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The Ghost of *Guimi* from Imperial to Millennial China

Keywords: *Guimi*, Female Ghost, Asian Well-Beings, *Twenty Your Life On*, *Nothing But Thirty*, *Go Ahead*

ABSTRACT

Guimi is one of millennial China's favorite lexicons for boudoir confidantes, a coterie of usually three female friends, a support network in life's struggle in a Promised Land of mammonism and masculinism. *Guimi* stands on the shoulders of a long line of female bonding in imperial China. In millennial China, this womance manifests itself in young female protagonists in three popular 2020 TV series. That the series do not mellow into more senior women suggests ageism despite the nominal refutation of sexism. Unbound from men, females remain handmaidens to mammon in

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corporations headed by male CEOs, sinking under the weight of liquid assets plied by men. Liquid assets conjure up another tradition on whose shoulders *guimi* also stand: imperial female ghosts with their mountain of jostling, mutely screeching bones where *guimi* perches. This inter-Asian “base” of bones comprises imperial well-being/s, beings born out of killing wells of suicides and femicides.

G*uimi* (閨蜜) is one of millennial China’s favorite lexicons for boudoir confidantes, a coterie of two to four, usually three, female friends, a support network in life’s struggle in Promised Land of mammonism and masculinism. The use of the archaic word *gui*, or boudoir, signals that *guimi* stands on the shoulders of a long line of female bonding. In classical novels and costume dramas, ladies rarely appear alone, customarily attended by their maids or ladies-in-waiting. The traditional master-servant affiliation stands the ladies in good stead in court intrigues and family squabbles revolving around such men as the emperor, the patriarch, the husband, the betrothed, the intended, the philanderer, or male surrogates in the form of female matchmakers or even mothers and relatives. Although marginalized, this womance lineage forms a subtext, one overshadowed by the bromance of, for instance, the fourteenth-century classics of *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

In a “New” China where “women hold up half the sky,” this womance subtext, in Chairman Mao’s choice words in his Proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, “has stood up,” *fanshen* or flipping around from the prostrate position, manifested currently in young female protagonists in the 2020 TV series of *Twenty Your Life On* (二十不惑, literally, *Twenty No Temptation*, henceforth *Twenty*), *Nothing But Thirty* (三十而已, literally, *Barely Thirty*, henceforth *Thirty*), and *Go*



Ahead (以家人之名, *In the Name of a Family*, henceforth *Family*). That the hit series do not mellow into forty-, fifty-, or more senior women suggests ageism despite the nominal refutation of sexism. The Chinese title of *Twenty No Temptation* flouts *The Confucian Analects*' golden rule of "Reaching forty, no more temptation" by revising downwards the threshold. Millennial youth, a time rife with temptations, is endowed, instead, with wisdom of those twice her age in ancient China, a self-congratulatory fallacy typical of melodramas. *Twenty* revolves around four young and beautiful female roommates at the juncture of college graduation; *Thirty* focuses on three women turning thirty-year-old and dreading the loss of youth; *Family* features three flatmates fighting and supporting one another from their college days to the job market. Seemingly exorcizing traditional sexism in their shared female focus, they exercise not only ageism but implicit sexism in women's subjugation to money, if not to men with money. This irony is foreshadowed by the communist slogan of fanshen. Taken literally, merely turning over from a prostrate to a supine position does not elevate a bottom dog; on the contrary, the reversal makes it worse, now that women are allegedly unshackled from feudalistic patriarchy by communism. Unbound from men by the Great Helmsman, females remain handmaidens to mammon in mammoth corporations headed by male CEOs, sinking under the weight of liquid assets plied by men.

Liquid assets with the connotation of cash flow conjure up yet another tradition on whose shoulders guimi also stand: imperial and neoimperial Asian female ghosts piled high over time in a mountain of jostling, mutely screeching bones where the cheerful story of guimi perches. Female ghosts from imperial, feudal, and neoimperial Asia embody males' anxiety over their own power, fearing its loss, haunted by guilt over exercising it. Exorcizing female ghosts from millennial

China's women-centric TV series somehow deepens repression, making the TV series even more illusory. Such collective wish-fulfillment belongs to the dreamscape of President Xi's "Chinese Dream." Before tackling the "superstructure" of Chinese *guimi*, however, one must plumb the broad, inter-Asian "base" of bones stacked up from imperial and neoimperial well-being/s, beings born out of killing wells of suicides and femicides. Since precious few emerge from the mouth of the well in ghost stories and films, *guimi* may well be well-beings' afterlife. *Guimi* are modern China's ghosts prettified with long black hair and toothy grins so perfect as to be out of this world. The practice of suicides and homicides via wells has indeed stopped, but the spirit, pardon the expression, lives on.

Asian Well-Being/s

Serendipitously, the trope of female ghosts runs through the diametrically opposed genres of Asian melodramas and horror films, particularly through the metaphor of water. These films are populated by watery ghosts perished in the river or well, retaining attributes of liquidity in their avatars across Asia, from India to Japan to China and beyond. Patriarchal misogyny assigns blame to women, preferably youthful temptresses like the biblical Eve. Christopher Marlow's *Doctor Faustus* eulogizes "The face that launched a thousand ships" and endless human misery. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* laments "Frailty, thy name is woman." Had they had the Chinese language proficiency, *Faustus* and *Hamlet* on stage would no doubt intone the age-old maxim *Hongyan huoshui* (紅顏禍水 *Rouged Cheeks, Cursed Water*). Beautiful women are historically scapegoated for bewitching emperors, causing the fall of dynasties in the figure of speech of northern China's Yellow River that periodically flooded. The gesture to the Bible, Marlow, and



Shakespeare disabuses ourselves of any Orientalist demonization of the other, whose only fault lies in sharing some of the West's worst instincts.

