



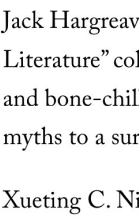
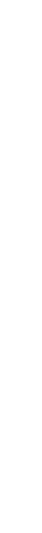
PODCAST

Ep. 28: Chinese Horror with Xueting C. Ni

Horror writing has an unsavory reputation in China, but comes with a long history and is full of biting social commentary. The translator of a recent collection explains what lurks beneath.

ALEC ASH — JANUARY 6, 2024

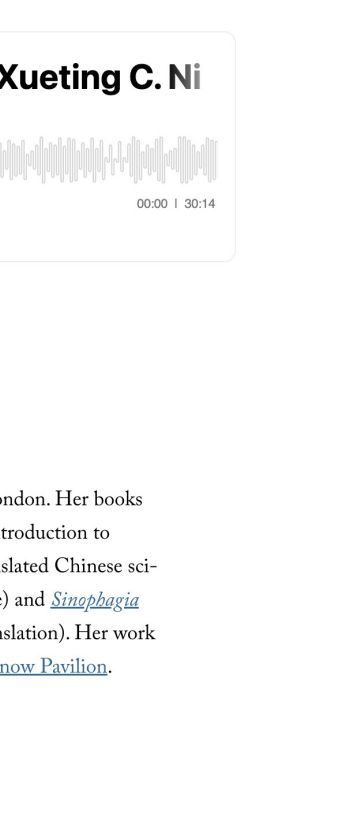
FICTION



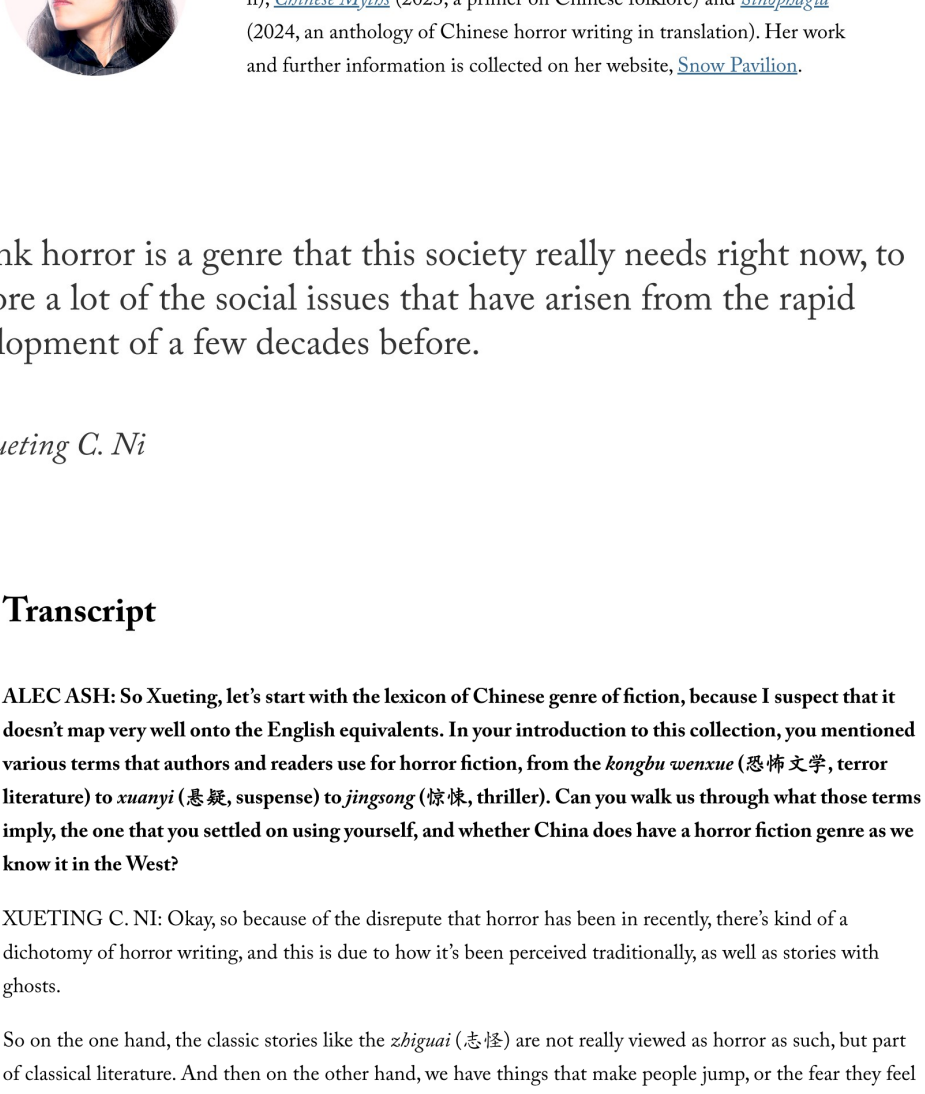
This is an episode of the China Books Podcast, from China Books Review. Follow us to listen to the pod on your favorite platform, including Apple Podcasts and Spotify, where a new episode lands on the first Tuesday of every month. Or listen to this episode right here, where we also post the transcript.

