



GHOSTS AND RELIGIOUS LIFE IN EARLY CHINA

Mu-Chou Poo

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For modern people, ghost stories are no more than thrilling entertainment. For those living in antiquity, ghosts were far more serious beings, as they could affect the life and death of people and cause endless fear and anxiety. How did ancient societies imagine what ghosts looked like, what they could do, and how people could deal with them? From the vantage point of modernity, what can we learn about an obscure, but no less important aspect of an ancient culture? In this volume, Mu-Chou Poo explores the ghosts of ancient China, the ideas that they nurtured, and their role in its culture. His study provides fascinating insights into the interaction between the idea of ghosts and religious activities, literary imagination, and social life devoted to them. Comparing Chinese ghosts with those of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome, Poo also offers a wider perspective on the role of ghosts in human history.

Mu-Chou Poo is Professor of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is the author of *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (1998), *Enemies of Civilization: Attitudes toward Foreigners in Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China* (2005), *Wine and Wine Offering in the Religion of Ancient Egypt* (2014), and *Daily Life in Ancient China* (2018).

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Preface

It is ironic that, after years of living with a person with passion for life and rigorous intellectual examination of things around us, I should write something about ghosts, something that death brings about, and something amorphous that often defies reason and rational explanation. There has to be a good reason for someone to spend a long time trying to describe the history of ghosts in any culture, let alone trying to establish some general understanding of ghosts in human societies, past or present. For one thing, the idea of ghosts is very much alive and even thriving in some part of the world. The metaphorical use of the idea of ghosts can be even more pervasive. Thus one can scarcely expect to reach any consensus regarding the ramifications of the idea of ghosts in human societies, ancient or modern. Yet it seems that ghosts are important constituents of human cultures and societies, and very few societies could claim to have not developed some sort of idea about ghosts, about the postmortem existence of human beings. In order to have a rounded understanding of a people or a culture, it seems logical to investigate what people think about the living as well as the dead.

Of course, whether or why one should engage in such an effort is not necessarily a totally rational or objective matter. This book can be said to have originated from my personal fascination about belief, faith, and the phenomenon of religion, within which the idea of ghosts has occupied a role. How should we understand the phenomenon that is now called “religion”? And how to explain the tug-of-war between the human and the extra-human forces that constituted the history of religions, and indeed history at large?

As a historian, I am more interested in the historical and sociocultural ramifications of religion in human societies. Although I do not have the proper training to tackle religion in all its spiritual, philosophical, or theological aspects, yet the fascination about religion led me to seek for a less conventional way to study things religious. Not by asking what is the nature and purpose of the divine, or whether god or gods exist, I found my focus on the phenomenon of ghosts, not only in Chinese society but also in other societies. This is because, as I try to articulate in this book, the idea of ghosts is almost as pervasive as god(s) in human societies, yet not enough attention seems to have been paid to this phenomenon. How did the idea of ghosts originate, how did it impact each society, and how could it help us to further understand humanity?

So this book is written with comparison in mind, although neither my training nor the space in this book allows me to engage in a full-scale comparison with other societies. I did, however, try to make some preliminary comparative observations in the first and final chapters so that the Chinese story could be placed in a proper context of multiple societies. These observations are meant to be invitations for interested scholars to join the discussion, and have by no means exhausted all the questions and issues that can be investigated.

Most of the material in this book has previously been presented in various forms as book chapters, articles, conference papers, or invited talks; thus, I have received criticism and help from numerous colleagues and students, for which I am very grateful. Here I like to thank the anonymous reviewers who helped to correct many mistakes and revised some of my understanding of the sources. For all its shortcomings, I hope this book might perhaps serve as a beginning for more in-depth studies that could advance our general goal of understanding humanity. Last, I would like to dedicate this book to my life partner Ping-chen, who constantly reminds me how far I am still away from what I claim to be pursuing.

