her son should marry Nie, Nie again showed her frankness and sincerity: "I have but one motive in what I ask, [...] and if you have no faith in disembodied people, then let me regard him as my brother, and live under your protection, serving you like a daughter." As a result, "Ning's mother could not resist her straightforward manner" (*Ibid.*, p. 131). After Nie had been diligently fulfilling her duty as a daughter-in-law for some time, Ning's mother "secretly wished Ning to espouse Xiaoqian, though she rather dreaded any unfortunate consequences that might arise. This Xiaoqian perceived, and seizing an opportunity said to Ning's mother, 'I have been with you now more than a year, and you ought to know something of my disposition'" (*Ibid.*, p. 133. Translation modified) and Nie took the initiative again to ask for her approval of their marriage. This time Ning's mother

agreed. All these bold behaviors of Nie were against the traditional morality and the social codes of ideal women.

As Chen Yinke (1890–1969), one of the most important historians in twentieth-century China, pointed out, “in my country’s literature, due to the rules of etiquette, people do not dare to write about the relationship between men and women, much less about husbands and wives. The reason is that the romances in bedroom and the trivialities of family are not considered as worth to write about in detail, but only in general terms” (Chen 1962, p. 93). However, these romances and trivialities were exactly the focus of “Nie Xiaoqian” and many other tales in *Strange Stories: How did the husband and the wife meet and know each other? How did society react to this? What were the roles of husband and wife in marriage? How did they think of each other? How should women behave, when they are daughters, daughters-in-law, wives, and mothers at the same time?*

When Nie Xiaoqian first arrived in Ning’s family, although Nie and Ning were passionately in love, they could only act in a brother-sister relationship. Their complex feelings that they dare not express publicly were exquisitely depicted by Pu:

[S]he entered, lighted a candle, and sat down. For some time she did not speak: at length asking Ning if he studied at night or not—“For,” said she, “when I was little I used to repeat *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*; but now I have forgotten more than half, and, therefore, I should like to borrow a copy, and when you are at leisure in the evening you might hear me.” Ning said he would, and they sat silently there for some time, after which Xiaoqian went away and slept in another room. [...] In the evening before she went to bed, she would always go in and repeat a little of the sutra and leave pitifully as soon as she thought Ning was getting sleepy (Pu 1880, p. 131. Translation modified).

Two periods of silence here were particularly noteworthy. Nie did not hesitate to talk to Ning in private when they were earlier in the inn. When this time she and Ning were together alone at the beginning of this passage, why did she not speak for some time? It was the different atmosphere around her and her identity in the transition from ghost to women that held her back: Because Nie was now in Ning’s home with his mother around, she had to consider the social codes between single men and women as they were not married yet; the social codes also concerned her now more than before because she was not a lone ghost who can act freely anymore, but an adoptive daughter. After they had discussed the plan of reading the sutra together, there was silence for some time again. Pu had described these two periods of silence as powerfully intense because Nie and Ning clearly had much to say but they had to conceal their feelings. Although Nie was defiant in many ways, she chose to behave within the rules this time. By contrast, when later the marriage was arranged and Ning’s relatives eagerly asked to see the bride, Nie was finally able to be herself again and “came forth proudly in beautiful clothes and make-up.” “The whole room could not take their eyes off her. Instead of suspecting her as a ghost, they wondered if she was a fairy” (*Ibid.*, pp. 134–135. Translation modified).

When comparing these two scenes (reading together and appearance before relatives), we can find that Pu’s emotional subtext was more than clear: only if all the women could pursue their love freely like Nie Xiaoqian! Only if there were no

