

Haunting as Being/Loving: Apparitionalism and Chinese Femme Lesbianism

Wen Wen

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abstract

This study advances analytical insights into apparitional lesbianism through three pieces of Chinese contemporary literature in the 1990s. The valuable view of hauntology is deployed to address femmes' lesbianism by looking into the repertoire of images and narratives of these texts. Using narrative analysis, I argue that, like a ghost, femmes are living through a great oxymoron as the disavowed validity, vaporizing while becoming. Apart from the social imagination in the development of the phantom-like lesbian culture, this work tries to articulate a significant onto-epistemological interpretation of lesbians' existence as spectral being. In subsequent discussions, the spectrality of their lesbianism is considered in the poetic implicitly, the affect with regards to the diasporic nature of queerness and the hauntological time they embodied at the utopian margins. Such comprehensions are not only about the portray of these characters and their homoerotic love affairs showing how femme images coalesce into an apparitional life, but also concerned with the interpretative agency on behalf of female homosexuality and femininity.

keywords

apparitional lesbianism, femme, hauntology, affect, Chinese lesbians

Introduction

How is it that we are ghosts? For a long time, I have been trying to find a proper expression for the unutterably complex lesbian sentiments in postmodern urban space. Often, when there is no explicit, tangible harm against femmes because of their sexual orientation, the silent suffering from the reduced reality of lesbian existence becomes part of the lesbian identity. If I can ever find it in the literature, it should be something deeply familiar in feeling yet alien in context. I tried to select some words from highly marginalised and undervalued Chinese lesbian novels but ended up in distress due to the confinements of language. This was not only because the floating signifiers, however creative, just could not capture my true feelings, but also because "we can only use language to express our understanding of the organizational character of language itself" (Chia, 2000: 514). This lifeworld, however, is "a flux of fleeting sense-impressions" that goes beyond such brute experience where concepts name and solidify (Chia, 2000: 514). I did not know what kind of language could be used to approach this

specific sense of lesbian feeling – so elusive, wispy, and amorphous – until the word “ghost” was brought to me jokingly by a friend and started to haunt me night after night.

Thereafter, I felt inspired to centre on some key concepts related to ghosts to explore Chinese lesbian literature.⁴ I delved into hauntology and coined the term “apparitionalism,” which I will apply throughout this article. The word “apparitional” is not just meant to indicate that Chinese lesbianism is not sufficiently real due to the lack of representation, as some anti-essentialist literary critics oversimplify it, using a considerably dichotomic judgement of representation. Undoubtedly, it is important to interrogate the cultural representations and the political climate that embeds them beneath the panoramas of contemporary Chinese literature, where lesbian novels have been widely ignored and even routinely suppressed. However, what interests me more is the ontological meaning of ghostly lesbianism. I thus turn to hauntology, as its interdisciplinary capacity and adaptability have great analytical potential.

The term hauntology originally comes from Derrida’s deconstructionist reading of Marxism in *Spectres of Marx*. In its near-homonym ontology, the haunting being is not a wild imaginary for the sake of creative interpretation, but a way of existence only in the great oxymoron of non-existence in this real world. The ghost inhabiting the contemporary culture is concretised as “the deferred spirit, the promise or calculation of an expiation” (Derrida, 2012: 171). It recalls a nostalgic past and at the same time summons an active becoming for the future. Following his thread, the spectre is a deconstructive political power (Corredor, 2001) or a postmodern identity referring to the undercommons, the fugitive, and the abject (Kristeva, 1982; Harney and Moten, 2013). Subsumed under these varied terms is the multiplicity of histories, cultures, memories, and hope, the modality of existence as the “no longer” and the “not yet” (Häggglund 2008).

Particularly in literary studies, hauntology has been widely applied to Western gothic novels, symbolist poetry, and modern horror stories (Sword, 1999; Shaw, 2018; Castricano, 2000). One recent Chinese literary study also adopts the method of hauntological poetics (Dong, 2021). However, the interdisciplinary theoretical framework of hauntology is still insufficient to develop enough space for lesbian cultural registers, even though today’s academia has drawn some links between hauntology and homosexuality in the form of queer hauntology (Feiner, 2019; Møller and Ledin, 2020), and some scholars draw links between queerness and hauntology in literary studies (Knip, 2020; Price, 2022). Admittedly, Terry Castle’s remarkable book *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) does build a specific connection between ghostly writing and female homosexuality in modern culture. It comprehensively examines how lesbian visibility is limited and distorted in Western culture into sapphic apparitions that keep haunting Western literature throughout time, and addresses the difficulty of seeing the lesbian, even if she is there right in front of everyone. It is easy to conclude that

this is “in part because she has been ‘ghosted’ – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself” (Castle, 1993: 4). But this simple explanation is not satisfactory. In the formulation of the ghostly as lesbian, deeper meanings are not only embedded in the cultural context (where lesbian motifs in storytelling are represented in a very ambiguous, implied, phantom-like manner, however skilful and sophisticated), but – more significantly to me – situated on the ontological level, where the lesbian subject *per se* is a ghost. Another limitation of Terry Castle’s work (1993) is that the texts it analyses are exclusively from Western literature. In the field of queer literature studies, Chinese lesbian literature has not attracted adequate attention. Although there is a similar pattern of apparitional lesbianism in contemporary Chinese literature, the different socio-cultural backgrounds are salient.