I

Ghosts

The Other Side of Humanity

Poets, critics, historians, archaeologists, artists spend their working lives as necromancers, raising the dead in order to enter into their imaginations and experience, an ordinary and probably necessary human pastime.¹

I.1 TALKING ABOUT GHOSTS

In modern Chinese language, the concept or the term ghost (*gui* 鬼, see discussion below) appears very often, although people today may not really believe in the existence of ghosts. We often hear such expressions as “seeing a ghost (*jian gui* 見鬼, something incredible or ridiculous happens),” “ghosts fighting each other (*gui dajia* 鬼打架, a messy situation created by incompetent or irresponsible people),” “one’s mind has been beguiled/misled by a ghost (*gui mi xinqiao* 鬼迷心竅),” or “full of nonsense (*guihua lianpian* 鬼話連篇).” All these expressions suggest a common perception that the term “ghost” has a negative connotation, that the ghost is evil or up to no good. It creates chaos, fear, and anxiety for people, not to mention real harm as a result of the ghostly apparition. There are, however, also expressions that contains both ghosts and gods, and the meaning there could be more neutral, usually expressing certain awe and wonder. Examples include such expressions as “not even ghosts and gods could predict (*guishen moce* 鬼神莫測),” “by the axe of the ghosts and work of the gods (*guifu shengong* 鬼斧神工, i.e., marvelous work of an artefact),” or “appearing like gods and disappearing like ghosts (*shenchu guimo* 神出鬼沒).” It is significant to note that when

¹ Vermuele 1979: 4.

the word “ghost” appears alone in the texts or in conversations, it usually has a negative meaning, but when it appears together with the word “god,” its meaning is usually neutral and could in fact be synonymous with god. This actually resonates with the use of the terms *gui* and *shen* in the ancient texts, to which we shall return in [Chapter 2](#).

In many parts of the Sinic world, moreover, people still take ghosts seriously. One can often encounter religious rituals involving the embodiment of certain ghost in the performer, or exorcistic rituals performed by Daoist priests to drive away evil ghosts. In Taiwan and many overseas Chinese communities, the Ghost Festival and the Ghost Month, that is, the seventh lunar month, when the hungry ghosts are released from the *diyu* (地獄, “underground prison,” a Buddhist term usually translated as “Hell”) and seeking sustenance on earth, are still widely observed.² People avoid getting married in this month, and construction works often commence before or after it. In post–World War II Taiwan and Hong Kong, a large number of popular films took the advantage of people’s fascination with ghost stories, whether newly created or adapted from traditional sources. The Qing Dynasty writer Pu Songling’s (蒲松齡, 1640–1715) *Strange Tales from the Studio of Conversation* (*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異) was a favorite trove for modern ghost films.³ Yet Pu Songling had his predecessors. The Song Dynasty writer Hong Mai (洪邁, 1123–1202), among many others, left posterity with a story collection called *Yijian zhi* (夷堅志) in which many ghost stories were preserved.⁴ Before the Song Dynasty, there are a large number of short stories about strange events that involve ghosts and spirits, the origin of which could be traced far back in time, to the pre-imperial period. Notable among these are the legends and stories from the Tang Dynasty⁵ and the *Anomaly Tales* (*zhiguai* 志怪), a term for a group of story collections about supernatural events involving ghosts and spirits, purportedly written by various writers of the Six Dynasties period. Most of these stories are lost and are preserved only in excerpts in later works, notably, in the Song Dynasty encyclopedia of literary works, the *Taiping Guangji* (太平廣記).⁶

² For a study that traces the development of this concept in early China, see Teiser 1988.

³ Pu Songling 蒲松齡, *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異. See several studies in English on the ghost stories in *Liaozhai*: Zeitlin 1993, 2007; Kang 2006.

⁴ Hong Mai 洪邁, *Yijianzhi* 夷堅志. See Li Jianguo 1997: 335–57. The *Yijian zhi* was utilized to study the religious life of the Song period by Davis 2001.

⁵ See Li Jianguo 1993.

⁶ See a most important trail-blazing work by Lu Xun 1986. Lu’s work is now supplemented by Li Jianguo 1984, 2011.

We can further extend this back to the Han Dynasty and even earlier times, but since we shall discuss this in the following pages, suffice it to say that the idea of ghosts is a living part of the modern Chinese parlance and culture, and accounts about ghosts have a long tradition in Chinese society. Even in the earliest texts currently available – the Shang oracle bone inscriptions – the term “ghost” already features prominently, as it was often suspected to have caused illness to the king and his family.

