

Article

Lady White Bone: The Making of a Monstress

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Abstract: Lady White Bone, a demon from the sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記), has grown into one of the most celebrated femme fatales in popular imagination. This paper explores the formation of this monster as a gendered skeleton and its association with the dead body. Contextualizing this character in a broadly defined genre of skeleton fantasy, I investigate her lineage in a textual network of literature and religion, focusing on *zhiguai* 志怪 (accounts of anomalies) short stories and the Buddhist meditation “White Bone Contemplation” (*baigu guan* 白骨觀), which in turn, leads to the notion of “beauty is white bone” (*meiren baigu* 美人白骨), a highly gendered rendering of the Buddhist notion “form is void” (*se ji shi kong* 色即是空). To study the creation and development of this dazzling undead is to examine how women are posed as danger in various traditions, and to understand how this character continues to fascinate readers and viewers centuries after its creation.

Keywords: Lady White Bone; Buddhist literature

In chapter 27 of *The Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記), the Monkey King fights a monster, whose gender and identity are revealed only when it is killed: a skeleton with “Lady White Bone” (*Baigu furen* 白骨夫人) carved on her spine.¹ This demon is not a particularly memorable character in the novel: craving the flesh of Tripitaka for immortality, she appears in three transformations to deceive the pilgrims—first as a young woman, then as an old lady, and finally, as an old man—but the Monkey King sees through these tricks and defeats her easily. Nevertheless, her story has captured the popular imagination and generated an endless flow of visual, theatrical, cinematic, and political adaptations and reinterpretations, particularly based on her first transformation. Today, this mediocre demon has grown into a captivating femme fatale in pictures, comic books, regional operas, TV series, films, and games. She has become one of the most celebrated monstresses in the history of Chinese fantasy fiction: scheming, commanding, and ferocious, with unparalleled seductive beauty as her disguise.

This paper explores the formation of Lady White Bone as a gendered skeleton and its association with the dead body, as emphasized in her death scene and the chapter title in the novel, in which she is referred to as a cadaver demon.² Contextualizing this character in a broadly defined genre of skeleton fantasy, I investigate her lineage in a textual network of literature and religion, focusing on *zhiguai* 志怪 (accounts of anomalies) short stories and the Buddhist meditation “White Bone Contemplation” (*baigu guan* 白骨觀), which in turn, leads to the notion of “beauty is white bone” (*meiren baigu* 美人白骨), a highly gendered rendering of the Buddhist notion “form is void” (*se ji shi kong* 色即是空). I begin with a close reading of her first transformation in the novel, then move on to the religious and fictional lineages of this dazzling undead.

1. Lady White Bone: The Cadaver Demon

The sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* never describes Lady White Bone’s looks when she is alive, but she appears as “a pile of flour-white skeletal bones” (*yidui fen kulou* 一堆粉骷髏) upon her death, at which Tripitaka cries out, “This person has just died. How could she change all at once into a skeleton?”³ To foreshadow this shocking result, however, the narrative repeatedly associates her with the dead body throughout the



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chapter: she is referred to as the cadaver demon (*shimo* 屍魔) in the chapter title; she uses the magic called “Releasing the Corpse” (*jieshi fa* 解屍法) twice;⁴ twice; when she escapes from the Monkey King, she leaves a fake corpse on the ground; and when he finally kills her, the Monkey King explains to Tripitaka, “She is a demonic and pernicious cadaver, out to seduce and harm people. When she was killed by me, she revealed her true form” 他是個潛靈作怪的僵尸，在此迷人敗本，被我打殺，他就現了本相。⁵ In the physical world, when a cadaver decays, it loses its flesh and turns into a skeleton. This natural order is dramatized in the story of Lady White Bone.