Moreover, hauntology in its ontological sense does not mean an essentialist explanation of one’s gender expression and sexuality. Chinese femme lesbian identities exist along a spectrum of visibility and recognition, with individuals experiencing and expressing their queerness in diverse ways. Rather than being defined by rigid, clear-cut boundaries, the femme lesbian represents a fluid constellation of shared characteristics and experiences. It is the shared characteristics and experiences across individuals and contexts that constitute the essence of haunting. The femme, phenomenologically, with her ghost-like long hair and long dress, keeps escaping from and returning to the liminal space in a non-confrontational manner and becomes one of “the utopian margins in the other utopianism” (Gordon, 2020). Avery F. Gordon (2017) argues that the history of this utopianism is rooted precisely in an exclusionary zone – in other, often illegible, illegitimate, or trivialised forms of escape, resistance, opposition, and alternative ways of life. She shows an incomplete and disorganised intellectual history in the selection of those fugitives, runaways, deserters, heretics, and dreamers. I further see that the notion of ghost is fundamentally open and inclusive to our deeper understandings of diverse sexualities outside the spectrum of heteronormativity.

But here, using hauntology, I want to address a more fragile, more melancholic being, one that escapes from its own existence. Femmes are ghosts and *need to attach in order to manifest themselves*. When a femme is single, her homosexuality will be automatically reduced and even deleted. Her state is that of the spirit, because she can claim her lesbian identity only by being possessed by her female lover (and sometimes, although she is in a relationship, once she is in love with a butch, she is still considered to be reverting to heterosexuality rather than lesbianism). Her life is real only if she has the other. Without the one possessing her, there would be no her. The femme of femininity, the femme of grief, the femme of revolution, the femme of a revolutionary is ignored – even if she does not get kicked out when she goes into the ladies’ room. But cause and effect are mutual: she melts into the sea of all the others, fades into “nothing,” and she becomes the ghost haunting and seeking her love. This is what I call the

“ontological”, the essence of haunting. The ability to see femme lesbians’ true existence depends on the ability to recognise such suffering (Liu and Ding, 1998). This is apparitional lesbianism, sparked by and deviating from Castle’s metaphorical idea of the apparitional lesbian in its ontological conceptualisation and cultural inclusiveness. Specifically for Chinese femmes, this apparitional lesbianism embodies the implicitness of Chinese poetics, the diasporic nature of lesbian homosexuality in China, and their hauntological queer temporality – all of which will be critical additions to the haunting utopian margins of the queer world.

The situation in the 1990s mainland China contextualises our discussion. This period saw significant transformations in China’s public sphere, with the international surge of post-Cold War capitalism and domestic opening-up along with the reform of the market economy. Thereby, another cultural revolution of a different kind was sweeping through China, which led to a certain degree of sexual liberation in art (Huot, 2000). Dai Jinhua’s scholarship importantly links cultural and feminist studies at this time. In *Invisible Writing: Cultural Studies on 1990s China* (1999), she teases out China’s cultural distinctions under globalisation and points out that the multiple influences of penetrating transnational capital largely shaped the Chinese cultural industry and cultural market. It was in such circumstances that Chinese metropolises witnessed a veritable explosion of gayness in culture (Rofel, 2007: 85).

Several young Chinese scholars (Dai, 2015; Fei, 2020; Yi, 2020) have recently outlined how these social changes significantly altered Chinese women’s writing, especially lesbian literature. It is worth pondering, as does Jinhua Dai in the 1996 article “Encounters and Breakthroughs” (*qiyu yu tuwei* 奇遇与突围), that Lin and Chen’s works are still understood via the notions of sisterhood (*jiemeiqingyi* 姐妹情谊). These are not just Chinese versions of the suffering Sappho (who is “misunderstood”); rather, there is a crucial but hitherto overlooked problem of interpretative agency. These works ascribe agency to women’s voices in the liberal arts, while the equally important agency of interpretation and criticism is still missing. It is indeed disappointing to see that even some critics well versed in avant-garde and postmodernist ideas still have not attained the political leverage to fully transgress the notion of sisterhood – but the factor of censorship should be accounted for.²

In contrast, overseas scholar Tze-Lan Sang provides a comprehensive overview of the post-Mao female homoerotic narratives underlying almost all of Lin Bai’s novels and stories that include lesbian motifs. After positioning Lin’s work at the juncture of censorship and voyeurism, Sang (2002) endeavours to link these writings to diasporic studies in the form of transnational readership. Giving a fairer recognition to the homosexuality in the texts, Sang further makes an im-

portant point that Chinese lesbians and diasporic subjects share significant similarities in their polymorphous ways of being. At the core of these similarities is their civic half-being, and, in my interpretation, their spectral existence.

Overall, female writings in the 1990s are characterised by the expression of sexual desire, and some are called “bodily writing” (*shenti xiezu* 身體寫作) in a slightly derogatory way, suggesting they are eye-catching and marketable since they meet the needs of male voyeurism. Lesbian literature is on this list. But some Chinese literary studies (Wang, 2006 Ai, 2006 Luo, 2016; Xu, 2017), albeit marginalised, still endeavour to validate the autotelic female homoerotic expressions – with the very power, as Audre Lorde (1993) passionately writes in another context, that nurtured our profound knowledge as women of what is just feeling right. This reminds me of the “ghost” that is indicated in Dai’s statement: “The message of women’s writing in the 1990s no longer revolves around manhood but simply the company of ghosts” (1996: 101). The ghost here is an index to a deeper sense of unfulfillment, in which women’s writing has not just disclosed traumatic experiences but also unintentionally dismantled the optimistic discourse of women’s salvation in the face of social progress. It will also be fruitful for understanding Chinese lesbianism, haunting inside and outside literature, as apparitional.

