EMGT 1510-207: Concerning Ghosts / Fall 2019 Session 2

Jack W. Chen / Associate Professor of Chinese Literature

Mondays and Wednesdays 6:30–7:45 / Monroe 134

Office Hours: MTWR 5:15–6:15, New Cabell Hall B-059 or by appointment.

Course Description

Do you believe in ghosts? Or rather: What does it mean to believe in ghosts? What are ghosts as objects of belief and why are they confined to the framework of belief, as opposed to knowledge? If one could “know” ghosts, how would one prove their existence—and what would proof or evidence mean in these contexts? At the same time, ghosts exist, at least in stories told across many cultures in the world and over the long histories of these cultures. And, to be sure, the representation of ghosts differs across these cultures and time spans, in ways that are often dependent on historical contexts, cultural understandings, and belief systems. For some cultures, the ghost is an unwanted guest, but for others, the ghost is connected by kinship and owed certain services and dignities; and in some periods, the ghost speaks to (and for) larger religious frameworks, while for others, the ghost is a malevolent force unmoored from all logics.

This course will take up the problem of the ghost from a variety of perspectives—aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and empirical—though we will be grounded in ghostly representations in literature and film. As a class, we will read ghost stories, watch ghost films, and even participate in a ghost tour (and consider the critiques of such tours). Much of our work will begin with the question of how to think critically about cultural texts, whether these are literary works, films, philosophical writings, religious texts, or folkloric tales, and to be able to read these in a rigorously analytic manner. We will also discuss what the ghost represents in its specific cultural locus and historical moment, how the ghost complicates the boundaries of the living and the dead, what we owe to ghosts (if anything), what it means to be haunted, what evidence there is for the existence of ghosts, how we recognize a ghost, and above all, why there should be ghosts in the first place?

Learning Objectives

1. To be able to think and read critically across a variety of genres (fiction, film, drama, folklore, criticism).

2. To become aware of how ghost stories inform our cultures and histories.

3. To reflect on the historical, geographical, and cultural differences that shape how we imagine the boundaries between life and death.

3. To respond to and take stock of the ethical dimensions of ghost stories, and what ghost stories might tell us about moral understanding in our cultures.

4. To consider why we might choose to believe in something for which we have limited empirical evidence and what standards of evidence are.

5. To learn to express these thoughts in writing, and to consider how our thoughts and beliefs might change as we learn more about a subject.

Assessment Criteria

1. Attendance 10%

2. In-Class Journal Writing 50%

3. Final Project 30%

4. Lab Work 10%

**Attendance** is mandatory, given how little time we have together. Of course, we all get sick, and if you do get sick, everyone will appreciate you not getting your classmates (and me) sick. I do expect that if you miss class, you first try to get notes from a classmate and do the readings and write your journal entry **before** you come to my office hours and discuss what you’ve missed. Office hours are not a replacement for attending class!

**Journal writing** will constitute half of your grade. I will provide you all with journals at the start of the term. You will begin journal entries in classon meeting days that have the asterisked “**In-class writing**” and finish afterwards if necessary.Each evening (or before 12 noon on the next day), please upload these to Collab Assignments. I will assign your entries grades of 5 (entry complete), 3 (entry partially completed or minimal effort shown), or 0 (entry not completed). There is no make-up for this assignment.

**Final** **projects** should be developed over the course of the term and may take the form of short stories, comic books, paintings, sketchbooks, videos, podcasts, analytic papers—really, whatever medium you prefer to work in, as long as it builds out of our coursework. You should take into consideration, however, the truncated nature of the term and how much time will be required for certain media forms. More information on the final project will be provided after the second week of class.

**Required Books:**

Colin Dickey, *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (New York: Plume, 1990).

All other readings will be available as PDFs on the Collab Course site.

**Week One. Defining ghosts**

**Meeting 1.** Monday, October 21. Introductions

**Film:** Andy Muschietti and Barbara Muschietti, “Mamá” (2008). Screened in class.

**Reading:** <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/#ghosts-fortunetellers-and-communicating-with-the-dead>

**Discussion:** We will talk about our favorite ghost stories, whether any of us have had experiences with ghosts or heard secondhand of personal ghost encounters, and what it means to believe in ghosts in different cultural frameworks. We will spend some time trying to come up with a working definition for “ghost.”

**\*In-class writing 1:** Reflection on ghosts to begin your journal.

**Meeting 2.** Wednesday, October 23. Local Ghosts

**Discussion:** We will discuss the structure of nonfiction reportage about ghosts, with attention to issues of race, class, and Southern history. Each group will present one story and discuss.

**Readings**:

1. Colin Dickey, “A Devilish Place (Richmond, VA),” *Ghostland*,pp. 103–17.

2. Selections from Marguerite Dupont Lee, *Virginia Ghosts*: “The Little Gray Lady,” pp. 51–56; “Ash Lawn,” pp. 143–44; “Castle Hill,” pp. 19–22; “Green View,” pp. 139–40; “Kinloch,” pp. 119–21; “The McChesney Ghost,” pp. 135–38; “Federal Hill,” pp. 69–71; “At the Priest’s Field,” pp. 89–94. COLLAB.

**\*In-class writing 2:** Reflection on ghosts in Virginia.

**Week Two. Hauntings**

**Meeting 3.** Monday, October 28. The Uncanniness of Ghosts

**Readings**:

1. Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny.” Skim p. 1, but read marked passages on pp. 2, 3, 8, 9–10. COLLAB.

2. Dickey, Introduction to Part I: “The Unhomely,” *Ghostland*, pp. 15–20.

**Film:** M. Knight Shyamalan, *The Sixth Sense* (1999). This must be viewed prior to the meeting.

**Discussion:** We will consider what it means to be haunted, the notion of the uncanny, how film represents both the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the idea of the twist ending.