To trace the origin of the popularity of ghosts, we could point to one of the enduring puzzles and sources of anxiety of human existence, that is, the inevitable fate of death, the great equalizer. Where are we heading to and what will happen when our life crosses the border of daylight and enters into that unknown Dark City, a name given to the netherworld in the third-century BCE text *Chuci* (楚辭)? Is the end of life the end, or is there something more to it? From very early on people began to have all sorts of speculations. Some ancient philosophers, perforce of their rational mind, denied the existence of an afterlife. According to a story contained in the work attributed to the third-century BCE philosopher Zhuangzi, when Zhuangzi’s wife died, a friend found him not grieving, but sitting and singing while beating a pot. Dismayed, his friend inquired why he behaved in such an unsympathetic way. Zhuangzi launched his famous view of the cosmos and explained that when a person was born, the body was formed by the concentration of the *qi* (氣 ether); and when the person died, this body of *qi* will be dispersed into the universe again. Life and death are therefore the natural movement of the *qi* in the universe, thus there is nothing to be sad about that.⁷ A similar idea was expressed by the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus of Abdera (c. 460–370 BCE), as his idea of atom, the basic element that constituted everything in the universe, functions very much the same as the *qi*. Yet Zhuangzi and Democritus are but two extreme cases. Their views certainly could not have provided the average person, in the East or the West, with a satisfactory answer or solution regarding the origin and destination of life, or whether or how the dead could survive in another form and place. In any case, long before any thinker could have offered their explanations or speculations, the prevailing beliefs or the accumulated wisdom in a society would have already provided certain solutions. For those belief systems that postulate a life or world beyond this one, a certain form of postmortem existence of a person, be it called soul,

⁷ See *Zhuangzi jishi* 614–15.

phantom, or ghost, has to be assumed. This form, moreover, has to have certain attributes imaginable to the human mind, be they color, shape, or weight. For it is this existence that is supposed to enter into that unknown world of the dead, for better or for worse. It is this existence, whether one likes it or not, that would sometimes come back to the world of the living, which, of course, conjures up all the problems between the living and the dead, and forms the subject of this study.

The concept of ghosts must have begun in the prehistoric period, as suggested by the existence of burials and funerary objects. It is logical to assume that if the funerary objects were meant to be used by the dead in the netherworld, this implies that people who supplied the objects must have assumed, however vaguely, that the dead had certain ability to act and use the objects. But we can confirm this assumption only when written evidence is available. As we shall see in the following, although people in different societies could have different assumptions about the form and ability of their ghosts, as well as about the relationship between the ghosts and the living, the basic assumption that ghosts possess a certain ability to act, even as feebly as the shadowy figures in Homer's works, is present in all societies. What, then, is the significance of ghosts in human society, and why do we need to study them? We shall gradually unfold these questions and develop meaningful answers in the following chapters.

Although the origin of the idea of ghosts is lost in prehistory, once it came into being, there had to be a corresponding set of assumptions about the features of a ghost, its character, its relationship with the human world, and so on, that people could relate to and interact with. That is to say, by formulating a recognizable image, the imaginary now acquired a realistic status in people's minds, and became a concrete cultural entity. It would therefore not be surprising if ghosts were imagined as to have possessed certain characteristics just as living people did – though not necessarily in a human form, for it would be cognitively challenging to conceive of an “existence” without having at least some of the elements for the human mind to recognize and associate with an “animated being.” Thus this imagined form of existence would require a certain shape, weight, or color. It might also have physical and verbal capabilities, expressions of feelings, emotions, and even the possession of a moral sense. Supernatural power, moreover, was usually part of the picture.

In order to explain the inexplicable or the extraordinary, one would have to pull together all that one could gather from one's cognitive repertoire to form a description of ghosts. Thus even if one might not

