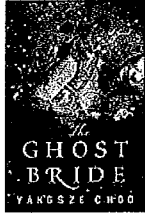


Ghost Bride (Choo)

[Summary](#) | [Author Bio](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Full Version](#) | [Print](#)



(http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0062227327/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_li?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0062227327&linkCode=as2&tag=litl-20)

The Ghost Bride

Yangsze Choo, 2013

HarperCollins

362 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780062227324

Summary

Yangsze Choo's stunning debut, *The Ghost Bride*, is a startlingly original novel infused with Chinese folklore, romantic intrigue, and unexpected supernatural twists.

Li Lan, the daughter of a respectable Chinese family in colonial Malaysia, hopes for a favorable marriage, but her father has lost his fortune, and she has few suitors. Instead, the wealthy Lim family urges her to become a "ghost bride" for their son, who has recently died under mysterious circumstances. Rarely practiced, a traditional ghost marriage is used to placate a restless spirit. Such a union would guarantee Li Lan a home for the rest of her days, but at what price?

Night after night, Li Lan is drawn into the shadowy parallel world of the Chinese afterlife, where she must uncover the Lim family's darkest secrets—and the truth about her own family.

Reminiscent of Lisa See's *Peony in Love* and Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *The Ghost Bride* is a wondrous coming-of-age story and from a remarkable new voice in fiction. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—ca. 1972-73
- Raised—Malaysia
- Education—B.A., Harvard University
- Currently—lives in the San Francisco Bay Area

Yangsze Choo is a fourth-generation Malaysian of Chinese descent. Choo grew up in Malaysia but, accompanying her diplomat father, spent her childhood in various countries. As a result, she says that she can eavesdrop (badly) in several languages.

After graduating from Harvard University, Choo worked as a management consultant and at a startup before writing her first novel. *The Ghost Bride* (2013), set in colonial Malaya and the elaborate Chinese world of the afterlife, is about a peculiar historic custom called a spirit marriage. The novel is a soon-to-be-aired Netflix series!

The Night Tiger (2019) is Yangzse's second novel.

Choo lives in the Bay Area of San Francisco, California, with her husband, two children, and a potential rabbit. She loves to eat and read, and often does both at the same time. (*From the publisher.*)

Book Reviews

Like all good literary heroines, Li Lan is motherless, impoverished, educated beyond the custom of the times, and uninterested in marriage, especially to someone who's dead. Since she lives in 19th-century Malacca, the British colony in what is now Malaysia, this is a situation whose disadvantages Jane Austen herself would appreciate.

Martha T. Moore - USA Today

In her debut novel, Choo tells the unlikely story of a young Chinese woman who marries a dead man...an ancient custom among the Chinese in Malaysia called "spirit marriage." ... Choo's clear and charming style creates an alternate reality where the stakes are just as high as in the real world, combining grounded period storytelling with the supernatural.

Publishers Weekly

Li Lan is from an upper-class but financially destitute Chinese family in Malaya (modern-day Malaysia). When the wealthy Lim family proposes that she enter into a spirit marriage with their recently deceased son, she reluctantly accepts.... Choo's first novel explores in a delicate and thought-provoking way the ancient custom of spirit marriages, which were thought to appease restless spirits. —*Caitlin Bronner, MLIS, Pratt Inst., Brooklyn*

Library Journal

Choo's remarkably strong and arresting first novel explores the concept of Chinese "spirit marriages" in late-nineteenth-century Malaya through the eyes of the highly relatable Li Lan.... With its gripping tangles of plot and engaging characters, this truly compelling read is sure to garner much well deserved attention.

