

## Of Dreams and Memories

### *A Ghost Story From a Land Where Haunting Is Banned*

From a secular point of view, the souls and spirits memorialized in funerals and cemeteries enunciate cultural ideals that transcend the lifetime of a given individual. From at least one person's or political party's point of view, they represent what *should* be remembered, connecting the past to the future in a positive fashion. Our memories, however, include more than that which we think we should remember. Some memories haunt us whether we would like them to or not. Such memories can be thought of as ghosts. Like the spirits and souls discussed in the last chapter, they are powerful, regardless of whether we approach them as beings with physical presence or "mere" psychological appearances.

They are also dangerous. As described in chapter 4, the ghosts that haunt public housing estates or haunted houses can entice people to commit suicide or murder. They force themselves into the minds of those who unknowingly enter their spaces. They can also be erotic, driving sexual fantasies or behaviors that some would like to repress. If chapter 4 attempted to understand ghosts socially as strangers, this chapter focuses on them psychologically. Ghosts remind us that our minds are never fully our own.

In China, ghosts are also political. Foreigners, outsiders, and political enemies can all be referred to as ghosts. By governing memorialization, the Party attempts to structure historical memory. But ghosts remain out of control. Not only may a deceased person be kin (an ancestor) to one person and a stranger (ghost) to another, those souls or spirits that one person or political party thinks should be remembered can be the ghosts that another thinks should be forgotten. When people themselves come to represent what should or should not be remembered, then the social, political, and psychological aspects of ghosts all blend together.

While ghosts can be both male and female, in China the ghosts depicted in fictional stories are more likely to be women than men. In addition to a view of

sexual psychology that attributes desire (and, hence, susceptibility to seduction) more often to men than women, the prevalence of female ghosts also reflects traditional practices of patrilineal, patrilocal kinship. Such practices could render women outsiders and block them from positions of political power. As the data from the cemeteries show, women are more likely to be buried alone and improperly memorialized than men. For all of these reasons, they are more likely to become ghosts.

I began this book with a slightly fictionalized depiction of a contemporary urban funeral and thought it would be fitting to end the book with ghost story, a bit of fiction. Between fiction and nonfiction there is both an absolute divide and a fundamental continuity. The divide lies in the intent. Journalists and social scientists go to great lengths to make what they write accurate representations of what they observed. Most of this book follows that intent. While such intent and the representations it generates are important, my desire to represent Chinese funerals accurately cannot completely overcome the continuity of nonfiction writing with fictional narratives. This continuity exists on at least two levels. The first is linguistic. By giving narrative form to the social life that I observed, I employ the same linguistic tropes, metaphors, structures, and vocabularies that novelists do. No author's use of language is simply transparent. Language must be seen as structuring our thought as much as we use our thought to manipulate language. Second is the problem of memory. Journalists and academics rely on both the memories of others and their own memories to collect their data, but no one's memory is fully under their own control. Stories, particularly ghost stories, portray truths about the way that we perceive and remember the world in ways nonfiction writing cannot.

To select a story for this chapter, as an anthropologist interested in the culture of the broad urban masses, I looked through popular novels instead of literary tomes read mainly by academics. I also wanted a story that was set in a realistic, contemporary setting, that involved ghosts that rang true for an urbanizing China. Rapid urbanization brings about particular forms of haunting. Families and communities break down and people can die alone. As village after village is demolished, graveyard after graveyard dug up, and neighborhood after neighborhood razed, cities themselves can be seen as haunted by their old architectural pasts and the people who lived them. These hauntings are necessarily full of political energy. Those whose lives are adversely affected by demolitions and relocations can become an oppositional political force. The officials in charge of urban renewal usually hope such hauntings, and the ghosts they involve, will be quickly forgotten.

In one city I visited, I asked students to tell me about places that were said to be haunted. One directed me to an abandoned part of a university campus that was scheduled for demolition. While it appeared to be occupied by a few migrant workers in the evenings, who may have been squatting there illegally, it was empty



FIGURE 17. Graffiti. Photo: Andrew B. Kipnis.

during the day. At the back of this quarter of abandoned buildings was a wall that marked the edge of campus territory. On that wall, I found some graffiti which could be interpreted as a four-lined poem:

Greedy Desire;  
 Contradictions and Selfishness;  
 Falsehood and Mediocrity;  
 [Is this] A Great Heaven on Earth?