As Monkey points out, this cadaver/skeleton is “out to seduce and harm people.” This process is emphasized in her transformation into a charming young woman “with a face like the moon and features like flowers. One cannot begin to describe the bright eyes and the elegant brows, the white teeth and the red lips.”⁶ The message is clear: beautiful women are cadavers/skeletons in disguise, to tempt men off their path and lead them to their death. To accentuate the seductive power, the narrative highlights her attractiveness in three passages. The first example is a poem describing the young woman moving toward Tripitaka:

The sage monk resting his horse on the cliff	聖僧歇馬在山岩
Saw all at once a young girl drawing near:	忽見裙衩女近前
Slender hands hugged by gently swaying green sleeves;	翠袖輕搖籠玉筍
Tiny feet exposed beneath a skirt of Hunan silk.	湘裙斜拽顯金蓮
Perspiring her face seemed flower bedewed;	汗流粉面花含露
Dust grazed her moth-brows like willows held by mist.	塵拂峨眉柳帶煙
And as he stared intently with his eyes,	仔細定睛觀看處
She seemed to be walking right up to his side.	看看行至到身邊 ⁷

The second and third couplets are close-ups on the woman’s body as seen through Tripitaka’s eyes: her hands/fingers and feet are described using sensual euphemisms (*yusun* 玉筍, jade-like bamboo shoots, and *jinlian* 金蓮, golden lotus); her face is compared to a flower and her eyebrows to willows, both familiar tropes for women’s beauty. These attractive body parts are moving closer and closer to Tripitaka, luring him into her trap. Fortunately, he is somewhat cautious. Although he does not know that this woman is actually a walking cadaver, he wonders why she would show up in the wilderness without company and declines to eat the food she offers. His disciple, Pigsy, however, has no sense of danger and reacts to this woman with abandon. The second verse describes her through his eyes:

Ice-white skin hides jadelike bones;	冰肌藏玉骨
Her collar reveals a milk-white bosom.	衫領露酥胸
Willow brows gather dark green hues;	柳眉積翠黛
Almond eyes shine like silver stars.	杏眼閃銀星
Her features like the moon are coy;	月樣容儀俏
Her natural disposition is pure.	天然性格清
Her body’s like the willow-nested swallow;	體似燕藏柳
Her voice’s like the woods’ singing oriole.	聲如鶯囀林
A half-opened [<i>haitang</i>] caressed by the morning sun.	半放海棠籠曉日
A newly bloomed peony displaying her charm.	才開芍藥弄春情 ⁸

The language of this poem is much more explicit than that of the first one. The opening couplet asserts a physical urge with vocabulary such as “skin,” “reveals,” and “milk-white bosom.” “Swallow” (compared to her body) and “oriole” (compared to her voice) are standard references to concubine and prostitute (*yingying yanyan* 鶯鶯燕燕), and the blooming *haitang* flowers and peony are unmistakably erotic here. The last word, *chunqing*, or “spring sentiment,” is a euphemism for sexual desire. This poem brings out Pigsy’s lustful nature.

Submitting to desire, he turns into an absolute idiot (as he is often called by the narrator), completely unaware of the threat.

In this episode, the Monkey King is the only one who sees the truth and is not tempted, but his verbal response to the situation also emphasizes how a woman's beauty can destroy a man:

"Master," said [the Monkey] Pilgrim, "I think I know what's happening. Your worldly mind must have been aroused by the sight of this woman's beauty. If you do have the desire, why not ask [Piggy] Eight Rules to cut some timber and Sha Monk to find us some grass. I'll be the carpenter and build you a little hut right here where you can consummate the affair with her. We can each go our own way then. Wouldn't that be the thing to do? Why bother to undertake such a long journey to fetch the scriptures?"⁹

After the Monkey King explains the consequences when one gives in to desire, Tripitaka's response shows that he is indeed tempted: "The elder, you see, was a rather tame and gentle person. He was so embarrassed by these few words that his whole bald head turned red from ear to ear."¹⁰ If even the sage monk is shaken, how can ordinary men escape the trap set by the walking cadaver? Herein lies the horror embedded in a woman's beauty: it tricks men, luring them away from their journey to become enlightened beings and making them food for man-eaters.

