
Satirical Fantasy and Idiom Literalization in Zhang Henshui's *A New Tale of Killing Ghosts*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the understudied novel *Xin zhangui zhuan* (*A New Tale of Killing Ghosts*, 1926) by the renowned Republican Chinese novelist Zhang Henshui (1895-1967). The main concern is the novel's fantastical portrayal of ghosts for a practical aim. In this ghostly allegory, Zhang Henshui employs narrative intrusion and personification to satirize society, notably human shortcomings. While the ghosts expose poor morality, Zhong Kui is the representative of a rectifying force, who tries to maintain the principal order in the story as the ghosts are finally punished. For didactic purposes, Zhang Henshui also develops a narrative technique that he picks up from Liu Zhang's *Zhangui zhuan* (*A Tale of Killing Ghosts*, 1701), namely the literalization of critical idioms. Rather than educate the reader on ethical principles via straightforward verdicts, Zhang Henshui cares more about how his messages reach the reader than about embracing didacticism. In this sense, idiom literalization generates dramatic performativity and enhances the communicative effect.

KEYWORDS *A New Tale of Killing Ghosts*, Zhang Henshui, ghost, fantasy, satire, literalization

Introduction

Xin zhangui zhuan, or *A New Tale of Killing Ghosts* (hereafter referred to as *New Tale*) is one of the least famous novels written by traditionalist novelist Zhang Henshui. It was first serialized between February 19 and September 4 of 1926, in *Shijie ribao* (Beijing) titled *Xin zhuogui zhuan* (*A New Tale of Catching Ghosts*) (Xie 711). The novel was later published by Xinziyou Bookstore in 1931 and Shanghai's Zhengfeng Bookstore in 1936 (Gan 82; Wei 988). In the early 1920s, Zhang Henshui found a copy of *Zhangui zhuan* (*A Tale of Killing Ghosts*, 1701, henceforth referred to as *Tale*) by an anonymous writer later proved to be Liu Zhang (1667-?) and decided to write a sequel to it (H. Zhang, *New Tale* 2).¹ Both novels adapt the traditional motif of “Zhong Kui slaying ghosts” to expose and ridicule “ghosts among mankind” (1).

Zhong Kui was depicted and dramatized in various ways in ancient China, which can be generally summarized in the following categories: legends recording the ghost killer Zhong Kui,² folkloric accounts describing Zhong Kui as an exorcist (*fangxiang*) in exorcizing rituals,³ and various adaptations of the motif of Zhong Kui in literature. During the Ming dynasty, there have been dramas such as the anonymous *Qing fengnian wugui nao Zhong Kui* (*Five Ghosts Making Fun of Zhong Kui in Celebration of a Fruitful Year*) and the Kun opera *Zhong Kui jia mei* (*Zhong Kui Marrying Off His Sister*) and fiction such as *Zhong Kui quanzhuan* (*The*

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¹ The known editions of *Zhangui zhuan* include five handwritten editions, three block-printed editions, and seven letterpress editions. See the detailed list in the appendix of *A Tale of Killing Ghosts* (pp. 278-82, 1989 edition). The editions display different titles. As observed so far, exceptions exist in the block-printed and letterpress editions. *Wanben*, namely a pocket-size edition block-printed by Wanertang, was titled *Dijiu caizishu: Zhangui zhuan* (*The Ninth Book Written by the Talented: A Tale of Killing Ghosts*) or *Shuo tang pinggui quanzhuan* (*A Tale of Quelling Ghosts in the Tang Dynasty*) (Liu, *Tale* 281, 307). In *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe* (*A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, 1925), Lu Xun refers to the novel as *Zhongkui zhuogui zhuan* (*A Tale of Zhong Kui Catching Ghosts*), which results in a wide adoption of titles such as “Zhong Kui zhuan” (“The Legend of Zhong Kui”) and “Zhong Kui zhuogui zhuan” (Liu, *Tale* 307).

² These include the allegedly earliest record in a Dunhuang Daoist document: *Taishang dongyuan shenzhou jing* (*The Divine Incantations Scripture* [AD 664]), Shen Kuo's (1031-95) “Bu bitan juan san” (“Volume Three of the Complement to *Mengxi bitan*”) of *Mengxi bitan* (*Brush Talks from the Dream Brook* [1086-1093]), the episode about Zhong Kui in *Tang yishi* (*Remnants of the History of Tang*) (allegedly from late Tang) as quoted in *Tianzhong Ji* (*The Tianzhong Records*) (Chen Yaowen, Ming dynasty), and *Shiwu Jiyuan* (*On the Origins of Things*) (Gao Cheng, Song dynasty) (Y. Liu 37).

³ Examples are Dunhuang manuscripts, such as Si 2055 “Chuxi Zhong Kui qunuo wen” (“A Writing on Zhong Kui's Exorcizing on New Year's Eve”), an attempted title by Wang Chongmin (X. Liu 51-53); “Meng wu Zhong Kui fu” (“Fu on Dreaming about Zhong Kui in Dance”) (Zhou Yao, late Tang) (X. Liu 52-54).

Complete Tales of Zhong Kui) (Wang 197; Zhang and Zhang 128-31). As the image of Zhong Kui develops across time and genres, he has always been characterized as a righteous and auspicious figure with the power and the authority to conduct exorcisms and purify the secular world (Liu 38).