oppression of women so that Nie and Ning would not be forced into silence! By directly and elaborately presenting Nie's happy marriage, Pu indirectly endorsed Nie's courage to protest actively against the ideal of the passive female and arranged marriages. Chang Chun-shu and Chang Hsüeh-lun, in their "The World of P'u Sungling's Liao-chai chih-I," one of the earliest and the most cited English papers on Pu, even argued that Pu developed a new concept of femininity: "Protesting against the prevailing idea of 'A woman without talent is a woman of virtue,' the author embodies his heroines with wisdom, courage, talent and wits that sometimes surpassed the heroes" (Chang and Chang 1973, p. 407). There is one more virtue that can be added to this list: many other heroines in *Strange Stories*, like Nie Xiaoqian, were portrayed as more determined and independent than men in general. They dared to act on their own and to break the basic code of "Three Obediences" in Confucianism: obey your father as a maiden daughter; obey your husband as a wife; obey your sons as a widow (Yang 2004, p. 308). Judith Zeitlin suggested that the domestication of Nie, her transformation from harmful spirit to exemplary wife and her "progressive reintegration into the human community" are only possible because Ning "maintains iron control" over his sexuality by resisting the ghost's advances at the beginning of the story (Zeitlin 2007, p. 35), but that is not enough, because unless Nie also has iron control over her destiny and chooses her own husband, there would not be any transformation in the first place. When it comes to describing women as superior to men, Pu's own comment in another story is most striking: "[Comparing with the heroine of this story], all those who wear Confucian hats and call themselves great men are shamed to death!" (Pu 1960, p. 769) Although this is not a comment of "Nie Xiaoqian," it is still representative of Pu's "new concept of femininity," an overcorrection in terms of gender equality.

While ghosts and spirits were practically ignored by the Confucian mainstream, at Pu's time women also belonged to this marginal "other," because they had almost no social status and were usually considered as men's property. The oppression of women during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was the strongest in Chinese history. Not only were foot-binding and concubinage more common than ever, the social pressures on widows to remain chaste or even to commit suicide of loyalty to their deceased husbands were also particularly intense (Ropp 1976, pp. 5–6). Thus, interestingly, this story is about how a member of one kind of "other" (ghosts) manages to meet every demand of another kind of "other" (women) so that she can come back to the mainstream and be accepted by the larger society. This intriguing setting makes "Nie Xiaoqian" a major source of Chinese gender studies since its publication. While most of the scholars focus on Pu's advocacy of women's free pursuit for love (Zhou 2015; Bo 1985), as we have talked about, many also noticed the fascinating identity transformation of Nie. In his influential *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun shrewdly observed that "the supernatural stories at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) are usually so brief and strange as to seem incredible. *Strange Stories*, however, contains such detailed and realistic descriptions that even flower-spirits and fox-fairies appear human and approachable; we forget that they belong to the 'other'" (Lu 1998, p. 147. My translation).

What if the author did not want to write about the supernatural in the first place so that the detailed descriptions of ghosts were not needed to make believe,

but only as a subversive cover? One modern Chinese scholar even shouted in his paper: “What *Strange Stories* wrote about was all *human!*” (Zhao 1980, p. 10) If we read Nie’s change from a ghost to a woman closely, we can discover that it takes more than “detailed and realistic descriptions” of ghosts as humans to make people forget about their otherness. Since feminism cannot be accepted by his society, Pu attributed Nie’s unconventional behaviors to her identity as ghost, but once we realize that this ghost element was only a cover-up, it becomes clear what his motive really was.

We have discussed how it only took Nie to “come forth proudly in beautiful clothes and make-up” to convince Ning’s relatives of her new identity. Indeed, they even went a step further to consider her superhumanly (Pu 1880, pp. 134–135), but it was much more difficult to win the trust of Ning’s mother. At first Nie “went into the kitchen and got ready the dinner, running about the place as if she had lived there all her life. Ning’s mother was, however, much afraid of her, and would not let her sleep in the house” (*Ibid.*, p. 131). Nie continued to work as a housewife industriously, and gradually made Ning’s mother from feeling “unbearably tired” to “wonderfully comfortable” (*Ibid.*, p. 132. Translation modified). Ning’s mother grew to regard her almost as her own child and even forgot she was a ghost: she kept Nie living and sleeping with her. Both mother and son loved Nie so much that speaking of her as a ghost became a taboo and other people were not able to tell the difference (*Ibid.*, pp. 132–133).

In this story there is a constant play between the appearance and the truth behind the appearance, both of which can be defined by the society in the case of Nie’s identity: for other people, the unknown truth is that Nie is actually a ghost; for Ning’s mother, as long as Nie can be a subordinate daughter-in-law and a child-bearing mother, her identity as human can be the truth. As argued above, it was the uncertainty of the fantastic (Todorov 1995) and the supernatural enabling this play of identities. The identity of ghost can be regarded as a metaphor for all the oppression of women, from which Nie tried to escape by actively acting on her own to choose her love and control her destiny, unreservedly supported by Pu.