It is in this particular disguise that Lady White Bone's face and body have been featured in the popular imagination. In visual and performative representations, she is always portrayed as a beautiful woman who can transform into an old lady and an old man. Her seductive power is often translated and amplified as magical martial skills and dark sorcery, which she uses to combat the Monkey King. In the 2016 Hong Kong film *The Monkey King 2*,¹¹ for example, Lady White Bone is played by the actress Gong Li, whose makeup and costume amplify seduction and denote destruction. She is not only a grand shape-shifter (she transforms into a larger-than-life skeleton fighting with supernatural powers), but also a fierce commander of a skeleton army, by which the Monkey King is almost defeated.

Nevertheless, this notion of a beautiful woman as skeleton/cadaver demon is not an invention of *Journey to the West*, but comes from long traditions in religion and in literature. In the following, I will turn to Lady White Bone's roots in Buddhism, then to *zhiguai* fiction.

2. White Bone Contemplation

Early Indian Buddhist literature takes very strong stands on the human body. It is considered both erotic and revolting at the same time. The living body is comparable to a corpse because they both emit foulness in their natural states. Hence, pursuing sexual gratification is utterly perverse.¹²

Theoretically, this notion of the body applies to both men and women. In writing and in practice, however, it is almost always the male viewer observing women as walking cadavers, whose flesh tempts, obstructs, and destroys men's paths to abstinence and enlightenment.¹³ Stories told from this perspective can be found in many early canons. One such account says that Gotama, right before he renounces the world and becomes Buddha, wakes up in the middle of the night in the women's apartments. The saliva dripping from the half-open mouths of his sleeping consorts and their stiff postures remind him of corpses in the burial ground. This vision of the harem as a charnel field agitates Gotama so much that he leaves home immediately to seek an alternative path.¹⁴

This view of the human body is closely linked to the rise of the Nine Form Contemplation (*jiuxiang guan* 九相觀, also known as Nine Perception Contemplation [*jiuxiang guan* 九想觀]) and Foulness Contemplation (*bujing guan* 不淨觀)—which is often referred to as White Bone Contemplation (*baigu guan* 白骨觀) in Chinese sources.¹⁵ These meditations are interrelated and similar in nature. Focusing on the notion of impurity, they aim to disenchant the practitioner in regards to the physical form and to cut off sensual craving. They

have been part of the Chinese Buddhist meditation since the medieval period,¹⁶ appearing not only in Buddhist scriptures, but also in literature¹⁷ and in visual genres.¹⁸

In Nine Form Contemplation, the practitioner either observes or visualizes the nine stages of decay of a corpse, from its discoloration in the beginning to the burned ashes at the end. Descriptions of these nine stages appear with slight variations in Buddhist scriptures.¹⁹ In *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom) (*juan* 卷 21), the Nine Forms are defined as 1. Swelling (*zhang xiang* 脹相), 2. Decaying (*huai xiang* 壞相), 3. Besmearing of blood (*xietu xiang* 血塗相), 4. Pus and decomposition (*nonglan xiang* 膿爛相), 5. Bluish stasis of blood (*qing xiang* 青相), 6. Being devoured (*dan xiang* 噉相), 7. Scattering (*san xiang* 散相), 8. Bones (*gu xiang* 骨相), and 9. Burning (*shao xiang* 燒相). Following this sequence, the practitioner visualizes these nine stages of the human body after death: the skin bloats and decays; the blood and flesh turn blue and become pus; the corpse deteriorates and is eaten by worms, birds, and animals; the remains are scattered; and there are only bones left. In the end, even the bones are burned, and the human body is reduced to ashes.