I asked several Chinese literature students if the words in the graffiti quoted any famous poems, but none could recall a poem that the lines in the graffiti reproduced. The line I translated as “falsehood and mediocrity” could refer to officials who use falsehood (telling their superiors what they want to hear) to get ahead despite their mediocre performance. However one reads these words, they are an outpouring of negative political sentiment. When I revisited the wall a few months after I took this picture, the graffiti was still there. Because almost all forms of politically subversive expression in China are suppressed, I was shocked by both my initial discovery of this writing and its ability to remain unaltered for a period of months. Its longevity suggests that no one connected to officialdom in China ever visited this place, a fact that could be explained by its purported haunting.

But though the graffiti managed to survive for at least a few months, ghost stories set in urban China seem more fully repressed. It took me many months to find one useful for this chapter. I never expected to find a story where the ghosts had died during the Great Leap famine, the Cultural Revolution, or any of the other historical incidents that the Party attempts to erase, but I could not even find a

story that seemed solidly set in a contemporary urban setting. An unspoken rule of censorship seemed to taboo both the hauntings caused by rapid urbanization as well as ghosts who had died in automobile crashes, medical mishaps, industrial accidents, suicides or murders during the contemporary era—that is, from any of the types of ordinary but wrongful deaths that occur in most societies and often result in unsettled ghosts.

Chinese students told me several stories orally, but these were usually quite short. The emphasis was on how scary the ghost was or on demonstrating that the ghost was real rather than the death that caused the ghost to haunt the present. I also visited several amusement-park style haunted houses in large cities, but again the emphasis was on scaring people with darkness, sound, and scary images (mostly borrowed from foreign horror movies) rather than tales of the ghost's origin. I read or skimmed several dozen novels listed in online literature websites as "ghost stories." These stories avoided contemporary urban ghosts by focusing on four other types of haunting. The first involved stories set in imperial China. These were mostly knockoffs of the famous Qing dynasty ghost story collection *Strange Stories of Liaozhai*. These stories do involve social commentary, but the commentary focuses on Qing dynasty evils rather than contemporary ones. The second type of haunting involved contemporary Chinese people, but was set in foreign countries. The abundance of such stories in Chinese cyberspace suggests that there are plenty of ghosts in Japan, Korea, Europe and North America, but few in China. The third type of haunting involved *Harry Potter* knockoffs. The final type was set in contemporary urban China, but involved ghosts with origins in ancient Chinese history and legend. No doubt China is haunted by its very long history, but to fit the theme of this book I wanted something more contemporary. Unlike the websites full of ghost stories and even directories of haunted houses available in Hong Kong, mainland China seemed to lack an easily accessible source in which contemporary urban ghosts were given narrative form.

#### CORONAVIRUS, POLITICAL PROTEST, AND MY HAUNTED HONG KONG

I moved to Hong Kong to work at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in late 2017, after nearly twenty years of work at an Australian university. I completed the research for this book in 2018 and 2019 while living in Hong Kong. 2019 and 2020 have been tense years. The autumn of 2019 was rocked by violent confrontations between pro-democracy protestors and police. The demonstrations were sometimes framed as a confrontation between native, Cantonese-speaking Hong Kongers and Mandarin speakers from mainland China. On campus I heard from students and colleagues of many backgrounds, including Hong Kong students fearful of police repression but determined to sacrifice for democracy; mainland Chinese students who felt caught between their nascent democratic sentiments

and their identities as mainland Chinese, unable to communicate openly with either Hong Kong students or their friends and relatives back home; and non-Chinese students who either supported the protests or felt caught in the middle as well.<sup>1</sup> Many in Hong Kong were so convinced of the absolute opposition between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese people that they thought I was risking my personal safety by travelling to China to complete the research for this book. While I was not harassed or arrested in China during my autumn 2019 visits, tones of strident Chinese nationalism increasingly intruded on my interactions. One of my last research trips of that autumn took me to the city of Wuhan in November 2019, just before the Covid-19 outbreak began there.