However, this transformation conforms with one of the most established ideas in Pu’s time, the reduction of women’s value to childbearing, an idea appeared not only in “Nie Xiaoqian,” but throughout the book. Not until Nie had reassured Ning’s mother by saying that ghosts could also bear children did Ning’s mother allow their marriage. The astonishing turn of Ning’s mother’s attitude to Nie from fear to love also shows how decisive childbearing was for a woman’s consolidation of her position in the family: it does not even matter that Nie was once a murderous ghost. Judith Zeitlin argued that in this story “childbearing becomes simply the final marker of [...] the ghost’s humanity” (Zeitlin 2007, p. 36). Childbearing cannot “physically” change Nie from ghost into woman, but it is so socially important that it can make people forget this fact. The “otherness” of both ghosts and women is most obvious when we consider how simple they can be defined by their “function” and how easily their identities can be transformed. At the end of “Nie Xiaoqian,” there is a typically Chinese happy ending: a big family with many distinguished sons, a cliché that many see as a serious compromise of the subversive feminist implications in this story.

Acknowledging that Pu was still bound by some traditional Confucian precepts of womanhood makes some scholars believe that Pu's feminism was not genuine, but only another form of sexual objectification, still serving for men's interest (Ma 2000; Xu 2001). But most of the secondary literature argues that *Strange Stories* unquestionably commend the female rebels by sympathetically writing about how they search for love independently like Nie Xiaoqian, showing the awakening of feminism in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (Carlitz 1994; Liu 1996; He 2004; Kang 2006; Hsieh 2008; Huang 2008). We suggest that these two positions are compatible, because in *Strange Stories*, as Maram Epstein summarizes, there is "a tension between two potentially oppositional ideological stances: one is a deeply conservative desire for social stability [...]; the other is an equally compelling desire for individual expressive freedom [...]. The interplay between these two ideological poles has long informed and inspired the development of Chinese culture in both political and aesthetic terms" (Epstein 2001, pp. 303–304). What deserves our attention more is Pu's feminist side and his usage of the supernatural to undermine the ideals of femininity. Briefly introducing the historical background of Chinese censorship can help us understand why retreating to a world of ghosts for subversive purposes was such an urgent need.

China has a long history of censorship, and, as a result, countless works went lost. The first emperor of China, Qin Shihuang (221–206 BCE), is notorious for his "burning of books and burying of scholars" (焚書坑儒) that he disagreed with. The Tang dynasty (618–907) banned private ownership of astronomical and prophetic texts. The Song Dynasty (906–1279) banned military treatises (Sunzi's *The Art of War* was fortunately excluded). The Ming Dynasty further tightened the censorship to forbid political allegories. But it was Pu's time, the early years of the Qing Dynasty (1660–1710), when the "literary inquisition" (文字獄, literally: "imprisonment due to writings") reached its peak. Because the Qing rulers were alien Manchus from the northeast of China, they were very sensitive to the native Chinese nationalists, especially the loyalists of the former Ming dynasty. In the striking case of Zhuang Tinglong (?–1655), his updated version of an unauthorized Ming history, published posthumously, was considered as defamatory to the Qing. As a result, Zhuang's remains were excavated from his grave and destroyed in 1663. Over 70 persons, including all the male members of the Zhuang family and many scholars associated with the works, were beheaded (Whitefield 2015).

Under this reign of terror that cast gloom over the academic world for a long time, supernatural fiction naturally became a vehicle for protesting against the oppression of women, because "orthodox" scholars despised them (Ropp 1976, p. 11). Avoiding censorship was one of the main reasons why, as Andrew Plaks pointed out, seventeenth-century Chinese novelists were consciously manipulating the literary and thematic conventions of the vernacular genre for new purposes (Plaks 1985, p. 543).