Among the Chinese lesbian novels and stories of the 1990s, the sense of apparitionalism is not an over-translation but an expression of the way of (non)existence lurking in the texts: On the one hand, when someone argues that “it is not reasonable that there are ghosts,” the argument “it is not reasonable that there are femme lesbians” follows the same logic. The linkage between lesbians and haunting beings is demonstrated with reasoning. On the other hand, the world delimited by human reasoning might not be the complete version of being. A phenomenological and transcendental heuristics of onto-epistemological ghostly writing considers the way “howness” grapples with the traditional perception of “whatness.” I do not resent that lesbian apparitions are situational and contextualised; I felt tortured and later amazed by the femme lesbian being an apparition herself after all.

Another perspective is to see apparitionalism as an embodiment of the lyrical tradition of Chinese liberal arts, namely poetics. Ghosts are formed by, and also contribute to forming, the artistic conceptions (*yijing* 意境) of implicitness (*hanxu* 含蓄), leaving blank (*liubai* 留白), and metaphor. Chinese writers of lesbian literature deal with the disharmony of strong lesbian emotions against such poetics of invisibility. Especially when the world keeps persuading people that all is well in reality, plots in literature seem more “easily conceived and easily resolved,” giving the illusory comfort of thinking that “the only disturbance is in our imagination” (Axelrod, 1999: xviii). In the context of modernisation in the 1990s, the discourse of the lyrical tradition underlying modernity in Chinese literature is highlighted in a comprehensive study titled *The Modernity of Lyricism*

(抒情之现代性) (Chen and Wang, 2014). This discourse can offer insights into how such aesthetics/poetics impact and construe China's modernity, in which female homosexuality is represented in contemporary literature.

Using the lenses of apparitional lesbianism and hauntology, I intend to address the research questions of (1) how femmes and their female homosexuality are represented in contemporary Chinese literature during the 1990s and (2) why these femme images congeal into apparitional beings. My reading of the ghostly text, diasporic space, and haunting time (respectively put in three sections of the following analysis) as apparitional for the femme subjects will not only serve as a form of redress for contemporary Chinese lesbian literature but also have implications for queer Sinophone cultural studies.

Methodology

I choose literary texts as a point of entry for an in-depth investigation of the performative language which makes out the shape of the lesbian as a phantom in the smog of patriarchal and heteronormative culture. In *How To Do Things with Words* (1975), J.L. Austin explains that performatives can be understood as the way in which speaking equates to doing. Such utterances themselves are actions that make changes. Understandably, this concept is particularly appealing to activist cultural theorists. With further deterritorialisation, it is claimed that all language is performative. Judith Butler expresses the even more radical idea that the performed is most performative when it is not so clearly visible (Butler qtd. In Sedgwick, 1998). According to this school of thought, literary language derives its performative power from actions that precede it (Culler, 2007). Texts enter as receptacles of content in the first place; on a social level, they function as agents in their own right (Prior, 2004). The ability of any representational project to expose violence seems to depend on a cultural context that has always condemned the violence but concealed it from the start. This is why text-based literary studies through a gender/queer scope can be productive and reproductive (for possible secondary creation and reflection on its interpretation).

My selection of analysed texts is associated with, but not limited to, the singularity of the 1990s Chinese culture outlined above. Women's writing was characterised by a greater self-consciousness than in the 1980s, after more than a decade of social transformation and development (since the "Reform and Opening-Up" process began in 1978), with "tenacious efforts to reveal women's existence and experience through the eyes of the dark and foggy" (Dai, 1996: 100). Thus, the works selected as representations of Chinese lesbianism and as an analytical corpus are Chen Ran's *Private Life* (*siren shenghuo* 私人生活) and Lin Bai's *A War of One's Own* (*yigeren de zhanzheng* 一个人的战争), and *Water in a Bottle* (*pingzhongzhishui* 瓶中之水). Lin and Chen are always mentioned together as the "twin"

authors” of 1990s’ feminist literature. Chinese scholarship has studied them in many other respects, but the perspective of hauntology and lesbianism remains untouched.

The focus of the literary analysis below is to explore the ontological meaning of hauntology for Chinese femme lesbians, with relatively less emphasis on socio-political discourses. This approach does not exclude social and political questions but rather reframes them through a literary-theoretical lens that goes beyond purely contextual analysis. This allows for a more nuanced exploration of apparitional lesbianism in the Chinese context while avoiding the methodological pitfall of reducing literary works to mere social documentation. Thereby, this approach also responds to the postcolonial critique of today’s literary-based Chinese cultural studies, especially those hinged upon intersectional social issues (thinking about who can be taken as a ghost). On “the question of literature in cultural studies”, Ray Chow (1993) problematises the non-Western cultural studies’ bias in their obsession with analysing the historical and socio-political background of the literary work rather than the work itself. Due to this bias, “modern China is not ‘literary’ anymore”:

The close and patient attention that classicists devote to literary texts simply evaporates. Instead, works of modern literature become mere research documents for the historian or political scientist. While there is nothing wrong with the use of literature as social documentation, what is alarming is the way such uses redirect the focus of the field of Asian studies to one of information production, thus making “interpretation” [...] “subjective” (privatised) and hence dispensable activity. (131)

While literary studies itself can intensively structure and question the discourses of power in social and political realities, it is worth contemplating the tendency in academia where works dealing with non-western cultures are rarely thought to “deal with intellectual and theoretical issues” but instead presumed to merely apply western theories to do a socio-political analysis “by way of a national, ethnic or cultural location” (Chow, qtd. in Berry and Farquhar, 2006: 13–14). This has manifested a prominent issue for “minor literature” in Deleuze’s words (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007). Although this tendency has been problematised over the past decades, it can still be traced in some more recent studies of Chinese lesbian literature, as Chinese literary theorist Xun Dai (2015) points out. Hence, my analysis of apparitionalism and Chinese lesbianism, albeit based on China’s socio-political condition, will no longer just centre on this background; and my methodological choice of hauntology is a development rather a pure application that aims to bring up a femme ontology and lesbian poetics from the Chinese cultural context on behalf of the apparitional femme lesbian.