have the experience of seeing a twenty-foot-high black ghost that flies, one could have in this cognitive repertoire all the conceptual elements (such as twenty feet high, black color, ugly face, flying) to construct such an image. In sum, to imagine a ghost involves the cognizance in the human mind of various elements that constituted the concept of an “animated being.” The mind gathers or retrieves these elements from experiences, and constructs or reconstructs them into an existence, using imagination. It is also precisely because of the individual differences of minds that mutually conflicting imaginations would be formulated. An early example of this working of the human imagination are the numerous spirits mentioned in the third-century BCE text *The Classics of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing* 山海經). Among the various “hybrid” spirits are those with “bird’s body and dragon’s head,” “dragon’s body and bird’s head,” “dragon’s body and human’s face,” “human’s face and horse’s body,” “human’s face and cow’s body,” or “goat’s body and human’s face.” All these betray a kind of mental hybridization of different parts of known images of human and animals.⁸ Some figures found on the painted coffin of Marquis Zheng (d. 433 BCE), thought to be protective spirits, are shown indeed with human body and bird’s feet,⁹ thus corroborating the descriptions in the *Classics of Mountains and Seas*.

Given the above observation, it seems fair to say that personal and social experience would supply a major portion of the material for the imagination of that existence after death and the abode that such an existence would enter and reside in. The ghost – the term that is often used to denote this postmortem existence – and the world in which it resides, therefore, could be considered as conditioned by the social and cultural contexts of the living in which the conceptions of death and afterlife are conceived. In other words, the idea of the ghost, despite its multifarious shades, can be examined as a social imaginary or cultural construct that complements the world of the living, as the other side of humanity.

Yet such an imaginary, being a product of culture and therefore having the characteristics of a culture, could not have a constant and unchanging composition.¹⁰ It is inevitable that it would have gone through changes throughout history. Even within a culture and at a given time frame, there could still have existed a variety of conceptions of ghost. As Catherine Bell indicates regarding the appropriation of cultural

⁸ Poo 1998: 57–62. ⁹ Hubeisheng bowuguan 1989: vol. 1, 28–45.

¹⁰ Berger 1967: 8.

assets, “any one person may appropriate parts of the culture.”¹¹ Thus it should not be surprising that different people would have appropriated different parts of the collective imagination and thus created a multifarious scene for the observers. On the other hand, once the idea of ghosts becomes an independent agency, it could exert real impact on religious beliefs, collective imagination, and all sorts of sociocultural phenomena. In other words, there is a reciprocal interaction between ideas and society.¹² If people imagine, inherit, or invent ideas of ghosts, then these ideas could also haunt, terrify, console, change, or even entertain the world of the living in distinct ways, with a profound influence on history in general and religion in particular.

Exactly how collective imagination produces or sustains each specific cultural phenomenon is a vastly underexplored subject. Similar to collective memory,¹³ collective imagination could be understood as a social act through which people’s imaginations congeal or converge in a particular sociocultural context that works as a filter to extract a more or less congruent consensus.¹⁴ The idea of ghosts, according to this line of thinking, could not have been the creation of a single mind or even a minority of people in society. The reasons why certain features of ghosts (e.g., weightlessness, fearsome look, or supernatural ability) could become commonly accepted descriptions of such beings must have been the result of a kind of collective consensus to allow certain features to pass as conditions of ghostly existence. Yet as we shall discuss in the following chapters, this collective image of ghosts, while passing down through generations, also evolves with changing social and cultural environment. Through the writing and talking about ghosts in literature and in exorcistic texts, the ideas can often be enriched and transformed by the users over time, as demonstrated, for example, by scholars studying Greek idea of the *psychē*.¹⁵ Thus with the changing conception of ghosts, we could detect a corresponding change of collective imagination, which may in turn reflect changing social values and religious propensities. For usually ghosts appear with reasons, and the reasons are prompted and supported by prevailing social values and sentiments. The study of ghosts, of how and why they appeared, therefore, gives us an opportunity to examine how collective imagination works in different societies, and how ghosts

¹¹ Bell 2004. The quote is from p. 101.

¹² Geertz 1973: 94–98.

¹³ For collective memory, the classic study is Halbwachs 1992. See also Connerton 1989: 37–83.

¹⁴ Poo 2009b.