There are certain genres of Chinese fiction that are well read in English translation, from Jin Yong's martial-arts novels to a rising interest in Chinese sci-fi. Then there are genres that are lesser known, but just as important in Chinese literary tradition.

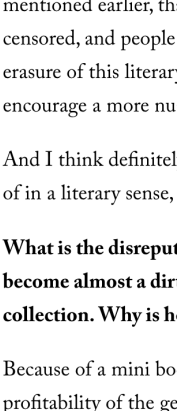
Horror fiction — if that is the best term for it — is a genre that readers might associate less with China, yet it stretches back centuries and is just as alive and kicking today. Thanks to the efforts of our guest this month, you can now read some of the best contemporary examples of the genre in translation in *Sinophagia: A Celebration of Chinese Horror* (Solaris, September 2024), which Jack Hargreaves recommended earlier in our "Translated Chinese Literature" column. It's a diverse collection that is equally gripping and bone-chilling, with stories varying from spooky campus myths to a survival-room horror that doubles as social satire.



Buy the book



Guest



Xueting C. Ni is an author and translator based in London. Her books include *Fran Kuan Yin to Chairman Mao* (2018, an introduction to Chinese deities), *Sinopticon* (2021, a collection of translated Chinese sci-fi), *Chinese Myths* (2023, a primer on Chinese folklore) and *Sinophagia* (2024, an anthology of Chinese horror writing in translation). Her work and further information is collected on her website, [Snow Pavilion](#).

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— Xueting C. Ni

Transcript

ALEC ASH: So Xueting, let's start with the lexicon of Chinese genre of fiction, because I suspect that it doesn't map very well onto the English equivalents. In your introduction to this collection, you mentioned various terms that authors and readers use for horror fiction, from the *kongbu wenxue* (恐怖文学, terror literature) to *xuanyi* (悬疑, suspense) to *jingzong* (惊悚, thriller). Can you walk us through what those terms imply, the one that you settled on using yourself, and whether China does have a horror fiction genre as we know it in the West?

XUETING C. NI: Okay, so because of the disrepute that horror has been in recently, there's kind of a dichotomy of horror writing, and this is due to how it's been perceived traditionally, as well as stories with ghosts.

So on the one hand, the classic stories like the *zhiqigui* (志怪) are not really viewed as horror as such, but part of classical literature. And then on the other hand, we have things that make people jump, or the fear they feel when they're chased, relating to this slasher-type horror. So this kind of dichotomy of the perception of horror.

What I've tried to do is, by combining two terms, *kongbu* and *xuanyi-kongxuan* (恐悬, terror and suspense) encourages a more nuanced approach to looking at horror literature, and really reflect the diversity of range that I can see out there, some of which are curated in *Sinophagia*.

The other term *xuanyi* has been used as a euphemism by agents and publishers, because of the disrepute I mentioned earlier, that horror perceived to be slasher type has been in, that for a long time, it was heavily censored, and people didn't want to be associated with the genre. But the danger of using euphemisms is the erasure of this literary tradition. So what I suggest is a combination of two of the existing terms, *kongxuan* to encourage a more nuanced and diverse approach.

And I think definitely there is a horror literary tradition. I think it is gaining its distinct identity, both in terms of in a literary sense, in a visually aesthetic sense.