This curséd water begins to lap against Asian moviegoers' mind as far back as the poignant lyrics by and on the river of Kamal Amrohi's 1949 Hindi Bollywood ghost movie, *Mahal*. Not exactly a scary film to make the audience scream, *Mahal* makes them shed tears instead through the tragic, unrequited love story stretching over several lifetimes. The imposing mansion, Mahal, built with colonial power and owned by a judge's son, is haunted because of the haunting river nearby, in which Kamini and her unnamed lover drown; to which Kamini's reincarnation Asha moves while singing "The one meant to return will return" throughout, particularly in the film's closing shot; on which Asha rows a boat intoning "never reaching the shore." "The one meant to return will return" does not say "will have returned," or, better still, "has returned." Rather, the line denotes a state of perpetual returning, casting in doubt any actual arrival. The refrain of imminent revenant bespeaks a desire never consummated. The Hindi refrain resonates eerily with what Judith Zeitlin attributes, by way of "the earliest Chinese glossary, the *Erya*," to the Chinese word *gui*, a pun on ghost and return (*The Phantom Heroine* 2007, 4).¹

Connected through the subterranean body of water and inter-Asian culture, the returnee in the Bollywood musical shape-shifts into ghosts in Masaki Kobayashi's Orientalist-expressionist-avant-gardist *Kwaidan* (1964) based in part on the American writer Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* (1904). Kobayashi's anthology film is so fraught with specters of ancient Japan that ancient

¹ The pun of *gui* for ghost and return manifests, in Zeitlin's view, "a favorite logic of ancient Chinese texts to define a word in terms of a homophone" (4).

Japan becomes spectral. “Black Hair” continues to grow beyond death in the eponymous story. “The Woman of the Snow” features a snow spirit who sucks dry human blood, yet ice seems to unfreeze as she returns human blood in bearing three children. “Hoichi the Earless” is a blind monk who chants the saga of the vanquished Heike clan women jumping into the river en masse. “In a Cup of Tea” a ghost is reflected; eventually, even the writer of that ghost story looks back from the bottom of the cup. Kobayashi favors this *mise en scene*, as the maddened samurai ex-husband in “Black Hair” also stares into the stone water jar and sees his own likeness, a crazed man with disheveled hair.

From ancient to modern Japan, Hideo Nakata’s J-Horror *Ringu* (1998) deviates from Kobayashi’s arthouse approach, upgrading ghosts with horror conventions and modern amenities. Courtesy of *Ringu*’s Sadako pushed into the well, possibly by her own father, and similar casualties in Chinese and Chinese American novels, the world gains a new definition of well-being. In the English language, well-being means the state of happiness and health, as we wish each other well or toss coins into the proverbial wishing well. As though ripping asunder the English word “well-being,” Asian subconsciousness flips it into its perverse negative of killing well, which begets watery ghosts of female suicides jumped or femicides dumped into the family well. The West’s Gothic genre favors the family crypt and cathedral vault as the setting where the vampire is resurrected and the innocent virgin violated, where Christianity is soiled by kinship with evil. By contrast, Asian ghost stories break water from the family well, where life-sustaining water becomes the amniotic fluid to ease into the world preternatural haunting. Gothic horror intensifies, framed by Western religiosity;



Asian well-beings multiply, rippling through the subterranean body of water from the body flailing in the family and patriarchal tradition.

All three Asian films of female ghosts come with foreign-sounding titles. Each hails from a foreign culture, the otherworldliness befitting alien visitants. The Hindi word *Mahal* has a Persian and Arabic root. *Kwaidan* means “Strange Tales” in Chinese. *Ringu* japonizes the telephone “ring,” with the added association of rings and ripples from the well as well as the ring or clique of evil. Within each film respectively, self-splitting persists. Asha in *Mahal* veils her whole face in a ghungat throughout, until the final courtroom scene, as India’s “real face” pits itself against British law. “In a Cup of Tea,” one of the four shorts in *Kwaidan*, displaces the apparition onto the bottom of a medieval Japanese cup, a fate subsequently befalling a turn-of-the-last-century writer, all viewed from the safe distance of 1964. Likewise, *Ringu* projects the ghostly Japan onto prewar Western-influenced spiritualism, not to mention West-originated modernity of telephone, television, and VCR.

Part of this broad inter-Asian base, Chinese literature has many Sadako-style well-beings, albeit those bodies once alive have rarely been so named and memorialized in a body, pun intended. Whereas only one of the following Chinese instances resembles Sadako pushed by the father or father figure into the well, all the cases wind up in the well through the invisible hand of patriarchy. In Chapter 32 of the eighteenth-century classic, *Dream of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢), the maid Golden Bracelet (金釧兒) to Madame Wang, the male protagonist Jia Baoyu’s mother, is slapped and expelled by Madame Wang for “leading astray” Baoyu. Shame and despair drive Golden Bracelet to jump into and drown herself in the family well. Her tragic end is foreshadowed by her last words to Baoyu as he flirtingly puts a lozenge in her mouth:

“What’s your hurry! ‘A golden hairpin dropped in the well, what’s yours will always be yours’” (Chapter 30, 226). That she cites a common saying with unwitting Freudian, oral-sexual connotation does not save her when conventional wisdom collapses in the face of her master’s rage. From her expulsion in chapter 30 to her suicide two chapters later, Baoyu continues to enjoy amorous relationships with various women, as if already forgotten about the golden accessory, bracelet or hairpin, out of his sight. Although the gold may still belong to the owner Baoyu, he has compensated the loss with subconscious escapism to other women, until the shock of her suicide and the punishment by his father.

Golden Bracelet is one of the *Sida lienu* (四大烈女 Four Fierce/Fiery/Righteous Women) celebrated by the readers’ misogyny in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Owing to an unworthy lover, loyalty and self-preservation, and unrequited love, the other three “fierce women” commit suicide by slitting the throat with the lover’s sword, by hanging in honor of her master’s death, and by cracking the head against the wall. A gang of four scapegoats sacrificed on the altar to romance and male fantasy! Yet a dark scenario unfolds in that Cao Xueqin, perhaps the greatest Chinese novelist, has touched on the collective unconscious, where handmaidens like Golden Bracelet are but expendable ornaments. Golden Bracelet’s ominous words reveal that her namesake on the wrist can be erased and displaced onto the hair. She takes her own life not because she fails to return to Baoyu, but because that is the only way to return as part of Baoyu’s collection of playthings, giving the Hindi refrain “The one meant to return will return” a Sinitic, sinister spin.



Four centuries earlier than *Dream*, chapter 41 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* tells of Lady Mi's martyrdom. General Zhao Zilong is entrusted by the emperor Liu Bei in escorting the imperial consort Lady Mi and heir A-Dou to safety in the chaos of a battlefield. Injured and urged to mount Zhao's steed to escape, Lady Mi replied: "What would you do without a steed? But the boy here I confide to your care. I am badly wounded and cannot hope to live. Pray take him and go your way. Do not trouble more about me" (<https://www.threekingdoms.com/>). She then left "the child on the ground . . . turned over and threw herself into the old well," followed by the formulaic poem in her praise:

The warrior relies upon the strength of his charger,
Afoot, how could he bear to safety his young prince?
Brave mother! Who died to preserve the son of her husband's
line;
Heroine was she, bold and decisive!

