



Some Chinese Ghosts

Lafcadio Hearn

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Contents:

The Soul of the Great Bell;

The Story of Ming-Y;

The Legend of Tchi-Niu;

The Return of Yen-Tchin-King;

The Tradition of the Tea Plant;

The Tale of the Porcelain God.

I think that my best apology for the insignificant size of this volume is the very character of the material composing it. In preparing the legends I sought especially for *weird beauty*; and I could not forget this striking observation in Sir Walter Scott's "Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad" "The supernatural, though appealing to certain powerful emotions very widely and deeply sown amongst the human race, is, nevertheless, a *spring which is peculiarly apt to lose its elasticity by being too much pressed upon.*" -- Lafcadio Hearn

Some Chinese Ghosts Details

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From Reader Review Some Chinese Ghosts for online ebook

Bonnie says

The stories in this book were probably groundbreaking when they were first released in the late 1800s. The amount of time and care to translate these stories must have been amazing; with so many translated works at our fingertips today, I think that we forget how small and insulated the world was a few hundred years ago.

However, time and technology has pretty much rendered this pedestrian. That being said, the selected works here are not all of the same quality; only a couple held my interest.

Eustacia Tan says

I borrowed this book thinking it was going to be scary (from the cover, and experience reading True Singapore Ghost Stories), and Chinese, but it turned out to be decidedly non-scary, and not that Chinese after all. This is what I get for not looking at the author name when picking stories.

Chinese Ghost Stories is actually Lafcadio Hearn's version of certain Chinese legends (which according to him are actually Chinese), written before he came to Asia. I think. That's what the introduction said anyway. And since it's written in 1886, according to the preface, the language is very flowery, and does not remind me of Chinese in any way.

There are six stories in this book, and I think my favourites were the first few. The last few books, especially the last two - The Tradition of the Tea Plant and The Tale of the Porcelain God, were rather confusing and uninteresting to me. Anyway, a short rundown of each book:

The Soul of the Great Bell: I liked this story. It's about filial piety, and rather sad, though completely not scary. It's about sacrifice and making a huge bell with metals that don't mix; if I say anymore, I'll give away the entire story.

The Story of Ming Yi and The Story of Zhi Nu: These are both love stories of humans with the not-quite human. It's a bit like Madam White Snake, but short and perhaps not as famous in Chinese lore.

The Return of Yan Zhenjing: This is about loyalty to country. Actually a ghost story (the others just involved death or non-humans, and not actually ghosts), but again, not scary.

The Tradition of the Tea Plant: This is a retelling of the legend of how tea came to be, which is a monk cutting his eyelids off and throwing them to the ground, from which the tea leaf appears. There's a love story in here, which I don't get, and where is the ghost?

The Tale of the Porcelain God: I did not get this. It's a bit like the The Soul of the Great Bell, but less clearly written. I kinda skipped the first three or four pages, which were lists of porcelains.

The glossary too, is suspect. I skimmed through it, but I saw an entry which said:

"JIA - "House"; but especially the house of the dead - a tomb"

Now, I'm just guessing, but the character is probably ? (jia). It just means house, and I've never heard it being used as a house of the dead, much less "especially" used as the house of the dead. I asked my family, and the closest we got was that according to my grandma, people in Singapore in the past (when she was young) didn't really have places to live, so some people lived above the cemeteries and used tombstones as tables. But the definition after the semi-colon seems to be very off.

In the author's defence, this was written before he went to Asia. He did eventually make it to Japan, marry a Japanese girl and write a lot of famous ghost stories. I will probably give them a go, if I come across them, though after this experience, I can't say that I'll intentionally seek them out.

This review was first posted at Inside the mind of a Bibliophile

Tony says

Hearn, Lafcadio. SOME CHINESE GHOSTS. (1887). ***. This was the first work presented in the Library of America's volume of the writings of Hearn. It consists of several charming retellings of Chinese legends. They are all relatively short and to the point and written in a style that mimics the storytelling style of a Chinese sage. Several of them stand out above the rest. These were, "The Song of the Great Bell," in which a young maiden sacrifices herself to enable her father to produce a bell to the specifications of the Emperor, whose tone will ring out over miles and have the desired sweetness and character most desired, and, "The Story of Ming-Y," a phantom tale apparently very popular among the Chinese about a young man who falls in love with the shade of a long-dead woman. One story that I completely missed was "The Tradition of the Tea-Plant." This story was written in such an obfuscating manner that I could not figure out what was going on. Aside from this one, the other tales had their charm.