Visualizing this appalling process is meant to repel all forms of physical attachment and desire, and envisioning the corpse of a beautiful woman undergoing these nine forms of decay is most violent, disturbing, and alarming. Thus, narrative images portraying this deterioration (“Painting of Nine Forms,” *Jiuxiang tu* 九相圖) often focus on women. This form of representation became a significant visual genre in Japan.²⁰ The most notable examples are the scrolls thought to portray Empress Danrin (786–850) in the nine stages of decay: although the historical empress received a funeral and was buried, the legend states that, following her wish, her body was left in the open for people to contemplate on the impermanence of beauty and the repugnance of decomposition.²¹

In any case, among the Nine Forms, the “bone” phase became the prominent form in Chinese expressions (thus the term “White Bone Contemplation”)²² and led to the idea that “beauty is white bone” (*meiren baigu*): while beauty/living is illusory, the skeleton/death is the truth. “Beauty is white bone” has been a familiar topic in Chinese literature and culture since the medieval period. Huang Tingjian’s 黃庭堅 (1045–1105) poem “Ode to Skeleton” (*Dulou song* 髑髏頌) is often quoted:

The desiccated skeleton in the yellow sand	黃沙枯髑髏
was a face of peach and plum blossom fair.	本是桃李面
Now I can’t bear to look at	如今不忍看
What I longed for back then.	當時恨不見
The karmic winds are drumming.	業風相鼓擊
The beautiful eyes were smiling.	美目巧笑倩
No feet and no eyes,	無脚又無眼
[Beauty and skeleton] join together and become one.	著便成一片 ²³

Another interesting example is Rao Jie’s 饒節 (1065–1129) “On the [White] Bone Contemplation Painting” (*Ti guguan hua* 題骨觀畫), which attests to the existence of a visual representation that is currently lost:

The slender white bone cleverly paints her eyebrows.	白骨纖纖巧畫眉
The delicate skeleton wears a silk robe.	髑髏楚楚被羅衣
Holding the round silk fans, facing each other in vain,	手持紈扇空相對
Unaware that they made viewers laugh to death.	笑殺傍觀自不知 ²⁴

The first poem in Fang Hui’s 方回 (1227–1307) “Remembering My [Upbringing] 憶我” includes these lines that directly relate “beauty is white bone” to the Buddhist notion of void:

The pink powdered face in the past	向之紅粉面
Has become a dry skeleton where the ants nest.	蟻穴髑髏枯

Thereupon we know that in the universe
Myriads of things are all void.

乃知宇宙內
萬有皆空虛²⁵

The most celebrated example of “beauty is white bone,” of course, is the Jia Rui episode in *The Story of the Stone* (*Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢), chapters 11–12: to cure his lovesickness, a Daoist gives Jia Rui a magic mirror that shows a beautiful woman (Wang Xifeng, his object of desire) on one side and a horrifying skeleton on the other side. Jia Rui is instructed NOT to look at the beauty, which is illusory, but to look at the skeleton, which is true. But he cannot help himself. After a few sexual encounters with the beauty in the mirror, his lust leads to his death caused by over ejaculation. This cautionary tale serves as a point of contrast in the full-length novel: while woman is simplified and projected as temptation that leads to death in the Jia Rui story, in the case of Jia Baoyu (the protagonist) we see how women complicate the young man’s passage in body and mind.

In the poems quoted above, “beauty is white bone” mainly refers to the impermanence of human existence; while Huang Tingjian’s work laments the loss of beauty, Rao Jie’s mocks women’s own blind fascination with their appearance, and Fang Hui’s lines bring the notion back to its foundation, that everything in the world is void. In other words, “beauty is white bone” is alarming, not harming. Yet, in the Jia Rui story, “beauty is white bone” becomes a death trap: the opportunity to look into the right side of the mirror is never an actual choice for the man because the temptation is too powerful and beyond control. Nevertheless, Jia Rui dies in his own sexual fantasy; the skeleton in the mirror never steps out to kill him. To find women who are indeed walking skeletons out to destroy men with their magic, we must look into *zhiguai* fiction.