Lady Mi's decision hinges on the lone horse and their sole protector. Even combining both would ensure, probably, only the safe passage for the rider and no one else. Hence, she elects her child. "Seeing that Lady Mi had resolved the question by dying," Zhao decides to push "over the wall to fill the well," a makeshift grave for the lady. To protect the child, Zhao "loosened his armor, let down the heart-protecting mirror, and placed the child in his breast. This done he slung his spear and remounted." The novel does not say that the armor and the heart-protecting mirror are reinstalled because, in all likelihood, they no longer fit, now that the child occupies the space. Although exposing Zhao and the child to grave danger, this is the trade-off when a soldier takes on the role of a surrogate mother,

carrying the child in the manner of suckling. Lady Mi has been replaced, akin to Golden Bracelet.

Informed of the incident in chapter 42, Liu Bei “took the child but threw it aside angrily, saying, ‘To preserve that suckling I very nearly lost a great general!’” The novelist’s ensuing couplet minces no words in exposing Liu Bei’s chicanery: “No way to comfort a loyal subordinate / deliberately throw his own child in front of the horse.” “Deliberately” aims to translate the word *gu* (故), which carries a strong undertone of affectation and ruse. Most revealing is Liu Bei’s utter silence on Lady Mi’s sacrifice. Her death factors into his calculus of statecraft insomuch as winning over General Zhao’s allegiance by putting on an act that suggests the general outweighs his heir, and definitely one of his consorts. Ironically, the infant child A-Dou, who costs his mother’s life and entails his father’s playacting, is known historically as *Fubuqi de A-Dou* (扶不起的阿斗 one who is so incompetent that no amount of help will put him on his own two feet). Indeed, Liu Bei’s Chu Han dynasty fell during A-Dou’s reign. Despite the novelist’s satiric tone over Liu Bei’s performance, suspicion lingers that Lady Mi had already been “dead and buried” discursively with the filled-in well and the maternal swaddling afterwards. This appears to confirm what Paola Zamperini calls the “good death” as opposed to the “bad death. . . that engenders ghosts and that needs to be ‘exorcised’” (“Untamed Hearts” 79). Zamperini views female suicides “not as virtuous martyrs or victims of an unjust patriarchal system, but as passionate agents of free will” (77). It begs the question, though, whether Lady Mi exercises agency in taking her own life or she foresees her own tragic end if she survives at the expense of the heir or even General Zhao. Among the three lives, hers is the most expendable in the eye of her husband-



master-emperor and, judging from centuries of reception, in the eye of the Chinese reader.

Given the popularity of Yimou Zhang's 1991 *Raise the Red Lantern*, it is in fact based on Su Tong's novel, *Qiqie chengqun* (妻妾成群 The Harem of Wives and Concubines), a story of feudal oppression of women symbolized by "the well of the dead" (死人井 *sirenjing*) under a purple wisteria arbor in the polygamous husband-master's back garden. The color of purple wisteria dilutes, oxidizes the blood spilled in the well, which the plant absorbs along with water and dirt. This "altar" secreted at the back of the compound is relocated by the Chinese filmmaker to the rooftop hanging room to exploit the heritage site of the Qiao Family Compound in Shanxi. Su Tong's novel ends with the fourth wife Song Lian gone mad after witnessing the third wife being thrown into the well for having cuckolded the master of the house. The mad woman's last words that conclude the novel are: "Song Lian says she will not jump into the well." But she is already in the well, not drowned, but neither is she truly alive. She is a living dead, a ghost in the company of the third wife's and at least three more women's corpses. J-Horror's *Sadako* need not be the sole sighting of well-beings. A deranged Song Lian wanders in her master's compound like a will-o'-the-wisp, a ghost light for fellow *guimi* weltering in a homeland or homeswamp "with Chinese characteristics."

Maxine Hong Kingston's 1976 ethnic classic *The Woman Warrior* opens by translating the trope of female suicide, yet another Asian well-being from afar: "In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. . . I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water" (3, 16). The Asian American protagonist declares independence here and now by disowning the

death-oriented Chinese patriarchy and by owning a matrilineage all the way back to there and then. Kingston's ethnic identity manifests itself, ambiguously, in the duality of drinking and drowning water, of an enabling and disabling China that continues to wrap "double binds around my feet" (48). On the Orientalist trope of bound feet stands the liberated Asian American woman warrior.

Similar well-beings can be culled from Japanese culture. The 1969 film *Double Suicide*, based on a bunraku (puppet theatre) play, chronicles lovers' twin drowning. Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994–1995) is partly set at the bottom of a well. Such plethora of killing wells and troubled waters do not the stereotype of death-prone Orientals make, though. To argue that Oriental cultures are death-prone on account of this literary and filmic motif is like arguing Christianity is a death cult on account of the crucifixion. Both contentions blithely dismiss Asian cultures' vibrant multiplicity and Jesus's resurrection.

Note the distancing in all these cases of Asian well-beings authored by Chinese males, plus one Chinese American female. Jia Baoyu escapes into female companionship to repress any thought of Golden Bracelet's desperation. Lady Mi's death is entirely dropped from her husband's consciousness when the infant prince is presented, notwithstanding the poem's praise of Lady Mi as *nüzhangfu* (female husband, female hero). Su Tong projects female oppression to the pre-Revolution 1930s. Kingston empowers her protagonist in the 1970s by remote controlling China. Such is the sound wave rippling through and out of the turn-of-the-century *Ringu*, or waves that are quite unsound, ill tidings of more well-beings.

Also note the company these well-beings keep. Golden Bracelet is one of the four fiery women and suicides in *Dream of the Red Chamber*;



Lady Mi belongs to the constellation of multiple eulogized “female husbands;” Song Lian barely survives from at least four other cases of femicides; Kingston’s fictional aunt joins her subtitle’s *Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, a phantasmagoria in America and Chinatown. Intertextually, these well-beings from Asian suicides and femicides form a society, a phantom sorority, literally and figuratively underground, deep in Asian subconscious. So does *Ringu*, siring its brood of *Ringu 2* (1999) and *Ringu o* (2000) from the J-Horror well, on one side of the Pacific Ocean, and *The Ring* (2002) and *The Ring Two* (2005) in the Hollywood well, on the other side. The last is directed by *Ringu*’s filmmaker Hideo Nakata, who closes his Hollywood debut with a profanity, a most un-Japanese turn of phrase, “I’m not your fucking mommy,” as Naomi Watts grimaces to seal the well with a slab of stone, damning Samara to darkness. Siring “its” brood may as well be “his” brood since all the filmmakers, even the genesis of Koji Suzuki’s misogynist novel *Ringu*, are male multiplying “her” brood of immaculate conceptions from the namesake Sadako or chastity.