Liu Zhang's *Tale* starts with Zhong Kui taking the Imperial Examination in the capital city. He ranks first with his performance in writing. However, his champion title is rescinded due to his disagreeable appearance. Zhong Kui takes his own life in protest against this gross injustice. Shortly after that, Emperor Dezong of Tang restores Zhong Kui's title, holds a grand funeral for him, and appoints him as the *Qumo dashen* ("The Great God of Exorcism"). Yama, the king of the Underworld, sends Xianyuan (a name with a similar pronunciation to *hanyuan*, meaning "being wronged") and Fuqu (a homophone of *fuqu*, meaning "suffering from unjust treatment") to assist Zhong Kui in leading the underworld troops. Their mission is to track down and punish those ghosts who wander among humans. During his journey, Zhong Kui deals with all the ghosts in Yama's name list one by one. In the end, Zhong Kui, Xianyuan, and Fuqu report to the Jade Emperor in the Celestial Empire. Zhong Kui is rewarded with a divine temple and enjoys extended worship from the living world. Emperor Dezong awards Zhong Kui an inscribed board for the temple as an acknowledgment of the latter's expertise in exorcism and heroic achievements. When the characters approach the board to take a look, they are struck by the inscription: "How can such things be true" (Liu, *Tale* 191).⁴ It is at this climactic moment that the story ends. Resonating with the closing poem of the novel (whose first two lines read, "Flowers were brushing against the bamboo screen / while I was having a long midday dream"), the inscription "How can such things be true" claims that the entire novel is nothing but the narrator's dream and acknowledges the story's fictionality with a sense of humour.

In Zhang Henshui's *New Tale*, the story continues with a new ghost-hunting expedition. It takes place hundreds of years after Zhong Kui was deified. By that time, the Monkey King had launched a revolution, toppled the reign of the Jade Emperor, and established a republican government in the celestial domain. One day, Zhong Kui accidentally finds that the inscribed board of his temple has been

⁴ The text of Liu Zhang's *Tale* within the present article's discussion is from the latest modern letterpress edition printed in 1998. This edition is based on two handwritten editions. The primary edition is *kangben* (the "kang" version), namely Liu Zhang's initial version (before the 27th year of Kangxi's reign or 1688, stored in the Capital Library, Beijing), and it is read against *qianben* (the "qian" version), namely Liu Zhang's revised transcription of *kangben* (from the 1st to the 10th years of Qianlong's reign, 1736-1745, stored in the Beijing Library) (Liu, *Tale* 279). The textual differences between the two editions are clarified in the form of footnotes. While the initial edition (*kangben*) lacks "How can such things be true," Liu Zhang's revised edition (*qianben*) shows the inscription clearly.

mysteriously replaced by a new one that reads, “Such things are indeed happening.” Zhong Kui, Hanyuan (namely Xianyuan), and Fuqu immediately understand the new inscription as implying that ghosts have re-emerged in the secular world, and so they set off on a new journey of exorcisms.

New Tale takes on the traditional novelistic form *zhanghui xiaoshuo* (the session-chapter novel), namely a chain of relatively independent events taking place in separate individual chapters. Each chapter in this episodic narrative features a limited number of ghosts who are characterized by different weaknesses and follies. Their moral weaknesses not only expose the ghosts to Zhong Kui, but also inspire him to tailor his strategies to capture and punish them. Zhong Kui’s job is not to eliminate them but to rectify their poor morality; sometimes the ghosts find themselves cornered by their own moral weaknesses and perish before Zhong Kui has had time to intervene.

Previous studies of the novel have been rather few and unsatisfactory in perspective and depth. I believe there are several reasons for this. Zhang Henshui is usually identified as a “novelist transforming from the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly style to the New Fiction” (Fan, “Excerpt” 279). Zhang eventually incorporated fresh techniques and ideas inspired by Western fiction into the indigenous session-chapter novel (Rupprecht xix, xxii). He tailored themes, subject matters, characters, and structures of the old-style fiction to contemporary public appetites (McClellan 4).

For the present study, I have consulted T. M. McClellan’s *Zhang Henshui and Popular Chinese Fiction, 1919-1949* (2005), King-fai Tam’s dissertation *Innovation and Convention in Zhang Henshui’s Novels* (1990), and Hsiao-wei Wang Rupprecht’s *Departure and Return: Chang Hen-shui and the Chinese Narrative Tradition* (1987). These works are mostly devoted to explicating the novel’s combination of artistic innovation and conventional features. Based on these studies as well as research articles collected in *Zhang Henshui yanjiu ziliao* (*Research Material on Zhang Henshui*) (2009) and *Zhang Henshui pingzhuan* (*An Annotated Biography of Zhang Henshui*) (1988), I summarize Zhang Henshui’s novelistic transformative features as follows.