Strange Stories was indeed regarded by the readers at that time as pure entertainment and a harmless collection of supernatural tales. Its popularity at Qing's court, in particular, proved that Pu's strategy worked: The famous early Qing scholar, Wang Shizhen (1634–1711), Minister of Justice, exhibited the contemporaneous view of *Strange Stories* in a poem commenting on the book: "Those that are told playfully are also received playfully" (Wang 2002). Ji Yun (1724–1805), another influential

Qing scholar, also wrote: “*Strange Stories* is exceedingly popular, but while this is the work of a talented man, it is not the way a serious scholar should write” (Lu 2000, p. 262. Translation modified). While Pu’s contemporary readers were primarily fascinated by his imagination, they did not recognize his deep-grounded social criticism, which, more than anything else, has won him the respect and sympathy of modern readers.

“Luella Miller”: the cult of feminine fragility

“Luella Miller” was largely narrated by an old lady Lydia Anderson, the last person alive who knew our protagonist. According to Lydia, Luella was an energy vampire, absorbing the life of those who loved her. Her husband Erastus Miller, sister-in-law Lily Miller, Aunt Abby Mixter, colleague Lottie Henderson, Doctor Malcom, helpers Sarah Jones and Maria Brown all worked themselves to death looking after her. Thanking these people who were obsessed with caring for Luella until they got ill and died, Luella managed to live. Unlike traditional vampires, Luella was not evil but indifferent and oblivious, because she had no intention to do harm, and she could not control her strange ability to enslave others and swallow their energy. In the end, “not another soul in the whole town would lift a finger for her. There got to be a sort of panic” (Freeman 1996, p. 315). She finally died, but not without her family and friends’ ghosts “helping,” which will be analyzed later.

Luella was a “true woman” of her time in terms of being an absolute domestic lady. Prior to the Victorian period, in both Britain and America, an ideal woman was expected to work with husbands in the family business. She could directly contribute to the family income by serving customers or keeping accounts. As the industrial era advanced, however, home and workplace became separated, meaning while men commuted to work in the public sphere of business, women stayed at home in the private sphere of domesticity. The perfect ladies at that time had little connection to society and became totally dependent on their husbands. According to this ideal, a woman did not even have to work much at home, since domestic duties were increasingly done by servants. Being a mother had different meanings too, as taking care of children could be left in the hands of nannies and governesses (Vicinus 1972, p. ix; Mintz and Kellogg 1989; McDannell 1994). Besides, women were always regarded as delicate and weak, because “their fragile nervous systems were likely to be overstimulated or irritated, with disastrous results” (Cogan 1989, p. 29). Consequently, she must be protected and taken care of by others, especially her husband. Therefore, being ideally domestic at that time did not always mean being good at housekeeping, but ironically the opposite. No one fitted this new ideal more than Luella Miller, and she never found anything wrong with it:

When the doctor had gone, Luella came into the room lookin’ like a baby in her ruffled nightgown. I can see her now. Her eyes were as blue and her face all pink and white like a blossom, and she looked at Aunt Abby in the bed sort of innocent and surprised. ‘Why,’ says she, ‘Aunt Abby ain’t got up yet?’
‘No, she ain’t,’ says I, pretty short.

‘I thought I didn’t smell the coffee,’ says Luella.
 ‘Coffee,’ says I. ‘I guess if you have coffee this mornin’ you’ll make it yourself.’
 ‘I never made the coffee in all my life,’ says she, dreadful astonished. ‘Erastus always made the coffee as long as he lived, and then Lily she made it, and then Aunt Abby made it. I don’t believe I can make the coffee, Miss Anderson’ (Freeman 1996, p. 310).