Booklist

Young Li Lan's family was once rich and respected...[so] she's shocked and disturbed when her father asks her if she'll consent to become a ghost bride to the dead son of Malacca's wealthiest family... Choo's multifaceted tale is sometimes difficult to follow with its numerous characters and subplots, but the narrative is so rich in Chinese folklore, mores and the supernatural that it's nonetheless intriguing and enlightening. A haunting debut.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. Perplexed by her father's absences and worried by finances and marriage negotiations, Li Lan wonders, "What was happening out in the world of men?... Despite the fact that my feet were not bound, I was confined to domestic quarters as though a rope tethered my ankle to our front door." How does Li Lan chafe against notions of femininity, and in what ways does she rebel?
2. Malacca is a city settled by various ethnic groups over the centuries, with a long colonial history as well. The Chinese in Malaya, like Li Lan's family, keep their own practices and dress, but don't follow tradition as rigidly as in China. How does Li Lan benefit from this blending of tradition?
3. After Li Lan gives in to Amah's superstition and visits a medium at the temple, she observes a Chinese cemetery that has been neglected due to fear of ghosts: "How different it was from the quiet Malay cemeteries, whose pawn-shaped Islamic tombstones are shaded by the frangipani tree, which the Malays call the graveyard flower. Amah would never let me pluck the fragrant, creamy blossoms when I was a child. It seemed to me that in this confluence of cultures, we had acquired one another's superstitions without necessarily any of their comforts." What do you think the comforts of superstition are? As Li Lan interacts with the spirit world, does her perspective on superstition change?
4. Why is Li Lan drawn to Tian Bai when they meet? How do her feelings for him change over the course of the novel, and why?
5. The ghost world Li Lan enters is a richly imagined place governed by complicated bureaucracy. How does the parallel city reflect the world of the living, and in what ways is it different?
6. When Li Lan thinks that she has found her mother—a second wife in the ancestral Lim household—she is shaken by how horrible she is. How does meeting her real mother, Auntie Three, help Li Lan understand her own family?
7. When Li Lan is a wandering spirit, able to observe from another perspective, what does she realize about herself and her world? Are there positive aspects to her time

spent outside her body?

8. Li Lan thinks, "All who have seen ghosts and spirits are marked with a stain, and far more than Old Wong, I have trespassed where no living person ought have." How has Li Lan's time spent in the realm of the ghost world – speaking with the dead, eating spirit offerings, seeing Er Lang's true identity – changed her? Is it possible for her to go back to normal life?

9. When Er Lang proposes to Li Lan, he warns her, "I wouldn't underestimate the importance of family." Were you surprised by Li Lan's decision at the end of the novel? If you were in her shoes, do you think you would have chosen the same route, with its sacrifices?

10. Did you know anything about traditional Chinese folklore before reading *The Ghost Bride*? What did you find fascinating or strange about the mythology woven throughout the novel, and the Chinese notions of the afterlife?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

top of page (summary)

The Ghost Bride Essay Questions

1. How does Li Lan's father fail in his relationship with his daughter?

Rather than take care of and prioritize Li Lan, her father is incapable of rising above his past tragedy to attend to his future. Even though losing Li Lan's mother was awful, Li Lan's father's choice to retreat from society and his addiction to opium make life difficult for Li Lan in the extreme. In many ways, Li Lan almost having to become a ghost bride is his fault: because he did not provide for her financially or socially, Li Lan is limited in her options for the future. Sadly, while Liam Tian Ching and the Lim family are the villains of this book, it is Li Lan's father that makes her vulnerable.

2. How does this novel explore the complex tensions of Chinese tradition and European modernity?

The novel is set in British Malaya, during a time when the British had control of what is now Malaysia, in a fairly prosperous port town. As a Chinese immigrant family, the Pan family is already caught between these two worlds of a Europe seeking to modernize by expanding its empire and a China (as well as Malaya) that was seeking to retain its traditions. But these complications become even sharper as Li Lan must navigate traditional elements of Chinese culture, like the ghost marriage and the spirit world, while still being in a world that's heavily affected by the West, which can clearly be seen in the character of Tian Bai. Despite European modernity being nominally in control, however, Li Lan's life comes to be defined by elements from Chinese tradition more than anything else.

3. Why is it hard to give this novel a simple genre classification?

Even though this novel is set in 1890s Malacca, which is a historical setting, and features the real tradition of ghost marriage, there are also fantasy elements to the story. At first, this does appear to be simply a historical fiction novel, but the presence of ghosts, spirit worlds, and dragons make it hard to call it simple historical fiction. However, these are not things that Choo made up: they are based on real Chinese and Malaysian cultural beliefs. Therefore, it's also not quite right to classify it as only fantasy, since the "fantasy" elements correspond to traditional cultural views.