First, Zhang Henshui put more effort into scenery, psychological, and subtle gesture depictions (H. Zhang, “Comprehensive Note” 238). He employed imagery for its metaphoric function of symbolizing the characters’ psychological states (Tam 153). Secondly, although Zhang failed to transform thoroughly the general outlook embedded in the traditional session-chapter form, he broke free from the “scholar and beauty” mode (120). More characters are derived from the middle or lower social classes, equipped with a critical mind against hardship and

suppression (Yuan 198-200). Thirdly, Zhang avoided overly detailed, chronological recordings of events typical of session-chapter fiction; instead, he concentrated on significant events or a character's crucial life periods to boost the appeal (202). Lastly, in order to achieve a sense of unity while retaining the episodic structure, Zhang accentuated the protagonists' experience as the main plot and surrounded it with branching plotlines reflecting social phenomena (Tam 116; H. Zhang, "Recollection" 26).

However, because of its intentional association with *A Tale of Killing Ghosts*, *New Tale* is not as radically innovative or experimental in form or theme as Zhang Henshui's other novels. As stated in the preface he wrote for the novel, *New Tale* is a sequel to *A Tale of Killing Ghosts*. Following the lead of Liu Zhang's novel in artistic traits and contents, *New Tale* does not exemplify the above-summarized modern features manifest in Zhang Henshui's reformed session-chapter fiction except for shaking off the classical couplet form in *New Tale's* chapter titles, which has partially led scholars to overlook the novel (Wen and Li 131). Also, *New Tale's* usage of curses rather than sarcasm has been claimed to be an aspect of artistic immaturity (Zhang and Wei 162). As for the content, *New Tale* is dismissed as less-than-profound in its exposure of darkness, since it rarely focuses on political or cultural events unique to its contemporary time but pays much critical attention to generic human vices (Huang 114).

Another reason for *New Tale's* being neglected is that the assessment of Zhang Henshui in literary history influences the exposure of certain types of his works. Zhang Henshui's preference for romances in theme and subject earned him the title of "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly novelist."⁵ Accordingly, *New Tale* is customarily ignored since it does not deal with romance. In addition, *New Tale* does not fall into the conventional categories of many other Zhang's novels, such as social romantic fiction (*shehui yanqing xiaoshuo*),⁶ national crisis fiction (*guonan xiaoshuo*), martial arts fiction (*wuxia xiaoshuo*), and historical fiction (*lishi xiaoshuo*). The reason might be that *New Tale* deals with humanity's general weaknesses, an atypical gesture during the Republican period. Consequently, *New Tale*

⁵ I temporarily sidestep the question of whether or not Zhang Henshui belongs to the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School. On this question, see Y. Zhang, "Master"; Fan, "On Several Representative Novels." One possible touchstone to test against the MDB School or the Saturday School is to see whether a novel is mainly characterized by escapist playfulness (Y. Zhang, "Master" 115). Regarding Western criticism, Perry Link includes Zhang Henshui in his study of Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fiction and discusses *Tixiao yinyuan* (*Fate in Tears and Laughter*) (Link 37, 169).

⁶ The most representative subgenre among Zhang Henshui's ameliorated session-chapter fiction is social romance fiction, "with social matters as the longitude while romances as the latitude" (Yuan 193; H. Zhang, "Comprehensive Note" 237). In this form, interwoven with the plot of courtship and marital life we encounter the ugliness in bureaucracy, family life, and people's morality and minds (Tam 137).

in itself is unlikely to attract as much attention as other novels, particularly when Zhang's fiction is discussed in the context of these subgenres.

Moreover, the selection of Zhang Henshui's works is pertinent to the approaches and perspectives that researchers prefer to hold. Under the biographical approach, researchers take more interest in Zhang's life experience (for example, as a newspaper journalist) and his ideas on the novelistic representation of contemporary non-fictional events in reality (Tam 15-16).⁷ Novels such as *Chunming waishi* (*An Unofficial History of Peking*, 1930), *Si ren ji* (*This Person's Notes*, 1944), and *Tixiao yinyuan* (*Fate in Tears and Laughter*, 1930) cater more to readers' curiosity about what real events in China are represented in fiction (Hou 306). By contrast, *New Tale* primarily presents abstract characters who represent various moral weaknesses (Y. Zhang, "Master" 99). A close analysis of the novel will show some degree of historical referentiality in *New Tale*, but one should bear in mind that the fictional world is constructed not in a realistic but in an allegorical style. I will demonstrate later that *New Tale* is written for the reader to recognize and judge aspects of general ugliness in human nature rather than to experience an engrossing fictional world resembling the non-literary world.

New Tale's linguistic tricks mocking communism explain why later researchers in Communist China rarely discuss the novel. Chapter 8 introduces a ghost family. Bragging Ghost asks his wife, Free Flower, and son, Red-Haired Ghost, for food. The names of the mother and the son imply their political standpoints. Red-Haired Ghost calls his father an "imperialist" and accuses him of practicing "domestic imperialism," because he never distributes family property equally but always puts his interest ahead of the other family members (H. Zhang, *New Tale* 94). The dialogues in this family conflict are heavy with revolutionary terms: "Promoting communism is popular nowadays"; "suppressing us with imperialism"; "The ox outside the gate was one of the weaker peoples, and so you had to liberalize it"; and "to quell the domestic Communist party" (94-95). The word *chifa* ("red-haired") has a similar pronunciation to *chihua* ("communist takeover"), contemptuously referring to the Communists. Political mockery is not unusual in Zhang Henshui, as he took the side of liberalism (Y. Zhang, "Master" 118).