True Horror

The paranormal tenor of these ghost stories vests a sense of uncertainty in modern readers and viewers, who hesitate to either countenance or disavow ghosts. This coheres with the very definition of “the uncanny” in Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Fantastic* (1973).² Once that Gothic paradox betwixt time and beyond time vanishes in secular, social realist, and melodramatic Chinese TV series, ghosts are exorcized by default. Yet that exorcism of female ghosts in the name of women’s emancipation and empowerment may well be wishful thinking, more

² Todorov argues that the fantastic in literature is marked by “a hesitation of the reader. . . as to the nature of an uncanny event” (157).

apparitional than apparitions, more self-deluding than “seeing ghosts,” given the ageism and sexism hiding in plain sight in *Twenty*, *Thirty*, and *Family*. True ghosts are those humans who turn others into phantoms, into either the erstwhile demonic bent upon avenging themselves or the modern angelic empathizing with *guimi* over the loss of men and, implicitly, financial security. True horror resides in the mirage of beautiful fakes taken to be real. Hyper reality trumps reality.³ Far more than ghost movies, true horror is that which is taken for granted, so normalized, even valorized, that it has become an object of desire, an object of beauty.

Asian cosmetic surgery springs to mind as women and men rush to acquire—by means of scalpel, bleaching, and other extreme measures—stylized Western facial and physical features. Amongst other Asian American representations, Maxine Hong Kingston notes that “Asian girls were starting to tape their [epicanthic] eyelids” (*The Woman Warrior* 182). Adolescent “home remedy” has since been adultized as double eyelid surgery for women and men with disposable income and body parts of skin and flesh and bone to be disposed of. Likewise, Patricia Park in *Re Jane* (2015) exposes West-idolizing when the *honhyol* or mixed-race protagonist Jane Re is complimented by her English cram school colleague in Seoul: “Honhyol has the white skin, big eyes, big nose, small chin, long legs” (187), reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s black protagonist dreaming of *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

³ Alberto Castelli in “Perspectives on Asia: Is China Kitsch?” likens China’s “Hyperreality” to kitsch, “a dense world of signs and simulation that becomes more real than the real itself. . . Computer technology, visual media in general (TV, radio, and video games) have the capacity of obliterating space and time and recreate a digital-virtual space and time where reality is replaced by simulations (TV series)” (3). In a China where “adultized children and infantile adults” view “Commercialization” as a form of “religious belief” (5-6), “kitsch is the response to the sense of spiritual vacuum left by the retreat of Maoism” (13).



Popular Chinese puns on ideal mates also enlighten: Gao Fushuai (高富帥 Tall Rich Handsome) for males and Bai Fumei (白富美 White Rich Beautiful) for females. Both Gao and Bai are perfectly legitimate last names, which come first in Chinese. The two ideals, read aloud together, flow aurally like a parallel couplet in classical poetry or, as intended, like a couple in modern China. Matching Chinese couple(t) is a merger of sound and sense, of good sound and beaucoup cents of a couple flush with cash. The tonal harmony lies in the symmetrical three-character names complimented by the internal rhyme, indeed, the repetition, of the pivotal “midfielder” fu or rich that lifts the performance of both the forward shock troops of masculine height and feminine fair complexion and the defense of the basics of good looks. In reverse, either the first or the last word would mean little without the operative word in the middle. However, all these qualities are transactional, circular in nature, for those not naturally born as such. Money pays for medical procedures for height (leg-lengthening), fair skin (skin bleaching), desirable Western features (double-folded eyelids, a higher and narrower nose ridge, shaved cheek bones, an angled, even pointy jawline, and whatnot), which in turn earn wealth through marrying or being kept by sugar daddy or sugar mommy or success in showbiz and other biz.

The male and female names resemble a Chinese *shuenkouliu* (順口溜), mellifluous, witty doggerels popular among folks playing on the monosyllabic, tonal, homonym-riddled, p(f)un-filled Mandarin and other Chinese dialects. To be fair to the Chinese tradition of *shuenkouliu*, the twin names augur desirable qualities, but their likeness to childish jingles, even silly tongue-twisters, lends themselves to be mocked. The nice sound turns against itself like the punchline of a joke, divorced from its power as a magic spell. By mouthing the ideals, a Chinese talks

out of both sides of the mouth, confirming the general sentiment of the society with a touch of irony, an implicit critique. Sour grapes, perhaps, since few fit the profile! But repeating these names with the discursive equivalent to a smirk, a shrug, even a grimace diverges from doing so with the mouth agape, looking up at tall idols looming above like stars.

This caveat notwithstanding, the phrasal order of the ideal male, followed by his female counterpart, signals the entrenched phallogocentric culture as ancient as the Old Testament's Adam and Adam's rib—in that timeless order. Rather than Keatsian “beauty is truth, truth beauty,” Asia's mantra reads “cosmetic beauty is truth, truth cosmetic beauty,” or simply “horror is truth, truth horror.” Rather than Alexander Pope's “The sound must seem an echo to the sense” (“Sound and Sense”), this Chinese couple(t) turns the tables into “The sense must be an echo to the sound.” What sounds good to Chinese ear not only makes perfect sense but also adds its two cents' worth in the piggy bank of symbolic capital. In a dizzying tautological fashion, the good sound of the couplet Gao Fushuai and Bai Fumei makes good sense as a couple, who make good money. The form of rhythmic couplets comes to dictate content to the extent that meaning-making serves to maintain such inured cultural habits as the inalienable sound-cum-sense, a knee-jerk, taken-for-granted reaction that leaves little room for negotiation.

The proof is in the pudding, in the words put before you. In the traditional Chinese script, the two names, should Confucius and other straight-face sages sanction such modern coinages, used to be written from the top right-hand corner down, line by vertical line, all the way to the bottom left of the page, like this:



白高

富富

美帥

Yet Chinese romanization of pinyin based on English alphabet has long immersed generations of school children in Anglicized, horizontal, and left to right reading and writing practice, if not the warp and weft of thought itself. This is further consolidated by computer input through the keyboard of English alphabet, no longer in the order of strokes for each Chinese ideogram. The new system of English typing has superseded the old system of Chinese calligraphy or handwriting. Neither romanization nor computer input predetermines the layout, though. Japan, modernized even earlier than China, maintains traditional word order in newspapers and even manga. Japanese novelist Minae Mizumura is inspired by this reordering of writing in *Shishosetsu from Left to Right* (1995), described in her essay collection *The Fall of Language* as “a fictionalized autobiographical work,” both a “how-I-became-a-Japanese-writer story” and a “how-I-failed to-become-a-writer-in-the-English-language story” (63-64). “By juxtaposing the two languages [in the title and throughout the novel],” adds Mizumura, “what I hoped to convey above all was the *irreducible materiality* of the Japanese language” (65 italics mine). By contrast, the *materiality* of the Chinese language is traded for digital expediency, each straight line of its classical texts fallen sideways, simplified, with multiple words retired, merged into the one with the least number of strokes. The corporeality of Chinese words vanishes in the stream of time like well-beings and their fellow guimi in the modern flow of currency.