Based on a close reading of Chen’s and Lin’s works, a hermeneutics of suspicion attempts to decode meanings that are disguised (Josselson, 2004). Hence, the method of narrative analysis (NA) together with the key concepts of hauntology

and apparitional lesbianism will be deployed to structure an analytical framework to settle these texts. On the one hand, NA has always been tied to the self, as the narrative is conceived in the multiplicity of “I” as the narrator (or in third-person narration, the character’s language of psychological realism). In such positions, every “I” is an author telling their own story (Hermans and Kempen, 1993). So it is fitting to deal with layers of voices (in which I can identify the lesbian as a living being in the heteronormative, patriarchal reality and as an apparitional haunting in her deviation) in their interactions, and the continuities, disjunctions, and ambiguities in Chen’s and Lin’s work, which is credited as the prelude to “bodily writing” for its conjecturally autobiographical style. The portrayal of the self in narratives is a process of composition and a confrontation with one’s identity. Yet, NA can also appropriately engage with the apparitional perspective. The method of content (the content of the narration, “the told”) versus form (the structure of the narration, “the telling”) refers to concentrating not only on what is told but also on how it is told (Maxwell, 2012). Thereby, necessary attention will be given to what is unsaid or unsayable³ in examining “the narrative discourse and markers of omissions” (Rogers et al., 1999: 227). As suggested by Wertz et al. (2011: 228), from the stance of the hermeneutic circle, there are multiple iterative readings “to identify different ‘voices’ of the self and to create a view of how these selves are in dialogue with one another, and eventually to develop a ‘Gestalt’ of coherent unity that also encompasses contradictions.”

It is also imperative to clarify the ontological thinking, since hauntology in Derrida’s original philosophy is an ontology of the spectre. It is invoked to understand the (non)existence of the very deconstructive figure outside the order of knowledge as the ghost “hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate” (Davis, 2005: 376).

Analysis

Ghostly Writing: The (Violent) Poetics of Implicitness

The rhetorical politics of implicitness and tolerance (Liu and Ding, 2007) in Chinese lesbian literature is worth contemplating. As a dominant aesthetic-ethical value in Chinese art, this model of implicitness does not merely function in the poetic or rhetorical domain but also powerfully maintains the heteronormative order by preserving the established appropriate sexual relationships and leaving dissenting sexualities stranded in a land of spectres.

This sense can be accurately captured in Lin’s and Chen’s writing styles, which are subtle, delicate, and often critiqued as typically feminine. The poetics of subtlety is one of the aesthetic ideals of the Chinese literary tradition, a particular form of writing in which meaning or emotion is expressed in a highly obscure, suggestive, or even enigmatic manner (Tsai, 1997: 307–8). The word *banxu* (含蓄 implicitness) literally means “holding back” and “storing up,” retaining

a strong sense of conservation and potentiality, undeveloped, and most of the time lingering in this state.

Lin's novel *Water in a Bottle* is the extended story of Qi Ye and Zhu Liang, which is also mentioned in her *A War of One's Own*. Zhu Liang always has Qi Ye, her handmaid, slap her all over her body when she bathes. Her beautiful naked body is presented to Qi Ye as the dark red colour of the setting sun resting on her wet and glistening nakedness like a wonderful coat of oil. The description of such intimacy is sophisticatedly subtle:

In the dim light, the surroundings were dark and colourless; only her shoulders and breasts floated in the steam, and it was a reminder that this dull red afterglow of the sunset had waited for this moment through the long summer days, that it had obeyed some magic and shone its full light on this person, that it had used its last strength before sinking to shed its richest light on her body. The droplets on her body turned from dark red to pale red, to grey red, light grey, dark grey, and the hands of the seven leaves kept patting her all over, pouring some hot water on her shoulders over and over again, and she chanted in comfort, her voice extremely soft, as if there were caterpillars inside. (Lin, 1995: ch. 3, par. 226)

From the furtive look that flashes through Qi Ye, the female narrator infers that there is something "unusual" between them. Since then, Qi Ye has shown great loyalty and affection to Zhu Liang. The descriptions of their getting along as years pass are beautiful; the subtlety contributes to achieving such beauty while sacrificing the necessary substantial affirmation of their love. Why is this so? The question mark here refers to a chain of essential assumptions: feminine lesbians always have to be implicit. It is not wrong that femininity connotes the aesthetics of implicitness; however, when femininity is solely anchored to and essentialised as implicitness, other cross-cutting axes of erotic expression and practice are erased and excluded.

