



Original article

Binary Opposites in Yangsze Choo's The Ghost Bride (2013)

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Received: 26 April 2026

Accepted: 21 May 2026

Published: 01 August 2026

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss3/Pt1.1907>



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Cite:

Khyoon, A. Y., & Almaarroof, A. R. A. (2026). Binary Opposites in Yangsze Choo's The Ghost Bride (2013). Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 22(3/Pt1). <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss3/Pt1.1907>

ABSTRACT

Claude - Levi Strauss's binary opposition is a groundbreaking contributions in myth literary analysis. The problem of the research lies in not investing in binary oppositions when analyzing modern representation of world mythology as well as not following a clear methodology for classifying these oppositions. The research aims at applying a method of identifying as well as classifying binary oppositions in modern novels based on world mythologies. The researchers selected Yangsze Choo's novel The Ghost Bride (2013) as a modern representation of Chinese mythology so as to identify binary oppositions and classify them into three types. The first category is existence vs nonexistence, the second is coexistence, and finally, the last type is associations. The researchers concluded that following this classification facilitates not only identifying binary oppositions, but also makes analysis more accurate. The researchers recommended applying this classification to other modern novels based on world mythologies.

Keywords: ancestor worship, hell money, offerings, Structuralism, Yin and Yang

الاضداد الثنائية في رواية يانكشي شو العروس الشبح 2013

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المستخلص

تعد الاضداد الثنائية التي جاء بها العالم الانثربولوجي كلود ليفي سترواس اساسا للتحليل والنقد الادبي للاساطير العالمية. مشكلة البحث تكمن في عدم استثمار هذه الاضداد الثنائية في التحليل الادبي لروايات حديثة مقتبسة عن اساطير عالمية فضلا عن عدم اتباع منهجية واضحة للتعرف على هذه الاضداد او حتى وجود تصنيف معتمد لها. يهدف البحث الى ايجاد طريقة للتعرف على الاضداد الثنائية في العمل الادبي وتصنيفها حسب منهج واضح. اختارت الباحثتان رواية *العروس الشبح* لكايتشي يانكشي شو كونها تستند على اساطير صينية للتعرف على الاضداد الثنائية فيها وتصنيف هذه الاضداد الى ثلاثة انواع وهي وجود مقابل العدم والتواجد التكميلي او التعريفي واخيرا النوع الثالث هو الاضداد الارتباطية. لباحثتان اتباع هذا التصنيف يسهل عملية التعرف على الاضداد الثنائية كما انها تضع الناقد الادبي على الطريق الصحيح للتحليل جاعلا التحليل أكثر عمقا. من اهم التوصيات ان يتم اعتماد هذا التصنيف وتعميمه عند النقد الادبي للروايات المعاصرة المقتبسة من اساطير عالمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تبجيل الاموات ، مال الجحيم،اضاحي، البنيوية ، الين واليانغ.

1. Introduction:

All we know of ancient world civilizations came to us through their mythology. Therefore, Claude Levi Strauss, a well – known anthropologist, started his career studying civilizations yet ended up studying mythology so as to understand similarities in world cultures. Strauss turned to structuralism and devoted all his life's work to studying the structure of myth to come up with similarities among different cultures. Strasuss's breakthrough in understanding myth lies in finding similarities that cannot be attributed to the diffusion of these cultures. The term 'myth' is derived from the Greek word "mythos" that is by word of mouth, to refer to a story or a plot, whether true or invented. (Abrams, 2005, pp 121-122) These stories are invented by a certain cultural group involving supernatural beings, deities, and superhumans either for explaining how the world came to be, like creation myths and origin myths, or for explaining natural phenomenon and cosmic forces. Myths are also a source for social customs, sanctions, and conduct. (Cuddon, 2012) Myths go further to predict the end of worlds, bringing the world of the humans with the worlds of the spirits or even gods. Myths are "the foundation of religions: they define cultures and codify their values." (Pumphrey, 2018, p12)

In the 1960s and 1970s Claude - Levi Strauss made a breakthrough from these traditional views of myth and treated "he myths of a particular culture as a signifying system whose true meanings are unknown to their proponents." (Abrams, 2005, p121) In his paper "The Structural Study of Myth" (1950) Strauss introduced to the world the results of his studies on myth stating that "all myths can be systematically deconstructed and categorized for recognition and analysis" (Atkins, 2016, p11) creating "a spiral link among them." (Atkins, 2016, p11) Furthermore, he

declared that myth is a cultural phenomenon that reflects a period of human civilization. (Zou, 2023, pp 106 - 110) He believed that all human beings think in the same way and thus use the same structure in reflecting their way of thinking. He supported his ideas with his vast knowledge of not only anthropology and linguistics but also arts, philosophy, geology, science, music, psychoanalysis, and Marxist theory as well.

