

REVIEW

**FUMIKO JŌO, *PEONY LANTERN TALES: GHOSTLY ENCOUNTERS IN THE EARLY MODERN SINOSPHERE*.
HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I PRESS, 2025.
256 PP. ISBN: 9780824895754.**

Qu You’s 瞿佑 (1347–1433) collection of supernatural tales *Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話 (preface dated 1378), the title of which is translated in the volume under review as *New Tales for the Trimmed Lampwick*, is among the best-known examples of a work of Chinese fiction that circulated widely throughout the Sinosphere, undergoing extensive adaptation, rewriting, and vernacularization in each location along the way. In China the text was printed in numerous editions in spite of a measure of official opprobrium, and later writers tweaked the tales to new ends or refashioned them in other genres and registers. In Korea and Vietnam, authors such as Kim Sisŭp 金時習 (1435–1493) and Nguyễn Dữ 阮嶼 (ca. 1496–ca. 1547) modeled narratives of their own on *New Tales*, while in Japan certain stories cemented their hold in the popular imagination with the publication of Asai Ryōi’s 淺井了意 (d. 1691) *Otogibōko* 御伽婢子 (*Talisman Dolls*, 1666), a collection that was followed by numerous other adaptations in media including narrative and pictorial fiction, oral storytelling, and the popular theater.

Fumiko Jōo ranges far and wide in this stimulating study as she explores a selection of literary responses to the most famous tale in the collection: *Mudan deng ji* 牡丹燈記 (“The Story of the Peony Lantern” or “The Peony Lantern” for short). Rather than (re)trace the text’s reception history *per se*, Jōo pursues broader objectives as she examines how components of the story were recontextualized, reassembled, and reconceived in different times and places, enabling these elements to assume new significance and opening up new possibilities for literary expression. Jōo refers to this larger body of works orbiting at varying distances around the source text as “Peony Lantern stories” or “Peony Lantern tales.”

The appearance of the expansive word “Sinosphere” in the title notwithstanding, the monograph’s scope is limited to China and Japan, with the chapters alternating back and forth between the two contexts. The first two chapters center loosely on the lantern as an

object. Jōo considers the practical and metaphorical functions of lanterns as sources of illumination, as decorative or ritual objects, and for their ability to link disparate realms—light and shadow, living and dead, visible and invisible, past and present. Chapter One foregrounds questions of time, situating Qu You in the literati context of his home city, Hangzhou, and recovering the sense of loss he felt for the city's vanished glory as imperial capital prior to its fall to the Mongols in 1276. Chapter Two jumps forward to early nineteenth-century Japan, tracing a trail of complex mutual influence between fiction and the popular theater, where lanterns were important not only as a source of lighting but also as an onstage device for spectacular set pieces. Jōo argues that the peony lantern came to be ascribed new meanings that carried particular ideological weight in the context of an urbanizing, commercializing society.

Among the conventions that took root as “The Peony Lantern” was transplanted to the Japanese cultural context was the substitution of the summer Bon Festival for the early-spring Lantern Festival, a seasonal shift that resulted in an auspicious alignment with the kabuki calendar. Theaters favored supernatural subject matter during the summer—among other things, the spine-tingling material was thought to have a chilling effect on the audience—and given that famous actors were often away on summer leave, these productions relied on spectacle and special effects over raw star power. The focus on the theater steers us away from familiar, straightforward adaptations such as those of Ryōi. Jōo instead traces a fascinating cross-fertilization between narrative fiction and the popular stage that unfolded across three works by the writer Santō Kyōden 山東京傳 (1761–1816) and the playwright Tsuruya Nanboku IV 鶴屋南北 (1755–1829) that were produced in a short window of less than two years. After Kyōden published an extended narrative titled *Ukibotan zenden* 浮牡丹全傳 (*The Complete History of Embossed Peony Flowers*, 1809), Nanboku lifted certain elements for his play *Okuni gozen keshō no sugatami* 阿國御前化粧鏡 (*Lady Okuni's Makeup Mirror*), which premiered in the summer of the same year. Kyōden attended the play and was in turn moved to write a piece of pictorial fiction titled *Kabuki no hana Botan dōrō* 戲場花牡丹燈籠 (*Flowers of Kabuki: The Peony Lantern*, 1810).