⁷ In "Xiezuo shengya huiyi" ("Recollection on My Writing Career"), Zhang Henshui writes that his novels tell about people's lives rather than fantasize about different lives, and he always draws inspiration from social events (26, 30, 31). In *Bashiyi meng* (*Eighty-One Dreams*), "Di sanshiliu meng: tiantang zhi you" ("The Thirty-Six Dream: A Tour in Heaven") features Pan Jinlian in a car ride that implies authorial sarcasm towards the then-ruling party KMT (the Nationalists). The prototype is Kong Xiangxi's daughter, who broke traffic laws and attacked the police (Y. Zhang, "Our Big Brother" 79). Likewise, *Jinfen shijia* (*The Story of a Noble Family*) incites gossiping among readers about Peking bureaucracy and celebrities' private lives since the novel makes use of real events (Y. Zhang, "Master" 106).

So far I have explained the reasons for *New Tale's* being ignored. In what follows, I seek to disclose the satirical strategies of *New Tale*. How does the novel build on its prequel *Tale*? How do the fantastical configurations of ghost characters and their magical manipulations serve this satirical purpose? How does Zhang Henshui achieve his didactic ends without utilizing a direct didactic narrative?

Zhang Henshui's
*A New Tale of
Killing Ghosts*

Narrative Intrusion and Ghostly Allegory

New Tale is an allegorical novel, as it configures a variety of ghosts for satirical and didactic exposure of the mortal world. Mimetic reading strategies are not suitable for *New Tale*. Its supra-normal events and entities, including Zhong Kui and the ghosts, are not likely to be featured as a severe challenge to readers' rationalistic world view, nor do they serve to promote a new "pattern of the universe" that accommodates supernatural phenomena (Huntington 111). The focus is always on human follies and social ills, as suggested by the various ghosts' meaningful names and actions. In his preface to *New Tale*, the popular Republican fiction writer Xu Qinfu (1891-1953) argues that one should not ignore the horrible deeds that people conduct, which renders some of them unworthy of being regarded as human (247).

An instance of narratorial intrusion instantly connects *New Tale* and *Tale*,⁸ namely the new inscription "Such things are indeed happening" that launches a new ghost-hunting journey. Realizing that the old inscription has been altered without his notice, Zhong Kui is furious at first about his authority being challenged. Eventually, he and his two assistants, Hanyuan and Fuqu, take "Such things are indeed happening" as a serious, meaningful message to be deciphered. They readily compare this message with the old inscription, "How can such things be true," and arrive at the conclusion that a new group of ghosts are now active down in the secular world. Consequently, Zhong Kui decides to conduct a new round of investigations. Surprisingly, what motivates these characters is not an officially confirmed mission to slay ghosts but a strange incident with no apparent cause.

The inscription in *New Tale* is presented as a humorous comment, as an articulation from the narrator that intrudes on the fictional world which Zhong Kui and others inhabit. In *New Tale*, a narrator tells the whole story. The narrator resembles traditional Chinese storytellers who "recite stories" (*shuoshu*) for townspeople. The reminiscent style of storytelling is conspicuous in two clear

⁸ An intrusive narrator is omniscient and, now and then, interrupts the story to impart (moral) commentary (Baldick).

ways: *qieshuo* (“let us resume the story”) that starts the chapters; and the one-line preview of the next chapter, usually *yuzhi . . . quekan xiahui fenjie* (“if you would like to know . . . wait to see the next chapter”). These “metanarrative” transition phrases have been identified as a set of long-used textual markers that vernacular novelists deliberately employ to imitate the traditional storytelling manner and style (Børdahl 125).⁹ Such formulas create an impression of a storyteller presenting the story to the audience (125).

Therefore, *New Tale* conveys an image of the narrator, who seems to be familiar with the novel *Tale* and echoes it with the exclamation “Such things are indeed happening.” On the one hand, the inscription, as an inner-plot commentary, conveys the narrator’s overall sentiment about the upcoming rampant ghosts. On the other hand, the inscription works as a component of the plot, as it takes up space and time in the story and pushes it forward by being perceived by the characters. Ultimately, the narrator/storyteller is intervening in his story. A narratorial manipulation of the fictional world comes into effect.

One can notice that, inventing the new inscription as both a homage and a challenge to the prequel *A Tale of Killing Ghosts*, Zhang Henshui engenders not only a sense of playfulness but also a different tone concerning reality. In *Tale*, the closing inscription “How can such things be true” appears as a striking message inside the sleeping narrator’s mind and declares that the story is merely a dream. On the level of the story, the inscription indicates the absurdity of the phantasm and Zhong Kui being a living, tangible figure in the secular world. Moreover, “How can such things be true” allows the author to vent his incredulity and exasperation at the *living ghosts* in the mortal world and, most notably, the human vices and follies. Generally, the focus of “How can such things be true” is settled on novelistic fictionality and the discernible distance between the reader and the fictional world of the story. It does not take on any thematic weight.