The coronavirus has wreaked death and havoc on the world, intensified the mounting cold war between the United States and China, and stepped up the already terrifying mechanisms of state surveillance within China. This surveillance makes me feel that autumn 2019 will be the last time I ever conduct ethnographic research in China, after more than thirty years of doing so. The Covid-19 app that all Chinese residents and visitors to China must place on their mobile phones traces out the contacts an individual makes. It is now a requirement to take your phone with you whenever you leave your residence. Consequently, for both Chinese citizens and non-citizens visiting China, all location data, physical contacts with other people, mobile phone communications, and purchasing history (most Chinese use smartphone apps rather than cash to make purchases) are easily shared with the police. Whether it is ethically possible to carry out any ethnographic research in China under such conditions is questionable. In addition, in 2020 it has become nearly impossible for foreigners to travel to China, as visas have been cancelled and fourteen-day quarantines imposed on both those travelling to China and those returning from China to Hong Kong. Even more damaging are the breakdowns in communication between China and Hong Kong. Some of the people I communicate with in China bombard me with messages signalling strident Chinese nationalism; others I fear to contact at all, as the questions I might ask them could only get them into trouble. And it is not just me who feels this way. Many of the mainland Chinese students I talk to in Hong Kong also feel that they are no longer able to meaningfully communicate with friends and relatives back in China; interaction involves either conflict over the chauvinist, nationalist statements emerging from the mainland or banal pleasantries. The Chinese government's move to impose national security legislation on Hong Kong, the reaction by the United States government, and the continuation of protestor/police violence in Hong Kong only further exacerbates these barriers. The reading of ghost stories has thus become one of the few forms of research that I can undertake.

Ghost stories illuminate two important themes for this book. First is the psychological relationship between repression and ghosts. Joseph Bosco (2003; 2007) writes about the ghost stories incoming students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong used to share and scare each other with during their pre-enrollment

orientation camps. While the stories are full of sexual innuendo, the mostly female incoming students would only describe them as “scary” and not acknowledge their eroticism. Bosco’s analysis comes from a period, nearly two decades ago, when sexual morality in Hong Kong was relatively repressive and students were admonished against serial dating and premarital sex. Dorm rooms were segregated by gender and no opposite-sex visitors were allowed. Attitudes have undoubtedly evolved since then; students now openly pair off in romantic relationships and the protest movement seems only to have amplified student devotion to romance. But if repressive attitudes towards sexuality can lead to ghost stories full of sexual content that is not consciously acknowledged or publically discussed, what about the repression of political attitudes, communication, and emotions? What about the repression of memories of how certain people died or what they stood for? Might that repression become visible in ghost stories, even if their narrators do not acknowledge it? At least in the thought of the Sigmund Freud, sex and death were the two drives that linked the unconscious mind to human behavior.

The question of the relationship between political repression and ghosts brings me to the second reason for my interest in ghosts—the particular coronavirus context of Wuhan and Hubei province. The virus first spread widely in the city of Wuhan. Quarantine measures were strictly implemented in the city and the entire province of Hubei from January of 2020. Official Chinese statistics count the number of Wuhan coronavirus deaths at nearly four thousand, but many analysts think that the actual death toll was ten to twenty times higher. In addition, as in other countries subsequently, Wuhan’s death-related infrastructure of funeral homes, crematoriums, and hospital morgues was completely overwhelmed. Restrictions on travel and social gatherings prevented any funerals from being held. It is unclear how bodies were disposed of, what conditions in hospitals, rural villages, and urban housing estates were like, and what forms of ritual families were managing to hold. While such unfortunate conditions are common throughout the world, in China more generally and Hubei in particular, the government has cracked down on all forms of communication about these events. People are harassed by the police for using their smartphones to share such information even among circles of friends. As a researcher interested in funerals who has recently visited both Wuhan and the nearby city of Jingzhou, and who used to be in communication with many people there, I have neither heard about nor dared to ask anyone for news about these events. The sorts of ghosts that might arise from all of this bad death, unperformed ritual, and political repression remain an open question.

#### GHOST ROAD

After many months of reading ghost stories, I finally discovered the “Ghost Road” series, written by an author who goes by the single character name of “Li (离).”

These three novels illustrate almost all of the themes discussed above. The ghosts die in contemporary urban tragedies like automobile accidents, murders, and suicides motivated by greed, sexual jealousy, or despair relating to unemployment. Districts full of abandoned buildings and factories are often haunted. Psychological tensions about the reality of ghosts constantly confront the reader and the protagonists of the stories. In one of the novels, the protagonist's unconscious mind tricks her into forgetting that she had murdered her friend, but then reveals the event through a series of seemingly real, ghostly projections. In the novel I summarize below, the protagonist has difficulty differentiating between her ghostly dreams and her ghostly reality. The inability to trust one's own mind reverberates in an inability to trust strangers and acquaintances in an urban setting. The main characters are female university students and the site of the university is a vaguely disguised version of the city of Wuhan, where Wuhan University sits on the shores of East Lake, the most important landmark in the story. As the discussion of the School of Funerary Studies at the Changsha Social Work College suggests, in China, universities are urban institutions. Not only are they located in large cities, but they are also consciously designed to prepare rural students for urban careers and lives.