4. What interesting questions does this book raise about knowledge, particularly as it applies to the idea of sight?

There are two kinds of people in this novel. First, there are people like Tian Bai, who believe that knowledge comes from what can be "proven" and visually perceived. Tian Bai does not believe in the supernatural, even though he is willing to bend to tradition occasionally. His love of clocks comes from the fact that they can be completely known—that is, that he can easily take apart and put them back together again. For him, there is little to know beyond what people can see for themselves. However, characters like Amah, the medium, and Old Wong suggest that this kind of knowledge and even something like sight is far from straightforward. Knowledge, for them, can come from many mysterious, unexpected, and often supernatural sources.

5. How does Li Lan's decision to choose Er Lang over Tian Bai reflect her journey to maturity in the novel?

At the beginning of the novel, Li Lan is young and inexperienced: she believes that love is simple. Her infatuation with Tian Bai, while genuine, occurs upon meeting him only a couple times. Despite them sharing a genuine affection, they don't really know each other, and as Li Lan matures, she shows herself to be a very different person than either she or Tian Bai had thought. Her adventures in the spirit world, which are a sort of coming-of-age for her, also make her the kind of woman that should be with someone like Er Lang instead of Tian Bai. As a mature woman, she is no longer content to limit herself and Tian Bai to a traditional marriage, even if she would have the option to join Er Lang later.

A Q&A WITH YANGSZE CHOO, AUTHOR OF THE GHOST BRIDE

Kaiti

SR Book Club

august book club, the ghost bride, the savvy reader book club, yangsze choo

1 Comment

All of us at the *The Savvy Reader* **cannot** stop talking about *The Ghost Bride*, and today we are very lucky to welcome the kind and extremely talented **Yangsze Choo** to the blog to talk about it with us! Below you'll find a Q&A between Shannon (**SP**) and Yangsze Choo (**YC**) as she discusses the tradition, inspiration and motivation behind her gorgeous debut.

PS: *The Ghost Bride* is our August *Savvy Reader Book Club* Pick, so keep an eye out for a some book club tips!

SP: The concept in *The Ghost Bride* is so, so interesting. (A young woman is asked to marry a ghost) How did you come up with this?

YC: There's a long Chinese literary tradition of tales set in the blurred borderline between spirits and humans, where beautiful women turn out to be foxes, and the afterlife is run like a monstrous parody of Imperial Chinese bureaucracy. When I was a child, I loved reading such stories and was always intensely curious about actually happened. How would you feel if the pretty girl you picked up had no feet, or the palace you visited was actually a beehive? It's a very rich and curious mythology where nothing is quite what it seems, and that I'd love to introduce readers to.

More specifically, however, one of the things that sparked this novel was a sentence in an old newspaper article. While researching another novel I was writing, I happened to go through the archives of our local Malaysian newspaper and found a brief mention of spirit marriages that offhandedly declared them "increasingly rare." At first, I wondered what this referred to, and then I realized that it must be the folk superstition of marriages to the dead. This was so intriguing that I ended up putting aside my first book to write this one instead!

SP: What kind of research did you do while writing *The Ghost Bride*?

YC: My dad used to collect a lot of old books about Malaya – mostly British traveler's tales such as **Isabella Bird** and **Bruce Lockhart**. I remember poring over them on long, hot afternoons when I'd run out of reading material, never guessing that years later, they would serve as the basis for a novel. The archives of our local Malaysian newspaper were also helpful, as well as Harvard's Widener and Yenching libraries, which were a trove of out-of-print books. I also heard many odd stories about ghosts from my family and friends in Malaysia, some of which gave me lifelong phobias such as avoiding banana trees at night!

SP: What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

YC: That part of the world is very dear to me, and I think that it's something that I can write about with authenticity. As a Malaysian of Chinese descent, I feel that there are so many peculiar and interesting things about SE Asia that I'd love to share with readers.

In fact, while I was writing this book, I was also reminded of those incredibly detailed 19th century novels, like *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Jules Verne's* books, and how so many of them were aimed at the armchair traveler – people who had no chance to embark on such voyages. In the case of my main character, Li Lan, she gets her wish to travel, but it turns out to be to the shadowy Chinese afterworld, in the grey border between spirits and humans. It's a terrifying place, yet full of strange beauty. If I can bring readers along on this curious journey, I'd be very happy.