Had literati from imperial China traveled into the future, they would be dumbfounded by the modern Chinese language so unheimlich that it seems a foreign tongue. In fact, typing the traditional vertical script from right to left requires twisting the computer's arm, so to speak. To a layperson, it involves layout manipulation and a bit of dissembling since the cursor refuses to go perpendicularly from top to bottom. It goes horizontally by default. What comes naturally to a modern Chinese at the keyboard estranges a premodern Chinese holding the ink brush, and vice versa—the estrangement of one's own past or future, thus of oneself. One comes face to face with one's own ghost. To paraphrase William Faulkner's famous adage: "The ghost is never dead; it's not even past," as in the very words one deploys on this page to string together erstwhile ghosts and modern dreamscape of guimi. Neither are Asian well-beings born out of water dead or past; they seep into guimi floundering in and ultimately rising above liquid assets to consummate happy endings.

Guimi Flailing in Liquid Assets

At first blush, to claim young ladies of TV guimi are dynastic well-beings' next of kin sounds downright preposterous. How can ghosts, as beautiful as they come in Pu Songling's archetypal *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (1766), be related to jovial, exquisite guimi, other than the fact that the two initial g-s alliterate? Joking aside, to trace back to their fountainhead, many Sinophone ghost movies spring from Pu's classic, which abounds with female ghosts. For instance, one of Pu's most renowned tales, "The Painted Skin," inspires a host of film adaptations revolving around a demon who wears an elegant woman's skin that requires disrobing for touch-up now and then. These ghosts leave a textual presence, apparently positivist proof of their existence.



Yet the notion of ghosts as empirical evidence is, in and of itself, an oxymoron, given readerly “hesitation” over the Gothic and the fantastic theorized by Todorov. Estrangement inherent in Pu and the genre of ghost stories destabilizes a spectator’s hold on the world in the book, on the screen, if not the hold on the world altogether. In addition, Pu’s human skin is but skin-deep, veiling the fiend underneath. As though foreshadowing “horror is beauty, beauty horror,” Pu concludes “The Painted Skin” with the moral: “Someone is obviously a demon, but people consider her beautiful” (qtd. Zeitlin’s *Historian of the Strange*, p. 30). On the other hand, TV series on guimi are realist dramas in a land of Marxist materialism where such “feudal superstition” finds no quarter, resulting in the total absence of ghosts. However, the eye candy of guimi masks social injustice of ageism, sexism, social Darwinism, communist authoritarianism, and countless other isms. Whereas Pu exposes the visible horror under the painted skin, guimi’s painted face and impeccable coiffure and dress countenance no trace of horror, now that horror is the invisible reality, systemically and ideologically. Well-beings and guimi differ primarily in terms of the type of scope through which one surveils the alternate universe commanded by imperial man or by millennial mammon: a ghostly telescope to scan dynastic patriarchy in the distance of time; or a guimi stethoscope to detect contemporary mammonism in deep space.

To rephrase Kurtz’s deathbed confession in *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), this argument on China’s “Horror Then! Horror Now!” would be much simpler if the cast of guimi were the proverbial “artificial beauty” with, verifiably, a fixed nose or chin or jaw or eyes or skin. But *Twenty*, *Thirty*, and *Family* feature performers much too young to require surgical intervention, including *Family*’s thirty-year-old Tang

Songyun playing, convincingly, a high schooler in the initial episodes. That said, it is but a common practice to powder an Asian actor's face crystalline white, eerily like a death mask next to a neck and shoulders betraying a darker hue. Such sharp unnatural contrast has come to be the natural look on the screen. If any, artificial beauties are usually relegated to supporting roles, silicon apples to the eye next to the leads' natural apples. One of *Family's* mothers Chen Ting (Yang Tongshu in her mid-40s), a belle of long standing on TV, has been rumored to have undergone cosmetic surgery, probably the result of gossip and jealousy over her looks. Further afield from China with its own paragons of artificial beauties, the 1994 Miss Korea second runner-up Hyeon-a Seong used to have a round face, typically Asian, evident in the 1998 TV series *Watching It Again and Again* (看了又看). Her cheek bones were subsequently shaved off, leaving a long, slender, and stylized Western face.⁴ Biographical fact turns fiction in Kim Ki-duk's *Time* (2006), where Seong stars as an obsessed woman putting herself through a complete face-off, hoping to cling onto her fickle lover with a new face and body.

Generically distinct as family drama and horror, *guimi* and well-beings appear to be apples and oranges, yet the blood tie is not that far-fetched should both fruits be artificial, factory- or studio-manufactured, *man-made*. Filmic ghosts serve as props to prop up everlasting romance or resentment across social divides and even across several lifetimes in denial of death. Classical human-ghost heterosexual love stories sugarcoat the bitter pill of the natural course of life of aging, loss, death, as well as the brutal power of patriarchy. Perpetual retelling of revenants and reincarnations is symptomatic of

⁴ See chapter 1, "Asian Cell and Horror," in Sheng-mei Ma's *Asian Diaspora and East-West Modernity*.



traumatic repetition compulsion over thwarted desires, which readily flip into revenge. On the other hand, modern female homosocial guimi sugarcoat the millennial reality of mammonism headed by male CEOs and fetishized capital. Imperial ghosts served to displace patriarchal guilt before; millennial guimi perpetuate a feel-good sentiment now. What was once cast as alien ghosts haunting male conscience has been upgraded to dream girls pleasing to all eyes and to the modern ego. One shocks; the other sucks up.