Unlike the Chinese University of Hong Kong ghost stories analyzed by Bosco, the sexuality in these stories is explicit and, to me, seems more aspirational than realistic. The female university students of these stories consume, travel and go through boyfriends at a rate that seems unlikely for the levels of economic prosperity and sexual repression extant in the place and time where the novels are set. The novels were published between 2005 and 2008, a period when censorship was less strict than it is today. They have now been reproduced on an open-access Chinese literature website, where they are the last of sixty novels listed in the ghost-story genre, and the only ones with ghosts from a contemporary urban Chinese setting. What follows is a summary translation of the first novel from this series.<sup>2</sup>

### *Ghost Road 1: The Haunted Dorm by the Lake*

Four college roommates, Su Xiao, Jingjing, Linzi, and Yu Si, live in a dorm room by East Lake. Jingjing is rich and beautiful and dates a new boy almost every weekend; Linzi and Su Xiao are middle-class and pretty; Yu Si is poor and plain. Linzi and Jingjing are close and often go shopping together. They sometimes deliberately exclude Yu Si. Su Xiao gets along with everyone, but has vivid nightmares that leave her exhausted the next day. Her schedule of sleeping and waking is erratic, and she sometimes confuses dream and reality.

One day Jingjing and Linzi go shopping. Yu Si is not around and Su Xiao feels tired, so stays by herself in the dorm. She falls asleep with a song by the Taiwanese pop star Angela Chang (张韶涵) in her head. She wakes up briefly to see Yu Si with long black hair and a pale white body standing in front of her, but then has a nightmare in which she is drowning and a pale, bony white hand is pulling her



under the water. She wakes up again when Jingjing and Linzi return, but thinks that she really saw Yu Si before she fell asleep. Then Yu Si returns and says she has been gone all evening, but Su Xiao notices that Yu Si's shoes are wet.

The roommates turn out the lights for the evening, but Su Xiao has trouble sleeping. The eyes in the Angela Chang poster above Linzi's bed keep staring at her. The next morning, after everyone else has left, Su Xiao decides to destroy the poster. She takes it off the wall and carries it out to East Lake. She sets the poster on fire, but a spark from the burning poster ignites her pants cuff. She puts her leg in the lake, but a pale, bony hand grabs her ankle and pulls her underwater. She sees the ghastly woman whose hand grabbed her and three others like her. They all have pale bodies and long black hair. They are water ghosts who have died wrongful deaths; Su Xiao sees their underwater graves as well. She escapes by picking up a brick from the bottom of the lake and hitting the hand that is grabbing her ankle. On the way back to the dorm room she passes an air-raid shelter built into a set of caves in a hill between the lake and their dorm.

She then wakes up and is sitting in a pavilion on the hill. She walks down the hill and sees Yu Si come out of the locked gate to the air-raid shelter. She follows Yu Si back to the dorm, but on the way realizes she is invisible, as no one greets her or acknowledges her greetings. In the dorm she sees Yu Si talk to Linzi as if she were not there. "Where is Su Xiao?" Linzi asks. "She must be with her boyfriend Jiang Wei," Yu Si answers. But Su Xiao doesn't remember anyone called Jiang Wei, let alone having a boyfriend with that name. Then she sees many other ghosts playing dirty tricks on the female students. They do things that leave no visible marks but make the students feel mysterious aches and ailments, such as hanging from a student's arm to give her backaches. When one of the students walks straight through her body, Su Xiao realizes that she too must be a ghost. She concludes that she must have really drowned in the lake. She sees that the Angela Chang poster is back on the wall above Linzi's bed. She finds her cell-phone and checks the contact list, discovering that a Jiang Wei is on it, so she texts him to meet her at a bench near the library. When she gets there, she sees a man sitting on the bench, but he cannot see her, so she texts Jiang Wei again, apologizing that something suddenly came up and she can no longer make it. The man's phone rings when she texts him and he leaves after reading the text. She follows him. The man bumps into Yu Si and they seem to recognize one another. The two of them walk together to his place, with Su Xiao following.