Jōo jumps between these texts, illuminating, for example the use of sophisticated stagecraft and kabuki-inflected viscosity to enable multiple perspectives—both on stage and on the printed page—on the famous moment in “The Peony Lantern” when a neighbor peeps through a hole in the wall and spies the protagonist cavorting not with a flesh-and-blood woman but with her skeleton. (The inclusion of the illustration of this scene in Ryōi's *Talisman*

Dolls might have provided a valuable comparative reference point in this discussion.) A few pages later, Jōo considers another famous visual trope, that of a female ghost emerging from a lantern, providing a compelling demonstration of the status of the lantern as a link between the worlds of the dead and the living. The discussion raises obvious questions about links with the most famous deployment of this visual device, which occurs in Nanboku's *Tōkaidō Yotsuya kaidan* 東海道四谷怪談 (*Ghost Stories at Yotsuya on the Tōkaidō Highway*, premiered 1825); although *Ghost Stories at Yotsuya* is referenced in passing elsewhere, this particular lead is unfortunately not followed. Less obviously, perhaps, one wonders about possible connections between onstage magical lanterns and the projecting devices also known as magic lanterns (the word “lantern” [*tō*] describes both devices in Japanese just as it does in English), which were frequently used in performances of other sorts and occasionally found their way into kabuki productions as well.

Chapter 3 returns to the continent to examine how, in contrast to the widespread, explosive popularity of “The Peony Lantern” across Japan, interest in China was more localized, with responses taking different forms in different places. These responses transformed the meaning of the story, particularly with regard to the figure of Fu Liqing 符麗卿, the ghostly female protagonist. Ningbo editions of “The Peony Lantern” appended an ending that features an imaginary white pagoda. In addition to the associations surrounding the real-life Huxin-si temple 湖心寺, where Fu Liqing is interred in the story, the new setting served to impart associations from the famous *Baishhe zhuan* 白蛇傳 (*White Snake legend*), transforming the heroine into a seductive, demonic figure. This image then escaped its literati confines and percolated into local lore through gazetteers and other genres. In Hangzhou, by contrast, a late-Ming retelling titled *Kong Shufang shuangyu shanzhui zhuan* 孔淑芳雙魚扇墜傳 (*The Tale of Kong Shufang's Double-Fish Fan Pendant*) is seen to present a more orthodox vision of morality, transforming the male protagonist into an innocent victim and seeking at the same time to tame and control the female figure. The larger historical progression is that the initially sympathetic view of the love affair observed in literati responses to Qu You's tale gave way to responses rooted in a more strictly patriarchal worldview.

The fourth and final chapter carries the story back to Japan, where Jōo turns to the unjustly neglected figure of Arakida Reijo 荒木田麗女 (1732–1806), an eighteenth-century writer whose works include supernatural tales presented in a self-consciously archaic style (*gikobun* 擬古文) modeled after Heian-period writers such as Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (ca.973–ca.1014) and Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (ca.966–ca.1025). Reijo's *Ukigusa* 浮草 (*Floating Weeds*),

an adaptation of “The Peony Lantern” that appears in her 1778 collection *Ayashi no yogatari* 怪世談 (*Talks of the Uncanny*), adds a female perspective to the exclusively male voices examined in the preceding chapters. Reijo’s narrative complicates the status of the male and female protagonists, anonymizing them, divorcing them from a clear sense of place, and rendering their relationship a more reciprocal one. Yet the gendered elements of Reijo’s perspective cannot be completely separated from other unique and contradictory elements of her subjectivity. Certain qualities of the narrative perhaps have their origins in her upbringing as the daughter of a priest at the Ise Shrine; these include a measure of distance from conventionally Buddhist-inflected readings (and writings) of the supernatural, her stripping the narrative of symbols and devices tied to religious authority, and the absence of either punishment or salvation at the end of her tale. At the same time, the very fact that Reijo was drawn to Chinese themes and plotlines invited criticism from *kokugaku* 國學 (nativist) scholars and readers such as Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801), who might otherwise have been naturally sympathetic to her writing.

With each successive iteration of the Peony Lantern story, Jōo observes it becoming further detached from place. We move from a narrative closely bound to its setting in fourteenth-century Ningbo, through less precisely localized retellings (both in China and Japan), and finally to the generic, unmoored setting of Arakida Reijo’s version. Along the way, writers present varied visions of female sexuality and gendered norms of morality. The monograph also includes as appendices English translations of three of the primary texts: Qu You’s original tale, “The Tale of Kong Shufang’s Double-Fish Fan Pendant,” and Arakida Reijo’s “Floating Weeds.” These will serve as valuable resources in their own right to those who teach courses in Chinese and Japanese literature. The translation of Qu You’s story will facilitate comparative readings alongside Asai Ryōi’s retelling in *Talisman Dolls*, which is readily available in English translation.¹ Jōo’s translation of Reijo’s story is arguably more valuable still, constituting a welcome addition to the comparatively small amount of Edo women’s writings that are accessible in English translation. More broadly, the monograph as a whole is a worthy contribution to the growing body of Anglophone scholarship that seeks

1 See the English translation by Maryellen Toman Mori, in *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600–1900*, ed. Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

to situate premodern and early modern East Asian texts in structures of circulation, readership, and authorship that transcend modern national divisions.

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