To rephrase Marx and Engel's "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1848), "A spectre is haunting China—the spectre of communism" as well as the specter's specter: capitalism. Inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping's open-door policies since the late 1970s, China mongrelizes capitalism-communism, or "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Despite the euphemistic terms, China resembles Sino-ese twins of one body with two drivers, not two heads, but a head and a phallus: the market-driven, profit-seeking business world, including media and entertainment, capped by the autocratic communist party. The wolfish Darwinian competitiveness in the marketplace jars with the socialist collective utopia in ideological orthodoxy, each plotting to lord over the other, to be the winner over the loser. Each wishes to be, in yet another favorite pairs of lingo, *ba* vanquishing, possessing *zha*.

Hero-worship in Thomas Carlyle's formulation of "totalitarian personality cult" has been sinologized in millennial China as *ba*-worship.⁵ *Ba* (霸) means hegemon, ruler, superman, and/or tyrant. Well-nigh amoral, beyond moral standards, *ba* goes all the way back to the Spring and Autumn (771-476 BCE) and Warring States (481/403-221 BCE) period in Chinese history when vassal states vied for the

⁵ See David R. Sorensen's "Introduction" to *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, p. 1.

coveted position of *bazhu* or hegemon, before the First Emperor of Qin crushed them all. By definition, *ba* is neutral, alluding to an evil tyrant abusing power as well as to a benevolent sovereign exercising power with discretion. Far from a political system where individual rights lie at its foundation, the Chinese feel, for lack of a better term, “at home” with *ba*, having lived for thousands of years at a home headed by a long line of *ba*, from emperors to Chairman Mao to President Xi, as long as the aphrodisiac of power had not gone to the head overmuch. Ironically, *ba* or hegemon is the homophone of “father” (爸), the patriarch of the family or the nation. Should *ba* be the master of the household, its opposite *zha* (渣 dregs, lees, trash) would be the runt, the pathetic, good-for-nothing loser. The *ba-zha* split befits the winner vs. loser, eater vs. eaten, and at-the-table vs. on-the-menu dichotomy of social Darwinism. Applicable to all walks of life, from business CEOs to top test takers in schools, *ba* morphs between the Burkean hologram of the sublime, bastardizing the Wise King and the Dark Lord into Master-cum-Monster.

As the setting of the business world prevails in most Chinese TV series on *guimi*, the representative *ba* is a company CEO respectfully called by his surname, followed by *zong*, short for *zongcai* (總裁 Supreme Decider, literally, with a hint of the omnipotent Supreme Dictator). *Zong* also happens to be the first word for *zongtong* or president. *Zong* can thus be roughly translated as President or Chairman. Rather than mutual exclusivity of *ba* versus *zha*, Taoist yin-yang binary complementarity joins hands with Marxist dialectical materialism in producing a precarious harmony in TV series on *guimi* balancing between super(wo)men, on the one hand, and, on the other, their intended with lesser qualities that endears them to the common



folk. The former—the dream self of *ba*—lies beyond reach; the latter of *zha* reflects part of viewers themselves.

Of the three TV series on the air almost simultaneously in 2020, *Twenty* leads *Thirty* in China's overall rating partly because the twenty-year-old in college are relatively carefree compared to thirty-year-old working mom or “shopgirl” juggling career and family. More of a light comedy than *Thirty*, *Twenty* appeals to TV viewers' nostalgia for, even regression to, younger days. Thus, the audience's preference for dreamscape gravitates them to one series more than the other. A youthful, if not juvenile, style marks *Twenty* right from the outset. Accompanied by a fast tempo, bouncy theme song, the opening credits consist of a series of quick cuts of symmetrical images of each lead actor in split screen, as if through a child's kaleidoscope. The opening credits end with each episode's title rendered in roundish cartoon scribbles, as if in a child's hand.

The order of billing of the four *guimi* reveals the show's hierarchy and, by extension, China's. Out of the four women, the “tallest,” most eye-catching *ba* Guan Xiaotong (playing fashion model and social media influencer Liang Shuang) receives top billing, adjacent to the “tallest” male actor Jin Shijia (playing Zhou Xun or the investment group CEO Zhou zong) and another male actor Niu Junfeng (playing Zhao Youxiu). Zhou zong embodies the idealized qualities of *gaoleng* (高冷 tall and cold/cool): the actor is 6'2” and his face is carved with a perpetual sneer. An imperious, condescending mannerism of cool idols attracts worshippers in pathological crushes variously euphemized as *nuelian* (虐戀 abusive, sadomasochistic obsession) or *anlian* (暗戀 secret crush). The widely accepted, even venerated, masochistic fixation is a throwback to Golden Bracelet's attachment to Baoyu and to Lady Mi's self-sacrifice, except it seems to sublimate the

master-slave, owner-owned relationship into the self-agency of a willing slave smitten with love. The most chilling manifestation of ba-worship lies in attributing to such ba as Zhou zong “*gao zhishan*” or high IQ (intelligence quotient) to justify dictatorial leadership in a disturbingly eugenic, fascist manner. Swept up in a national frenzy over triumphalism and innate greatness, China’s media conglomerate *aiqiyi* (愛奇藝) taps into this ba-worship by a makeover of its name as *iQIYI* with the website of, even more blatantly, *iq.com*.

Niu Junfeng’s character, on the other hand, comes across initially as a *zha*, a slick charlatan, whose first name Youxiu (excellence) foreshadows his subsequent redemption as an art photographer. Niu’s role is decidedly not as central as the other three co-starring ladies in second billing shown in the ensuing frame. To put it bluntly, the order of billing is determined as much by the performers’ roles as by their height, look, and gender. The tallest male and female appear first, flanked by a secondary male actor. Arguably, even the tallest male Zhou zong plays but second fiddle to the other three female leads. Despite their ample airtime and tour de force acting, the three females have their names deferred to second billing.

The three thus relegated comprise Luo Yan, nicknamed Rock, withdrawn, socially awkward, indulging herself in the fantasy world of videogame. Rock can afford to do so because of financial support from her attorney mother. Rock is played by Li Gengxi, who demonstrates the breadth of her acting in taking on this escapist persona, quite a departure from the insomniac, suicidal high schooler in *A Little Reunion* (2019). The other even wealthier roommate is Duan Jiabao (played by Dong Siyi), girlish and burikko (cute), practically a *fuerdai*, or child of the nouveau riche since the market liberalization of the late 1970s. Duan is so generous and good-natured that she is treated as an ATM



machine by friends, except her roommates, particularly Jiang Xiaoguo (played by Pu Guanjin), who shares her own coupon with Duan to help save money. To round off the four roommates, Jiang capitalizes on her Manchurian accent to silhouette a humble origin, as Manchuria or China's northeast is reputed to export impoverished migrants to coastal metropolis. A recent college graduate and a lowly intern at Zhou zong's company, Jiang still shares with her dormitory suitemates due to limited resources, a scrapper in the cosmopolitan Shenzhen, Guangdong. The petite Jiang, shortest of the four, has a crush on Zhou zong, who, despite his haughtiness, is secretly impressed by Jiang's thick-skinned drivenness.