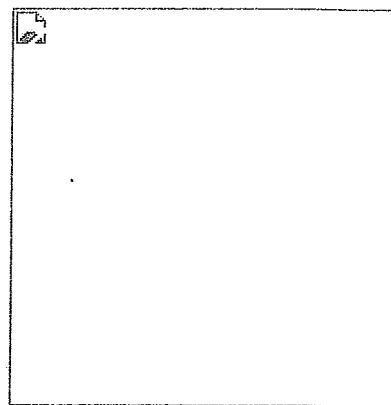
SP: We're going to be asking questions about the afterlife, love, family, the supernatural elements, and Li Lan's journey in our Book Club. What's one theme or question you hope that readers will discuss or think about after reading *The Ghost Bride*?

YC: Love and death are two of the things that we worry about in this life, and I think my book combines them. On the one hand, you have the fear of dying and whether there is an afterlife, and on the other, the fear of being forced into an unwanted relationship. There's a lot of inherent tension in the prospect of marrying a dead man – I couldn't help wondering about what that actually meant at the time, and if people really believed that such relationships continued into the afterlife.

In the second part of my book, the main character Li Lan actually journeys into the world of the dead, which I imagined must be filled with the paper funeral offerings that people still burn today. It's a creepy, yet touching idea, that you would want to continue to provide for your loved ones even after death. On the other hand, it also means that obligations to relatives never end even after death. Hmm...discuss!

SP: Now a tough one: what's your favourite book? What's your favourite 'book club' book? (Ie. one that you just love to talk about)

YC: Oh dear, there are so many books that I love – it's very hard to choose. I think for a "book club" book, it's great to pick one that encourages discussion and even opposing points of view. So I'd like to suggest *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, by **Susanna Clarke**. It's such an unusual book, combining historical fiction with fantasy – like **Jane Austen** meets **Neil Gaiman**. I was so sad to get to the end even though I almost got a hernia toting this hefty book around. Her footnotes, in particular, break almost every rule about footnotes for fiction, yet are so strange and winsome that I was completely charmed.



“Li Lan’s odyssey keeps her on the brink of earthly demise and keeps the reader riveted to the page . . .”

Yangsze Choo considered writing her thesis at Harvard about spirit marriages, but chose economics instead. That was lucky for us.

In *The Ghost Bride* Ms. Choo offers the literary world an intriguing tale involving the “spirit marriage” custom among Chinese immigrants in Malaya. Within this community, there is a strong folk tradition dealing with marriages to the deceased in order to placate their restless spirits.

According to Ms. Choo, Western attitudes about spirits are influenced by science; Asian minds do not question the existence of these spirits, but dedicate energies to their “management” such as feeding, mediating disputes, providing for comfort, etc.

Readers who seek to learn about cultural tradition or who have tired of either vampire or zombie genre will enjoy this unique view of the afterlife. Woven in are elements of intrigue, twists of fate, and the power of love between beings—regardless of realm.

The setting is Malaya, in 1893, a colony of states, including Singapore, which the British controlled from 1771-1948. Chinese immigrants formed overseas communities there and became part of the business upper class. Despite a very western kind of material success, they maintained strong ties to ancestral clans, to which they remained loyal for many generations.

As the story begins, we meet a businessman who has fallen into debt and secluded himself in his own opium-infused world. Prospects for his daughter, Li Lan, to marry into wealth are dim at best until he receives overtures from the Lim family.

There is only one catch. The prospective groom is dead and they wish Li Lan, to marry his spirit as a “ghost bride.” Such an arrangement would allow her to live with the groom’s family, enjoying a comfortable life while returning her own family to its former status. This represents a “way out” of inevitable poverty, but the man is troubled by having to seal his daughter’s fate in such a manner.

Li Lan is horrified and tempted. However, complications set in when she meets (and is enamored by) another member of the Lim family. She is then troubled by dreams from the intended (deceased) son.