1.1. Strauss's Binary opposites as A Structure of a Myth:

One of Levi-Strauss's greatest contributions is his interpretation of myth through its structure of binary opposites. (Bertens, 2005) That is, underneath language there exists a binary structure that resembles the brain itself. The human brain is a mere reflection of the world. Claude Levi Strauss, as a structural anthropologist, used many of linguistic theories to analyze different cultural phenomena, and one of the major linguists that he derived from was Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure originally formed the concept of binary oppositions in the study of language. Strauss adapted the concept and used it for analyzing the structure of many cultural processes like cooking, dressing, family, and myths. For us, to understand myths, it is essential to look for binary oppositions because they reflect the frame of mind of a certain culture or society, just like the mind organizes reality in pairs: male and female, good and evil, light and darkness, etc. It does not reflect individual thinking; it reflects an entire culture. Through understanding that binary opposites, one can understand the culture that presented it. (Telaumbanua, Sayuti, & Sari, 2024) According to Strauss, all cultural activities have structure, and through that structure meaning emerges. Binary opposition structure reflects not only the human mind but also reflects the entire universe as well. (Gul, Farooq, & Ali, 2022). Therefore, all cultures can be analyzed through their binaries or opposites: male vs. female, good vs. bad, etc. Strauss believed that the way a certain culture resolves its opposites reflects how that culture conveys meaning. (Strauss, 1995) He also believed in the universality of the human mind, stating that although cultures differ, there is a universal, unconscious structure that they all share. (Klages, 2006)

1.2. The problem of the Research:

Binary oppositions serve as a powerful literary device reflecting ideologies through the structure of the human mind. They are also powerful in representing cultural constructions through words. In mythology, binary oppositions create themes and develop characterization as well as serve as a literary device. Although many researchers and literary critics applied the binary opposition structure to analyze different literary texts, very few applied it for literary analysis of modern representations of world mythology, namely Chinese mythology. In addition to that, there are no standardized guidelines that facilitate conducting such analysis.

1.3. The aim of the Research:

The research aims to provide researchers and literary critics with guidelines for the identification, classification, and analysis of binary oppositions in modern representations of Chinese mythology. *The Ghost Bride* (2013) is a modern representation of Chinese mythology selected by the researchers for analysis based on Strauss's binary opposition.

1.4. Questions of the research:

The research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How to identify binary oppositions of Chinese mythology in the modern representation of Yangsze Choo's novel *The Ghost Bride* (2013)?
2. How can these binary oppositions be classified for deeper analysis?
3. Does this classification facilitate literary analysis?

1.5. Methodology:

After consulting many previous studies conducted on the classification of binary oppositions, the researchers proposed three types of binary oppositions as guidelines for literary analysis:

1) **Non - existence vs Existence Binary Oppositions:**

This type of binary opposition is considered the most prominent type of binary opposition. In this type, two signs or words make sense only when they are in opposition to each other and the existence of one is determined by the absence of the other. Typical examples of this type of binary opposites are death vs. life, darkness vs. light, day vs. night, etc. (Ahmadi, Mostaali, Piri, & Bajelani, 2013)

2) **Coexistence Binary Oppositions:**

In this type of binary apposition, one thing gives meaning to the other, making it more distinguish and understandable. For example, two entities sun vs. moon, the yin and yang, different beings like man vs. woman, two parties like believers vs. nonbelievers, good vs. evil, etc. In this system of opposition, the essence of one thing is defined by its opposite, in other words, the knowledge of one entitles the knowledge of its opposite. (Gul, Farooq, & Ali, 2022)

3) **Association Binary Oppositions:**

Two things that are related to each other yet are associated with cultural associations. The two are not contradictory to each other; they are related to each other for structural and complementary purposes. This type of binary opposition usually endows the opposition with value due to its various cultural, religious, and societal associations. For example, female vs. male, in this type does not only refer to the gender; it goes deeper including all associations of both opposites according to the culture, religion, and society where 'female' stands for fragility, emotions, and beauty, while 'male' stands for power, strength, and dominance. Further and deeper associations can actually reflect the organization of human cultures within the hierarchy of society, where males are at the top in certain cultures and at the bottom in others. These associations give value to oppositions, and this value creates a different level of literary meaning. (Gul, Farooq, & Ali, 2022)

1.6. Review of literature:

There are many researches that base their framework on classifying binary oppositions for literary analysis yet only one study is closely related to this work. In a research entitled "**Binary Opposites in Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010)**" the researchers followed the same type of classification to conclude that applying this classification facilitates deeper analysis of the novel as well as provides a clear guideline to be followed in other myth – based novels. (Khyoon & Almaarroof, 2026)