What is the disrepute that you're talking about? And you bring this up in your introduction, that horror has become almost a dirty word in genre fiction in China, and it was difficult to persuade people to join the collection. Why is horror in a state of disrepute?

Because of a mini boom in horror films and books in the 2000s. This led to a lot of exploitation of the profitability of the genre, and led to a lot of trashy works and some kind of Satanic Panic, or China's version of that, in the population and in the kind of mainstream media. So it was a genre that was disapproved of.

Can you give an example of the Satanic Panic?

There were a few cases of copycat deaths from reading kind of trashy horror literature. And I think this was kind of magnified, and because horror is associated with that kind of image, rather than what it actually is — just another kind of literature that looks at different facets of humanity. So there were a lot of scares about it, in a similar way to video games recently being seen as harmful to the youths that was a few years ago.

And then recently, I can see some changes happening. It's being openly talked about on social media like Xiaohongshu (or RedNote), where we see people making indie films and creating their own art featuring a kind of Eastern sense of visual esthetics. So I can see it's coming back, and it's certainly in a lot of adjacent storytelling. It's still not called horror, but it has the Gothic elements to it, so in storytelling like mysteries and thrillers and kind of dark suspense fiction.

And as you note the term *kongbu wenxue* could be translated as terrorist literature, because it shares the vocabulary with terrorism. So was it seen as a potential force for social harm in the way that Chinese press and propaganda department could be quite censorious of anything seen to spread social harm or pornographic literature or anything violent?

I mean, it sounds like *kongbu fenzi* (恐怖分子), which is terrorism, right? So if you say that word, then the association is there.

I think more so China is at the stage where it doesn't like to show the flip side of its culture, whereas horror is more developed in certain countries, like in Europe and in the U.S., where it's celebrated as a type of genre fiction.

This is not to say that there aren't any problems with female representation, for example, within Western horror. But it's a lot more recognized as a proper genre of writing. So I think it's a stage that China will probably get to in the future, hopefully, and I can see that things are changing.

But I think horror is a genre that this society really needs right now to explore a lot of the social issues that have arisen from the rapid development of few decades before.

We'll get into that in just a moment, but I want to tell our readers about the history of horror in China. I guess the work most people will think of here is Pu Songling's (蒲松龄) 18th-century collection *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊斋志异), which includes famous stories like "The Painted Skin" (*Huapi* 画皮) about fox spirits and such like. I think that was one of the movies from the early 2000s that you referenced.

Does that book qualify as horror for you, in which we're talking of it, or is it something different? And what are some of the other early examples in Chinese literature that we might not be familiar with?

I think it certainly does qualify as horror. What it's famous for, which probably has something to do with the TV series and films that were made in the 80s, there were these romantic stories or female fox demons that popularized the book to the public, that is being associated with kind of romantic fox ladies primarily. But it definitely has horror elements. It's several hundred stories of different tales, and some of them look at the supernatural creatures in quite a complex way.

There is a section which I talk about in the book, in one of the recent lectures which I gave at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) about Chinese horror, it is definitely very visceral in stories that inspire dread definitely and they're probably not the most popular or most well-known ones. But they're definitely falling to the horror category, rather than just supernatural fantasy. But because Pu Songling was considered classic literature, it doesn't tend to be seen that way.

Having said that, a lot of the recent renditions, I think there's one coming up, a TV series, and some more recent versions of *Huapi*, "The Painted Skin," have brought out the horror elements more, so traditional horror is almost inseparable from strange tales. Although not all strange tales are horror, a lot of it is. And it's a tradition that goes way back than Pu Songling, whose work is a pinnacle of this. It goes back to the Wei Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties (魏晋南北朝).

Can you tell us more about the strange tales? You bring up the term *zhiqigui* (志怪) in your book, as you mentioned all the works like *Shuyiji* (述异记, Records of the Strange). How is this tradition of supernatural or superstitious stories distinct to what we conceive of as horror fiction today?

Yeah, so they started off as these cosmography in the very early times, of records of far away lands, that were given to the rulers, as it reports about the peoples and lands of China as its territories grew.