¹⁵ Bremmer 2002: 1–4.

could serve as a vantage point to observe social values and sentiments. The fact that each cultural system produces its own version of the netherworld, and its own kind of ghosts, suggests that although the need to produce certain explanations regarding death and afterlife might be similar among all societies, the actual result may differ according to specific cultural/local conditions. Again, having said this, we do not suggest that there could be only one understanding in any one culture about what a ghost was or is, since, just as discussing religious beliefs, we should be cautious about seeing the belief in ghosts in any culture as embodying a coherent system of meaning without internal contradictions or deviations.¹⁶

We have, however, been discussing ghosts as imaginary beings and have not touched on the issue of the reality of ghosts. Whether ghosts exist or not – a question yet to be answered – deserves some consideration here. Ever since the beginning of recorded history in human societies, ghosts of various types made their presence and caused impact to societies in various degrees. Most modern scholars tend to see records of ghostly sightings as the result of various combinations of imagination and cognitive functions of the human mind. Yet even if ghosts are just the figment of human imagination or hallucination, the imagination itself is still a real cultural entity that has exerted an impact on human society. If, however, ghosts do exist, we still have to distinguish between the “real” ghostly sightings and the imaginative or cognitively mistaken ones, which, given the nature of historical records, would constitute some difficult challenges.¹⁷ That is to say, even if ghosts really existed, the report of ghostly sightings, just like any other “historical facts,” could have been recorded and transmitted through all sorts of distortions, alterations, and imaginative additions that made the “true” record obscure, especially given the extraordinary inflammatory and controversial nature of the subject of ghosts, even in the ancient world. The fact that we may not be able to decide if a record about a ghostly apparition was true or not reminds us to leave some room for doubt – not only about the truthfulness of the record but also about what kind of truth we are seeking to understand. In the present study, we will have to set aside this problem of whether or not ghosts indeed existed, and pay attention to the cultural and religious environment that allowed or nurtured these records, and the

¹⁶ Bell 2004.

¹⁷ There are a considerable number of studies of ghosts and apparitions that involve parapsychology. For a summary, see Baker 2003.

meaning and revelations that they could shed on contemporary society. Ultimately, we need to assess the impact ghosts – whether as a reality or as an imaginary entity – exerted on human society, just as we need to do with any other subjects in history. There is the reality, and there is the imagined reality. Both could exert real impact on society and culture. The indeterminable nature of ghosts seems to be an ideal reason to explore the records in all their ambiguous and ambivalent aspects.

1.2 CROSS-CULTURAL TYPOLOGIES OF GHOSTS

The previous section has, for the sake of convenience, referred to the postmortem existence of the dead as “ghosts.” However, when we examine the terminologies used in various religious cultures to describe the state of human beings after death, it becomes clear that there are certain limits to the application of the English term “ghost.” For the modern English user, the term “ghost” usually refers to the spirit or soul of a dead human being; however, in other cultures, there could be multiple kinds of postmortem existence of human beings, thus multiple terms referring to these existences. It is necessary, therefore, to consider at the outset whether the modern English term “ghost” is appropriate to represent the various forms of postmortem existence that we encounter in other cultures.

The earliest reference to a postmortem existence is likely the ancient Mesopotamian concept of *eṭemmu*.¹⁸ This *eṭemmu*, according to Mesopotamian mythology, originates from the flesh of the gods, resides in the human being, and is released after death. Because it is originally part of the gods, who by definition are immortal, it explains why it could continue to exist when the body decayed. This also suggests a certain connection between human beings and the gods, as this divine element is what makes human beings different from all the other creatures. The distinct divine feature of this *eṭemmu* makes the Mesopotamian “ghost” different from other ghosts that are merely the remainder of human beings. However, this divine nature does not afford the ghost a superior existence. The *eṭemmu* is often imagined as having the shape of a human being and leading a shadowy life in the dark corner of the underworld with no end of this misery in sight.¹⁹ This bespeaks, at least partially, to

¹⁸ For a general account, see Alster 1980; Cooper 1992, 2009.

¹⁹ Bottéro 2001: 105–10.

the Mesopotamian's pessimistic attitude toward the meaning of life and a generally gloomy view of the world.