1.7. Binary Oppositions in Chinese Mythology:

Duality has deep roots in Chinese culture reflected in the fundamental principle of Yin and Yang. Although Chinese mythology is one of the oldest, yet, it is continuous. In other words, to this day, this philosophical concept influence Chinese people “throughout their history, shaping their mentality, business practices, and social pursuits.” (Gan, Zhao, Niekerk, & Ncube, 2024, pp13-26) According to ancient Chinese legend, the cosmos started from chaos, and then the great creator separated the chaos into heaven and earth where the first is regarded as Yang while the latter as Yin. (Vo & CAO, 2022) Each part is endowed with unique primal yet equal qi that works in cyclic order. Chinese people classified every detail in their lives according to these forces after observing natural phenomena and agricultural activities. The Chinese characterized the sun, men, light, heat, and strength as Yang. The Yang represents ascent, positivity, kindness, and passion. On the other hand, the moon, women, darkness, cold, and weakness represent the Yin, which stands for descent, stillness, negativity, and malice. (Gan, Zhao, Niekerk, & Ncube, 2024)

The philosophy of the Yin and Yang continued to develop with each dynasty, especially during the Warring State Period when Zou Yan, a prominent philosopher, developed the philosophy formulating five – element theory. According to this theory, to live a harmonious life, the Yin-Yang principle should be observed according to the five elements; wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, that represent the human body in health and disease. (Vo & CAO, 2022) Lao Zi, one of the founders of Taoism, used the Yin–Yang philosophy to interpret the evolution of the entire universe. In Taoism the Yin–Yang is represented as two intertwined black and white fishes. The white fish with a black dot represents the Yang and the black fish with a white dot represents the Yin. (Gan, Zhao, Niekerk, & Ncube, 2024)

The Yin and Yang



Note: From Yin and yang, by

Wikipedia, 2025

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yin_and_yang)

After that, the concept expanded representing an unlimited range of opposite pairs in the universe: cold/hot, slow/fast, still/moving, masculine/ feminine, and lower/ upper. The core of the Yin – Yang theory holds that everything consists of two opposite aspects. However, it is vital to note that harmony is achieved only through the cyclic mutual subduing of each other. When there is no mutual subdue disease occurs. Moreover, the Yin – Yang can change, in other words, the Yin can become Yang and this change is continuous due to internal and external circumstances. The Yin

– Yang binary opposition is characterized as being not only oppositions, they are unifications that each coexist with the other, interdependence where each part depends on the other and cannot exist without it, and finally, it is mutual in consumption and transformation. (Gan, Zhao, Niekerk, & Ncube, 2024)

1.7.1. *The Ghost Bride* (2013)

The Ghost Bride is a New York Times bestseller novel adapted as a Netflix original series in 2020 written by Yangsze Choo (2013), a Malaysian writer of Chinese descent. The novel is based on Chinese mythology and set in Malaya in 1893, nowadays Malaysia, during British rule. It tells the story of Li Lan, a seventeen – year – old girl who is the last descendant of the previously wealthy Chinese Pan family. Her father, after his wife's death, fell into heavy debt and became addicted to opium. The novel is divided into four parts; part one, 'Malaya 1893,' starts on the festival of the dead when she is asked to become a ghost bride for the wealthy Lim family. In return for marrying their dead son and living as a wealthy widow her entire life, her father's debt will be paid off, and both her Amah, an elderly nurse, and Old Wong, the cook, will be secured for life. Unfortunately, Li Lan was already betrothed to the dead groom's cousin, Lim Tian Bai, but the engagement was canceled; instead, he is betrothed to a girl from Quah's wealthy family. In the beginning, Li Lan refused to become a ghost bride, yet not only did the Lim family take extra measures to convince her, the ghost of the groom, Lim Tian Ching, started to haunt her. Plagued with sleepless ghost – hunted nights, Li Lan started taking sleeping medications and made a deal with the ghost, vowing to discover his murderer in exchange for her freedom. She started investigating the murder when she met Er Lang, a handsome man who claimed to be an official investigating corruption and bribery of afterlife judges by the wealthy Lim family.