Yu Si tries to kiss Jiang Wei, but he resists her. He asks Yu Si about Su Xiao, and she replies that Su Xiao is dead already. Jiang Wei says, "How can that be, I just got her text message," but Yu Si keeps kissing him and Jiang Wei relents. They tear off their clothes and have sex on the sofa. Su Xiao takes the opportunity to steal the key to the air-raid shelter from Yu Si's pocket. She goes to the air-raid shelter, opens the door, and enters. It is pitch dark. After feeling her way through the darkness for a long way she comes to a TV-like screen at the end of the cave. By the



screen is a dark well. The screen is a window onto their dorm room. Su Xiao can see that no one is in their room and that the screen looks at the room from the position of the eyes in the Angela Chang poster. Su Xiao then sees Yu Si enter the room and look through Su Xiao's things. Yu Si next stares at the poster as if she knows that Su Xiao is watching her. Su Xiao then tries to leave the air-raid shelter, but realizes she has lost the key. She returns to the TV screen and pushes her hand through it. It emerges in the dorm room. She then jumps into the TV screen and pops out from Angela Chang's eyes into the room. The other roommates are all there. Jingjing appears terrified, and only Yu Si can see and talk to Su Xiao. Yu Si tells Su Xiao that since she came through the poster she must kill someone. Su Xiao follows Jingjing into the water room and her bony, white hand starts moving independently of her will. It strangles Jingjing. Water then fills the room, and Su Xiao dies a death of drowning again.

Su Xiao wakes up. She is in her boyfriend's apartment. His name is Zhang Sheng. She remembers that she moved out of the dorm room two months ago to live with him. Zhang Sheng says that she has been feverish and sleeping for two days. She goes back to the dorm room and sees Yu Si, but Jingjing is away. Jingjing has sent a text to Linzi saying that she has gone travelling for a few days.

Over the next few days, Su Xiao has a series of nightmares; Zhang Sheng is always there when she wakes up, but she can't distinguish what has really happened and what was a dream. She is often walking in deserted urban neighborhoods that are scheduled to be demolished. In one dream, she hears a knock on the door at night. When she opens the door she sees nothing but feels a ghostly presence enter the room. Then she keeps hearing cloth shoes walking behind her, but doesn't see anything. When she wakes up she notices that Zhang Sheng has a pair of shoes just like those in her dream. She often dreams of his shoes following her as she walks through neighborhoods filled with condemned buildings.

One morning Su Xiao asks Zhang Sheng to take her to the air-raid shelter. They use a hammer to knock the lock off of the door, but after going halfway in, they are blocked by a newly built brick wall and discover nothing suspicious. The next day she decides to talk to Yu Si about her dreams. That same morning Linzi asks Su Xiao to accompany her to her uncle's apartment in the evening, so Su Xiao meets Yu Si at a coffee house in the afternoon. Su Xiao tells Yu Si about her dream of murdering Jingjing and then Yu Si tells her a story from her childhood. When Yu Si was eight years old she woke up in the middle of the night. She went to a window, saw two shadowy figures, and heard one say that ghosts always congregate at crossroads. The two figures then buried something. When she woke up the next morning, her mother told her that her father had died of a heart attack. Two months later the police dug up what the figures had buried. It was money and valuables from a series of thefts. Yu Si also learned that her father had committed suicide after being laid off. For a long time, she thought that the shadowy figures were ghosts who stole and buried her father's soul, but later, she accepted that the

two incidents were separate. So, she consoles Su Xiao, you don't really need to believe in ghosts.

Then Linzi calls Su Xiao to make the trip to her uncle's apartment in an urban district on the outskirts of the city. Su Xiao tells her that she is with Yu Si, but Linzi and Yu Si don't really get along. The three of them arrange to have dinner together, but after dinner Linzi and Su Xiao go to her uncle's apartment and Yu Si returns alone to the dorm. Linzi and Su Xiao catch a bus. Linzi has brought a backpack with the Angela Chang poster (which she intends to trade with a friend who lives near her uncle) and some other things. After travelling about half an hour through increasingly desolate urban districts, the bus engine dies while stopped at a red light. There are three others left on the bus: a middle-aged man, a young man, and a young woman. The driver says to wait for the next bus, but after ten minutes suddenly runs out the door. The middle-aged man, the young woman, Su Xiao, and Linzi decide to walk to the next crossroads to find a taxi. When they get there, there are ambulances and a group of people gawking at a car wreck. Some men are trying to revive the mangled body of the wrecked car's driver, but one says, "We have to stop, he has already been dead half an hour." They notice that the dead person was the young man who used to be on the bus with them, which they had only left ten minutes ago. So he must have been a ghost. Then the middle-aged man tells them that he too would like to die. He had been laid off two months ago, cannot find another job, and has lied to his wife, who is also unemployed, about the situation. Then he runs off. The young woman then says she would also like to die. Her boyfriend has left her for another woman. That was bad enough, but then the old boyfriend and his new girlfriend went travelling and died in a bus accident. So there is no longer any chance that she can reconcile with him. Linzi and Su Xiao are now scared, and ask the woman if she too is already a ghost. She says no and the three of them get a taxi. The young woman needs to get out first and Su Xiao and Linzi slide out the door to let her exit. But when they get back in the driver asks, "What are you doing?" They say they had just let out the other passenger but the driver says "What are you talking about, all along it has only been the two of you."