They were kind of adopted by their literati during the Tang dynasty. And that's when it gained a consciousness as a form of fiction. And that was a time when you began to have horrific elements in the strange tales, because it was a time of opulence, but had a lot of dark sides, definitely dark underbelly of society, particularly urban society.

Horror elements, stories that inspired dread really began to appear from that time onward. But they really started during the Qing dynasty that it reached a pinnacle in the works of Pu Songling, who made a whole kind of literary personality out of his world of strange tales. But not just him. There's two more writers who are quite influential. There is Ji Yun (纪昀), and there is the other one, who wrote *Zi bayu* (子不语) — Yuan Mei (袁枚). These are the three great masters of the strange tales.

You have a line: "Where nearly every horror myth I have come across in the West is a cautionary tale, China has a long tradition of journal and documentary style writing," by which you're referring to these *zhiqigui*, the tales of the strange.

What do you mean by documentary style? Many of these early readers take it as factual, as a sort of accounting of the *yaoguai* (妖怪, demons/demons) of demons, the cosmography of all of these spirits in Chinese folk belief?

The tales of the strange grew out of reportage of faraway lands and things happening in those places to rulers of the land. And that kind of rhetoric was continued by fictional writers. So even if they made the whole story up, it was still presented like it's fact. So in the early times, it was a reportage but the tradition was also adopted by fiction writers as something that they've heard, or seen themselves, or heard from other people — as something that actually happened. Yeah, so there's two senses of the tradition.

And I was struck when reading the collection, how many of the stories did feel that they were infected with this almost nostalgic preoccupation with old tales, myths and legends from China, from allusions to "the Painted Skin" in one of a stories "Immortal Beauty" (红颜朱老), to the myths of ghost grooms and ghost brides in "Huangcun" (荒村), another one. This kind of traditional belief in spirits and ghosts — *yaoguai* (monsters), what you might call superstition, which occurs to me, was broken down in part by the Cultural Revolution, and then the reform era that followed; but has clearly endured in some form... those older beliefs and that tradition of supernatural writing in China, which goes back so far.

Do you think that these contemporary writers of horror are re-channeling those beliefs, or what remains of them? Or is it purely a sort of fascination with this rich, superstitious past in China that has nothing to do with China's present anymore?

I don't think you can look at it in that way, that the present has nothing to do with the past. It always has something to do with the past and a lot of contemporary literature finds their origins or an evolution of some form of traditional writing.

Like the strange tales, it's become so incorporated in literature now that in a contemporary story, the writer may start with, because I was unemployed, I went on holidays in the mountains, and this is what I saw — which is one of the stories of She Cong Ge (蛇从果) goes, that's the premise of his story "Those Who Walk at Night." So it's very integrated with storytelling, strange tales, that it's part of the rhetoric of a proper story.

And actually, *Sinophagia* really shows that horror literature can be very contemporary and modern. I mean, we have a college horror set in contemporary times. We have science fiction set in the future, "In the Waking Dream" (清醒梦).

Even "The Ghost Wedding" (喜姑鬼嫁) deals with the kind of crime in contemporary society of people trafficking, unfortunately, but there are little pockets of rural China where a lot of traditions and old customs exist. Unfortunately, something like the ghost wedding is still practiced in some regions, and one of the stories you mentioned earlier on, "Forbidden Rooms" (禁屋), that's entirely contemporary. So is Zhou Dedong's (周德东) story about the housing crisis and space crisis, set in contemporary China, "Beijing in the Outer Rings."

It's actually quite a contemporary series, and actually that's one of the reasons why I set "The Girl in the Rain" (雨女) to open the book, because it is a story with a modern setting, with some young characters, set in a university campus in contemporary China. And that challenges perceptions of horror being rural, historical or only.

Let's get into some of the stories! Your notes at the end of each explain some of the key themes and the social context. And I was struck at how many of them, like you said, get to the heart of the nation's more recent anxieties you mentioned in the introduction — the urban fear of the rural. And that jumped out at me from such stories of "Huangcun," about this guy from a town who visits rural China. Do you find that urbanization has sped up some of these fears and anxieties which horror stories bring out in a fresh way?

Okay, so the urban-rural divide is just one of the issues that has come up in *Sinophagia*. To me, the story of "Huangcun," it's more about a Chinese Gothic story that's to do with antiquity, history of the eastern coast of China, furthermore, the idea of what is a chaste woman. So it's more about perception of women and their roles in society.