Admittedly, the modernisation of desire does not mean that emotional and erotic expressions should always conform to stereotypical Western patterns of openness and straightforwardness, but here Chinese lesbian writings are wrapped in another kind of singular conformity where there are primarily (and in some cases, only) implicit individual expressions of desires and feelings embedded in descriptions of females' everyday lives (Larson 1997). Meanwhile, even when using a postcolonial perspective to understand the formation of homophobic culture in Chinese society that differs from Western patterns (Zhou, 1997), the analysis requires careful consideration of three key aspects (Liu and Ding, 2007: 3–4): the simplistic "past–present" and "Chinese tolerance–Western homophobia" dichotomies in the historical narrative of homosexuality and homophobia, the idealisation or concretisation of "tolerance" as a classed virtue in the aforementioned historical narrative that represents the "real, traditional China," and the cultural essentialism that distinguishes between the positive

tolerance of the past and the repression and homophobia practised in the family or workplace in the contemporary “modernised” China. In many cases, it is exactly this “silent tolerance” that apparitionalises homosexual love with its a delicate form of violence – the violent poetics of implicitness. With a feminine appearance that superficially aligns with the gender norms, femme lesbians are compelled to accomplish such implicitness. As feminine-presenting lesbians who break the societal lie that femininity exists solely for male appreciation, femmes have to disappear.

When the narrator visits their place, Zhu Liang is like another life haunting Qi Ye’s storytelling. In the narrator’s dream, “Zhu Liang leads me up the stairs and I see a strange little wooden door at the top of each flight of stairs; I don’t know what’s behind them. Her footsteps are so light as if in a basin that I cannot hear them” (Lin, 1995: ch. 3, par. 294–304). Zhu Liang whispers, “You can get out of here, and then you will experience a stupid love affair, and a monotonous marriage. After you have experienced these events, you will still come here” (Lin, 1995: ch. 3, par. 310). This fortune-telling indicates the apparitional experience of Qi Ye’s love life. To get out, the narrator needs to face the largest mirror, close her eyes, and imagine passing through it without any distractions. Then Zhu Liang and her words disappear like smoke, leaving the narrator sitting alone in this strange room full of mirrors, seeing her own figure floating unrealistically in the mirrors on all sides.

This is when all words come non-existence, like a hallucinatory mirage with a ghostly glimmer – the discourse of fear of love continuously confronts “a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject” (Kristeva, 1982: 6). In the sense of subtle horror, the femme’s character is beset by abjection – the twisted braid of affects and thoughts, when her apparitional self is a manifestation of the abject – “the jettisoned object,” which radically draws her towards the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982: 6). Zhu Liang’s images in dreams, wearing an old-fashioned cheongsam, lifting her neck stiffly with a sigh, alarms the narrator and wake her up. “I had a vague feeling that if I stayed any longer, I might well be bewitched” (Lin, 1997: 232). The pale face of old Qi Ye and the human specimen of Zhu Liang in the dream with her surreal elegance in the black-and-white photograph carry the strange scent and flowing threads of years gone by, forming another space of truth and falsehood. Underneath this fear is a confusion between the real and the fake in such a dark and lonely place. Every detail suggests that Zhu Liang is a phantom. She is gone but somehow still haunting. Moreover, her life is revealed as a dreamlike flashback, a glimpse of a fantasy, not real enough, when the narrator returns to their place after ten years only to be told that Zhu Liang died over fifty years earlier. This psychology of fear is intertwined with abjection, with a sense of loving someone who is supposed to be unlovable for the subject she is, or loving someone she is supposed to repudiate.

This way, the fundamental interrogation of reality, the validity of one's own subjecthood that has desire, passion, and happiness becomes a secret, a cryptonym.⁴ Following a literary critical tradition,⁵ however, Derrida's spectre is more like a calling on us to speak and listen to the spectre (Davis, 2005: 376). This is to know the secret from the ghost. Instead of a finite interpretation ending with the revelation of occluded meanings, the spectre's secret is a generative, open system from a deconstructive point of view. Therefore, the poetic implicitness of these stories is exactly how these lesbian characters deconstruct their lived experiences (rather than form a one-size-fits-all identity) and code their own stories into spectres.

Nothing is directly pointed out, but everything is already evinced. This is the beauty and the filth, the harm of ambiguity. Such "ambiguity" strategically suppresses language on key issues of visibility and validity to prevent or sometimes "protect" the oppression from being centred as a public issue. It is not easy to reflect on implicitness, because it has been naturalised as an integral part of Chinese culture and everyday life. From a lyrical tradition (as opposed to the narrative tradition in Western literature), it operates as an aesthetic-ethical emotion, somehow mythically dominated. This is a deliberate trade-off made by rhetoric, formally reciprocal but essentially a silence of inequality. With such linguistic connotations, power relations between individuals and between social orders are often maintained and even reinforced at the expense of marginalised sexual practices (Liu and Ding, 1998: 8).

Subtlety means that emergence itself takes the form of stealth. There is a homophobic effect on sexual deviants that resembles the effect on ghosts: fearful and reassuring; since they are not going to go away, let them not be seen and cooperate with others; people watch over them with tolerance and defensiveness. On the other hand, the fact that they have to be appeased and guarded is a sign of the potential and inescapable power of ghosts over the institutional (Liu and Ding, 1998: 7). As the narrator murmurs, "it is unknowable, it is a secret that must be kept, a secret that becomes more and more precious with the disappearance of another person; it is distributed like a heavy gas in the rooms of this dark red mansion [Zhu Liang and Qi Ye's old home]. You cannot see it in any case" (Lin, 1997: 226).

Diasporic Haunting as Apparitional Feeling

The understanding of Chinese lesbianism as haunting is not only about the omissions. It is not a coincidence that these texts have, to varying degrees, all adopted a special manner to describe feminine lesbian women as spectres. The intertextual relationship between texts, as Rashkin (2014: 45) proposed, is in itself a relationship "at work in narratives organised by phantoms," especially when the transtextual element here in these femme lesbians' stories is the exactly the haunting matter.

