

# The Ghost Amusement Scroll: The Assemblage of Ambiguous Ghost Stories & a Canvas of Self-Expression

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**Abstract:** Luo Ping (1733-1799) was one of the eight Yangzhou eccentric painters (also known as Yangzhou baguai) in the Qing Dynasty in China, renowned for their innovative approach to art. This project explores why Luo's Ghost Amusement scroll appealed to the scholars and literati of his time and how it became a visual work representing the Zhiguai theme in the eighteenth century. Rather than investigating the artist's intention and perspective to interpret his work, this paper focuses on the painting's quality of ambiguity and how it fascinated its audience. Then, the paper suggests that the painting's greatest appeal lies in its ambiguity, which prompts viewer interaction and self-expression. This paper utilizes biographical, social-historical, and psychoanalytical methods to contextualize the artist's influence and the painting's popularity. In addition, it offers a visual analysis to demonstrate the painting's quality and techniques, which significantly impacts audiences' interpretation. Following the analysis, it connects the painting with the rise of the Zhiguai theme in contemporary literature, especially with Pu Songling and other Zhiguai writers. In doing so, the paper aims to claim that the Ghost Amusement scroll grants its audiences a space for self-expression. The paper thus enables us to explore the "representation crisis" and censorship issue in the last Chinese imperial dynasty.

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“... by seeking rational, purposeful explanations for his [Luo's] paintings, we largely miss the point of an art concerned with the in-between, the beyond, and the underneath.”

Landscape as a subject matter had dominated Chinese painting since the tenth century. However, during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a group of artists from Yangzhou broke free from this tradition by creating a painting style that combined new visual appeals and recognized motifs that promoted individualism. Later in the nineteenth century, Chinese art critics grouped eight significant artists of this style and named them the “Yangzhou baguai” (eight eccentric painters) for their unique approach to art.<sup>2</sup> The golden age of this style paralleled the rise of wealthy salt merchants, who sought possibilities to escalate their gentry social rank in many ways, including by commissioning art. With this new group of patrons, Yangzhou attracted numerous independent amateur artists who later transformed the city into a dynamic art center with a distinguished art style.<sup>3</sup>

Initiated at the end of the Kangxi period (1667-1722), the painting style lasted until the Jiaqing reign (1796-1829) and came to an end with the death of Luo Ping (1733-1799) as the last representative of the Yangzhou baguai painters.<sup>4</sup> This paper focuses on Luo Ping and his most famous artwork, the Ghost Amusement scroll. With the concentration on only one piece of art, the paper aims to explore

why the Ghost Amusement scroll appealed to scholars and literati of Luo’s time, and how it became the visual work that represents the Zhiguai theme (records of anomalies) in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Rather than investigating the artist's intention and perspective to interpret his work, this paper concentrates on the painting's ambiguity and how it fascinated its audience. It argues that the painting's greatest appeal lies in its ambiguity, which prompts viewer interaction and self-expression.

To contextualize the popularity of the painting and its interaction with audiences, this paper will use biographical, social-historical, and psychoanalytical methods, combining visual analysis of the painting with the rise of the Zhiguai theme in contemporary literature works. It will connect Luo and his contemporary writer, Pu Songling, and other Zhiguai writers to understand the desire for self-expression during the Qing era. The project thus will enable us to explore the “representation crisis” and censorship issue in the last Chinese imperial dynasty.

Born and raised in Yangzhou in a middle-class scholar-official family, at age nineteen, Luo built a romantic relationship with Fang Wangyi, a talented poet and painter. At the beginning of his career in the 1750s, Luo achieved his reputation as an ambitious poet with the collection of poetry *Poem from the*

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Hay rephrased Richard Vinograd’s idea. See Vinograd. 1982.

<sup>2</sup> The loosely connected group of artists included Li Shan, Wang Shishen, Jin Nong, Gao Xiang, Zheng Xie, Li Fangyi, and Luo Ping.

<sup>3</sup> See Chu-tsing, Li, “Eighteenth Century Foundations in Modern Chinese Painting,” in *Chinese Painting under the Qianlong Emperor, 1735-95*, ed.

<sup>4</sup> Later scholars added Hua Yan, Gao Fenghan, and Min Zheng to the list due to the individualism quality in their styles.