Such is millennial China's strategy of making ba-worship palatable. To make the bitter bill go down, Mary Poppins' spoonful of sugar is replaced by a mutual attraction of the ba Zhou zong and the zha Jiang, their power differentials notwithstanding. This ba-zha magnetism plays out between Liang Shuang and Zhao Youxiu as well. Sweeter still, two ba-s compete for Jiang's love. Zhou zong finds a rival in Duan's younger brother, a fencing champion with such good looks that young women constantly ask to exchange their WeChat accounts, equivalent to Facebook accounts or email addresses. Thus, two hegemonies from two ends of the marriage market vie for Jiang's affection, one mature and established, the other a young and appealing fuerdai. Caught in between, Jiang reminds one of the symbol that leads the twelve-animal Chinese zodiac: the diminutive and unrepresentable rat, a survivor amidst market-driven adoration of ba, a residual of traditional virtues of single-minded tenaciousness, devotion, and honesty. So hard-working is Jiang that she even boasts of qualities of ox, the second in line in the Chinese zodiac, pivotal to plowing and long revered in agriculture. In an underhand and circuitous way, Jiang

dominates *Twenty*'s opening episode, overshadowing the female ba Liang Shuang yet to make her debut.

To rephrase an American idiom, *Twenty* has the ba and eats it, too. Liang Shuang appears belatedly, in the closing moments of episode 1 to the great shock of her three roommates. They cower under her towering shadow and defer to her as Shuangjie (elder sister Shuang), a term of respect reserved for those older, more senior, and higher-up. Seeing the pieces of luggage piled on her upper bunk, a convenient storage space, Shuangjie flings them across the floor, ordering lights-out at 10:30 PM sharp to commence her beauty snooze. Guan who plays Shuangjie may indeed be the most senior actor of the cast, having been catapulted to the big screen in Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (2005) in her cameo appearance as a beggar girl. For that matter, Pu Guanjin who plays Jiang has a supporting role in the 2016 indie film *Mr. Donkey*, albeit a decade behind Guan. Insofar as *Twenty* is concerned, however, Jiang is the only one holding down a steady job and deserves the title jie (elder sister).

Absent from the dormitory for years, Shuangjie has been staying at her own luxurious apartment, thanks to the largesse of her fuerdai lover "Golf." Her roommates so nicknamed him behind her back because their romance began when Shuangjie caddied at the golf course for the rich and famous. Jiang and other roommates reluctantly share with her that Golf is to marry another fuerdai with a degree from Columbia University, dashing her dream of marrying up. Complimented as having such "long legs," or "all legs under the neck," in Jiang's endearingly whispery, mumbling, yet crisp elocution, Shuangjie's stature as the Goddess or ba crumbles upon Golf's betrayal and the disintegration of her fan base online. She begins her climb back up in the fashion model and social media business with the support of her



guimi and the art photographer. The ba of yesteryear is crushed by a bigger ba with an Ivy League diploma. But Shuangjie's renaissance in showbiz, despite a vengeful Golf's obstruction, elevates her above and beyond the nouveau riche with Western cachet. China's homegrown ba beats foreign-imported ba, except Shuangjie's height, china doll skin, and other inborn endowment areas remote as Columbia or Western capital to most Chinese audience.

Although culminating in the coming out of the star Shuangjie, the opening episode of *Twenty* pivots on the "rat" Jiang Xiaoguo. Even the childish script of the first episode's title "Is it wrong to love money?" describes Jiang's money problem rather than her independently wealthy roommates. In episode 1, Jiang is ashamed to have been found with her antique Apple 5 cell phone by her ex-boyfriend, with whom Jiang purchased the phone back in their sophomore year. Not only a spurned lover, but Jiang feels like a *lushe* (魯蛇 loser), having been caught "red-handed." Jiang blurts out the subterfuge that her regular phone is temporarily out of work. To impress her ex with a new cell phone in the upcoming class reunion, Jiang scrounges around for funds, exhorting a school friend to pay back the debt of 300 RMB. Rather than paying the outstanding and long-standing debt, her friend uses the scholarship stipend to buy new apparel and shoes for job interviews. Enraged, Jiang confronts her friend in a shopping mall, which is recorded and uploaded online. Cyberbullying ensues, smearing Jiang as the bully riding her downtrodden friend. Overshadowing both passionate romance and heart-warming friendship is cold cash, along with the chilling cyberspace of disinformation. With the exception of fuerdai, every character seems drowning in debt. Seemingly a debtor, Jiang would owe far more had she dressed herself appropriately for her position at Zhou

zong's investment company. The episode title is a rhetorical question for it is clearly not wrong to love money, only if such money comes at the expense of friendship, love, and the true self.

This segues to Shuangjie's breaking up with Golf in the following episodes. Even this setback fails to faze Shuangjie, who finds her moral fiber in severing ties with Golf. That inner core, however, must couple with that outer look, as episode 3's title "*Yanzhi ji zhenyi?*" (顏值即正義?) illustrates. Yet another rhetorical question, the episode title equates the physical appearance with fairness, even justice. A popular saying in modern China, the title betrays a skewed value system, especially when it rolls off the tongue as a matter of course to justify an unjust system. Whatever happens, the saying suggests, it is one's own fate in accordance with one's face. The natural corollary seems inevitable: to remake one's fate, one starts by remaking one's face. If episode 1's title belongs squarely to Jiang wrestling with mammon, episode 3 befits Shuangjie, female charisma par excellence. Shuangjie lets drop remarks of unabashed entitlement: "If you are beautiful, you are halfway to triumph," or "The face is one's passport," whereas her opposite Jiang fumes over losing out on job interviews to taller, more attractive applicants. Translated literally, *yanzhi* in episode 3's title denotes "physical appearance worth," or the worth/value/ranking of physical appearance. That notion of *zhi* or worth is grounded in monetary value, where the easiest ranking derives from the sum total of a woman's body parts.