Luella was interrogated, directly like this by other characters or indirectly by narration, and placed under the microscope throughout the story by the biting critical narrator, Lydia. While Luella, excessively dependent on others, enjoyed a luxurious life, Lydia, hard-working and self-reliant, lived in misery. As a result, her portrayal of Luella as vampiric has often been regarded as unreliable by the critics because of her mixed emotions towards Luella: In her narration, the reader can find that Lydia was fascinated and repelled by Luella simultaneously. On the one hand, Lydia never restrained herself from praising Luella’s beauty. According to her, “Luella Miller used to sit in a way nobody else could if they sat up and studied a week of Sundays, [...] and it was a sight to see her walk. If one of them willows over there on the edge of the brook could start up and get its roots free of the ground, and move off, it would go just the way Luella Miller used to” (*Ibid.*, p. 306). On the other hand, she jealously described how Erastus “worshipped her” and how Lottie “used to do all the teaching’ for her” and “just set her eyes by Luella, as all the girls did” (*Ibid.*, p. 307). This obvious resentment of the narrator indirectly reflected the author’s attitude of the ideal women at that time whose job was only to be beautiful and to depend on others. As a professional author who could support herself by writing short stories, Freeman caricatured the ideal of femininity which regarded helplessness as one of the supreme virtues (Lundie 1996, pp. 21–22; Hinkle 2008) and implicitly criticized the ideal of the true woman by telling Luella bore “an evil name” (Freeman 1996, p. 305) (although, as mentioned above, she was not deliberately evil as Lydia suggested), because people’s acceptance of this passive and fragile ideal enabled her prey on the goodwill of her relatives and friends.

As Alfred Bendixen argued, “supernatural fiction opened doors for American women writers, allowing them to move into otherwise forbidden regions” (Bendixen 1985, p. 2). By setting the experience of their characters in the supernatural realm, Freeman was able to explore more freely “‘unladylike’ subjects as sexuality, bad marriages, and repression” (*Ibid.*). The fact that the supernatural element is only a marginal theme and a vague background in “Luella Miller” also suggests that the author only intended to use it as a cover for critique. Even the only explicit supernatural plot in the story was doubtful, where Lydia saw Luella’s ghost escorted by other people who were already dead [“I saw Luella Miller and Erastus Miller, and Lilly, and Aunt Abby, and Maria, and the Doctor, and Sarah, all goin’ out of her door, and all but Luella shone white in the moonlight, and they were all helpin’ her along till she seemed to fairly fly in the midst of them. Then it all disappeared.” (Freeman 1996, p. 316)], because, as argued above, the narrator Lydia was not necessarily reliable, for she was jealous of and disgusted by Luella at the same time. As the only person surviving Luella, Lydia

said: “There was somethin’ about Luella Miller seemed to draw the heart right out of you, but she didn’t draw it out of me” (*Ibid.*, p. 312). Before retelling the story of Luella’s death, Lydia emphasized its authenticity too much, “I saw what I saw, and I know I saw it, and I will swear on my death bed that I saw it” (*Ibid.*, p. 316), only making it less convincing. Again, as we categorized “Luella Miller” into the ambiguous fantastic (Todorov 1995), if the author wanted to play up the supernatural, she would not make the reader hesitate about it.

In a letter to Fred Lewis Pattee (1863–1950), a leading authority on American literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, Freeman clearly revealed that she wanted more indirect suggestion in her stories and how she had to compromise for commercial reasons: “Most of my own work [...] is not really the kind I myself like. I want more symbolism, more mysticism. I left that out, because it struck me people did not want it, and I was forced to consider selling qualities” (Freeman 1985, p. 382, on 5 September 1919). Perhaps this is part of the reason why unlike some of her more openly feminist contemporaries, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), Freeman was often regarded as a “subtle feminist” and “a fascinating middle ground”, because she is neither like an outspoken and unambivalent “new woman” in the 1890s nor a passive promoter of the status quo in women’s advice books and journals of her time (Glasser 1996, p. 214).

We can see better why Freeman was considered “subtle” when she undramatically described the tragic death of Lottie Henderson, Luella’s colleague, the first victim in the story:

It was funny how she came to get it [Luella came here to teach the district school], for folks said she hadn’t any education, and that one of the big girls, Lottie Henderson, used to do all the teachin’ for her, while she sat back and did embroidery work on a cambric pocket handkerchief. Lottie Henderson was a real smart girl, a splendid scholar, and she just set her eyes by Luella, as all the girls did. Lottie would have made a real smart woman, but she died when Luella had been here about a year—just faded away and died: nobody knew what ailed her. She dragged herself to that schoolhouse and helped Luella teach till the very last minute. The committee all knew how Luella didn’t do much of the work herself, but they winked at it (Freeman 1996, p. 306).