<sup>5</sup> Zhiguai (records of anomalies) is a literature theme that first appeared in ancient China with the main subjects are ghost, demon, supernatural beings. See Lu Xun 1927, pp.9, id. 1981, pp.301-302

*Thatched Hut of Fragrant Leaves*

(Xiangye caotang shicun).<sup>6</sup> As he reached his manhood, Luo became interested in painting. Zhu Xiaochun, a painter-official, likely introduced Luo to finger painting, an “eccentric” art style of Yangzhou.<sup>7</sup> In his early twenties, Luo had the opportunity to meet and build an intimate teacher-disciple relationship with Jin Nong, a famous plum painter. Besides the plum paintings, Jin also worked on calligraphy, landscapes, and figures, and his works were always in high demand to the extent that “even his forgeries were soon bought up and gone.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, as a young painter, it was a great honor for Luo to work with a famous artist and improve his painting skills. By the time Luo started working under Jin’s supervision, Jin was already in his seventies with failing eyesight. Hence, Luo later became the artist’s substitute brush (also known as a ghost painter).<sup>9</sup> As one of the most promising literati painters, Luo Ping indebted the “strange” quality to his predecessors. Though the artist spent roughly a decade creating art in Beijing, he took great pride in being a Yangzhou painter long after the heyday of the city had passed.<sup>10</sup>

In 1763, Jin passed away in Yangzhou while Luo was not in town. After Luo returned,

he performed all the funeral rituals for his teacher and escorted Jin’s remains back to Hangchow, Jin’s hometown, in 1765. Following Jin’s death was the salt merchant scandal in 1768, causing numerous capital sentences and exiles. This event led to the decreasing demand for art, so Luo decided to take his first trip to Beijing in 1771.<sup>11</sup> In the capital, Luo entered the elite circle with the support of Jin’s old friend, Qian Zai (1708-1793), who introduced Luo to Weng Fanggang (1733-1818), a calligrapher and literature critic who became Luo’s long-life friend. He connected Luo to Ying Lian (1707-1783), a grand chancellor, who hosted scholar gatherings at his mansion regularly. Having access to the scholar elite circle, Luo still needed an artwork that addressed his independent identity and overcame his teacher’s shadow.

Coming to Beijing, Luo carried his Ghost Amusement scroll, which was possibly made in 1766 based on the oldest colophon, a salient feature of Chinese paintings, which shows viewers’ commentary in a written text or poem. The scroll was about 25 meters long and contained eight leaves in an inconsistent painterly manner. With the format of handscroll, it was not only easy to carry but also provided space for colophons. Indeed, the scroll

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 22. yet it is still unknown when his first engagement with this art type was.

<sup>8</sup> For quotation, see Ch’in Tsu-yung, Ch’i-chia yin-pa, MT 2/3:173.

<sup>9</sup> Jin hired a ghost painter early in his painting career as he started painting at an old age. There was also evidence that his patrons/ audiences also knew about the ghost painter. Though the artist showed great appreciation toward his ghost painter, Hsiang Chun, and Luo Ping, his behavior still provoked harsh criticism from his later critic. See Hsu, 2001. pp.199-2011

<sup>10</sup> He often indicated himself as “Luo Ping from Yangzhou” on his works. See Karlsson, Kim, Alfreda Murck, and Michele Matteini. *Eccentric Visions: The Worlds of Luo Ping*. Zürich: Museum Reitberg Zürich, 2009, pp. 11

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Yuming. “Luo Liangfeng yin cun kaoshi” (Examination of Preserved Seals by Luo Liangfeng). In *Yangzhou huapai shuhua quanji: Xunlun huibian* (Complete collection of Calligraphies and Seals by the Yangzhou school: collected prefaces), edited by Shan Guolin, pp. 234-68. Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1999.

accumulated over 100 colophons of some of the leading literary men, the artist's friends, and his later admirers that cramed every inch of the borders of the mount surrounding the illustrated pictures.<sup>12</sup> The impressive number of colophons highlighted the absence of authorship. On this painting scroll, Luo left no inscription and did not sign or date the picture, which clouded the interpretation of the artist's intention and the visual meanings. To further demonstrate the ambiguity of the scroll, this paper presents a visual analysis and proposes a few potential questions as demonstrations of the ambiguity.

As the scroll is unrolled, the first Leaf depicts two ghosts with similar appearances. Luo paints them half-naked with pronounced foreheads and protruded stomachs. While the one on the top left has both hands crossed, resting on his chest, and seems to be sad with his drooping lip, the one on the bottom looks over his shoulder with a smile on his face and one hand on his left chest. In addition, Luo uses a wash brushstroke to surround the spirits with a gray cloud to conceal their feet and enhance the murky effect. In this painting, Luo uses fine and dry lines to depict the spirits with a human expression on a foggy background, which creates a sense of mystery and obscurity.