3. Skeletons in *Zhiguai* Stories

A study of the skeleton in the Chinese narrative tradition should begin with the famous chapter “Perfect Happiness 至樂篇” in *Zhuangzi*, which can be traced back to the third century BC. In this tale, Zhuangzi encounters a skull abandoned on the roadside. He asks the skull what causes his state of misery: a human error, the destruction of the state, a crime, an illness, or simply the passing of time? The skull answers that those are the troubles of the living, and being dead brings more pleasure than being a king. When Zhuangzi offers to resurrect the skull, the latter refuses without thinking.²⁶

Dialogue between the dead and the living is a theme that can be found in the early literature of Eurasia and northern Africa, but most of these works emphasize the dark side of death and the glory of living.²⁷ This skull in *Zhuangzi*, however, argues the controversial opposite: living is full of trouble; death frees one from social hierarchy and difficult times caused by nature. This dramatized exchange set a rich literary tradition in motion, with adaptations and reinterpretations in the forms of rhapsody (*fu* 賦), narrative *daoqing* 道情, *zaju* 雜劇 play, youth book (*zidi shu* 子弟書), precious scroll (*baojuan* 寶卷), and even a modern parody by Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936).²⁸ In this body of work, while the rhapsodies largely follow the skull’s original claim that being dead is better than being alive, in the later texts, the skull is often re-envisioned as a skeleton, who is reluctantly resurrected by Zhuangzi and refuses to be enlightened, an interesting contrast to the Zhuangzi in the original story, who does not understand the skull’s view at all.

Zhuangzi’s skull is eccentric, but far from wicked. He is a rhetorician (just like what he calls Zhuangzi in the tale) who can be comfortably used as a headrest (as Zhuangzi does with a hint of humor). Except for the ability to think and talk, he has no magical power. He is a dead man without a body: his vocabulary and concerns clearly reflect his gender role, and he has no response to Zhuangzi’s question on bodily sensations, such as cold and hunger. Thus, even though they are the same species, the skull in *Zhuangzi* and Lady White Bone belong to two separate traditions, providing contrasts rather than similarities. To find Lady White Bone’s kin, we must look outside of the *Zhuangzi* framework.²⁹

The *zhiguai* genre is where skeletons of her sort reside. Just like other denizens of the supernatural world, skeletons appear in both genders, and *biji* 筆記 (random notes)

anecdotes provide many interesting examples. Female skeletons are captivating *Others*, like fox spirits, the popular shapeshifters in Chinese supernatural narratives: they often show up as gorgeous women, fulfilling men's desires and departing (or destroyed) when their true forms are discovered. Some skeletons are benign, such as the one depicted in "Jin Youzhang 金友章" in the "Monsters" (Yaoguai 妖怪) section of *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* (*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記). In this tale, Jin lives in the mountains and sees a beautiful woman drawing water from a nearby stream every day. She accepts his invitation to visit and eventually becomes his wife. They have a good marriage until one evening when she asks him not to light the candle at bedtime. When he does and finds a skeleton under the comforter, he heaves a long sigh and covers her up. When she wakes up, she explains that she is the spirit of the dried bones on the southern side of the hill, and the ghost king is punishing her for missing six months of audiences. She urges him to leave the mountains; then, she disappears, and he also leaves in sadness.³⁰ Loving, tender, and respectful, the skeleton is an ideal wife to the diligent young man: "Youzhang studied every evening, often till midnight. His wife often sat and kept him company" 友章每夜讀書，常至宵分，妻常坐伴之。³¹ The turning point, when he violates the trust and uncovers her identity in her sleep, echoes the moment when Psyche brings a lamp and sees Cupid in sleep in Greek mythology. While Psyche is struck by the beauty of her husband, Jin Youzhang faces the horrifying fact that his wife is a skeleton. Interestingly, he is not scared and reacts with sympathy. Unfortunately, unlike for Psyche, who reunites with her husband after grueling trials, learning the truth ends Jin Youzhang's marriage. The boundary between humans and *Others* is maintained after a short transgression.³²

