

Seeing Ghosts
By Eric Lin and translated by Scott Williams

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"What women can't do, female ghosts can."

Li Ang's writing has always been extremely focused, dealing with women and sexuality, politics, and history. These concerns have animated her work since she first shocked Taiwan's literary world at the age of 17 with "Flower Season" in 1968, and she has never looked back. Some readers might think that these themes had already been explored for all they were worth, yet Li continues on as if they were virgin territory, never failing to uncover new wrinkles and complexities with which to shock and titillate her readers.

If Li usually uses her stripped-down, direct prose to shine a spotlight into the darkest corners of life and literature, then in this book she has taken flight, using a group of female ghosts to soar to unheard-of heights and beyond the constraints of time, and offering us a penetrating examination of vistas both vast and finely drawn.

Seeing Ghosts features Li's patented blend of stream of consciousness, allegory, and folk legend. Its key comes after the ghosts achieve their "revenge," when the new fate and the new physical awakening they have achieved function as a multilayered metaphor. It is the culmination of Li's life's work, a difficult book full of delightful new vistas for readers willing to work through it. If we were to nitpick for a moment, Li's efforts at reaching a new literary peak are somewhat hindered by the tendency for feminist writings to indulge in visions of a "new future."

Seeing Ghosts shows us a limited, though very imaginative, vision of the future.

Li Ang released her newest title amidst the hubbub surrounding the recent presidential elections. Long viewed as a writer with strong political views, Li Ang has never hesitated to describe her political goals in her fiction. Yet she flew to Paris a few days

before March's presidential elections to receive France's insigne de Chevalier des arts et des lettres, giving rise to much speculation.

But Li states her position clearly in the preface to *Seeing Ghosts*: "If the island loses its economic edge, and fails to develop a cultural identity, if it buries its independence and sovereignty and ceases to rely on itself, as time goes on it will again, as it did before, come to regard itself as a periphery of a larger national center, becoming just a little island in a vast sea.... Such a land of ghosts is not a nation, nor does it have its own borders. The voice with which it once spoke is not heard by the larger nation, but only outside where it is a language of ghosts, just a nonsensical murmuring of spirits."

Transgressive ghosts

We cannot help but marvel at Li's imagination and the gripping power of her allegory. She has chosen to take as her subject the most ambiguous figure in traditional Chinese fiction—the female ghost—thereby casting aside the limitations of the political subjects of her earlier works *Everyone Sticks Their Incense in the Beigang Incense Burner* and *Autobiography: A Novel*. Through the ghost, Li is able to offer more acute observations of the terrain, uncovering precisely the "fantastic" subject matter that all authors dream about and drawing from it a masterful performance.

Li uses allegory to write history, and centers her history on women. Drawing on Japanese feminist Chizuko Ueno, she writes: "As soon as a woman exceeds the limits placed upon her, she becomes a ghost. So too for a nation—once it transcends those limits, it becomes a ghost nation."

Li sets her stories in her hometown of Lukang, here appearing as the city of Lu, about which vengeful female spirits have entrenched themselves, one each to the north, south, east, and west, and another in its center. Their implacability has put them outside of the cycle of life and death—unable to be reborn, they tarry in the human world as ghosts. Over the course of time,

these ghosts have participated in and even helped to forge the island's history. In Li's work, they are not only history's authors, but its protectors.

Li places Na Tao Ji (Lin Touzi), a tragic figure in Taiwanese folklore, on the city's south side. Her story is only four pages long, but it ties the book to Taiwan's heritage.

Li's four other spirits come from different ethnic groups, regions, and backgrounds. One of them was a prostitute in life. Abused to death, she by chance becomes a spirit to whom offerings are made and of whom fortunes are requested. Another is a "two-spirited corpse"-a pregnant woman kicked to death by a man in Fujian's Quanzhou whose anger runs so deep that she is able to follow her killer all the way to Taiwan to seek her vengeance. The

third is a woman of literary talent who was forced to kill herself by absurd ideas about chastity. After her death, she begins writing a history of Taiwan.

The last is a capable woman killed for her money by her husband, an immigrant from China of dubious background who had married into her family. Determined to cross the sea to seek her vengeance, she ultimately becomes a traveling ghost haunting both sides of the Taiwan Strait. As time brings her into the modern era, she dreams of one day traveling by airplane.