Confused and frightened, she consults a medium, and in the process encounters another interesting character, Er Lang, who turns out to be a “shuttle diplomat” who traverses the earthly and spirit worlds.

While in consultation about her dilemma, Li Lan makes errors in judgment that “plunge her into the shadowy parallel world of the Chinese afterlife:”

“Was I a spirit now? Frantically, I circled my body. My body, I reminded myself. It was said that when the soul was parted from the body that it could be enticed back.”

What follows is a long series of travels and adventures as she attempts to return to her former self. Was she dead or alive? She teeters on the brink of both worlds. Her spirit self passes through doors and walls and into the home of her betrothed, where she uncovers secrets of the Lim family. Later, she learns truths about her own family history. Both discoveries contribute further to her dilemma.

She braces for the next phase in her search for further truths: Life on the Plains of the Dead. This is a ghostly “Purgatory” where residents await their eternal fate. The burnt offerings from the living determine the status of the inhabitants. Amidst the desolation, many live the good life, with ample help from those less fortunate who were sent into the afterworld with no support from the living. They become the servants and live out their waiting time in total servitude.

Li Lan’s old friend Er Lang dips in and out of various situations with a reassuring-- almost humorous-- predictability. He is an affable spirit, whose help is both welcome and necessary. Occasionally, a

contemporary vernacular creeps into the dialogue. It is noticeable because of the ethereal feel of the rest of the story.

Can she “go home again”? Neither the answer nor the implementation is a simple matter. The author provides a clever twist of fate as she takes up the threads of the story and deftly leads us to the final chapter.

Ms. Choo gives us insight into old Chinese beliefs of the afterlife and its worlds. The plot is intriguing, as are the lessons subtly interwoven about aspirations, material success, loyalty, perception versus reality, and trusting one’s own instincts.

Li Lan’s odyssey keeps her on the brink of earthly demise and keeps the reader riveted to the page—even though it’s “only a ghost story”!



INTERVIEWS

Yangsze Choo

Finding a groom in the afterlife

BookPage Interview by Becky Ohlsen (/search?contributor_id=126)

August 2013 (/print-edition/212-august-2013)

Plenty of girls daydream about their future weddings. Usually these dreams include, at minimum, another human being. In that sense, the first marriage proposal in Yangsze Choo's debut novel, *The Ghost Bride*, is a little unusual: It comes from someone who's been dead for months.

Set in the 1890s in Malaysia (or, as it was known then, Malaya), this decadently imagined, elaborately romantic novel delves into the world of the supernatural in colonial Chinese culture, including the tradition of "spirit marriages." Historically, spirit marriages were a way to appease the ghosts of young people who had died single, so they wouldn't be lonely in the afterlife. The novel's heroine, Li Lan, receives an offer of marriage from the wealthy family of Lim Tian Ching, a young man who died suddenly of a fever. It seems the young man carried a torch for Li Lan while he was alive, though she was intended for his cousin (unbeknownst to her). The cousin now stands to inherit the family fortune *and* get the girl, which drives the petulant ghost of Lim Tian Ching crazy.

We know this because the ghostly groom visits Li Lan in her dreams, explaining the situation and making ominous threats. Soon thereafter, Li Lan herself gains access to the realms of the dead, and it's here that the novel takes a unique and wonderful turn.

Ordinarily, an unmarried young woman in a Malaysian port city in the 1890s would not be permitted to wander around unescorted. But due to some unfortunate circumstances (which I won't give away), Li Lan happens to be more or less invisible, caught between the physical world and the ghost realm. Though distressing for her, this is excellent for the reader, because it gives us a sharply observant and entertaining guide to both the city and the spirit world. We see not only the vast banquet halls and embroidered silk clothing and sumptuous meals of the historic city, but also the afterlife's terrifying ox-headed demons, floating green spirit lights, unnaturally aged courtesans, silent puppet servants, enormous predatory birds, hungry ghosts and many other wonders.

Perhaps unusual for a story so fantastical, the novel began as Choo's senior thesis at Harvard. "I wanted to write about Asian female ghosts," she explains by phone from her home in California, where she lives with her husband and two young children. After receiving a degree in social studies from Harvard, Choo worked in various corporate jobs before writing *The Ghost Bride* and landing an agent for the novel through an unsolicited query letter. She's been surprised and delighted by the early accolades the book has received.