Kiran Sandhu says

Boring!

Anthony says

I enjoyed this, some interesting mythical tales from China. The story of the author - Lafcadio Hearn - sounded fascinating in the short forward. Someone to find more about in the future. :)

robyn says

No scary ghosts in this one. Not even all ghosts, really, not in the traditional sense. People committing suicide and being made into the substance of bells and vases made up two of the stories.

There were two I quite liked about supernatural brides. But a very brief and somewhat unsatisfactory read overall. I expect when Hearn translated these, they had the virtue of originality for his audience.

Snail in Danger (Sid) Nicolaides says

I really like the first story. But after that, none were grabbing me. (You can read them all for free here.

This version has a nice introduction. Okay, mainly it sticks out in my mind for its quotation of Sir Walter Scott on the supernatural in stories. I'm tempted to try to track down the full work, assuming it came from an essay. (Possibly "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition"?)

Amalia Gavea says

"You will ask me who she was-beautiful Xue Tao...For thousands of years and even longer, the trees have been whispering over her stony bed. And the syllables of her name reach to those who listen, with the breath of the leaves; with the trembling of the long-fingered branches; with the flickering of lights and shadows, and the breath -sweet like the presence of a woman- the plethora of wildflowers -Xue Tao."

Dragons, artists, aristocrats, deities. Ghosts, demons. Beautiful women and brave young men. A tapestry of Chinese ghost stories by Lafcadio Hearn, a writer of Greek and Irish blood, influenced by the Chinese and Japanese culture with a distinctive sensitivity and clarity in his writing. These stories take us to the heart of an early medieval society populated with heroes and women dedicated to Art and Love while spirits stand witnesses to haunting deeds.

The Story of Ming Yi : A young man falls in love with a mysterious widow, a lover of poetry and calligraphy. But Xue Tao hides more than meets the eye...

The Legend of Zhi Nu : A beautiful young woman married a young man who became a slave out of duty to his father. His life changes in unfathomable ways. A story of a goddess walking among mortals, a well-known motif of Asian myths.

The Return of Yan Zhenjing : A story of the Son of Heaven, an incompetent emperor, fire and blood.

The Story of the Porcelain God : A tale of the porcelain mystery and the spirits that protect it. A story dedicated to a product that lies at the heart of China and its glorious culture.

This is a very interesting collection. Don't think it is scary in the sense of an "in-your-face" horror. Hearn creates a poetic, haunting atmosphere worthy of the richness and mystery of beautiful, enchanting China.

Extract translated by me, taken from the Greek edition by Ars Nocturna

My reviews can also be found on <https://theopinionatedreaderblog.wordpress.com>

Maria Victoria Sanchez says

I love everything that Lafcadio Hearn wrote, he was gifted author and a true citizen of the world. I really

love short narrative and storytelling already but this is some pretty good narrative mixed with stories that are traditional but at the same time touch genres like magic realism and poetry. I will make one of my goals this year to read everything of this writer that I haven't read already. I recommend this book for those who like traditional art and fairy tales.

Saara says

In all honesty, I expected more from this book. The stories were interesting, sure, but the execution simply did not resonate with me. I shouldn't let this turn me off from oriental horror, however.

The volume includes a glossary at the back, which is nice.

Gaspar Alvarez says

Los dos últimos textos son brillantes, en especial "La tradición de la planta del té"

Mattias says

While these stories are entertaining, I don't think they're very Chinese. The book was published in 1887, while Lafcadio Hearn was living in New Orleans and working as a journalist, years before he ever went to Asia - he never went to China, although he lived in Japan for many years, where he wrote *Kwaidan*, a book of supposedly Japanese folktales and the work he's best known for. I don't know enough about Japanese folktales to be sure how faithful *Kwaidan* is to them, but there are a lot of elements in *Kwaidan* that are also in Hearn's earlier non-Japanese work, so I have doubts.