In Chen's *Private Life*, the young girl Niuniu engages in a deep intimacy with her neighbour, a beautiful widow named He. In their private space, they secretly kiss and touch. The description of Niuniu sucking on He's breast after He stroked her spine reveals a sense of warmth and ease. Later, however, the narrative is developed to recount Niuniu's nightmare, in which the breast becomes an image of death. A corpse comes to Niuniu, saying that she hates graves and likes walking through the fir woods. The woods can be interpreted as an unrealised hope. As Niuniu reaches out and touches her chest to see if she is still breathing, she finds her breasts flat and genderless. The feminine features have collapsed into a form of the death drive. Death is the only space in which her love belongs. In the endless exile of her longing and erotic feeling for femininity, her queerness manifests the diasporic nature of haunting.

Enabling a diasporic queer reading of Chinese lesbian literature does not just integrate a sense of broad intertextuality, but points out a culturally specific existence: the status of being a femme lesbian in China is being diasporic. In Sang Tze-lan's (2002) analysis, the depiction of a dissident sexuality in Lin's novels (1998) imparts such alienation and alterity that a lesbian banishes herself in her own imagination and goes into exile in her own country. Drawing on the existence of a Chinese queer diaspora understood to be living as a diaspora in their homeland, the homeland (though often interpreted in territorial terms) should be deemed as something more profoundly tied to the feeling of its opposite – "a space from which a group has been forcefully detached" (Lyons, 2006: 111) and almost a mythic place of no return (Brah, 2005). The "displacement" in the state of diaspora for homosexual women is not simply of one's own volition. The haunting of homosexuals is not determined by leaving one's home/country but by the internalised sense of exile more than the external form of being diasporic (Ji, 1995). When Niuniu dreams of having sex with He, who has passed away, they are both in exilic spaces – dream and death. They are exiled from the reality. "Queer diaspora is indeed bracketed as an existential conundrum here" (Chiang and Heinrich, 2014: 271). In the description of this dream, Niuniu feels that they are "whirling in a dance." "Everything around is melting away, her entire skin submerged in an overstimulating numbness" (Chen, 1995: 128). But as they relax and wearily lower their heads to catch their breath, Niuniu suddenly notices that "my dance partner's legs have lost their former delicacy and grace, like trees rapidly growing and expanding in an instant, becoming powerful and robust. [...] I discovered my dance partner had transformed into another person—a man" (Chen, 1995: 129). As Niuniu anxiously looks for He and repeatedly cries out, "I don't need you!" to the illusionary image of the man, she feels tortured by her own desire that is mixed with the compromised sex with males. It is noteworthy that in these novels, lesbian intimacy is always put in a shadow alongside a heterosexual relationship, even if the lesbianism is foregrounded in the overt plot, and the sentimental theme sustains the whole storytelling. The lesbian narrative itself is fugitive, a

breathhtaking fleeting moment that subsists in the dizzy montage of time, in which only present feelings can be preserved, albeit secretly, in the softest spot. The past is negated, the future is out of bounds, and the saved beauty in the present is also muddled. There is always a tear shed on the core feeling, wispy and beautiful, right upon the recognition of the inevitably lost or the everlasting unfulfilled.

The tropes of ghosts in texts, unpacked by an analysis of diaspora narratives, are visible in various ways. First there is the “fictionality” of lesbianism framed in the characters’ self-questioning. In Lin’s novel *A War of One’s Own*, the female protagonist Duomi keeps asking herself, “could we be an imaginary person?” She often daydreams that a river in “the dead of night” is the entrance to the underworld, where at a certain moment the dead mysteries gather. “I will go there and wait for the truth of my existence. More than once I have heard a voice say to me: you are made up. What a blessing it is to be a fictionalised child [...] a crystalline incantation emanates from within us and lands on time ten years later, what a perfect fiction” (Lin, 1995: ch. 2, par. 92–98). The fiction is another suppressing manner of existence, in which lesbian lovers can save each other only in their own small, inner world:

The narrow space around us was covered in darkness, like being covered with a sheet; we could not see each other, our faces were blurred, the walls of the cave around us emitted a hushing echo so that we dared not talk aloud. Below our toes was an unseen abyss, we could not move an inch [...] We were pushed to the edge of our existence. (Chen, 1995: 37)

Their affection is punctured by existential questions to themselves, hope always confronted by hopelessness in the wake of impasses, premature mourning, and the pre-remembrance of the present happiness – as that which will inevitably be lost – anchored inside. Readers recognise these femme phantoms dimly, moving through crowds as if in a no-man’s land, and realise that they are real and unreal at the same time. Here lies the classic syllogism: if she becomes a ghost for the sake of her lesbian love and her love is put in the shadows as “too temporal to be real,” then even this ghostly nature itself can never be real in the end. Ghostly matter is such a contradictory reality.

In these texts, apart from the usage of allusion and synecdoche, there are parenthesis-like monologues directly referring this kind of suffering to the surreal, the ghostly: “those who once suffered injustice will eventually reach the ghost. Sometimes it becomes a cloud floating from over there and comes to earth as rain. The dead in their special form continue to fight their living enemy” (Chen, 1995: 119). Along with such a sombre undertone, readers can imagine a pensive sapphic phantom of a grand oxymoron: the visible void, the disavowed validity, the fugitive splitting between locating oneself and dislocating oneself (Harney and Moten, 2013). It is woven of different materials that must forge a connection under conditions of the space: continuous dispersal, exile, and

blockage.