Most female skeletons, however, are terrifying and malicious. "The Story of the Peony Lamp" (Mudan deng ji 牡丹燈記) in Qu You's 瞿佑 (1347–1433) *New Tales Told Beside the Trimmed Lamp* (*Jiandeng xinhua* 剪燈新話), begins with a student encountering a beauty at the Lantern Festival. She follows him home and starts to visit him every evening. When his suspicious neighbor peeps through a hole in the wall, he sees a skeleton sitting next to the student. Terrified, the neighbor persuades the student to investigate, and they find a coffin in a temple with the woman's name on it. The student is able to stay away with the help of a Daoist, but when he forgets the Daoist's instructions, she finds him and drags him into her coffin and makes him a fellow monster. They cause trouble together till another Daoist arrests them with his magic.³³ In this tale, the narrator calls the skeleton "fen kulou 粉骷髏" (powdered/pink/white skeleton). This term is used in chapter 27 and chapters 54–55 of *Journey to the West*, referring to the dead body of Lady White Bone and the Queen of the Women's Kingdom (*nü'er guo* 女兒國), a clear reference to the trope "beauty is white bone." Nonetheless, the setup in this tale is very common in skeleton stories: while the protagonist is blinded by the physical beauty, the third party sees the terrifying truth. This structure is a standard in *Journey to the West* when the pilgrims encounter monstresses: when Tripitaka (and Piggy) see(s) an attractive young woman, the Monkey King sees a fiend.³⁴

The skeleton in "Shao Tingquan 邵廷銓"³⁵ in Hebang'e's 和邦額 (1736–?) *Yetan suilu* 夜譚隨錄 is described with stark imagery. Appearing as a gorgeous woman, the skeleton initially responds to Shao's pursuit with stern rejection but begins to visit him nightly, reminiscent of the famous Tang tale "The Story of Yingying" (*Yingying zhuan* 鶯鶯傳). However, Shao's page boy "saw Tingquan in bed, embracing a skeleton dressed in red and flirting under the lamp. The skeleton also embraced Tingquan back, being coy in a hideous manner" 則見廷銓於床上，擁一紅衣骷髏，戲謔燈下。骷髏亦擁廷銓，儻倖作態。³⁶ After learning from the boy's report, Shao's friends try to warn him. At a meal, they look at the leftover bones of a soft-shelled *bie* turtle and ask what is so charming about the bones without flesh, and Shao replies that seeing the skeleton of a steed is worth a thousand gold pieces because seeing the bones is like seeing the horse. Since Shao is spellbound, his friends work with his father, find the skeleton's coffin, and burn it, and Shao finally wakes up to the truth and turns his attention to his official career, a common ending in tales portraying passages of young men. The story ends with a commentary by a certain Mr. Lanyan 蘭岩:

Embracing the skeleton as a gorgeous woman—aren't there many men like this in the world? They only feel the beauty and yet don't know the vice. Alas! The delicate moth brows and white teeth turn to void in a glance. Among the broken ridges and in the wilderness, fixated thoughts couldn't be set off. Can the passionate people in the world liberate themselves? Causing herself the calamity of crushed bones and smashed body for one night's pleasure, this woman was also unwise!

擁骷髏而為佳麗，世間寧少此人哉？但只覺其美，而不知其惡耳。嗟乎！蛾眉皓齒，轉盼成空；斷隴荒郊，凝思莫釋。天壤間癡情人能自解哉？一夕歡娛，釀成粉骨碎身之禍，此女亦不智矣！³⁷

Instead of condemning the paranormal Other, the commentary mocks the blindness of men and the danger of passion, and calls the woman “unwise” to bring herself disaster for one night's pleasure. The phrase “crushed bones and smashed body” is an idiom exaggerating a horrible death, but in this tale, it becomes literal.