The death of “a real smart girl” and “a splendid scholar” for no obvious reason at the beginning of the story should have been seized on by the author of a traditional ghost story to develop a melodramatic and intriguing plot. However, Freeman’s account here cannot be calmer, which indicates that she did not aim to create suspense and horror but to use the genre of this story as a sham to undermine the helpless ideal of femininity. Leah Blatt Glasser, in her *In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Work of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, the most comprehensive biography of Freeman so far, recognized Freeman’s implicit fear of the open expression of feminism because she understood “the obstacles to open protest” (Glasser 1996, p. 217). As a result, Freeman wrote “*seemingly* supernatural tales” (*Ibid.*, pp. 218–219. My emphasis) to protest implicitly.

The death of Lottie (and a boy who helped Luella after Lottie) did not stop Luella’s admirer Erastus Miller from marrying her not long after. He grew

weaker and weaker afterward, because not only could Luella not help him run a home, but she was herself in great need of daily care. Still, Erastus loved her whole-heartedly:

He always got the breakfast and let Luella lay abed. He did all the sweepin' and the washin' and the ironin' and most of the cookin'. He couldn't bear to have Luella lift her finger, and she let him do for her. She lived like a queen for all the work she did. She didn't even do her sewin'. She said it made her shoulder ache to sew, and poor Erastus's sister Lily used to do all her sewin'. She wa'n't able to, either; she was never strong in her back, but she did it beautifully. She had to, to suit Luella, she was so dreadful particular (Freeman 1996, pp. 307–308).

Erastus “went almost bent double when he tried to wait on Luella, and he spoke feeble, like an old man.” (*Ibid.*, p. 307.) He died soon too. Again, like the case of Lottie, the author did not treat his death as important or exaggerate its mysteriousness other than clearly showed that Luella’s “true womanhood” killed his husband. Despite this, her next suitor, Doctor Malcom continued to admire her and wanted to marry her.

How could Luella’s complete dependency on others keep attracting so many people, even after her helpers had died one by one? Why was her fatal helplessness not only considered as harmless but also lovable? Freeman show her subversive power by compelling the readers to ask these questions and challenge the ideal of charming woman in nineteenth-century America, because accepting this ideal can potentially make you an accomplice, as in the case of Lottie, the committee of the district school all knew how Luella did not do much of the work herself, but they winked at it and consequently made Lottie die helping Luella.

We may also notice that Luella was described “like a baby” many times: she slept like a baby (*Ibid.*, p. 310), looked like a baby (*Ibid.*) and was ignorant “like a baby with scissors in its hand cuttin’ everybody without knowin’ what it was doin’” (*Ibid.*, p. 314), however, her baby-like helplessness is not genderless, but always feminine, with “a wonderful grace of motion and attitude” (*Ibid.*, p. 306). Emphasizing this is crucial because describing her as a genderless baby would weaken the author’s subversive representation of ideal femininity. In Nina Auerbach’s words, Luella was a “perfectly idle Victorian lady who exists to be helped, [...] the exemplar of her class and time, the epitome of her age, not an outcast in it” (Auerbach 1996, p. 108). To serve for her feminist criticism, Freeman designed the plot so exquisitely that although Luella actually belonged to a class in which a woman must work, as she did not have servants and had to “work” as a teacher before she married Erastus, it did not stop her from being de facto an ideal lady from upper class, because according to Freeman’s setting, this helpless ideal is so powerful that once you fulfilled it, people would volunteer to help regardless of your class.

Many early critics regarded Freeman’s supernatural stories, a minority of her works, as vastly inferior to her realist works with which Freeman established her reputation (Voller 2002, p. 121). As Perry Westbrook, the author of one of the early biographies of Freeman, argued:

As early as 1903 the deterioration in [...] Freeman's art had become catastrophically noticeable in a volume of ghost stories, *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Tales of the Supernatural*. Deficient in suspense and atmosphere, these tales rely on the most ludicrous devices for their interest [...]. With the exception of an occasional flash of [...] Freeman's old flair for presenting the distortion of village characters [...] these stories are without merit (Westbrook 1967, p. 149, cited in Oaks 1985, p. 208).

"Freeman's old flair," for many critics like Westbrook, is exclusively her realistic presentation of the New England village life in which people are "free to work out their own destinies by their own devices" (*Ibid.*). In terms of her feminist concern with the strictly defined roles of women, Freeman directly discussed the responsibilities assigned to her female characters and the limits of their freedom in her earlier realist short stories. Freeman's ghost stories, on the other hand, according to this standard, does not explore the individual struggles as thoroughly and thus are of lower quality (Oaks 1985, p. 208).