**\*In-class writing 3:** Reflection on the uncanny, *The Sixth Sense*.

**Meeting 4.** Wednesday, October 30. Haunted UVA

**Reading:** from Lisa Morton, *Ghosts: A Haunted History*, Ch. 6: “The Quest for Evidence”

**Activity:** We will divide into three groups and explore three sites across Grounds: Peabody Hall (Lecture Room), and Alderman Library (Stacks and Garnett Room). We will also spend some time with the official Hasbro Ouija Board.

**Week Three. Hauntings, continued**

**Meeting 5.** Monday, November 4. Haunted Houses, continued

**Reading:** Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), pp. 1–93.

**Discussion:** Focusing on Shirley Jackson’s short novel, we will examine how characters are established, the reliability of narrators, what it means to possess or own a space, and how ghosts are represented in literary fiction (as opposed to nonfictional reportage).

**\*In-class writing 4:** Reflection on *Haunting of Hill House*.

**Meeting 6.** Thursday, November 7. Haunted Houses, continued

**Reading:** Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), pp. 93–182 (end).

**Discussion:** We will finish our discussion of Shirley Jackson, reflecting on possession (in both senses), gender roles, narrative consciousness, and the question of what *exactly* happened.

**Final Project Handout and Discussion**: I will provide a handout detailing the parameters of your final project. Ten minutes will be used for brainstorming about your project.

**Week Four. Bad Hosts and Uninvited Guests**

**Meeting 7.** Monday, November 11. Toxic Fathers and Haunted Hotels

**Reading:** Dickey, Introduction to Part II: After Hours,” *Ghostland*, pp. 93–101.

**Film:** Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining* (1980).

**Discussion:** We will consider how representations of childhood, masculinity, abusive behavior, and madness inform this reimagining of Stephen King’s classic novel, set in the emptied out and defamiliarized space of a hotel in the off-season. (Note that I am not asking you to read King’s novel, which is very different from Kubrick’s film and too long for a seven week course).

**\*In-class writing 5:** Reflection on *The Shining*.

**Meeting 8.** Wednesday, November 13. The Problem of Home Ownership

**Reading**: Excerpt from Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (1993). COLLAB.

**Film:** Alejandro Amenábar, *The Others* (2001)

**Discussion:** Homes are rarely ever only our homes; homes have pasts and futures that we are often rarely aware of. We will conclude our discussion of home ownership and difficult guests with a film that complicates narrative perspective and emplotment.

**Final Project:** Please bring a one paragraph proposal describing your final project idea; we will spend ten minutes in groups discussing your final projects.

**Week 5. Ghosts, Race, and Gender**

**Meeting 9.** Monday, November 18. Slavery and Family Histories

**Reading:** August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (1990).

**Discussion:** Following from the discussion of haunted houses, we will turn to the haunted legacies of slavery, property, and family in this play set in post-Depression 1936 Pittsburgh. We will consider what the ghost of the slave-owner Sutter represents and what it means for Sutter’s ghost to haunt an African-American family caught between the past and the future.

**\*In-class writing 6:** Reflection on *The Piano Lesson*.

**Meeting 10.** Wednesday, November 20. Ghostly Lovers

**Readings:** “The Magic Sword and the Magic Bag,” pp. 168–79; “Lotus Fragrance,” pp. 211–28; “Silkworm,” pp. 238–49; all from Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. COLLAB.

**Discussion:** East Asian ghosts are predominantly female and more often than not interested in seducing young male scholars. (the exception being ghosts in explicitly religious contexts, such as hungry ghosts). We will discuss the representation of female ghosts in the late imperial Chinese cultural imagination, with attention to filiality, religious belief, and the effects of ghosts on male health.

**Final Project Discussion**: You should have started on your final project at this point. Please bring a draft or outline or treatment of your project for discussion and critique in groups.

**Week 6. History, Race, Empiricism**

**Meeting 11.** Monday, November 25. Ghosts and Empiricism: Field Trip to Staunton

**Reading:** Tiya Miles, “Ghosts ’R Us” (<https://uncpressblog.com/2015/10/30/tiya-miles-ghosts-r-us/>)

**Activity:** We will take a bus to Staunton, one of the more haunted places in Virginia, and take a tour with Black Raven Ghost Tours.

**\*Journal assignment 7:** After the tour (the night of, if possible), write at least 250 words reflecting on the tor and the Miles reading. Due before Thanksgiving break.

**No Meeting:** Wednesday, November 27. THANKSGIVING, one day early.

**Week 7. Ghosts and Technology**

**Meeting 12.** Monday, December 2. Spirit Photography

**Reading:** Dickey, Ch. 5: “The Family That Would Not Live (St. Louis, MO),” *Ghostland*, pp. 81–92; and <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Bringing-Out-the-Dead/35660>.

**Film:** Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, *Shutter* (2004)

**Discussion:** Beginning with Spiritualism’s interest in new technologies, we will consider how photography promises the capture of things as they truly are, thereby making possible the documentation of the ghostly realm.

**\*In-class writing 8:** Reflection on *Shutter*.

**Meeting 13.** Wednesday, December 4. Accursed Technology

**Film:** Hideo Nakata, *Ringu* (1998)

**Discussion:** Boredom is central to horror films, as the moment of the scare is built up only with longer sequences of the ordinary. We will consider the concept of the ordinary, how the mundanity of objects such as videotape or the telephone are imbued with horror, and how the ghost speaks to modern forms of alienation.

**Group discussion:** Lightning talks (2 sentences or less) on your final project.

**Final Projects Due on MONDAY DECEMBER 9 at 4 PM.**