⁹ Metanarrative phrases listed by Vibeke Børdahl include “pre-verse phrases” and “phrases of narrative transition” (86, 91-92). Pre-verse phrases appear before the descriptive inner-textual verse. One example is “*shi yue*” (“The poem says”) (86). Phrases of narrative transition serve as signs of progression or punctuation in the narrative (92). Based on her meticulous analysis of the “Wu Song fighting the tiger” story in many forms of literary representation, Børdahl finds that metanarrative phrases are consolidated as a set of the storyteller’s rhetorical conventions mostly appearing in the “full recension” (*fanben*) of vernacular novels (124-25). W. L. Idema also notes that the “storyteller’s manner” is a “deliberate artistic invention” instead of evidence of any direct connection between a traditional vernacular novel and its “commented tales” (*pinghua*) (105). The markers of the storyteller’s manner include the following: division of the novel into chapters (episodic structure); suspensive conclusion of each chapter; transitory jargon (e.g., *huashuo* [“the story says”], “*qieshuo*” [“meanwhile, let’s tell”]); inclusion of descriptive verse and occasional authorial passages addressing the reader in order to deliver a moral verdict (70).

By contrast, in *New Tale*, “Such things are indeed happening” implies the actuality of immorality in the external world before the core story unfolds. *New Tale* came into being in a cultural background hostile to descriptions of “unreal” subject matters in fiction. The New Literature rose in opposition to traditional world outlooks with the new intellectuals accusing tradition of oppressing humanity.¹⁰ Although Zhang Henshui’s re-imagining of ghosts in the human world went against the trend of the New Literature, his allegorical and satirical purpose in *New Tale* is clear. “Such things are indeed happening” serves as a “warning,” a thematic authorial statement, and the “eye of the novel” (*wenyan*, literally the “eye of a piece of writing”).¹¹ The question is not whether this round of ghost investigation is a dream; the point is to realize that the ghosts representing social ills are not pure fantasy. The ghosts are not just Zhong Kui’s task but may also belong to the readers’ reality.

What counts as a ghost? In Liu Zhang’s preface to *Tale*, he delineates the nature of the satirized objects: immoralities beyond the reach of laws, such as conceitedness, brazenness, dishonesty, greed, lecherousness, and alcoholism (Liu, *Tale* 1). In *New Tale*, Zhang Henshui concretizes several universal weaknesses in humanity by assigning a ghost to each one. The naming of the ghosts enables the reader to grasp without much effort the author’s attitude of ridicule. The names include Mean Ghost, Opium Ghost, Hypocritical Ghost, Toady Ghost, Silly Ghost, and Opportunistic Ghost, among others. The easily comprehensible names in these labels dispel any sense of mystery that might have derived from the notion of ghost.

Zhang Henshui employs caricature and exaggeration to stress targeted follies and vices. Ghosts act in a comical and sometimes dramatic style. For example, Hollow-Hearted Ghost struggles to squeeze out an article, making him an allegorical figure mocking people who pretend to be erudite but are actually ignorant; Dissolute Ghost abuses his power and position as a private teacher and flirts with a female student; Cunning Ghost pays for alcohol perfunctorily with a jokingly forged banknote; Stingy Ghost takes a bite of a dog poo in his bet with a melon peddler just to get a trolley of melons for free; Short-Lived Ghost dies from excessive

¹⁰ For example, as a leading figure of the “New Literature,” Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967) wrote the article “Ren de wenxue” (“The Literature of People,” 1918). Zhou argues that literature should depict either ideal, ordinary, or miserable lives (122). Whichever kind of life the writers write about, one substantial criterion is to respect humanity as it is, to insist on human dignity and the combination of body and soul, and to write about real personalities in individuals (121). At the same time, Zhou blacklisted several literary subjects once popular in ancient literature, including obscenity, superstition, divinities, ghosts, monsters, slavery, bandits, scholars, beauties, vulgar jokes, and scandals (123).

¹¹ Liu Xizai (1813-1881) notes in the Qing-era Chinese theoretical work on verse and prose *Yigai · wengai* (*Artistic Outlines: An Outline on Prose*) that the “eye” is aimed to imply the theme of the entire piece of writing, a figure that can be placed at the beginning, middle, or end of the text (Cao 50).

flattery; Bragging Ghost is so obsessed with self-aggrandizement that he distributes oversized name cards with Chinese characters as large as bowls; Nasty Ghost uses the Jade Emperor's chamber pot to make tea in order to show his submission and admiration to his superior.

Zhang Henshui also introduces other ghosts that display historical characteristics typical of the Republican era. The connection built between the novel and the extraliterary reality catches the reader's eye. From the start the Celestial Empire undergoes an unprecedented change, from a monarchical regime to a republican government. This arrangement appears awkward and abrupt at first. In terms of the plot, there is no palpable reason for the Monkey King's sudden and radical rebellion, nor does the story explain why it has to be a republican form of government that replaces the reign of the Jade Emperor. Apart from the context, some ghosts show modern signs. For example, Zhang Henshui gives Nonsense Ghost romantic characteristics to ridicule those ambiguous poems that make no sense; Nonsense Ghost's friend, Philosophical Ghost, is an aloof and dull scholar who cares for nothing but indulging in philosophical contemplation.