Choo grew up in Malaysia, but her father, a diplomat, was often posted abroad, and she traveled extensively with him. She speaks English in a very proper-sounding British accent. "Everybody and their uncle has some ghost story," she says of the Malaysian inspiration for her novel. "And I realized the worst ghosts were all women! I thought, why is that?"

Choo theorized that the misogyny historically inherent in Asian culture was to blame for the fact that the scariest ghosts were all women: "Maybe this is a subconscious, underlying way it's showing up—people feel guilty," she says. Describing a few particularly awful examples—including a "female ghost that's just a head flying around, trailing placenta"—she adds that the prevalence of female ghosts must have "some sort of root in the sense that women were historically oppressed, and only after death could they seek their revenge."

All of which she'd intended to explore in her thesis. "But," she says, "I didn't write it." Worried that she wouldn't be taken seriously in academia, she instead submitted a "boring thesis about industrial townships," and that was that.

Some time later, while working on an early novel (one she now calls an "absolute disaster" with a "massively complicated" plot), Choo was doing research in the archives of her local newspaper in Malaysia and came across an offhand mention of the fact that "ghost weddings" were becoming increasingly rare. She was instantly intrigued.

Digging around, she found "many manifestations of this [tradition], weird, weird permutations and local variations." Research on ghost weddings led her back toward the other ghosts that populate her homeland.

"Because my book is set in Malaya, which is kind of a melting pot, there are many different kinds of ghosts there that you wouldn't get in China," she says. For example, there's an Indian ghost that specifically haunts banana trees; people who believe in it studiously avoid them. Malaya's traditions and stories were brought there from several very different places and gradually mixed together, Choo explains. "It's all a big mishmash."

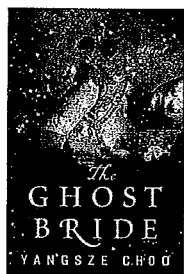
One product of those blended traditions in *The Ghost Bride* is Li Lan's foil and possible romantic interest, Er Lang, who looks like a man but isn't precisely human. He keeps his face hidden beneath a bamboo hat, frustrating our curious heroine: "Perhaps there were no features beneath his hat at all, merely a skull with loose ivory teeth or a monstrous lizard with baleful eyes," she speculates. He turns out to be something entirely unexpected, an irresistible invention of the author drawn from several different myths.

Then there's Amah, Li Lan's nanny, who worries nonstop about bad luck entering the household. She is typical of a certain kind of rural Chinese person, Choo says, even today. "Many Chinese are extremely superstitious," she says, adding that the dozens of rules and precautions Amah uses to ward off bad luck probably spring from an urge to control a chaotic world.

"I have my own theory about this," she adds, laughing. "I wonder if the first person who did all this was kind of OCD." Choo tells a story about a friend of her father who, for years, wouldn't use the front door of his house because a fortuneteller had told him it was bad luck. This was inconvenient for him and his family and guests, but there was no ignoring the fortuneteller's advice; he believed it.

Choo says she doesn't have such superstitions herself, though she was amused to notice recently that Los Angeles is peppered with signs advertising psychics, evidence of the same instinct.

Meanwhile, the author is recording the audio version of *The Ghost Bride* and working on a new novel, "another subplot out of my gigantic mistake."



The Ghost Bride

By Yangsze Choo (/author/yangsze-choo?book_author_id=9507)

Morrow

\$24.99

ISBN 9780062227324

Published 08/06/2018

Historical Fiction (/search?book_genre=historical_fiction) / Fantasy (/search?book_genre=fantasy)
/ Fiction (/search?book_genre=fiction)

ENDED
ONLINE
OCT 23
\$1,000
AWARDS
+PUBLICATION

POETRY
NOVEL
SHORTSTORY

C N F G R

(<https://litbreaker.nui.media/pipeline/519024/0/cj/V12256B20CBJ->

5093461C66FA4C0L648215L648212QL514841QQP0G00G0Q17FB667900001010000G0PG30H36W8blee27282DW4012f2DW44ebc2DW4a07a2DX1279f983t18489