There are several themes there. Also, the Gothic element of being overwhelmed in an old house with all its history and antiquity. More about that, than the rural and urban divide, although it is true that part of it is set in a city and part of it is set in a village.

Some of the other stories feel much more contemporary and futuristic. You mentioned one, "The Waking Dream" by Fan Zhou (范舟), which is about a metaverse where you can work virtually while in an induced sleep, but some of those who use it are infected by the horrors of their subconscious.

Could you tell us a little bit about this story? We don't want to give spoilers here, but we do want to introduce some of the story's plots to our readers. And could you tell us what you think that particular story might be commenting on in contemporary China?

I think you've done a pretty good job of telling the audience a bit about this story. When I read it, I felt it had a relevance that crosses borders, that's quite universal. The pressures of work, capitalist exploitation of the workers is something that people have been feeling all over the world.

And something that's quite interesting about China is the growth of the metaverse, and also, to some extent, around the world as well. We do a lot of things virtually now. I mean, we have meetings, we socialize virtually. So why not the possibility of, in the future, working virtually — we do now, but how about in our dreams, or in our subconsciousness? That is quite a close future story, really. That seems to have many points of relevance, both in terms of what is going on in China, in the tech industries and in the industry such as the big data industries, the unreasonable, the demanding working hours. So relevance of that, but also wider issues of the demands of contemporary life, particularly, probably made worse by high technology that I think we all, to some extent, experience.

So various of these stories are very much taking on more modern fears and anxieties and horrors of the technological age.

And then the other story you mentioned, "Have You Heard of Ancient Glory?" (你听说过古辉煌吗?) by Zhou Dedong, is, as you said, about the pressure on young Chinese to buy an apartment. In the story, this young couple finally manages to scrape and save and buy an apartment on the far outskirts of Beijing, or really, Hebei Province, only to find — I hope it's not too much of a spoiler to say that — there are no other occupants to the rest of the apartment block, only the stored ashes of deceased loved ones — family members. Did you see that story as a sort of criticism or satire of modern Chinese society and these economic pressures?

I thought it was very spot on in dealing with the housing crisis, where people are increasingly able to afford, buying places to live, and also the change in burial traditions due to the expense of buying the burial plot and space issues — a lot of people are now cremated.

That's a huge change from previous burial rites. And with the traditional belief that of the souls going on into their next world, their next life, when people pass away, they are sort of still there in where they're buried, but just in another dimension — sort of this is a huge change, because if you're cremating someone, then they're not actually in the earth anymore. So I thought it was quite interesting.

Yes, and am I right in thinking that that story is based off a real news story where columbariums, where you store the ashes of the deceased, had become so expensive inside Beijing that some residents actually bought cheaper flats on the outskirts to store the ashes of their deceased? So it's really fiction imitating life.

Yeah, that's right. So it's interesting that quite a few of the stories have been based on newspaper articles, news that the writers have read like "Forbidden Rooms" and "The Ghost Wedding," something from the real experiences of one of Yimei Tangguo's (一枚糖果, Ed: the author of "The Ghost Wedding") readers. So we're getting social horror coming out of China.

So "The Ghost Wedding" you mentioned, is that inspired by the real tradition of *minghun* (冥婚, literally "underworld marriage"), sort of marrying the deceased? Although in this story, it's a little bit more literal.

Yeah, it's inspired by that and the practice of this custom that still goes on in certain regions, and also the crimes of people trafficking that's coming to light more recently in the news. But as I said in the comments in that story, it's based on real events that were told to the writer by one of her readers, who was a teacher in certain parts of China.

And then you also mentioned "Forbidden Rooms" by Zhou Haohui (周浩辉), which was one of my favorite stories. It's a sort of room survival horror story based, as you note, on a real story where the grandparent died and the child that he was caring for, because the child's father was out working, the child died of thirst and starvation, because the neighbors didn't take action after they heard the child crying for several days.

So that's a real news story, which the author here springboards off into this horrific story, which seems also to criticize or satirize this breakdown of societal trust, which has been a sort of hot button issue in China for decades, with various reports of bystanders, passerbys, not intervening to help those in need. Do you read the story in that way as well as a work of social criticism?