Meanwhile, there is another connection in addition to the space. In such cases, these ghosts live as two women loving each other. Separately, their subjectivities are both solid, but the thing between them – intimacy, desire, love, whatever you name it – is a transient matter, the present moment. However, the present itself is not self-sufficiently real if not well situated in the relationality of the past-to-future cosmos. In *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions*, Frosh (2013: 123) pinpoints a kind of historical disturbance to reveal the feelings behind such spectrality: for example, a past trauma is inaccessible, but in the meantime, “it keeps coming back, disrupting everything, a threatening hollow at the heart of whatever is held dear.” Thus, it ceases to become history “in the sense that it is never properly represented – it is rather an unrecognised past that saturates the present, with both individual and social-historical significance.” For Chinese femme lesbians, not only the past but also the future trauma lingers, as the forever “yet-to-come” is haunting. At this point, I will now address the crux of the “time” lesbians experience as apparitional.

Lesbian Spectrality at the Margins of Time

Derrida’s term “haunting” is a referent to the deconstruction of the capitalist frame of “time and experience,” by which exploited subjects in production have to deal with a ghostly reality, appearing as a scene of flux or spectral mobility: when we sense that a spectre exists, time is “out of joint.” The movement of such an abstraction materialises through haunting and becomes powerful (Corredor, 2001). This perception of time can forge a worldview of Chinese lesbianism as well. In Chen’s *Private Life*, Niuniu’s narration starts with the word “time” and an explanation about its inexorable flow and ends with the same concept (Pozzi, 2004). There is a poetic verse repeated at the beginning and the end of the storyline: “Time has passed by and I am still here.”

Gordon (2008) offers a novel conceptualisation of utopianism,⁶ a new way of illuminating this ghost-obsessed past and future and therefore the screamingly urgent present, which goes unnoticed in conventional discourses. The utopian margins are in a liminal place, “neither a lost past nor an elusive future. Fugitive mode of living in the what if as if it were reality” (Gordon, 2020). To understand these subjects is to understand ghosts, reciprocally, in that an imaginative foundation is needed. In Chapter 19 of Chen’s story, after the delicately elegant widow has died in a fire, Niuniu starts talking to herself, attempts suicide, and suffers from hallucinations. According to Chiang and Heinrich (2014: 260): “[F]or a woman who can stage a utopianism of social harmony [...] in order to debunk psychological reading of her ‘sickness,’ she must indeed be anything but insane.” These lesbian apparitions, as a form of utopian margins, are surrealistic – they evoke a poetic knowledge, which is, to quote Aimé Césaire indirectly, “born in the great silence of scientific knowledge” (Gordon, 2017: x). Time for an apparitional lesbian is something that itself does not progress. It revolves round

one centre of the pain, blocked and endless. Niuniu thinks she “experience(s) the thing only before and after it, the real and fleeting ‘it,’” which is a dreamlike fiction confined to readers. “My gaze lingers on the fragments of past years because they are not pages of dead history to me, rather, they are living bridges that extend to my present day” (Chen, 1995: 75). Likewise, Niuniu and He’s feeling about the future give readers a stormy pathos of hopelessness. When Niuniu promises to take care of He when she grows up, He whispers her name with tears streaming down her face. Her undulating choked cries show that her heart is being torn by a mixture of aggravation and emotion, sadness and hope. Later in the story, Niuniu talks about it to herself:

It was many, many years later that I realised that she had been waiting for me to grow up [...] waiting for the mountains to grow taller and taller in the distance, covered with white hair and dead vines; waiting for the creepers to hang from her roof in green curtain after green curtain. Waiting for me to turn into a grown woman with an independent mind and the ability to act like her. The time between us was as long as the hills, the wilderness, the siege, the mists and the taboos, the cruel things that blinded her vision and hindered her desires. (Chen, 1995: 44–45)

It is inspiring to interpret these parallel metaphors of time through Heidegger’s (2010) statement that “time” temporalised itself only to the extent that it is human/the subject. The lesbians embody their time; and since they are rejects, their time is a persistent, engrained illusion of entity (Rovelli, 2019). This is both allegory and analogy – essential for understanding how, in this patriarchal and heteronormative world, femmes are nothing but ghosts. It is not only because they “look straight.” In the introductory section of *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), Castle contends that lesbians are not asexual, and lesbianism should not be taken as a form of bonding for feminist struggle, friendship, or female homo-social networking. Indeed, women’s sisterhood – the emotional and spiritual connection and mutual support often depicted – is beautiful. But when the lesbians emerge, they are apparitionalised into this restrictive reading. In both novels, no matter how many women the protagonist has loved and had erotic attachments to before, once she has a single relationship with a man, all her previous relationships with women are invalidated, and she recounts her own sexuality as a cisgender straight woman. Apart from the clear problem of a monolithic understanding of sexuality, this is also an expression of “the queer art of failure” (Halberstam, 2011) shared by both Sinophone culture of heteronormativity and a kind of queer culture that excludes femmes who look straight as well as bisexuals who should be guilty of potential straightness.