In contrast, in the second Leaf, Luo shows his skills in different painting techniques, in which he uses more ink to outline the pair of spirits and a different brush stroke to create the ink bleeding effect. Through his brush choice, the first ghost appears with an official hat and

tattered pants while revealing his chest and touching his swollen stomach as if he is hungry. Moving in the same direction as him is an undulating bald-headed figure. This chubby figure walks with his giant hands positioned awkwardly. On a plain background, these strange figures appear distinguishable with ambiguous gestures and shabby outfits that prompt viewers to question their relationship and the meaning behind the outfits.

The quality of the alluding storyline on Leaf 2 continues and is even more apparent on Leaf 3. A large and dark ink wash covers almost the entire Leaf, and within this black spread, a scholar man offers a flower to a woman next to him. The woman appears femininely with white skin and a soft face, stereotypically attractive with her revealing pink garment. Contrary to the couple's intimacy is an alone spirit dressed all in white with a bizarre tall hat that holds a black umbrella on the right and a fan on the left close to his face. Unlike the plain background of Leaf 2, a black eerie air occupies the background and surrounds the trio. Additionally, Luo highlights the discrepancy between the couple and the unaccompanied spirit with the utilization of color by adorning the woman with bright red and pale pink. Still, with a closer observation, the bare feet spirit and the man obtain a few similar features: the square face line, yellowish skin tone, red lip, and long-dropping eye brown. With the similarities and dissimilarities, Luo creates a dramatic scene that includes both humans and a ghost. What is the

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<sup>12</sup> The leaves are numbered based on the order they were mounted on the scroll and does not indicate the timeline when each leaf is made.

relationship of this trio? Why does the black air surround the trio?

Following the dramatic storyline from Leaf 3 is a pair of dwarf-like spirits that occupy the center of Leaf 4. Luo utilizes the ink bleeding technique more noticeably in this depiction, giving his subjects a gloomy aura. Similar to Leaf 2, the pairs are distinguishable with a tiny face, hands, and feet spirit that is dressed in a red garment and depicted with a hump on his back. This unappealing ghost appears beside a white ghost with a face as big as his companion's body. With the dark aura surrounding them, the two figures seem to be heading towards somewhere. Where are they heading to? Did they travel to spread dark energy and bring bad luck to people? The answer is unclear.

Not as dramatic as Leaf 3 and not as exotic as Leaf 8, Leaf 5 is still one of the most striking scenes on the scroll due to its unconventional image. As the largest Leaf (26.6 cm x 42.1 cm), the scene attracts viewers with the apparent facial expression spirit and innovative combination of painting techniques. On this Leaf, the artist paints the spirit in turquoise with long straw-like hair. The spirit's bony arm reaches the far right of the Leaf, its left foot extends diagonally, and a misty cloud initiates from the bottom right of the painting to cover its body. The tremendous spirit looks like it runs out of nowhere. Using an empty negative space to highlight the subject's size is a fascinating feature of this scene, as this technique has been commonly seen for centuries in landscape painting to emphasize a

colossal mountain or a vast scenery.<sup>13</sup> With the familiar technique of an innovative image and unique theme, this Leaf grabs viewers' attention quickly and presents the artist as a virtuoso painter for his knowledge and skills in different painting styles.

The following Leaf is a scene of action, which displays a balloon head with shabby clothes chasing after two smaller figures. The puffy-faced spirit looks over his shoulder to keep an eye on his chaser while his black and white companion dashes away. Like Leafs 2 and 4, Luo also depicts these spirits with ink-bleeding outlines and vacant backgrounds. Why does the balloon head chase after those two spirits? This type of question may come to the audience when viewing this leaf.

The second to last Leaf is a crowded scene that displays a group of traveling ghosts, in which the frowning ghost stands under a tattered umbrella, expressing its concern or confusion. While the expression of its accompanying ghosts on both sides is not explicit, a ghost behind the frowning one appears with big staring eyes and drooping eyebrows. Akin to Leaf 2, Luo uses more dry brushstrokes and delicate lines to depict the figures with dynamic expressions that give the scene a sense of humor. Like other leaves, this one also proposes an (unclear) storyline without any supporting context that stirs audiences' curiosity.