In the second part, 'Afterworld,' Li Lan cannot continue her investigation because she accidentally overdoses on her medicine, becoming temporarily a spirit. She encounters hungry ghosts and spirits and meets Fan, the female ghost who helps her enter the Plains of the Dead. In the third part of the novel, 'The Plains of the Dead,' we accompany Li Lan on her journey to the land of the dead, where she witnesses the ten courts of hell and the nine judges and eventually finds Lim's mansion. With the help of Er Lang she solves the case, finding the corrupted judge and Lim's murderer. Being a temporary spirit caused her to suffer the separation of her spirit from her body thus Er Lang saves her by giving her some of his qi, fifty years of his life, revealing he is a higher being, a dragon, and then returns her to her body that she discovers is occupied by another ghost. The fourth and last part of the novel 'Malacca describes her quest to expel the intruder ghost from her body. The ghost managed to be engaged to Tiam Bai and are set to marry within three months. After reclaiming her body, Li Lan realizes that her true love is Er Lang, the dragon, and therefore ends up marrying him.

1.7.2. Binary Oppositions in *The Ghost Bride*

Keeping the Yin – Yang theory in mind, binary oppositions in Choo's representation of Chinese mythology is categorized into three types of oppositions:

1. First type Existence vs. Nonexistence:

In this type of binary opposition, zero refers to nonexistence while one refers to existence that is manifested in setting as well as in theme and characterization.

A. The Living World Vs the Afterlife:

This binary opposition represent the setting that is divided into two distinctive worlds; the world of the living and the world of the dead. Although both worlds exist, characters however cannot exist in both worlds normally. They are either in the world of the living or the world of the dead. When the ghost of Lim Tian Ching appeared in the living world it disrupts the balance of the Pan's family causing disease that eventually lead to Li Lan's collapse into the spirit world. The same is true for all ghosts haunting the living characters; Lim Tian Ching haunting his mother, ghosts haunting Old Wong, the Pan's family cook, and Fan haunting her lover. The same is true when the living enters the afterlife, Li Lan, a living human, disrupts the balance of the afterlife, therefore, she starts losing her qi and subsequently her earthly body.

B. Reality Vs Fantasy:

The novel starts as a historical account of colonial Malaysia in 1893, a port city rich with trade, populated with different races, and influenced by many religions. This reality is suddenly disrupted with fantasy when Li Lan's father asks her to become a ghost bride. This proposal changes the realistic setting into a fantastical one. The practice of ghost bride is performed for many reasons and one of them is to calm an angry spirit. Such a proposal entails believing in the spirits, and the fantastical spirit world. As mentioned above, the living world, Malacca, is the reality, and Li Lan was able to live in it when she was human. Once she transforms into her liminal state, the in-between state, her reality is replaced with fantasy. The fantastical world is parallel to her real world yet she is deprived of many abilities for start she cannot reclaim her physical body, she has no influence on the real world, and living humans cannot see her nor hear her let alone help her. The reality is starving her and weakening her while the fantastical world of the Plains of the Dead on the other hand gives her power. When she enters the Plains of the Dead she notices that Fan gained substance, she feels pleasure, and Li Lan notices that "her skin was no longer shriveled and even the details of her dress had taken on the appearance and weight of cloth." (Choo, p168) Li Lan too feels that this fantasy is her new reality:

For the first time in a long while, I had a physical impact on the world around me. Instead of relief, however, this discovery filled me with dread. I didn't want to belong to this world. I wanted to go back to Malacca, my living, breathing Malacca, with its humid air and torpid days. (Choo, p171)

She missed her reality and did not accept how Fan could see flowers all over the place thinking it is paradise when the only thing she thinks of that it is a wasteland.

As far as the eye could see was a barren plain. It was so dry that the grass had shriveled into white stalks of dead vegetation, barely covering the crumbling earth, like a thin coarse pelt. Above it rose a burning sky. Accustomed as I was to the lush jungle of Malya, I stared in wonder and horror at this wasteland. (Choo, p168)

Although Li Lan considers this fantasy a wasteland, she does not get hungry or thirsty there. She is able to roam the entire fantastical world riding her fantastical horse Chendana, learning secrets about her family, solving mysteries, saving Er Lang, a fantastical creature, and eventually saving herself from the ghost of Lim Tian Ching. It is in this fantasy that her character develops. This opposition between reality and fantasy functions as a medium through which Li Lan can develop, and take a second chance to live a life she plans for herself. This binary opposition is “crucial to the development of narrative and character.” (Masson S. , 2018, pp60-81) When she returns to her reality, she is able to regain her body, grow out of her infatuation with Tian Bai, find Lim Tian Ching’s murderer, break from her cultural chains, reject the security of a stable home, and finally choose a dragon as a husband. She ends up choosing fantasy over reality by accepting Er Lang’s marriage offer:

If you go with me, it won’t be easy for you,” he said warningly. “it will bring you closer to the spirit world and you won’t be able to lead a normal life. My work is incognito, so I can’t keep you in style. It will be a little house in some strange town. I shan’t be available most of the time, and you’d have to be ready to move at a moment’s notice.” (Choo, p340)