In some stories, the men do face the truth. In “Student Chen Made an Effort to Enter the Academy 陳生發憤入詞林,” in Yu Yue's 俞樾 (1821–1906?) *Youtai xianguan biji* 右台仙館筆記,³⁸ a young man sees a beauty dressed in green. He follows her home and spends the night there. When he wakes up in the morning, he finds himself in a burial ground: “the bones of jade and flesh of ice were still in his embrace, but when he looked closely, it was a dry skeleton” 玉骨冰肌，儼然在抱，審視之，乃枯骸一具也。³⁹ “Bones of jade and flesh of ice” is a commonly used idiom to describe the body of a beautiful woman, but here it becomes an ironic contrast to the dry bones of the long dead. The student is horrified and becomes sick, but this incident makes him change his questionable behaviors, and he eventually succeeds in the civil examination, just as Shao Tingquan does in the previous tale.

In any case, men waking up in the cemetery can be found in many *zhiguai* stories: after going home and spending an amazing time with the stunning beauties, these men wake up physically and metaphorically, recognizing the truth that the beauty is a horrific creature (skeleton, ghost, animal spirit, and others) luring them into the burial ground. In *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (*In Search of the Supernatural*), *juan* 18, a fox spirit named Azi 阿紫 transforms into a beauty and a man follows her home. He stays with her for an extended period before he is found in an empty grave, looking and acting like a fox. It takes him more than ten days to recover and explain his story.⁴⁰ In *Taiping guangji* (Gui 鬼18), Pei Hui 裴徽 follows a beautiful woman to her luxurious home. While he enjoys the visit, the magic sword he carries starts to glow, and suddenly, the house and its residents all disappear, and Pei finds himself in a lone tomb surrounded by thorny shrubs.⁴¹ In this framework, the woman is not only associated with monstrosity, but is also compared with a dead body in the burial ground, as emphasized in early Buddhism. Herein, we see the kin of Lady White Bone as a cadaver demon: a charming dead body that brings men to their graves.

4. Afterthoughts: A Monstress Still in the Making

In *Journey to the West*, the pilgrims are destined to undergo eighty-one calamities, and Lady White Bone is the first ordeal brought on by a female monster on the road. It is significant that this trial is the literal embodiment of “beauty is white bone.” While Tripitaka and Pigsy are tempted and shaken, the Monkey King sees through the skeleton's tricks and kills her without much effort. Yet, as a result, Monkey is banished by his master, who is stirred by Pigsy's slander that the true form of the monster is an illusion created by Monkey to avoid punishment for killing three innocent people. Without Monkey, the group quickly falls into trouble, the journey cannot move forward, and Pigsy has to convince Monkey to return after facing chaos he cannot handle. In short, Lady White Bone fulfills the Buddhist warning that women are walking cadavers that obstruct men's paths to enlightenment. This chapter of the novel, therefore, can be read as a cautionary tale.

Indeed, Lady White Bone's character can be traced back to various sources; her family tree includes numerous components, from early Buddhist texts to late imperial Chinese fiction. Most of these sources are cautionary in nature: beautiful women are erotic, dangerous, and deadly; men must see this truth to save themselves. This warning is heightened in Lady White Bone's first transformation, in which the reader sees clearly that the attractive woman is a demon who plans to turn Tripitaka's body into her food.

It is this particular image that strikes the popular imagination. Lady White Bone continues to evolve after the sixteenth-century novel: in pictures, on stage, and on screen, as the beauty and as the monstress. She is often envisioned as a dazzling femme fatale in modern and contemporary mediation, and her story is turned into spectacles of theatricality, celebrity culture, and technology. Productions bearing the title "Sun Wukong san da Baigu jing 孫悟空三打白骨精" (The Monkey King Thrice Beats Lady White Bone) incessantly appear as postal stamps, picture books, regional operas, films, television high-lights, and video games, among other genres.⁴² In this capacity, she continues to lure not only men, as a dangerous monstress, but also readers and viewers as a fascinating character. The making of Lady White Bone thus carries on, as she never ceases to transform in our fantasy.