Through these ghosts, Li depicts a number of opposing propositions; aggression and vengeance, repression and tolerance, resistance and collaboration, and constraints and awakenings. Perhaps the most shocking stories in this volume are "The Ghost Who Howled in the Bamboo" and "The Ghost Who Never Saw the Sky."

The howling ghost

"The Ghost Who Howled in the Bamboo" tells of immigrants, their new land, their mother country, and the complex emotions that tie the three together. The text mixes elements of rustic Taiwanese ghost stories- suspense, whispers, nudity, and vulgarity-to bring the story to repeated climaxes. Yet underneath this exciting story is layer upon layer of metaphor

and neatly structured allegory.

When the story begins, a herbalist and his family are rushing ashore after traveling from Quanzhou. The author asks repeatedly, "Why were they so obviously in a rush? Why did they make no effort to mask the terror writ large on their blanched faces. Why?"

Why? Why?

The ghost begins to make trouble as soon as they arrive. Howling and cursing from a pile of bamboo, she gives them no opportunity to hide the truth. The ghost soon possesses a female danggi, or spirit medium, who, amidst nearly hysterical crying and wailing, gradually reveals an image of a ghastly murder involving a "two-spirited corpse."

"After fleeing through night after night, abandoning the family business in China, and crossing such a broad expanse of sea before coming to Taiwan, this island adrift in the vast ocean, they had been unable to escape this 'two-spirited corpse' woman. What else could they do to exorcise her spirit?"

The story asks this question breathlessly and repeatedly, keeping the reader wondering: Who is this herbalist that came ashore so precipitously? Who is this stubborn and malicious ghost? Is the "two-spirited corpse" an oblique reference to "one country, two systems," or the prospect of a new nation? Is the description of the murder as presented by the ghost accurate, or has her perspective colored the story like What does the infant whom the herbalist promises to take back to China as an adopted child imply about this new kind of reverse immigration?

A feminist ghost

"The Ghost Who Never Saw the Sky" presents readers with yet another bizarre image.

Pursued by a man in whom she has no interest, the talented daughter of an important family throws herself into a well to escape a farcical romance. After her death, she ends up residing in a repository of Buddhist texts, where she spends her time

devouring their wisdom. Who could anticipate that she would one day discover an ancient sex manual among these classics? Suddenly enlightened about the nature of male-female relations, this extremely upstanding ghost liberates herself from the constraints placed upon women.

After working up her courage, she flies away from her home and finds herself loitering around a covered market where one "cannot see the sky." There she hears the merchants making scattered remarks about the lonely history of an island nation, and begins writing on the ceiling. "After much time had passed, her leaning head seemed to have received a large amount of invisible blood which sprayed out and fell." When attacked by the armies of the mainland court, she even uses that private place in which women conceive to absorb their cannonade. The power of her physical awakening allows the virgin ghost to forgive all.

The ghost who "doesn't see the sky" and writes Taiwan's history resembles Li herself. Li infuses her story with a great deal of history, but brings it alive through her skill as a writer, a skill that seems almost superhuman when she writes of the cannonade.

Nonetheless, at the story's climax, Li falls into the clutches of the spirits of feminist writing-by exaggerating the power of sexual awakening, the story loses its persuasive force. When she turns her lens to the conclusion, this spirit seems to jog her arm and her narrative loses focus.

Of obsessive purity and dirt

Li loves to write about sex, and is perfectly willing to be absolutely candid, writing about it in the most vulgar and direct language. In those portions of her work that deal with sexual love and even in her writing more generally, we catch glimpses of "improper" language and ideas. This is not just an element of her style, but also an effort to stir public debate. However, in so doing, she selects her readership. Guardians of public morality don't read her work; they just accept whatever they've heard about it and relegate her to the margins.

Literary critic David Wang has called Li a transgressive

sorceress of the written word: "She uses the rash words and invective that spew from our mouths to reveal thoughts and fears we are ashamed to mention." From this perspective, isn't Li's use of "rash words and invective" to discuss historical issues a means to make us see our tendency to avoid looking squarely at this island's turbid past?

Confronting Li Ang's work means confronting our own fear and vanity. So give it another look. No matter how obsessed we may be with our own purity, we cannot deny the existence of dirt. Moreover, that dirt lies thickest precisely where our darkest secrets hide.

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