She chose Er Lang with all his uncertainties stating that, although he is not human she will accept him “I will tell him that I’ve always thought he was a monster. And that I want to be his bride.” (Choo, p349)

C. Love Vs Haunting/ Obsession:

It is a major theme in the novel for there are many types of love starting from the motherly love that triggered the events of the novel. This type of binary opposition incarnates consumption and transformation where one opposite can transform into the other or even worse consume it causing imbalance in harmony and eventually disease and death. Madam Lim’s obsessive love for her son enabled him to manipulate her leading to complete disruption and destruction. Li Lan is disappointed when she first sees Madame Lim stating “I was expecting, perhaps, nothing less than the Queen of Heaven.” (Choo, p11) However, due to her son’s obsessive haunting, she has “shadows under her eyes and the loose flesh of her cheeks. She looked unutterably weary, although her posture denied such weakness.” (Choo, p17) She is exhausted, her hands trembled and she does not look well at all and when Li Lan asks her if she is well Madam Lim answers ““I’ve had trouble sleeping,” she said in her small, feathery voice. “But I think it will soon pass.”” (Choo, p17) Even before his death, she gives her son everything her fancies and preferred him to everyone. After his death, she obsessively burns funeral goods for him, lies to Li Lan about knowing her mother, and tricks her into taking her ribbon so that her son can haunt Li Lan. She is pleased with Li Lan’s untrained manners to better manipulate her, ironically, she ends up being manipulated by her own son. By the end of the novel Madam Lim looks as if she is a hungry ghost, with wild hair, and her figure “had shrunk until it was little more than bones rattling in a bag of skin.” (Choo, p330) Even her expensive clothes are changed and stained with food, she is ill but the imbalance caused terrible change. (Choo, p330) She cannot live without him even when he haunts her she feels better but now she wails “he is really gone. He doesn’t come to me in my dreams anymore.” With a crazy frenzy,

Madame Lim pushes Yan Hong and Li Lan into the well to die and tries to kill Tian Bai with a knife. She ends up under consistent supervision in her own mansion.

Li Lan's motherly love, on the other hand, saves her, and so does Amah's love. Li Lan lost her mother when she was only four years old but she always misses her presence in her life. She believes if her mother is alive, she would have been raised differently with more privileges and opportunities. She meets her mother in the Plains of the Dead and learns that her mother refuses to go through incarnation to protect her from Lim Tian Ching's obsession. She is forgiving and understanding showing from her point of the story about the Third Concubine. Li Lan's mother trades her youth in exchange for Li Lan's life and beauty. "I left you motherless. But I traded my youth for your recovery from smallpox." (Choo, p258) Amah's love for Li Lan is a vital force for she is always present in every detail of Li Lan's life taking good care of her. She tries to save her from the ghost that haunts her, and she is the only one to notice that Li Lan's body is possessed by someone else. She helps Li Lan regain her body and gets betrothed to Tian Bai.

There are four men in love in the novel each ends up with a different ending according to their type of love, Lim Tian Ching's feeling towards Li Lan is an obsession, not love. Lim Tian Ching's interest in Li Lan stems from the fact that she is betrothed to his cousin Tian Bai. His jealousy of Tian Bai during his life does not stop at death, on the contrary, it increases to the extent of accusing him of murdering him. The third Concubine's love for Tian Bai's uncle leads to the complete destruction of the Pan's family hailing smallpox that kills Li Lan's mother and distorts her father's face. Mr. Pan's obsessive love with his dead wife causes him to neglect both his daughter and business finally leading him to opium addiction and financial ruin. Tian Bai's obsession over Isabella is apparent in his dreams a matter that ruins his chances with Li Lan. All these obsessions lead to imbalanced oppositions therefore causing calamities. Genuine love like Er Lang's love for Li Lan is rewarded at the end.

D. Human Vs Supernatural:

The novel is populated with supernatural characters ranging from simple spirits, ghosts, hungry ghosts, demons, monsters, and dragons. The first ghost Li Lan is introduced to is the ghost of the recently dead Lim Tian Ching in her nightmares while she is introduced to the dragon Er Lang in the temple where she goes to seek refuge from Ching's hauntings. After becoming a spirit, Li Lan is able to see all other supernatural creatures. Both spirits and ghosts, according to Chinese mythology, can be either protective spirits like her mother's spirit or hateful and vengeful ghosts like Lim Tian Ching, Fan, and the third concubine. The fear of malignant ghosts is deeply rooted in Chinese belief and is a vital type of ancestor worship. Therefore, during the Hungry Ghost Festival, the Chinese burn offerings to their dead ancestors in the form of food, money, buildings, animals, and different items that can be useful in their afterlife. Lim Tian Ching's mother is portrayed constantly burning offerings for her dead son and when Li Lan meets him in the Plains of the Dead she can see all his mother's offerings. The medium advises Li Lan to burn hell money for herself and she is surprised at how much she needs it when she becomes a spirit that she has to ask Tian Bai to burn some for her. Tian Bai does burn money for her and most importantly he burns a wooden effigy of a horse that helps her a great deal for transportation in the Plains of the Dead. "The horses