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Notes

- ¹ The monster is only referred to in gender-neutral terms, such as the fiend/demon/monster (*yao* 妖/*yaojing* 妖精/*guai* 怪/*guaiwu* 怪物/*yaoguai* 妖怪) in the chapter, and the third-person pronoun *ta* 他 was not gender specific when the novel was written.
- ² "The Cadaver Demon three times mocks Tripitaka Tang; In spite the holy monk banishes the Handsome Monkey King 屍魔三戲唐三藏，聖僧恨逐美猴王." (Wu 1999, p. 318; 2012, p. 15).
- ³ (Wu 1999, p. 327; 2012, p. 29).
- ⁴ According to Anthony Yu, "*jieshi fa* 解屍法," the magic of Releasing the Corpse, is an inversion of the common Daoist term *shijie* 屍解, "Liberation through the Corpse," or "Deliverance from the Corpse." (Wu 2012, p. 420, note 3).
- ⁵ (Wu 1999, p. 327; 2012, p. 29).
- ⁶ (Wu 1999, pp. 319–20; 2012, p. 19).
- ⁷ (Wu 1999, p. 320; 2012, p. 20).
- ⁸ (Ibid.).
- ⁹ (Wu 1999, p. 322; 2012, p. 23).
- ¹⁰ (Ibid.).
- ¹¹ Aka "Sun Wukong san da Baigu jing 孫悟空三打白骨精", directed by Zheng Baorui 鄭保瑞.
- ¹² (Wilson 1996, pp. 57–62).
- ¹³ (Wilson 1996, pp. 3–5).
- ¹⁴ (Wilson 1996, p. 2).
- ¹⁵ (Greene 2021, pp. 26–27).
- ¹⁶ (Bianchi 2021, p. 903).
- ¹⁷ For example, Monk Konghai's 空海 (Kūkai in Japanese, 774–835) "Poems on Nine Forms" (Jiuxiang shi 九相詩). Cf. (Zheng 2002; Xiao 2012).
- ¹⁸ (Greene 2013; Mohr 2009).
- ¹⁹ (Shi 2002).
- ²⁰ (Kanda 2005; Kaminishi 2011; Xiao 2012).
- ²¹ (Kanda 2005, p. 34).
- ²² (Greene 2021, p. 27).

- ²³ (Fu 1998, p. 11714). Huang Tingjian's poem is almost identical to Su Shi's 蘇軾 (1037–1101) "On Skeleton" (Dulou zan 髑髏贊). Su Shi's poem is not included in *Quan Song shi*, but can be found in (Fu and Mu 2000, p. 1050).
- ²⁴ (Fu 1998, p. 14599).
- ²⁵ (Fu 1998, p. 41505).
- ²⁶ (Guo 1961, pp. 617–19; Zhuangzi 2003, pp. 116–17).
- ²⁷ (Idema 2014, pp. 8–9).
- ²⁸ Idema's volume cited above is the most comprehensive study of this tradition in English scholarship.
- ²⁹ I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewer who suggested including a discussion on early Quanzhen 全真 Daoism. The use of skeleton imagery in Quanzhen teachings is an important branch in the development of the Zhuangzi tale (cf. Idema 2014, pp. 14–22). It is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will be mindful of this as I continue to work on the genealogy of Lady White Bone.
- ³⁰ (Li 1961, pp. 2895–96).
- ³¹ (Li 1961, p. 2895).
- ³² Transgression of boundaries is a common theme in fox spirit stories. Cf. (Huntington 2003).
- ³³ (Qu 1994, pp. 103–16).
- ³⁴ See the case of the Spider Spirits (chapter 72) and the Mouse Spirit (chapter 80).
- ³⁵ (Hebang'e 1988, pp. 27–30).
- ³⁶ (Hebang'e 1988, p. 28).
- ³⁷ (Hebang'e 1988, p. 30).
- ³⁸ (Yu 1910, juan 11, 1b–2a).
- ³⁹ (Yu 1910, 2a).
- ⁴⁰ (Gan 1959, p. 123).
- ⁴¹ (Li 1961, p. 2646).
- ⁴² (Sun 2018, pp. 86–88; Wagner 1990, pp. 139–235).

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