The amuse scroll wraps up with a scene of a pair of skeletons in faint pink facing each

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<sup>13</sup> See Bush, Susan. *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*. [2nd ed.]. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012.



other. While one is strikingly like the illustration from *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (On the Fabric of the Human Body, dated 1543) by Andreas Vesalius, the scene awed its viewers for the unconventional image.<sup>14</sup> Beginning in the late sixteenth century, the Jesuit missionaries came to China, which led to the increasing art exchanges with the West under the Qing dynasty. In particular, the Swiss Jesuit priest Johann Schreck (1576-1630) came to Macao and brought the *Theatro Anatomico*, an inspired work from Vesalius by Gaspard Bauhin (1560-1624). Due to the book's popularity among scholars, the Chinese version of this book, *Illustrated Explanation of the Human Body According to the Distant West* (Yuanxi renshen tushuo) was released. The text contains two wood-block illustrations of skeletons seen in Luo's work.<sup>15</sup> In this scene, we see a similar combination displayed in Leaf 5, the conflation of ghost or spirit with landscape. Compared to the previous scene, this Leaf portrays the conflation more obviously with the mountain plateau background. In the closing scene of the scroll, Luo combines the mountain, representing the human world, with skeletons, a portrayal of a ghostly world. Ultimately, he blurs the line between reality and imagination.

With the visual analysis, the image of Luo as an eccentric painter is evident through his conflation of traditional brushstrokes and the traditional landscape painting theme with unconventional images. This strangeness or

eccentricity of the Ghost Amusement scroll allows Luo to use it as an entry ticket to enter the Beijing literate elite in 1771 and “enjoy [its] immense popularity.”<sup>16</sup> Having access to the elite social class, Luo often shows the scroll at the scholar gatherings and invites viewers to comment and sign their names with seals on the painting. These colophons are “a dialogue [which both] resulted from and reproduces convivial literati gatherings of the time” and provide useful primary sources to explore the viewers' interpretations.<sup>17</sup> The following colophons display how this artwork opens for varied interpretations, proving the quality of ambiguity.

Luo's close friend, Zhang Wentao (1764-1814), was the most enthusiastic fan of this scroll; he shares his thoughts on every Leaf. His interpretations often involve allegorical meanings. For example, he writes in his colophon in 1794 about the accompanied spirits on Leaf 2 as “a master and slave,” which the slave is “...the dog with the hat jumps and dances, following his master ---[he is the] ‘hair-washed monkey’”.<sup>18</sup> Through his expression, Zhang reveals his disapproval of the unfair treatment of people from different social statuses. In addition, he writes, “At the night platform, who can tell from the high class from the low class? ... they are absolutely worthy of our compassion”. A similar allegorical implication also appears on Leaf 6 (the balloon ghost chases after others), in which he

<sup>14</sup> See Hay, *Culture, Ethnicity, and Empire*, pp.16-222.

<sup>15</sup> See Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, pp. 87. Historian Nicolas Standaert argued that Luo was inspired by the illustration and created his work based on it.

<sup>16</sup> For quotation, see Karlsson 2004, pp.158

<sup>17</sup> For quotation, see Karlsson 2004, pp.52

<sup>18</sup> I indebted Kate Farrington and Zhu Hong for their translation of Zhang Wentao's colophon. The “hair-washed monkey” is a mocking way of mentioning officials. See “Seeing Ghosts in Late Eighteenth-Century China in Luo Pin's 1766 ‘Guiqu Tu’ (‘Ghost Realm Amusements’) Scroll.”

manifests, “With those kinds of heads and clothes, after going through the door of death, is their appearance so different from one another?”<sup>19</sup> Through Zhang’s interpretation, we see his criticism of society at the time.

Sharing the same thought as Zhang, Jiang Shiquan, a Hanlin academician and playwright in the eighteenth century, sees Leaf 2 as an illustration of a “slave ghost” and his master. That allegorical illustration indicates the “corrupt Confucian officials.”<sup>20</sup> Together, Zhang and Jiang’s understandings of Leaf 2 display how these scholars see this specific scene as a painting of social satire. This interpretation continues carrying on the dramatic Leaf 3, in which Zhang decodes the scene as a portrayal of a loving couple living in an unideal social context that makes a beautiful thing like love become undesirable. For example, he writes, “The man holds a fragrant orchid to please her. Love in such gloomy surroundings is pitiable.”<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, Zhang believes the couple could express their “secret feelings and unhappy love” only under the ghost’s watch due to the conservative community and moral constraints.<sup>22</sup> Agreeing with Luo’s contemporary, a modern scholar like Zhuang Shen also sees this scene and the scroll as satiric art, which he believes it represents “the manifold evils of the human world.”<sup>23</sup> Lacking the artist’s indication and inscription, the artwork

encourages its viewers’ interpretations of the unconventional ghost images.