However, as Jack Voller also observed, we argue that this "lapse" that for many critics Freeman's ghost stories represent was deliberate. It was an attempt to involve what she called, in her letter mentioned above, more "symbolism" and "mysticism." Although she recognized that this might not sell as well as her realist works, still she wanted it, because it allowed her, as was common for many other women writers in her time, to use the supernatural as a means of giving voice and examining the feminists issues that the constraints of realism did not permit (Voller 2002, p. 121). In the end, she found a middle ground among bookselling, censorship and radical feminism by undercutting traditional ideals of women in her "seemingly supernatural tales." Recognizing this is significant because it makes us reconsider not only the values of Freeman's ghost stories, but also helps us understand the sizable body of supernatural fiction by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American women in general, which was "organized around recurrent themes and tropes that develop out of, responded to, and, in many cases, critiqued the roles of women in Victorian and Edwardian America" (Weinstock 2008, p. 2).

Conclusion

The ghosts told their King, "Here is that crazy scholar who [had just died and] didn't believe in ghosts and spirits and persecuted us when he was alive." The King of the Ghosts blamed him angrily, "You have sound limbs and intelligence—haven't you heard the line [from Confucius] 'Abundant are the virtues of ghosts and spirits'? Even Confucius, who was a sage, said you should revere us and keep your distance. [...] Who do you think you are and how dare you to say we don't exist?" (Qu 1981, p. 186. My translation)

As this tale goes, Confucianism never denied the existence of the supernatural, but only refused to talk about it and wanted to keep a distance. Ghost stories were therefore always tolerated but taken less seriously and were not judged as strictly by the moralists as other forms of literature. Pu Songling was thus able to use the

supernatural to directly write about femininity and indirectly criticize its ideals. In “Nie Xiaoqian,” while still conditioned by the ideal of woman as prolific mother, Pu advocated for female independence by writing favorably of Nie’s free pursuit of love.

In “Luella Miller,” Luella was described as an extreme example of an ideal woman in Mary Freeman’s time, whose dependence and passiveness made people addicted to her, eventually leading them to death. The real horror of this story was not its metaphorical vampirism, but the cult of “true womanhood.” According to this ideal, a “true feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood” (Greenwood 1850, p. 311; Welter 1966, 1977). By adding “a lethal dimension” to this most widely circulated Victorian stereotype of passive women (Auerbach 1996, p. 107), Freeman hid behind the supernatural and accused this cult of creating useless women who were kept from independence like Luella and of forcing other people to work themselves into an early grave.

In Pu’s story, the boundary between the strange and the normal was often uncertain because it was constantly altered and redefined, especially by the actions of the heroines. By fulfilling her duties as a good wife or filial daughter-in-law, a female ghost could earn acceptance and esteem from society and become human. In “Luella Miller,” the supernatural element was also uncertain since the only obvious supernatural plot involving ghosts was doubtful because of the narrator’s unreliability. If the authors wanted to write “real” ghost stories that were sensational, scary and dramatic, they would not have made the supernatural element uncertain and marginal. Therefore, for both Pu and Freeman, ghost stories were only a formulaic covering allowing them to express discontent without openly challenging the norms.

Just as female ghosts offered insight into constructions of femininity in seventeenth-century China, we have argued that feminism and women’s supernatural fiction in nineteenth-century America were firmly connected as well. The ideals of femininity were not only the main topic of Freeman but also many other American women ghost story writers. As Catherine Lundie argued, these women are actually not “dealing with fantastic worlds” but “dealing with their own” (Lundie 1992, pp. 271–272). Although this article is based on only two stories, it collaborates with the existing studies of Pu and Freeman, which both have respectively argued that ghost stories as a conventionally less serious form enabled both Pu and Freeman to inquire into sensitive issues without fear of exposure, as we have repeatedly stressed as well. By comparing these two stories, our primary goal is not to find similarities and differences of ideal women in China and America, but to suggest that writing ghost stories for subversive feminist purposes can be a cross-culture and cross-temporal practice.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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