Su Xiao then wakes up in Zhang Sheng's apartment and explains what happened on the bus trip, but Zhang Sheng says that it was all a nightmare and that she had never gone on the bus with Linzi. She had come home early that evening and gone to bed. After talking with Zhang Sheng, Su Xiao goes to her dorm room and finds that there are policemen outside the building. The night watchman had died at 3:00 a.m. the previous night. The police have drawn a chalk outline on the ground where his body had fallen and have ruled his death a heart attack. Since he had been in good health, Su Xiao assumes that some sudden fright must have caused the heart attack. Su Xiao also learns that Linzi actually did go to her uncle's apartment. She has sent a text message saying she is still there. It also develops that she, Yu Si, and Linzi actually had dinner together. At first she suspects that Zhang

Sheng has lied to her but then realizes that she could have had dinner with the two other roommates and then decided to go home instead of accompanying Linzi. She notices that Yu Si's shoes have mud on them. That evening, when Zhang Sheng comes home, she sees him wash mud off of his shoes as well.

For two more days, Linzi does not return—and neither has Jingjing. Su Xiao is worried and decides to go to Linzi's uncle's apartment on her own. He lives in a building that is scheduled to be demolished. An old woman answers the door and says that she recognizes Su Xiao from a couple of nights ago but that Linzi left with her and had not stayed with them. Linzi's uncle comes out from the back bedroom, but his sickly, ghost-like appearance scares Su Xiao and she runs out. On the way down the steps, she calms down and leaves her phone number with another woman she sees, asking the woman to tell anyone with news about Linzi to get in touch with her. Su Xiao now worries that she is schizophrenic and actually killed both Linzi and Jingjing while in an altered state of mind.

The phone number she left behind results in a man in his late twenties, Ma Er, calling Su Xiao. They meet in a coffee shop. He reminds her of Jiang Wei. She instantly trusts him and tells him the story of going to Linzi's uncle's apartment. He says he will help her investigate. She goes home and confronts Zhang Sheng with the fact that she had visited Linzi's uncle. Zhang Sheng says: "OK, I'll tell you the truth. That night you came home at 1:00 a.m., covered in blood, looking like a devil, holding a blood covered brick, and carrying Linzi's backpack. You were in a daze. I undressed you, washed you, put you to sleep on the sofa, and washed your clothes. The next morning, I buried Linzi's things and the brick on the hill near the shelter. Also, the night Jingjing disappeared, you came home late with a crazed smile on your face. There was blood under your nails and on your phone was a message you had sent to Jingjing. I deleted the message." Su Xiao is even more convinced that she murdered both of her roommates, but has no idea why she did so or how she could be strong enough to do it.

The next day, Su Xiao asks Zhang Sheng to take her to where he buried Linzi's things. He does, digs them up and shows them to her, and then reburies them. She has nightmares for several days and Zhang Sheng is rarely around. She decides to call Ma Er and see if he knows anything. He asks her to meet him at an abandoned factory in an old industrial district. She feels safe with him and says yes. At the factory Ma Er scares her with tales of ghosts and monsters as they walk around in a dark tunnel. She loses consciousness several times, hears footsteps, sees shadowy figures, and assumes there are ghosts. One time, after passing out and dreaming of ghosts, she wakes up with a song in her head. Ma Er asks her what it is. It is "Floating Clouds" (浮云) by Angela Chang.<sup>3</sup> She has another nightmare about drowning and ghosts pulling her under water. When she wakes up she is with Ma Er and in the light. Ma Er says that he took her down into the tunnel to test her suggestibility and found that she is easy to scare into having nightmares about ghosts. He says that they were completely safe the whole time and nothing

came near them. He also tells her that he was the person who saved her from drowning fifteen years ago, when she was five and he was fourteen.