On the other hand, the quality of ambiguity allows other literati and scholars to shed light on different interpretations. For example, on Leaf 8, the pink skeleton portrayal with the landscape background is a conflation between an exotic image and a native painting theme. The strangeness of this scene awed its audience with different interpretations. For instance, Zhang Wentao expresses his belief in the existence of ghosts, which he manifests, “Even when the skeletons gradually decay, they are still capable of threat or intimidation. As a ghost, you only exist in black soil, green woods, and forest.”<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, Jiang Shiquan sees the scene under the light of religion, which he believes the artist’s exceptional talent of seeing ghosts and depicting them is the fruit of being a devout Buddhist and having a “Buddhist heart” for years.<sup>25</sup> Yet, a modern scholar like Jonathan Hay argues the scene is a result of European influence since skeletons are a common image in Western books of anatomy and autopsy.<sup>26</sup>

Based on the colophons and modern arguments, we view different ideas from social satire and novel interpretation to religious artwork and European influence. Through these interpretations, the scroll displays the viewers’ feelings and thoughts and their responses to Luo’s work. Without any explicit indication, Luo utilizes different brush strokes and

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 86

<sup>20</sup> For quotation, see Huang Maozi 1989: 612.

<sup>21</sup> For quotation, see Farrington and Zhu, pp. 84

<sup>22</sup> Karlsson, 2004, pp.169.

<sup>23</sup> See the essay, Zhuang Shen, “Luo Pin Yuqin Guiqu tu,” *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyuan yanjiushuo jikan*, 44.3 (1972)

<sup>24</sup> For quotation, see Farrington and Zhu, pp. 86.

<sup>25</sup> For quotation, see Karlsson, Kim, Alfreda Murck, and Michele Matteini. *Eccentric Visions: The Worlds of Luo Ping*. Zürich: Museum Reitberg Zürich, 2009, pp. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Hay, Jonathan, *Culture, Ethnicity, and Empire*. RES 35, 1999, pp.201-222.

techniques to demonstrate different kinds of ghosts. Combining various brush strokes with dynamic subject images, Luo creates a series of paintings that propose ambiguous storylines to engage his audiences and offer room for interpretation and imagination. The quality of ambiguity of the Ghost Amusement scroll fascinates the viewers besides unconventional depictions. Yet, one may wonder why the invitation of different interpretations matters in the mid-eighteenth century. Therefore, a social and historical context background is necessary to understand why the ambiguity becomes the greatest appeal of the painting and how the scroll is a canvas for self-expression.

The story stretches from the late Ming dynasty to the early Qing era (early sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century) when China was ruled under the Han Chinese emperor. This period welcomed different points of view and highlighted the concept of individualism, which allowed the influential intellectual giant to shine, such as Wang Yangming and Li Zhi. As a result, this golden time released numerous autobiographies celebrating individualism; however, their heydays suddenly came to an end with the Manchu (non-Han) ruler took over China in the mid-seventeenth century. After consolidating his authority, the foreign ruler was driven to establish himself as the chosen one. To accomplish his goal, the emperor decided to ban all literary works that centered

on or celebrated individualism. For instance, an edict in 1653 writes, “those works...which self-consciously set themselves apart [from the Classics] even though their prose is artful, should not be copied out by student.”<sup>27</sup> With the restriction and censorship order in literature, a contemporary scholar like Mao Qiling destroyed years-long studies to protect themselves; the philosophical school of Wang Yangming also lost its aura.

Due to the change in politics and the literature restriction, the contemporary literati had limited space to express their talents and selves, which engendered the self-representation crisis and encouraged the scholars to find a new way to express themselves. A substitute mean was first found by the late Ming writer Zhang Dai when he released the Self-Written Tomb Inscription with the main character sharing many similarities to the author’s real life.<sup>28</sup>

In the following years, intellectual literati faced more challenges among increasing political persecution and intellectual terrorism.<sup>29</sup> During the Yongzheng era (1723-1735), literature censorship became crueler. For instance, Lu Shengnan, a lower official in 1729, was convicted and executed for discussing the feudal system of the ancient time.<sup>30</sup> “From then on [the literati] dared not discuss current affairs, they did not even dare to read the old classics. Such a literary inquisition never happened in the previous dynasties.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, an edict in 1774 under the Qianlong era expressed the emperor’s dictatorship that “heterodox opinions

<sup>27</sup> For quotation, see Huang 1995, pp.2

<sup>28</sup> Huang, Martin W. *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation: Autobiographical Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Chinese Novel*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, pp.3

<sup>30</sup> He Bang’e 1934, “preface”. The translation of the preface is from the Sheng Yang, “The Revival of Zhiguai”.