For the ancient Egyptian conception of postmortem existence, it is well known that there are three kinds of "souls": the *ka*, the *ba*, and the *akh*. The *ba*, usually in the form of a bird with a human head and hovering in and around the tomb, represented the faculty of free movement between the worlds of the living and the dead. In literary works, this *ba* could sometimes be seen as the moral conscience of a person. The *ka*, etymologically related to the concept of "sustenance" or "life force," usually appeared in the full life-form of the deceased, representing the living body, to which the offerings are made. But it is the *akh*, represented in the form of an ibis, that can be seen as the best equivalent to the idea of "ghost," since it could interact directly with the living and could exist in the company of the ancestor spirits. It is often translated with the rather enigmatic term "transfigured spirit." It seems that the Egyptians deconstructed the essential characteristics of a person and identified these with three different agents or spiritual manifestations.²⁰ Such rich imagination of the postmortem existence of human beings cautions us not to take for granted what we consider as a simple concept.²¹

For the ancient Israelites, the Hebrew term *ʾôb* narrowly refers to the soul of the ancestors, thus could be seen as the closest concept to the idea of ghosts. The term *rēpāʾîm*, on the other hand, specifically refers to the dead Canaanite lords who are trapped permanently in Sheol, the realm of the dead.²² Thus there is no one term that could express an idea of ghosts for the dead in general. When and if ghosts are mentioned, however, the common description is that they are shadowy figures, weak and powerless, confined and contained forever in Sheol. Though this is similar to the Mesopotamian idea of ghosts, and rightly so because of the cultural connection between the two, the ghosts in ancient Israel were not known for their malevolence or vengeance. They did not terrorize or threaten the living.²³

²⁰ Assmann 2005: 87–112 is of the opinion that when a person dies, their entire existence disintegrates into different elements, including the *ba*, the *ka*, the heart, and the image and the body, etc.

²¹ A classic study of the Egyptian conception of death and afterlife is Kees 1926. Zandee 1960 has the eye-catching title: *Death as an Enemy*. A study treating all aspects of death-related phenomena in Egypt is Assmann 2005. A recent study of the Egyptian souls is Eyre 2009.

²² See Davies 1999: 92–93. ²³ See Wan 2009.

The situation with the ancient Greeks is again somewhat different. Instead of differentiating categories of the postmortem existence of the dead, the Greeks used a number of terms to refer to the condition of the deceased, among them *eidōlon* (image), *psychē* (soul), and *phasma* (manifestation). Each of these terms refers to certain aspect of the person, yet their common character is the lack of wit and life power, or *phrenes*. In the classical period, *phasma* may play the role of “evil ghost” that could somehow interact with the living in a tangible way.²⁴ Compared with the Egyptian *ba*, *ka*, and *akh*, it seems that the Greek conceptions of *eidōlon*, *psychē*, and *phasma* differ from each other not by their division of the human life characteristics but by their representing the different conditions of the same soul.

The Romans seem to have made some distinction between different categories of the dead: *anima* (soul), *umbra* (shade), *manes/lemures* (ghost in general), *lares familiares* (ancestral ghosts), and *larvae* (threatening ghost). Yet exactly how different these are is debatable.²⁵ The Roman *manes* is an example that shows the inadequacy of the use of the term “ghost/*manes*” as something opposed to “god,” since the difference between the *manes* and the gods is not their nature, but their power and influence. As a contrast, the Greek ghost would never be able to become divine, since divinity by Greek definition is immortal, while the ghost – be it *eidōlon*, *psychē*, or *phasma*, is only the residue of the mortal, the dead.²⁶

Similar to the Roman *manes*, the ancient Chinese term *gui* has often been considered as the equivalent of the English term “ghost,” that is, the spirit of the dead person. Yet, as we shall discuss below, it is clear that in early China the term *gui* could also refer to the spirit of divine beings, or nonhuman spirits/demons. The difference between a ghost/*gui* and a god/*shen* is not the fact that they possessed supernatural power, but whether or not they can perform certain benevolent or miraculous deeds that could prompt the people to revere and worship them. Those ghosts that could justify their power by performing worthwhile deeds stand in good chance to be apotheosized. Those that could do only harm, however, remain evil ghosts. Yet even the so-called *guai* (怪), *mei* (魅), *wu* (物), and *jing* (精) – goblin, animal spirit, or demon, respectively – may not be totally evil. The concepts of *gui* and those beings that are called *guai*, *mei*,

²⁴ For an account of the conception of ghosts in Classical antiquity, see Bremmer 1983 and Finucane 1996.