Conversely, there are the potentials of the queer negativity or “the queer art of failure” when “it turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable; it quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (Chiang and Heinrich, 2014: 267). So even though Lin and Chen do not transcend this confinement, their sentiments slide into their writings and make these subjects come into spectral being. For example, in Lin’s

work, Mei Ju, another feminine woman Duomi feels attracted to, resembles a phantom. When the scantily dressed Mei Ju sits in front of the mirror, she has “a pair of trance-like, dark eyes, like a ghostly figure of a female body,” and whenever Duomi returns to Mei Ju’s house, she feels that she has entered “a transcendental time and space, a labyrinth, and a place where many visions gathered. Mei Ju lives on her own and in silence, as if she were sleepwalking, her soul thousands of miles and many years away” (Lin, 1998: ch. 2, par. 222). These kinds of spectral ephemera do not give up materiality (Muñoz 1996). In these texts, they get refashioned and then serve to make haunting poetics: femmes’ lesbianism is an embodiment of both past bygones and future utopian margins and it radiates a sense of weightlessness or even nothingness when forced into present reality. It is not dysfunctional for forming a reality, because it has no reference to such a function in the first place. Therefore, being spectral is not a negation; rather, it is a wandering paradox, existing in the non-existence, relying on the unreliable, accepting the unacceptable, and ascertaining uncertainty, living in the common life of the undercommons and the lifeless (Harney and Moten, 2013), and grieving the ungrievable (Butler, 2016). In the apparitional time, these lesbian spectres have only ungrievable love – that will not be apprehended as injured or lost because it has never counted in real life (Butler, 2016).

Consequently, living through such a great oxymoron, these femme apparitions do not even fit in the context of sexual rights narratives. Today’s sexual politics and secularism, as Butler (2016) points out, position sexual freedoms as beacons of modernity and use incompatible representation and ideology that delimit and inflict exclusions. This argument can be used to respond to many critiques of Chinese 1990s lesbian literature (e.g., Deng, 1999; Dai, 2015). For instance, the Chinese male philosopher Deng contends that these lesbian novels by female writers do not enable male readers to read into the women’s soul but merely satisfy male voyeurism and curiosity, and thus they will not reach a universally humanitarian level and will be confined to narrow-mindedness, pettiness, narcissism, and vindictiveness. By this, he not only presumes male readers to be the arbiters of literary value but he also ignores the truth hidden in the cultural spectrality of Chinese lesbianism. Furthermore, there is a concern that 1990s female writings have lost the strength of writing “others” while obsessively diving into an individual’s micro-spiritual events (Deng, 1999). Indeed, there is a need to reconnect literature with public life, but no one has figured out the best way. This raises the question why femmes’ lesbian identity and its integrations remain only at the level of individual intimacy and never enter a sufficiently socialised space, the public domain. The reason, however, should invoke an onto-epistemological consciousness that, whether historically or politically, femmes’ lesbianism and the underlying lesbian culture is apparitional, and that a ghost, albeit staying, wandering, and haunting everywhere, is unable to emerge in a “real” world.

Conclusion

The important indicator of the apparitionalisation of femme lesbians will ultimately bring out a polysemy of the concept of “ghost.” By thinking ontologically of ghosts, I manifest a condition of (non-)being that preexists but is not essentialist – she cannot be the thing she is by herself (unless attached to another queer one to manifest herself). My analysis has mainly developed in three movements. The first is the silently violent poetics of implicitness in the text as ghostly writing. Such rhetoric strips off the substantiality from Chinese femme lesbians who only turn out as spectres. The second part analogically deploys the idea of diasporic feeling to understand spectres and revolves around the emotionality of diaspora in the queer Sinophone culture. In the third part, I interpret the hauntologically embodied time circulating Chinese lesbianism, in which the femmes’ lesbianism can only be temporary and their present reality is merely a flowy mirage at the margins of the past memory and the future utopia.

Furthermore, Chinese femme lesbians’ life status of “not-yet,” of “becoming,” might be where we reclaim the ghost to work for a revolution of love, with more liberating politics of difference, as Deleuze has depicted in his philosophy of becoming differences (Deleuze, 1994). Hence, future researchers should not only work on the more recent Chinese lesbian cultural products, but also, just like Derrida in his call on the intellectual of the future, address the limits of the politicisation of this work for the hauntings of the past and the future: “to let the (ghost) speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself” (Derrida, 2012: 176). With the outlook of apparitionalism that carves a niche for cultural-specific understandings about Chinese femmes and their ontology, I expect future work to resist the domination of Western literary theories, to migrate far and wide, step into, transgress, and reclaim hauntological ideas, to wrestle with any one-dimensional, generalised conceptualisation of Chinese lesbianism.

notes

- 1** All translations from Chinese to English are by the author unless otherwise noted.
- 2** According to the novelist Chen, Jinhua Dai avoided using “same-sex love” and replaced it with “feminine love” as a way to protect the writer.
- 3** According to Rogers et al. (1999), languages of the unsayable are categorized as: (1) a language of negation, (2) a language of revision, (3) a language of smokescreen and evasion, and (4) a language of silence. Lesbian narratives in their own haunting manner take the form of the unsayable and thus can be analysed within this framework.

- 4 In cryptonym, the self is “haunted” by the ‘ghost’ of the ‘living-dead’ that ‘comes haunting out of the Unconscious of the other’ yet which resides as an ‘inhabitant of the crypt within the Self” (Castricano, 2000: 142).
- 5 According to Davis (2005), literary critical work following the “phantom” pattern developed by Abraham and Torok (1994) often revolves around the notion of secrets, using their psychoanalytic approach to literature. I want to emphasize the importance of the essential secret that Derrida associates with literature in general: everything is secret in literature, and there is no secret hidden behind it – this is the secret of this strange institution about which and in which I keep struggling. Through the scope of apparitionalism, understandings of the ghost-like sapphic secrets should be fruitful.
- 6 Herein ghostly matters were archived in a way not to show what is missing but rather to show something of what is in the space made invisible by its diagnostic frame – to show things in the present of the blind field.

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