Hearn admits, in his notes at the end of the book, to basing these "Chinese" stories on translations of Chinese tales by early Orientalists, and on his own imagination. Mostly, I think, the latter.

(view spoiler)

The descriptions are vivid and flowery and the places and characters leap off the page. There are a lot of transliterated Chinese words which I think are there for decoration and to give these very Victorian stories an "Asian" flavour and authenticity, but he cuts down on them after the first page or so of each story. He does give explanations of them in the glossary (this book is nearly one-third appendices); as far as I can find out he didn't understand any Chinese language, but he liked the sound and the exoticism of the foreign words.

From the opening of the first story, *The Soul of the Great Bell*:

The water-clock marks the hour in the Ta-chung sz',—in the Tower of the Great Bell: now the mallet is lifted to smite the lips of the metal monster,—the vast lips inscribed with Buddhist texts from the sacred Fa-hwa-King, from the chapters of the holy Ling-yen-King! Hear the

great bell responding!—how mighty her voice, though tongueless!—KO-NGAI! All the little dragons on the high-tilted eaves of the green roofs shiver to the tips of their gilded tails under that deep wave of sound; all the porcelain gargoyles tremble on their carven perches; all the hundred little bells of the pagodas quiver with desire to speak. KO-NGAI!—all the green-and-gold tiles of the temple are vibrating; the wooden goldfish above them are writhing against the sky; the uplifted finger of Fo shakes high over the heads of the worshippers through the blue fog of incense! KO-NGAI!—What a thunder tone was that! All the lacquered goblins on the palace cornices wriggle their fire-colored tongues! And after each huge shock, how wondrous the multiple echo and the great golden moan and, at last, the sudden sibilant sobbing in the ears when the immense tone faints away in broken whispers of silver,—as though a woman should whisper, "Hiai!"

You can read the whole book for free via Project Gutenberg.

Madeline O'Rourke says

I was quite surprised when I read the forward to find out that *Chinese Ghost Stories* is a lot older than I thought. As a result, the language definitely required more focus and attention to understand, but nonetheless, I liked the collection.

I particularly liked the first four stories, especially *The Return of Yan Zhenjing*. However, I found the last two stories dragged on and were a bit boring, more so *The Tradition of the Tea Plant*, though. I did find them all to be interesting, overall, and was fascinated the recurring idea of one sacrificing themselves for their art or beliefs.

In the end, I wouldn't say the title "Tales of the Supernatural" accurately reflects the contents of the collection, but it is still very interesting, particularly from a cultural perspective.

Glenn Hammer says

I wanted to like this, and one of the stories was OK. The subtitle "Curious Tales..." would have been a better title the chinese ghost stories.

Helmut says

Schwülstig und veraltet

Ich bin ein großer Verehrer der alten chinesischen Literatur, und insbesondere des Liaozhai Zhiyi des Pu Songling, einer Sammlung von Geistergeschichten aus der ausgehenden Ming-Zeit. Hearns Sammlung ist zwar deutlich neueren Datums, aber keineswegs als modern zu bezeichnen - während der Plot dieser Erzählungen sich zwar durchaus an diese alten Geschichten anlehnt, so ist der Stil doch durch und durch viktorianisch verquast und heutzutage kaum mehr lesbar. Schwülstig, laberig und exotisierend wirkt dieser

Text aus dem 19. Jahrhundert dadurch viel älter und verbraucher als Pus klarer, reiner Stil aus dem 16. Jahrhundert. Zwischendurch schimmert ab und zu etwas wie Atmosphäre durch, die dann aber im nächsten Absatz zu tode geplappert wird.

Sogar für Leser, die gerne so alte chinesische Geistergeschichten lesen, ist dieser Titel überspringenswert. Dazu kommt eine eBook-Aufbereitung, die zu wünschen übrig lässt und die Einzelgeschichten einfach so aneinanderklatscht ohne eine einzige Zeile Weißraum.