The Literalization of Idioms

In the preface, Zhang Henshui praises Liu Zhang's novel *A Tale of Killing Ghosts*, arguing that it outvalues Zhang Nanzhuang's *Hedian* (*Which Allusion Is It?*, 1878, hereafter referred to as *Allusion*) in its humorous, satirical touch (H. Zhang, "Self-Preface" 203). Tracing the three novels chronologically, one may find signs of coherence and commonality. Notably, they all tell stories about characters who are represented as ghosts but ultimately resemble humans in caricature. Moreover, the three novels adopt written idioms creatively, displaying differences in the scope of their employment and their degree of fantastical dramatization. These differences ultimately distinguish Zhang Henshui's *New Tale* in style and literary effect from the other two novels.

In *Tale*, Liu Zhang takes the literal meaning of an idiom and materializes it as an event or scene in the story. In Chapter 2, Rowdy Ghost, Residue-Digging Ghost, and Scrubby Ghost acquire a peculiar ability: they can weaken their enemies' fighting skills by shouting degrading words at them. When Zhong Kui and his soldiers suffer the ghosts' "linguistic" attack, a fat monk comes to their rescue: "The monk smiled, opened his mouth widely, and swallowed the three ghost kings in a mouthful" (31). The monk explains to the awestruck crowd: "You don't need to teach the ghosts lessons or debate with them. Just accommodate them with a big belly. Why do you have to fight with them?" (31).

Behind the scene of the big monk swallowing ghosts is the idiom *dudanengrong* (the four-character idiom *du-da-neng-rong* denotes “belly-big-able to-accommodate”). Its figurative meaning is that one should try to be tolerant.¹² Customarily, in the Chinese context, the figurative sense prevails, and the imagery of the idiom is not taken seriously (that is, in the case of *dudanengrong*, one can still be tolerant even without a capacious stomach). However, in *Tale*, Liu Zhang sees the potential for bringing the idiom’s literal meaning to the semantic surface of the story and making the moral verdict more vivid. A similar example is the literalization of the idiom *suotouwugui* (*suo-tou-wugui*, “withdraw-head-turtle,” meaning “a turtle withdrawing its head into the shell”). When Deadbeat Ghost turns himself into a turtle and withdraws his head, the narrator criticizes him: “He has no way to welch on debts by talking nonsense, but he is able to avoid people by shying away like a turtle” (72). On the one hand, the metaphorical allusion to cowardice is highlighted; on the other hand, the literal imagery of the turtle occupies the fictional space of the story by actually having the ghost character turn into a turtle.

Liu Zhang’s literalization echoes Tzvetan Todorov’s ideas on the figurative discourse in fantasy. Todorov’s figurative discourse is about expressions in the narration leading to a “veritable metamorphosis” (77). Supernatural incidents in the story take place as the “literal sense of the figurative expression getting realized by the fantastic” (79). Expressions characterized by exaggeration or metaphors may still convey didactic messages through specific fantastical scenes, even when the expressions are not articulated in their exact words.

The late Qing novel *Which Allusion Is It?*¹³ by Zhang Nanzhuang also contains idiom usages, but generally in a more conventional and rigid way—the characters’ dialogues or the narrator’s accounts can be difficult to understand without relevant

¹² The prototype of the fat monk figure is Milefo (Maitreya) in Buddhism. The most popular couplet description of Maitreya in Chinese religion is “with a belly big enough for everything, he tolerates the intolerable under the sky; wearing a big smile all the time, he laughs at the ridiculous in the world,” which can be spotted beside the Maitreya statue in many temples.

¹³ Compared with *Tale* and *New Tale*, *Allusion* presents a tighter and more coherent plot focusing on one particular protagonist. The various ghosts are secondary characters whose actions push forward the protagonist’s story. The fictional world does not have Zhong Kui or any other figures that inherently represent justice or moral rectification as opposed to the ghosts. The basic plot is as follows. Living Ghost and his wife Female Ghost make a wish in front of Tianzun (Lord of Heaven) and eventually give birth to a boy ghost named Living Dead. Showing gratitude, the couple build a temple for Tianzun and invite a band of ghosts to watch plays. One of the ghosts loses his life in a drunken fight, but the criminal flees. Going through a series of torments, including blackmail, imprisonment, monetary loss, disease, and a failed remarriage, Living Ghost and Female Ghost both die, leaving behind the youngster Living Dead for a relative to raise. Living Dead is ill-treated and later runs away to make a living by himself as a beggar. One day he saves the girl Stink Flower from a rapist. After becoming engaged to the girl, Living Dead devotes himself to studying with a wise master, Guigu, but is eventually reunited with Stink Flower in the war. The couple defeat the army led by two Big-Headed Ghosts, are rewarded by Yama the Ghost King, and get married in the end.

linguistic background on the Wu dialect or editorial annotations. The idioms do not occupy imagery space in form of plot components but only contribute their allegorical meanings. To cite one of many instances, in Chapter 1, *baduanti* (*ba* translates as “retract,” *duan* as “short,” and *ti* as “ladder”) literally means “remove the short ladder” while figuratively it is equivalent to “burning the bridge after crossing it.” This idiom appears in a dialogue between the ghosts. Living Ghost promises to dedicate a temple to Tianzun, the supreme god in the mythological system of Chinese Daoism, as long as the divinity sends him a boy. Living Ghost sees his wish fulfilled but has no intention to keep his promise. His friend Mourning Ghost tries to dissuade him from merely paying lip service to Tianzun: “Since you’ve already promised to dedicate a temple to Tianzun, you can no longer go back on your word. Are you the kind of person to *baduanti*?” (N. Zhang, *Allusion* 16). Evidently, the idiom *baduanti* only functions in an allegorical sense, while its literal meaning of removing a ladder is not involved in the story. This conventional way of using idioms lends the novel a vivid, provincial, and comedic style.