<sup>31</sup> See 自茲以往，非惟時事不敢議論，即陳古經世之書亦不敢讀矣，此真歷代文字獄所未前聞也。Xiao Hengxiangshi Zhuren 1997, pp. 249.



must be quashed that later generations may not be influenced” and would put any works he found offensive to the flames.<sup>32</sup> The literature restriction limited the resource of self-expression in the elite class. Yet, Zhang Dai and his creative writing shed light on this social concern and helped literati in finding a subtle mean to express themselves.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the following generation saw the escalating of the novel with the Zhiguai theme that implies autobiographical concern.

Pu Songling (1640-1715) was the leader of Zhiguai writing in the eighteenth century; though the compilation of his book was not completed many years after his death, an early version had been circulated in the elite circle. In his preface, Pu wrote, “My situation resembles [Su Shi in] Huangzhou, I thus enjoyed people telling ghost stories.” to clarify the intention behind his work, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. Following him, many Zhiguai writers, like He Bang’e, Zhu Hai, and Shen Qifeng, also mention that they modeled after Su Shi talking about ghosts.<sup>34</sup> De facto, Su Shi (1037-1101) is one of the well-known official scholars of the Northern Song dynasty, who was successful in many fields from literature, politics, and painting. However, after being demoted in 1079 due to a bureaucratic case, Su lost his passion for a political career and started to discuss ghosts with his friends to avoid political issues.<sup>35</sup>

So, what is the connection between this Zhiguai literature trend and Luo Ping’s artwork? In the early eighteenth century, Pu Songling initiated the craze of talking about ghosts among scholars in literati gatherings.<sup>36</sup> By talking about ghosts, these literati, like the author, modeled themselves after Su Shi, and could avoid political issues. With Pu Songling’s influence, the eighteenth century became a time of Zhiguai literature. Nevertheless, none of these literary works contain illustration.<sup>37</sup> Within the political and social context, the Ghost Amusement scroll is one of a few ghost paintings from the eighteenth century. Distinctly from other ghost paintings of his contemporary, such as Jin Nong or Zhong Kui theme painting with established iconography, the Ghost Amusement scroll displays unconventional ghost images with ambiguous storylines, that together offer a safe space for interpretations and self-expression. It would be imagined that, during the literati gatherings, the viewers shared their thoughts and backed up their interpretation with some sort of self-evidence. In addition, the quality of ambiguity encourages viewers’ interaction through colophons, which transforms the artwork into a canvas of self-expression and visual work that represents the Zhiguai theme in the eighteenth century.

With the scroll Ghost Amusement, Luo experiments with different brush strokes and techniques to demonstrate his skills to the

<sup>32</sup> Brook, Timothy. “Censorship in Eighteenth-Century China: A View from the Book Trade.” *Canadian journal of history* 23, no. 2 (1988): 177–196.

<sup>33</sup> In his book, Martin suggests that the novel genre in the late Ming was able to distance the contemporary author from himself and allowed him to explore new roles and identities.

<sup>34</sup> See Yang 盛洋, Sheng. 2015

<sup>35</sup> Tuotuo 脫脫 (ed.). 1990. *Songshi* 宋史. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

<sup>36</sup> See Chan. 1998.

<sup>37</sup> The Zhiguai literature works appear with illustration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the advent of photolithography. See Huntington. 2003.

audience. Moreover, his innovative ghostly images draw audiences' attention quickly and gain the artist's success and fame. Using brush strokes and unconventional images, Luo creates a painting that blends reality with imagination. This conflation offers the quality of ambiguity and offers a space for varied interpretations. These interpretations may or may not represent the artist's intention behind the painting. Still, they indeed show the audiences' expression, the quality that is

restricted and regained through Zhiguai literature and art by the contemporary literati. After almost three centuries, the artwork has continued inviting scholars and general audiences for new interpretations. Yet, with a different social and political background, what do people see in the painting? And, what those modern interpretations tell us about our society and its art taste?



Figure 1. Luo Ping - The Ghost Amusement Scroll (version 1766)

Pair of handscrolls, ink, and color on paper

Handscroll with eight paintings and colophons: 35.5x approx. 1500cm

Ressel Fok Family Collection

(view right to left)

(Leaf 1 is the first illustration on the right)



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