Man with money makes *ba*, from Golf to Zhou zong to *Thirty's Hong Kong*-based Asian American millionaire Liang Zhenxian, an avowed bachelor with whom the upscale clothing store associate Wang Manni is in love. The formula of acknowledging and disavowing *ba* repeats itself when each *ba* is given up by the woman to be true to

herself, with the support of her guimi. Shuangjie chooses the young art photographer over becoming Golf's mistress; Jiang moves on from both ba-s—Zhou zong and Duan's brother; Wang Manni retires to her minority village in China's southwest rather than stay in Shanghai as a kept woman. Compared to the college setting of *Twenty*, *Thirty* with the three professional women features far more location shooting. Wang's home village in the mountains offers tourist sight-seeing and exotic customs, crossing nostalgia for the pastoral with dream of a Chinese Shangri-la. One of Wang's guimi, Gu Jia, played by Zhang Ziyi look-alike Tong Yao, reprises the homecoming motif in acquiring a tea farm in China's remote interior, a sanctuary when her marriage and pyrotechnics company collapse. Though married, Wang's guimi suffer from husbands either besotted by a young woman à la Glenn Close of *Fatal Attraction* (1987) or with zero emotional intelligence (EQ), still preoccupied with the fish in his aquarium while his wife miscarried.



Figure 1: Episode 9 of *Twenty* and episode 41 of *Thirty* reprise the same scene where the guimi of the latter series chance upon the guimi of the former series. The guimi of *Thirty* bow out of the auditorium under the curious stare from the guimi of *Twenty* sitting one row in front. Source: Tencent and iQIYI.

All three distraught over their careers and families, they embark on a vacation together in episode 9, flying from Shanghai to Shenzhen, where the thirty-year-old *guimi* ride bikes leisurely across the campus of Huanan University, where they chance upon the four twenty-year-old *guimi* from *Twenty* at the university auditorium. This television marketing spectacle of having two top-rating TV series overlap creates an effect that is almost spectral, a fitting closure to an argument yoking apples and oranges, imperial ghosts and millennial *guimi*. The two sets of *guimi* from two TV shows cross paths like each other's shadows. Tiptoeing into the tiered auditorium at a whim, the professional women, two recent divorcees and one long-time "old maid," sit one row behind the four college students. The interlopers are the student's future; the students are the interlopers' past. The past and the future seat themselves in tandem, spatially and temporally, in the perpetual present of episode 9. Neither group comes to fully recognize the other, except a fleeting glance at, not to mince words, one's own ghost so strange yet so alike (Figure 1). The four students turn to face those behind them because the professor, male authority figure once again, has drawn class attention to the three strangers giggling in the last row. Figure 1 captures the moment when the three mature women bow out of the auditorium under the students' curious stare. The exact scene with identical dialogue, *mise en scene*, and plot returns serendipitously in episode 41 of *Twenty*, before the series folds in episode 43. Not only do the two sets of *guimi* inhabit the same space, but they do so twice at different times in two separate shows, an embryonic eternal return in the fan's mind's eye.



Figure 2: Episode 1 of *Thirty's*'s start menu where the character Wang Manni hugs herself. Source: Tencent.

This doubling motif is embedded in *Thirty's*'s alternating film still of each episode, the arrow at the center of which must be clicked to start screening. Figure 2 captures the very first episode's film still. Wang Manni embracing herself in figure 2 will shift in subsequent episodes to her two other guimi, cuddling and commiserating with herself respectively, which subconsciously undercuts the healing, cathartic power of guimi. Why not have them hug each other? The freeze frame suggests that each woman is unto herself, conjuring up the shadow of well-beings. Whereas the phantom sorority constitutes itself after the fact of individual drowning, each death unmitigatedly solitary, episodes of millennial guimi attempt group therapy after the frozen picture of failed self-help.

Before parting their ways, however, the two groups talk past as well as at each other. The beauty of the thirty-something, Wang Manni, takes note of the beauty of the twenty-something, Shuangjie,

sitting in front. Wang whispers her admiration of the “post-00” generation, referring to those born after 2000, now in their late teens or early twenties. Directing her *guimi*’s eyes to Shuangjie, Wang praises the flawless makeup that sculpts a ceramic doll of a face, while Wang’s own skin is as smooth and iridescent as a ceramic doll and while the students’ laptop screens an ethereal princess from imperial China. That princess from *Novoland: Eagle Flag* (2019) happens to be played by Jiang Shuyin, whose next role is Wang Manni. *Thirty* plays on the metanarrative of *mise en abime*. Intertextuality notwithstanding, a simultaneous dialogue continues apace. Parallel to Wang’s observations under her breath on the post-00, the “rat-pack” leader Jiang Xiaoguo assuages Duan’s fear over her imminent twenty-two-year-old birthday party: “Why worry? You’re only 22. Behind you are twenty-five, thirty. How are they going to face themselves?” Literally, of course, three thirty-year-old women sit right behind them. Shuangjie picks up where Jiang left off, rubbing it in, unaware of those at her back: “Haven’t you heard? The face after 25 slides down like a roller coaster.” Taken aback, the thirty-year-old exchange a hurt look, bemused as to whether they resemble “old aunts.” Wang Manni, the star of the thirty-something, closes by salvaging their self-esteem: “When I was 22, I also bought all kinds of skin care products. But when I’m 30, I realize love is the best skin lotion,” although she has just fallen out of love with her Tall Rich Handsome partner. One remedy for romantic disillusionment, shared by both series and many other TV shows, is self-medication through alcohol, the sole legal “opiate of the masses” sold over the counter.

Pushed down by men with money, an imperial Chinese woman sinks to the bottom of the well, kept company by other well-beings. Imperial and neoimperial suicide and femicide has a note of finality,



yet the afterlife of well-being “will return” time and again like the Bollywood tune’s refrain. By contrast, pushed down by money from men, a millennial Chinese woman sinks to the bottom of the bottle, kept company by her drinking pals of guimi. Drowned imperial women rise as ghosts in ghost stories and cinematic horror; drunken millennial women sober up more refreshed and lovely for the happy ending in melodrama and romance. Which is more uncanny: Return of repressed ghosts, or magical thinking over guimi? Which sounds like ghost whispering: Imperial horror distancing beautiful ghosts, or millennial melodrama idolizing guimi beauties, or the blood tie (blood that ties) of forgotten phantoms and trending phenoms?

Mi in *Guimi* (閨蜜) means honey-like sweetness based on the radical of *chong* (虫 insect or honeybee), but *mi* puns with “secret, veiled” (密) based on the radical of *shan* (山 mountain). Hence, the sweetness and bonding of the fad of boudoir confidantes buoy atop a secret mountain of bones of female ghosts, welling up from imperial to millennial China. True guimi or companionship enfolds imperial well-beings and millennial boudoir confidantes across time and space, although either party—and us viewers—pretends not to see the other, the mirror image floating on ancient waters or modern liquidities.

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