in Lim Tian Ching's grand stables had been static and lifeless, for they were only made of paper. But this horse, carved from a block of wood, moved like a real animal. There were no words for my delight." (Choo, 160) Li Lan lives a privileged spirit life because of these offerings and together with Fan, they form an extreme binary opposite of nice vs malignant spirit. When Li Lan becomes a spirit in the afterworld she does not know what that entails. She meets Fan, a ghost, who teaches her the meaning of becoming a spirit, how to find food, how to haunt her lover, how to get to the Plains of the Dead, and many details. Fan is practically Li Lan's guide and for that, she is grateful at the beginning. However, after a few incidents, Li Lan starts to be cautious of Fan. For Li Lan, Fan is an opportunist parasite feeding on her lover's qi and wishing him death. Li Lan does not agree with many of Fan's behaviors making them binary opposites, they were at extreme ends, and the existence of one meant the nonexistence of the other. When Li Lan and Fan come back from the Plains of the Dead, Fan tricks Li Lan leaving her lost to possess her earthly body. Bodiless, Li Lan weakens until she starts to fade away like vapor and even then she refuses to feed off her lover's qi like Fan. When she finally gains enough qi to last her fifty years, she has to get rid of Fan to regain her body and consequently her life.

Hungry ghost is an entire realm in Buddhism's hell where the deceased are reincarnated as hungry ghost due to their earthly sins. There are many types and ranks of hungry ghosts depending on specific types of sins that are all related to food. Hungry ghost keep their personal memories therefore they become vengeful. The hungry ghost festival mainly target these types of ghost feeding them through offerings in exchange of peaceful living. (Vinczeová, 2019)

Demons are also supernatural creatures that are portrayed according to Chinese belief systems as negative whose role is to serve the gods through punishing sinners in hell. In the novel, these demons are depicted as having ox – heads serving corrupted hell officials. (Vinczeová, 2019) They are portrayed as monstrous, ugly, terrifying creatures, that have "burned carrion scent" and wicked tones, and guttural voice. They are the binary opposite of the dragon, Er Lang who is portrayed as a helpful, beloved water god. He is the seeker of the truth trying to unveil the corruption in the afterlife and restoring justice. When Li Lan promises to help him, he does not leave her even when his life depends on it. In the Plains of the Dead Er Lang enters only to save Li Lan although he knows that this place weakens him, it is no place for a god. When they are trying to escape Er Lang got injured and Li Lan has to carry him on her horse slowing them down till they are caught by the flying beastly birds with triangular leathery wings, sharp beaks, and claws trying to tear them to pieces. Er Lang changes from his human form into his dragon form "he rose up into the sky, shaking and snapping at the flock, curling back on his snakelike length and slashing with his claws. A great dragon, a long, lord of the water and air." (Choo, p268) In Chinese culture dragons are symbols of the emperor and royalty. It is lucky to see a dragon and emperors killed for his qi. Li Lan never sees Er Lang without his Bamboo hat that covers most of his face, before losing her last life force she asks him to remove his hat so that she could see his human face. Choo portrays him as shining in the moonlight with unparalleled nobility and his human form "was handsome beyond belief. Beautiful eve." (Choo, p308) Li Lan is like a moth drawn to the moon.

2. Second type Coexistence:

In this binary structure one term gains its significance only in relations to or when compared to another term like light is defined as being the contrast or opposite of dark.

A. Life vs Death:

The entire novel is based on the idea of life and death concentrating on the importance of keeping these extremes separate from each other. Tampering with these balanced contrasts caused all kinds of chaos starting with the marriage proposed between a very much a live woman and a dead ghost. The dead ghost's consistent attempts to drag Li Lan to the world of the dead disturb the welfare of all the other characters in the novel. Unfortunately, Li Lan's journey to the land of the dead did not restore the balance simply because she is not dead.