A similar example is *liangmiansandao*, where the idiom is grafted into the plot with only the literal meaning remaining. On the surface, *liangmian* means “double faced” and *sandao* “triple knives.” The figurative meaning is “double-crossing.” However, *liangmiansandao* loses its figurative meaning in the narrative and is taken as the name of a weapon wielded by Light-Bone Ghost: “Light-Bone Ghost heard it, grabbed a *liangmiansandao*, and jumped away” (N. Zhang, *Allusion* 127). The weapon reappears later: “Although Light-Bone Ghost survived, his *liangmiansandao* got stolen by some knife thief on the killing field” (151). The writer partially makes use of the element “knife” in this idiom, which results in semantic confusion, since “a double-faced triple knife,” as written in the original story, makes no sense for the reader. The other shortcoming of such usage of *liangmiansandao* is that the idiom’s figurative meaning is completely put aside, since neither the ghost character nor the plot indicates that the ghost is double-crossing others.

Having presented the overview of the idiom usage in *A Tale of Killing Ghosts* and *Which Allusion Is It?*, I would like to turn to *New Tale*. Literalization of idioms is taken to a much more mature level by Zhang Henshui. Not only is this strategy used more frequently, but there also displays a better integration of the idioms’ literal meanings in the story.

Following Liu Zhang’s style of exposure and criticism, Zhang Henshui had in mind people’s moral weaknesses as he witnessed these in society and gave literary representations to these abstract targets. His criticism is collectively reflected through the idioms that he chooses and whose meaning he extends into supernatural

figurations. For example, in mocking some men's improper desire of women, Zhang Henshui portrays Dissolute Ghost. This ghost is so taken over by his lascivious obsession with a stranger that his soul drifts out of his body:

[Dissolute Ghost] stood in the middle of the street, not responding to any calls. Careless Ghost walked closer to him and noticed that he was gazing at something inside a gate. He was cold from head to toe except for the slight warmth near his heart. Careless Ghost had always known that Dissolute Ghost often became soulless when he came upon beauties, so there must be one inside that gate who had accidentally hooked his soul. (*New Tale* 64)

Zhang Henshui's
*A New Tale of
Killing Ghosts*

The crucial sentence in this excerpt is "Dissolute Ghost often became soulless when he came upon beauties." The whole scene is based on the idiom *hunbushoushe* in the original Chinese text, which is translated as "soulless" in the above excerpt. Literally, *hunbushoushe* ("soul/spirit-not- stay/keep-house") means "one's soul/spirit failing to stay in the body." This image leads to the figurative meaning of "being unable to concentrate on what one is supposed to do because of some powerful distraction." Zhang Henshui's strategy is to literalize the idiom *hunbushoushe* by transforming its imagery components into an actual literary event. Thus, Dissolute Ghost's soul leaves his body and transports itself into the beautiful woman's dead pet dog so that the ghost's mind can enjoy her company. It shows that Zhang Henshui takes the idiom as the inspiring prototype for imagining the supernatural plot.

Likewise, to criticize avarice, Zhang Henshui presents a greedy ghost's behavior in an "impossible" occurrence. The occurrence is derived from the idiom *jianqianyan kai* ("see-money-eyes-open"), literally meaning "once seeing money, one's eyes are wide open." The literalization takes shape in the Blind-Ghost episode in a slightly altered form. Blind Ghost smells a large sum of money:

He knew the sum was by no means small and thus craved to touch the money. But he had not sight, and the guy carrying the money would see his reaching hand before he even touched it. Burning with avarice, Blind Ghost felt his inner greediness turning into a hot flow soaring straight to the top of his head. The flow found no way out of his head and finally rushed out from Blind Ghost's eye sockets and dispelled his blindness. (158)

That the mere scent of money brings vision back to Blind Ghost's eyes, driven by his irrepressible craving, mocks monetary desire. In the previous examples of

Dissolute Ghost and Blind Ghost, idiom literalization is used to furnish dramatic scenes in which ghosts personify human weaknesses. The human follies are not represented mimetically in daily situations. What is satisfying about these practices of literalization is that not only do the literal meanings bring visual effects to the story, but the figurative meanings also remain in the story and create a humorous effect.

The confrontation between Zhong Kui and Hollow-Hearted Ghost in Chapter 3 epitomizes this literalization strategy in the most comprehensive way. Hollow-Hearted Ghost has another widely recognized name: Yan Zhihou. Both names carry vital information about the ghost. First of all, “Hollow-Hearted” was used to ridicule those complacent Republican Chinese literati who were far less academically sophisticated or knowledgeable than they pretended to be. For instance, the ghost intends to pull out a draft of a declaration of war against Zhong Kui, but the declaration ends up being no more than a mixture of sentences that Hollow-Hearted Ghost has stolen from a number of books.