²⁵ See Ogden 2001: 219–30. ²⁶ King 2009.

wu, or *jing*, though relatively distinct – *gui* refers mostly to the ghost of the dead, while *guai*, *mei*, *wu*, and *jing* refer mostly to the spirits of nonhuman agents – have always retained a certain degree of overlapping ambiguity.²⁷ To complicate the matter further, there are two Chinese terms, *hun* (魂) and *po* (魄), that could also refer to the spiritual existence of the dead. Although still a subject of debate, the *hun* seems to refer to the soul of the dead which rises up to the heavens, while the *po* seems to refer to the more physical aspect of the dead that tends to remain in the tomb underground. Detailed analysis of available evidence shows that depending on the time period and the textual contexts in which they appear, the *hun* and the *po* could and indeed had been regarded as synonymous.²⁸ Although in this study I concentrate mostly on the “human ghost,” sometimes the available texts could lead to spiritual beings of nonhuman origins. Yet my goal has always been to use the material available to portray the religious environment in which the average people lived. Whether or not the “thing” that a person encountered was a “human ghost” or a “fox spirit,” the more interesting messages that are worth pursuing are why the “thing” appeared, how the “thing” interacted with the living, and how the living could find a way to deal with the situation, malicious or otherwise.

As we shall see in Chapter 6, when Buddhism came to China, the need to use Chinese terms to translate the various forms of Indian “ghosts” and “demons” presented some challenges as well as opportunities for the Buddhist monks to engage in a cultural rapprochement. An example of the ambiguous meaning of spirits is the demon/ghost Vetāla, which inhabits a corpse and talks to the living, but is also considered a sort of divine being. The fact that the Chinese translation of the name Vetāla contains the character *gui* (ghost) – *qishigui* 起尸鬼 (meaning “the ghost that could raise a corpse”) – indicates that there is some ambiguity in the Chinese understanding of the “status” of Vetāla: Is he considered a god or a ghost? Is this simply a translation problem, or does it convey certain property of Vetāla?²⁹ In any case, in the Chinese context, the term *gui* could indeed refer to the spirit of a god, thus the translator of the term “Vetāla” might have solved this ambiguity already by using this term. Nevertheless, the fact that it is

²⁷ Du 2001; Lin 2005.

²⁸ For discussions, see Yu Ying-shih 1987; Poo 1993a: 208–12; Brashier 1996; Lai 2015: 43–46.

²⁹ See Huang 2009.

referred to as *gui* but not *shen*/god might have hinted at a certain evaluation of the nature of Vetāla.

Despite all the nuances of the different types of “ghost” – if we may still use the term – there are certain important similarities among them that could exemplify the kind of social need that prompted people’s imagination of the fate of the dead, and the relationship between the living and the dead. As can be demonstrated easily, there are some common types of ghosts in various religious cultures: evil ghosts who are harmful to humans, benevolent ghosts who might help particular people they choose, vengeful ghosts who feel mistreated by the living and seek justice, distressed ghosts who need help from the living because of their own impotence, playful ghosts who might have certain messages to convey to the living, and so on. These various types of ghosts can be seen as the embodiments of various kinds of social needs of the living, since the behavior of ghosts and their relationship with the living are conceived mostly in the context of solving certain problems that confronted social values and ethical systems. From the typology of ghosts, therefore, there is a chance to see what a society needs in terms of how to handle the relationship between the living and the dead, as that need is somehow fulfilled by the deeds or misdeeds of ghosts. In seeking to understand the sentiment and need of people far away from us in time and space, we gain more understanding of humanity. The pursuit of the phenomenon or the phantom of the ghost can be part of this effort.

1.3 LOOKING FOR GHOSTS IN EARLY CHINA

Although ancient China is a place where ghosts thrived, the study of ancient Chinese culture and society has traditionally concentrated on rational achievements such as those in philosophy, literature, art and architecture, or the empire and its ruling apparatus. Even when the “spiritual” aspects are discussed, the focus tends to be on cult worship, sacrifice, scriptures, and moral or ethical values. Sages or sage-hood, for example, are among the favorite subjects for modern scholars.³⁰ Ghosts, on the other hand, are usually no more than the subject of curiosity that deserves no serious study. However, as mentioned above, there is actually a long tradition of ghost stories in Chinese literature, and ghosts feature prominently in popular religion throughout Chinese history. Indeed,

³⁰ See a most recent example, