

The Terrible Victims: "Female Ghosts" as a Cultural Symbol in Chinese Indie Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper explores the symbolic role of female ghosts in the horror puzzle genre of Chinese indie video games, focusing on how these spectral figures express layered anxieties about gender, memory, and justice. Drawing from Gothic theory, folklore studies, and feminist media critique, the study compares representative games from both mainland China and Taiwan to uncover how socio-political contexts shape divergent portrayals of ghostly femininity.

Over the past decade, Chinese indie games have emerged as a space for subcultural expression, despite structural constraints such as limited funding, government censorship, and an algorithm-dominated distribution ecosystem (Gao 2018; MacKinnon 2006). These limitations have driven developers toward genres with low production costs but high narrative potential—particularly horror puzzle games. Within this genre, female ghosts have become a recurring and symbolically charged figure.

These ghosts are not mere antagonists; rather, they represent historical traumas, ethical ruptures, and gendered silences that continue to haunt modern society, especially in China (Creed 2023; Zeitlin 2007; Lai 2020). Their origins lie in a long literary tradition, from *Soushen Ji* to *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, where female spirits returned to the world of the living to seek justice, redress suffering, or bear witness to injustice (安琦 2009; 翟鹏玉 2005; 孙生 1997; 洪潇楠 2014). However, contemporary games reimagine this figure through new media affordances, articulating previously unspeakable pain and protest through spectral embodiment.

The paper analyzes four representative titles: *Detention* (Red Candle Games, 2017), *Blind Village* (Independent, 2022), *Laughing to Die* (Gamera Game, 2024), and *Firework* (Shiyang Studio, 2021). Using qualitative textual and visual analysis, it identifies two major archetypes of female ghosts: the wrathful avenger and the empathetic helper. These archetypes are regionally inflected, revealing striking contrasts across the Taiwan Strait.

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In *Detention*, the ghostly protagonist represents a generation burdened by the suppressed memories of Taiwan's White Terror (Lin 2024; Wu 2021). As a spirit caught in the school where she once betrayed others under authoritarian rule, she must undergo a redemptive journey of self-confrontation. Here, the ghost is an ethical agent and historical witness, facilitating civic reflection rather than fear. This narrative leverages Taiwan's relatively open memory culture to foreground themes of guilt, remembrance, and moral repair.

In contrast, mainland Chinese games such as *Blind Village* depict the female ghost as a figure of suppressed rage and folk justice. Inspired by real-world incidents of human trafficking and forced marriage, the ghost in *Blind Village* is a woman ritually murdered and sealed by villagers complicit in systemic abuse. Her reappearance as a vengeful spirit—clad in a red wedding dress, face obscured by hair—draws from both folkloric tradition and feminist allegory. She enacts revenge not as a monster, but as an avenger of failed institutions, mirroring popular anger over gender injustice and legal impotence.

A gentler model emerges in *Laughing to Die* and *Firework*, where female ghosts function as compassionate intermediaries. Ghostly grandmothers or teachers accompany protagonists through journeys of grief, trauma, and suppressed truth. These spirits embody what this study terms “underworld justice”—an imagined ethical system where care, remembrance, and reparation persist despite the failures of human institutions. Notably, this spectral form of justice stands in contrast to China's tradition of “state feminism,” where women's agency has often been subsumed under nationalist and revolutionary imperatives (Wang 2016; 蒙克 2013). Their spectral tenderness offers an affective counterweight to patriarchal violence and institutional neglect.

The paper argues that these ghostly figures reflect the dual pressures shaping Chinese indie horror: cultural memory and digital precarity. In Taiwan, where expression about historical trauma is relatively permitted, ghosts serve as mnemonic agents linking past to present. *Detention* and *Devotion*, though later banned in mainland China for political reasons (Kerry Allen 2019), profoundly influenced the aesthetic style and narrative ambition of subsequent mainland horror games. In mainland China, where supernatural themes are restricted in official media, indie games distributed via semi-underground platforms like Steam or TapTap re-appropriate the ghost as a subversive signifier. The female ghost becomes a workaround—voicing trauma through folklore, allegory, and horror mechanics.

In conclusion, this study positions female ghosts in Chinese indie games as “terrible victims”—figures who, through their haunting, reclaim narrative space and ethical agency. By analyzing their regional variants and symbolic work, the paper contributes to broader discussions on cultural memory, feminist aesthetics, and the politics of game design under constraint. Ultimately, these spectral women do not vanish into silence; instead, they insist on being heard, remembered, and felt—within the code, pixels, and stories of a haunted digital China.

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