The name Yan Zhihou echoes this satirical implication. *Yan* is equivalent to *lian*, denoting “face,” whereas *hou* means “thick” and *zhi* serves as a conjunction. “Yan Zhihou” is deliberately invented in reference to the idiom *houlianpi* (“thick-face”), a more common idiom used to blame someone for being shameless. The ghost’s two names delineate the satirical target: the literati who are shameless about feigning erudition. Giving two names to one ghost does not follow from a need to enrich the character; rather, it is intended to inform the reader of the satirized object more comprehensively.

Zhang Henshui goes into great length to present the battle between Hollow-Hearted Ghost and Zhong Kui. The satirized phenomena embedded in the name take dramatic forms as the ghost’s magical ability and the weapon. The writer takes *houlianpi* (“thick-faced”) at face value, thus having the ghost’s face solid enough to survive hard blows and even artillery fire: “[Hanyuan] fired two cannons at the face of Hollow-Hearted Ghost. The ghost was equipped with a thick face . . . he advanced; the artillery fire struck his face and disappeared, leaving no scars at all” (32).

Hollow-Hearted Ghost uses book bags as his weapon: “[Hollow-Hearted Ghost] shook his bag only once, and Hanyuan was struck like thunder. The ghost’s servants all carried large or small book bags and kept shaking them. All the underworld soldiers started to feel numb and feeble” (32-33). As it turns out, Hollow-Hearted Ghost’s book bags have only word fragments instead of books: “He snatched books from many places and filled them in the bags” (33). Dangling the book bags is the literalization of the idiom *diaoshudai* (“drop-book-bag”). Figuratively, *diaoshudai* satirizes writers who fill their writings with too many quotations to show off their rich knowledge.

In the counterattack, the underworld soldiers are equipped with huge knives, broad axes, and wastepaper baskets. They successfully defeat Hollow-Hearted Ghost: “The servants of his had several of their book bags slashed open by axes, so piles of paper pieces fell out with fragmented bits of text. . . . [T]heir book bags were magically absorbed by the wastepaper baskets” (34). This scene literalizes the idiom *dadaokuofu* (“big-knife-wide-axe”). While indicating that the underworld soldiers are taking actions decisively and quickly, *dadaokuofu* has also been divided character by character into images, coming together as “huge knives and broad axes.” Picturing the ghost’s book bags slashed open by the blades, Zhang Henshui suggests that excessive, showing-off quotations in writings should be excised without hesitation, and wastebaskets are rather more suitable for rubbish articles. As one can see, the fighting scene in the plot is not driven by a realistic, causal logic. Instead, the ghost’s and Zhong Kui’s activities are pictured according to the authorial verdicts, conveyed through idioms about men of letters. The hectic fighting scenes add a sense of performativity to the story.

In the type of defamiliarization I have explored, the reader should not take the conventional idioms for granted according to their naturalized, metaphorical meanings. As Robert-Alain De Beaugrande and Wolfgang Ulrich Dressler state in their chapter on “coherence” in text linguistics, usually there is only one intended sense of a linguistic expression, even though the given expression may have several virtual meanings (84). However, the idioms in Zhang Henshui’s *New Tale* are fully perceived in both the literal and the figurative dimensions. What distinguishes this literalization strategy is that, with its help, Zhang Henshui ridicules ugliness in the fantastical and funny fictional scenes instead of making sharp criticism or direct judgments, thus entailing a good deal of humor.¹⁴

Conclusion

As I stated in the introduction, Zhang Henshui’s *A New Tale of Killing Ghosts* has been overlooked by many researchers for many reasons. On the surface, it follows the lead of Liu Zhang’s *A Tale of Killing Ghosts* in the motif and setup; it is written in keeping with traditional session-chapter fiction and shows limited immediate modernity; it draws on almost no personal material from the author’s life; and it plays jokes on communism.

¹⁴ In his preface to the novel, Zhang Henshui states his reluctance to curse directly in the narration (H. Zhang, “Self-Preface” 203).

Zhang Henshui identifies the motif of Zhong Kui along with a variety of ghosts as a workable framework to satirize society, notably various human shortcomings. In “Such things are indeed happening,” Zhang Henshui makes a humorous reference to *A Tale of Killing Ghosts* and highlights the allegorical nature of his novel. Apart from the above thematic articulation, ghost characters communicate significant messages through satire. The ghosts are one-dimensional characters with highly indicative names pointing out satirized and immoral elements. In other words, the ghosts are more like personifications of immorality than actual characters. The novel is thus like a discursive parade of follies and vices while Zhong Kui represents the only rectifying force, trying to maintain the principal “law” in the story as the ghosts are finally punished.

In terms of carrying out a didactic task based on ghost fantasy, Zhang Henshui develops a minor narrative technique in *A Tale of Killing Ghosts*. *New Tale* outperforms *Tale* and even the better-known satirical novel *Which Allusion Is It?* in its creative usage of Chinese idioms. In the technique of literalization, Zhang Henshui revives the literal dimension of the idioms while keeping the figurative dimension active in the conveyance of satire. Most of the idioms selected here are intended for exposing the ugliness that occurs in broad daylight. Nonetheless, rather than educate the reader on ethical principles through straightforward verdicts, Zhang Henshui cares more about how his messages reach the reader while avoiding a moralistic didacticism. In this sense, idiom literalization generates dramatic performativity and enhances moral communication.

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