It's definitely a work of social criticism. To me, it also speaks for those who are marginalized because these quick changes, the ones that are left behind. There are certain children who are left by the parents because they need to migrate to where the opportunities are, and then the elderly as well, similarly, sometimes can't be taken care of as much, because the children are working elsewhere — people like that, who are kind of left behind, not literally but due to the social changes that have resulted from the economic changes, the ones that are neglected. So they deal with the marginalized in this sense.

As well as social criticism, many of the stories are about individual psychology, psychological horror. You make the point that mental health and mental health issues are stigmatized and neglected, often in Chinese culture, certainly traditional Chinese culture. Do you feel that these stories are an outlet for that, both individual and societal, in the absence of more normalized therapy?

I think horror has always been an outlet wherever it is written, for the things that society is less willing to look at, the darker side of people, of things. That's not just China. That's one of the great functions of horror writing, is that the horror writers, I find, are very willing to look at the darker side of things.

Right. As you said, if sci-fi often expresses the hopes and dreams of a culture, then horror gives voice to its fears and its anxieties. Can you explain the name that you chose for your collection to us, *Sinophagia* — what does that mean?

So the credit really has to go to my long-term collaborating editor. Well, we came up with the term *sinophagia*, because it sounded quite creepy. But "sino" was always going to be there, because it's a series with *Sinopticon*. And then, "phagia" comes from the Greek word to devour, so giving a sense of always intangible, kind of unplaceable, kind of sense of the creepy, the eerie. And it's also a made-up word that we thought sounded cool and horrific.

It almost reminds me of *sinophobia*. Was that intentional at all? Because phobia, of course, would be the more natural derived word, but the word is already taken.

It does sound like *sinophobia*, but that's not intended. But perhaps the meaning of "to devour," we sort of slightly intended it to be an ironic comment on the phobia of Asian eating habits that have arisen from the way that COVID has been handled by certain media and presses. And sure enough, I did get some responses from certain people online saying, is it about the horror of eating Chinese food? No, it is not about the horror of eating Chinese food.

That's only a delight.

That's great, exactly! It's only a delight. And even the piece that has food in it, "The Yin Yang Pot" (阴阳锅), is a creepy tale that comes from the rituals of eating a certain dish rather than the dish itself.

I love that story. I think that was my favorite in the collection, "The Yuan Yang Pot," with the white and the red sides being eaten by ghosts and humans, respectively.

One last question, or penultimate question for me, which I can't resist riffing off, this idea of *sinophobia*, it occurs to me that as Western readers, especially white readers, reading and consuming horror from Asia, part of the effect maybe comes from this sort of othering or alienating effect. Japanese horror films are very popular in the West, for example, perhaps because it's such an alien culture which can be more conducive to being scared, because you're not familiar with it.

Do you think there's something there in these stories as you engaged with them — which relates to whether scare does, in fact, come from elements of xenophobia or a fear of the other alien culture?

It's one thing to be xenophobic. It's another thing to enjoy the horror writing of a different culture, because the unfamiliarity with the rhythmic of storytelling accentuates the horror element, and I think the latter is a very good thing. A lot of readers have told me that the scare or the twist in these stories have happened where they were least expecting, and that in horror works very well.

And this is why separate from some kind of xenophobic or racist viewpoint that Western audiences have enjoyed, things like *The Grudge* or *The Ring*, because that kind of storytelling, which shows the similarities with Chinese storytelling, has a different pulse, a different rhythm to Western stories.

In your past work, you've introduced us to so many different aspects of Chinese culture, from myths and legends to sci-fi, now to horror. Are you willing to tell us, what is your next project?

Yeah, sure. So I'm working on a range of things, a couple of new fiction anthologies of Chinese genre fiction, one on queer literature, and another one called *China 100+*, which imagines the country 100 years from the pandemic. In terms of non-fiction, I'm working on a book on the cultural history of *wuxia* (武侠), martial arts fantasy storytelling.

Wonderful! Well, that seems like plenty to keep you busy, and we very much look forward to reading those books when they come out.

Xueting Ni, thank you so much for coming on the podcast.

Thank you, Alec. ■