That night Su Xiao dreams of Jiang Wei again. She goes to his apartment and they have a long talk. He tells her that people cannot control their dreams but they can learn to interpret them. Often things in dreams are recombinations of things from real life. He says that he is a combination of Ma Er and Zhang Sheng. When Su Xiao wakes up she starts to doubt Zhang Sheng. She follows him the next day and sees him meet with Yu Si near the library and hug her. Then he leaves alone. Su Xiao follows him to the back of the hill where there is a second, lower door to the air-raid shelter. Zhang Sheng has a key to the door and goes in, coming out ten minutes later. She goes home and Zhang Sheng returns shortly later. He says he is tired, so Su Xiao offers him a sleeping pill. After he has fallen asleep, she takes his key to the lower air-raid shelter door and goes to check it out. The stench is terrible. At the bottom of an old well, Su Xiao sees Jingjing's and Linzi's rapidly decomposing bodies. She leaves and then loses consciousness somewhere. She dreams that Yu Si says to her, "If you want to know the truth, you must follow me." She wakes up and finds that she had fainted in their old dorm room. She decides to confront Zhang Sheng and Yu Si and returns to her apartment.

In the apartment she hears the sound of water dripping. After checking the bathroom and kitchen sink, she listens carefully and hears that it is coming from the closet. She opens the closet door and sees Yu Si's dead body dripping blood. She has been stabbed many times and her left eye has a knife sticking out of it. In her hand is a note:

Dear Su Xiao, I am so sorry. The day Jingjing disappeared, she and I were alone in the dorm room. As usual, she was so snobbish to me, not letting me listen to her Angela Chang CDs. I was upset and decided to dare her to go to the air-raid shelter with me without a flashlight. I had a key and I knew it would scare me, but I hoped it would scare her more. She agreed and we went in and walked into the dark. She led the way, acting as if she wasn't scared in the slightest while I was trembling in fear the whole way. We got to an old well. Then she suddenly yelled and rushed at me. I pushed her away and she fell. I think she fell down the well because I couldn't see her any more. I must have killed her. I left in a panic. The next day I met Zhang Sheng and told him about it. I sent a text message from Jingjing's phone saying that she was travelling. Zhang Sheng told me not to tell anyone, and consoled me. Somehow I fell in love with him, so now I am also having an affair with your boyfriend. I am so sorry. Later, since you were always mixing up dreams and reality, we decided to trick you into thinking that you might have killed her. I don't know what happened to Linzi and the night watchman, but I doubt you had anything to do with those either.

The rest of the note has been torn away. Su Xiao calls Ma Er and he says he will come over right away.

The final chapter is told from the perspective of Zhang Sheng. One night, Zhang Sheng was exasperated from dealing with Su Xiao's constant nightmares. After

putting her to sleep with a sleeping pill, he went out for a walk. He saw Jingjing and Yu Si going into the upper air raid shelter door, so he decided to play a trick on them. He went in through the lower door and climbed up the well. He saw Jingjing next to the well, so he touched her back and yelled next to her ear. She panicked and rushed towards Yu Si. Yu Si pushed her and Jingjing fell next to the well, hit her head, and became momentarily unconscious. Yu Si couldn't see her and left in a panic as well. A minute or so later, Jingjing started to regain consciousness. She was beautiful and Zhang Sheng wanted her. He decided to rape her, but she fully gained consciousness and fought back. In the struggle, he pushed her down the well. He climbed back down the well and saw that she was then really dead. The next morning, he first returned to the air-raid shelter to build a brick wall to make it harder to find Jingjing's body. Then he went to look for Yu Si to see if she knew anything about what had happened. Yu Si actually thought that she had killed Jingjing. Zhang Sheng told her he would protect her and acted nice to her. She was so lonely and desperate that she easily fell in love with him. A few days later, Su Xiao told him that Linzi had invited her to go to Linzi's uncle's apartment. Zhang Sheng worried that Linzi had somehow found out what had really happened and that she would tell Su Xiao. So that day, he secretly gave some sleeping pills to Su Xiao, hoping that she would fall asleep and not go. But she went to meet Yu Si anyway. Zhang Sheng followed her. He saw her meet with Yu Si, have dinner with Linzi and Yu Si and then get on a bus. He followed them in a taxi and noticed that Su Xiao was half-awake and half-asleep the whole time on the bus. After they came back, they split up so that Su Xiao could walk to Zhang Sheng's apartment and Linzi could return to the dorm. Zhang Sheng followed Linzi to the field between the hill and the dorm and bashed her head with a brick. The night watchman saw something and came rushing over. When he got close, Zhang Sheng held up Linzi's bloody, dead body and the sight scared the night watchman to death. Then Zhang Sheng dragged Linzi's body to the air-raid shelter and put her next to Jingjing. He sent a text from Linzi's phone saying that she was still with her uncle. He started to drop hints to Su Xiao that she was responsible for the deaths. But then Yu Si came over and said that she was feeling guilty and that the two of them should tell Su Xiao the truth. Zhang Sheng couldn't convince her otherwise and became enraged. He stabbed Yu Si repeatedly. After killing her, he put her in the closet, but she kept staring at him so he stuck the knife in her left eye. He stuck it in so hard that he couldn't pull it out to stab her right eye. He cleaned up the blood from the bedroom and prepared to make a run for it. But somehow, after leaving the apartment, he was drawn to the air-raid shelter. He went in the upper door, where Jingjing's and Linzi's ghosts ganged up on him and pushed him down the well.