The setting itself serves as a tricky complicated binary opposite of the world of the living represented by Malacca in contrast with the spirit world. Choo intentionally blends these two seemingly separate worlds making them dependent on each other. As mentioned earlier, Malacca is portrayed as being very much a live city, rich with different cultures, inhabited by people from different races and religions yet governed by physical laws of time, and space, and restricted by social rules. The spirit world, on the other hand, is a dreary bleak place, it seems to have limited cultural diversity, and of course, has only one religion. In this world time and space are unique and are governed by supernatural and mystical laws. Ironically the creatures of the spirit world mingle and feed off the living world. (Masson S. , 2018) Li Lan does not experience the lively Malacca when she is alive, on the contrary, she experiences life in the spirit world where she moves freely without restrictions of any kind. Unfortunately, her liminal state deprived her of spirit offerings thus she started to become hungry therefore she followed the smell of food to a tiny dining area where a small family was eating. She was starving but she could not eat "I would starve unless someone made a spirit offering to me. Miserably, I crouched in the corner of the room as they ate, envying their chatter and every mouthful of food they ingested. I had been hungry before, but never like this." (Choo, p108) It was not until the old man of that small family asked his family if they put out food offerings for their ancestors and hungry ghosts as well that Li Lan was able to eat. "I ran to the alter, inhaling sharply so that the fragrance filled my nostrils and thankfully, my stomach." (Choo, p108) Little did she know that this old man made these food offerings for Fan, and when Fan knew some other ghost ate her offerings she was angry. Apparently the lively Malacca is populated with deadly ghosts. Ghosts that glow in the darkness of the night each with its own distinctive color "like strange flowers that bloomed in the night." (Choo, p114) Furthermore, there were crowds of scaled creatures, tiger – headed men, tiny birds with female faces, walking trees, and gigantic glowing flowers. Their numbers are plenty that Li Lan could hardly breathe because of "spiritual pressure, caused by the congregation of yin from the ghosts." (Choo, p114) This binary opposition is crucial for portraying the richness of Chinese mythology upon which the novel is based.

B. Wealth vs Poverty

Wealth is the main driving force of the major characters in the novel, the Lim family is wealthy having economic power and through their wealth, they arrange ghost marriages, and decide who their hires should marry. They are the symbol of corruption in both worlds. Even in the afterlife,

they maintain their social status along with all their bureaucratic privileges. (Masson S. , 2017) Fan tells Li Lan that in the afterlife there is a place called the Plains of the Dead where the wealthy are allowed to enjoy funeral offerings that their family burns for them. If a human ghost has enough money they can stay for centuries. Li Tian Ching comes from a rich family in life, due to his loving mother in the world of the living he lives as an emperor in the Plains of the Dead. With his mother's offerings, he is able to bribe one of the Nine Judges of Hell.

Hungry ghosts, on the other hand, cannot go into the plains of the Dead because they do not have clothes nor money for the journey and to make things even worse "they can't even steal, as spirit goods must be given freely." (Choo, p117) Li Lan meets all types of poor ghosts in the Plains of the Dead all complaining about the cheap paper offerings that are burnt for them. They all envied her for the horse that Tian Bai burnt for her. One ghost explains to her that everything she gets in the afterlife depends on filial devotion, "Your house, your servants, your clothes – they all depend on someone else's filial devotion to you." (Choo, p179) Once a ghost is called upon to the courts, all his possessions vanish as well.

3. Third type Associations:

In this type of binary opposition each binary is related to the other according to cultural, religious, and philosophical associations.

A. Man vs Women

The traditional Chinese community is a patriarchal one where men are more privileged than women. In Choo's novel, Li Lan is struggling with all sorts of men trying to decide her life for her. (Satkunanathan, 2020) Her father proposes a ghost groom for his daughter to marry so as to save his business and pay off his debt, and a ghost who violates the privacy of her dreams, forcing himself on her, tormenting her to a breaking point. Confucianism encourages women to be submissive, obedient, and content in belong lower in the hierarchy. Women are "denied the means and avenues to express their subjectivities and, consequently, had to express their desires to conform a collective identity." (POH, AWANG, TERMIZI, & CHING, 2021, p100) in an article entitled "Transnational Hauntings, Hungry Ghosts: Malaysian Chinese Domestic Gothic Fiction," Satkunanathan portrays Li Lan as a postcolonial feminist because she defies space and time, refusal to consent to traditional ghost marriage, therefore she is in a consistent conflict between obeying her father's wish and her right to choose her own spouse. Li Lan after all the conflict she went through broke this patricidal chain accusing herself of being selfish for marrying the man she wanted. Choosing her own destiny means that she has to leave her home and family, a decision she made with a heartbeat yet not after knowing that her father, Amah, and Old Wong will be taken care of. Although she felt alienated in her own home, she did love it and wanted to visit her family even if it is "only as a shiver on the wind. And is they should die before me, as they surely must, I will be waiting to escort them to the Plains of the Dead." (Choo, p349) Li Lan started her quest by travelling outside her own home both physically and spiritually to reclaim her own destiny therefore becoming "doubly transgressive" (Satkunanathan, 2020, p43) as a feminist.

This binary opposition functions on two levels of associations; the first is gender inequality, and the second is Chinese traditions vs Colonial Modernity. Choo starts the novel by telling the reader

that her characters come from the Pernankan House, in other words, “a house that is made out of many elements: English, European, Chinese, Moorish and Malay.” (Satkunananthan, 2020) She craftily portrays a hybrid community is of different races, religions, and cultures. The afterlife, is, however, purely Chinese.

B. Buddhism vs Confucianism

Chinese mythology is based on a blend of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, in the novel, however, we learn that there is a clear distinction between Taoism and Buddhism on one extreme, and Confucianism on the other. Li Lan repeatedly mentions how her father being “a strict Confuciaist” (Choo, p42) does not believe in ghosts and the entire spirit world while she and the rest of the characters are Buddhists. Choo, cunningly constructs the afterlife based on Buddhist hell as being a temporary purgatory where ghost purge their sins before reincarnation. Daoism’s influence is also apparent in adding ten courts of judgment ruled by judges who decided the proper punishment for each spirit. (Vinczeová, 2019)

Li Lan’s father does not believe in ghosts and spirits, he forbids Amah from telling Li Lan any superstitions and horrible terrors about ghosts when she was a child. This fact is repeated many times throughout the novel “he abhorred superstitions”(Choo, p316) and always disagrees with Amah for believing too much. He cries out of despair watching Amah slapping spell papers on Li Lan’s possessed body. She does not tell her father anything about her journey in the Plains of the Dead, instead, she tells him that she recovered from brain fever.

In the Plains of the Dead, Li Lan experiences the Buddhist wheel of reincarnation when she meets the vengeful and monstrous third concubine. The third concubine is betrayed by her lover, from the Lim’s family, who, after making her pregnant, refuses to marry her and even forces her to lose her baby. Not stopping there, he actually arranges for her to marry Li Lan’s grandfather as a third concubine. Eventually, her lover leaves her for Li Lan’s mother who refuses to marry him. What makes the situation worse is that the third concubine cannot become pregnant so she starts seducing her stepson, Li Lan’s father, who refuses her again because of Li Lan’s mother. The third concubine upon realizing that Li Lan’s mother is pregnant, she tries to push her down the stairs but falls and breaks her neck instead. She haunts the house for years till she is exorcised. However, her thirst for revenge remains to the extent that she allows a demon to devour her essence in exchange for smallpox that can kill everyone in Li Lan’s family. Li Lan’s grandfather and mother did not survive. Therefore, in the Plains of the Dead, her mother lives in Lim’s family mansion. Here, Li Lan collapses:

The Lim family. All paths led back to their door. Our destinies seemed darkly tangled, and for the first time I considered the burden of the Buddhist wheel of reincarnation. Groaning beneath its weight, individual lives were forced to play out a farce time and time again.(Choo, p188)

At that moment, Li Lan wishes she were Christian because death, in Christianity, represents the final stage of the soul, unlike the continuous cycle of reincarnation of her own religion. She thinks to herself that even the Christian graveyard looks peaceful symbolizing the souls that rest in peace. Consequently, she wishes to be buried in a quiet graveyard, that is a Christian one, thinking

to herself, “when I died, I thought, I would rather rest there [Christian graveyard] undisturbed than continue like that old concubine, eaten up by her schemes of vengeance from beyond the grave.” (Choo, 2013, p188)

This binary opposition represents many literary elements all in the same time; first it draws the settings and how it changes from one belief system to the other, second it defines the characterizations of all characters in the novel that are categorized based on their religion, third it sets the atmosphere and the mode of each belief system. Finally it symbolizes the themes of the novel; the painful cycle of reincarnation, the finality of death, vengeful spirits, and karma. The elements and symbolism of each belief system serve as literary devices as well for example the wheel of reincarnation itself is a metaphor for the cyclic nature of that belief system.

1.8.Conclusion:

Following the three classifications of binary opposition makes identifying the binary opposition easier. Each type of binary opposition is crucial for deeper literary analysis of the many literary devices applied in the novel. Classifying the oppositions provides researchers with opportunities for analyzing each binary in isolation concentrating on setting, characterization, theme, and a wider range of literary devices. As researchers, this classification facilitates the process of literary analysis. Finally, the researchers recommend applying this classification to other modern representations of world mythologies.

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