. . .

The ending to the *Ghost Road* novel raises a series of questions for the end of this book. Much of Zhang Sheng's narrative seems to demonstrate that it is not

necessary to believe in ghosts at all. The boyfriend did it, and the ghosts were all figments of Su Xiao's imagination. But the appearance of the ghosts of Jingjing and Linzi returns the uncertainty. Were their ghosts real, or was Zhang Sheng driven by guilt to commit suicide? The ambiguity of the physical reality of ghosts is reinforced by the ambiguity between Su Xiao's dreams and her real life. She sees four water ghosts in her dream, and four people she knows die. She bashes the water ghost's hand with a brick, and Zhang Sheng bashes Linzi with a brick. Yu Si has an affair with Zhang Sheng, and Su Xiao sees her have sex with Jiang Wei. The eyes in the Angela Chang poster resemble the staring eyes of the dead Yu Si. Though *The Haunted Dorm by the Lake* is undoubtedly a work of fiction, might it still have something to tell us about the psychological realities of university-aged Hubei natives and the social realities of sharing ghost stories? What might such psychic and social realities have to do with rapid urbanization, the horrors of the coronavirus, or political repression? The confusion between dream and reality reverberates in a confusion over who to trust. Su Xiao doubts Zhang Sheng and Yu Si and even herself. This distrust can be read as a problem of life in a society of strangers, but also as a problem of life among people who are contagious but either don't know it or refuse to quarantine themselves, or a problem of life in a political system in which informants report on their friends. Why are condemned buildings so often haunted? Why are sexually active female students so harried by ghosts? Why do those who die in automobile accidents, suicides, and murders become ghosts more often than those who pass away with their families at an old age?

Anthropologists have documented a belief in ghosts and narratives of their existence in the most urban of Chinese settings (Ikels 2004b, 103; Jankowiak 1993, 296–7; Kipnis 2016, 132). But even when people do not literally believe in ghosts, haunting can occur. At Mr. Wang's funeral, we saw how the elder daughter was overcome with grief at various moments. She related her grief to feeling guilty about not being able to properly care for her father during his illness. In her case, there was good reason for her inability to care for her father, and she was able to think through the causes of her emotions. But guilt is another emotion, like sexual desire or politically driven fear, that can easily be repressed. Grief itself can be overwhelming, and inhibit self-analysis about the causes of one's emotions. In this psychological sense, haunting is a common reaction to death. The convoluted plot of the story (the twists and turns of which I was not able to fully capture in the truncated translation given above) provides a realistic parallel to the convoluted nature of working through repressed emotions. The exorcism of ghosts may be as an effective means of dealing with psychological pain as any form of psychoanalysis.

Though political pressure can lead authors to self-censor their fictional writing about urban ghosts, though expressions of literal beliefs in spirits can be suppressed, though burning spirit money can be outlawed, though social

media exchanges about coronavirus death can be policed, though cemeteries can be closed and perhaps even funerals themselves “thinned” to the simplest of procedures, none of these acts will prevent urban ghosts from haunting the present. As long as humans have memories, dreams, and nightmares, the haunting will continue.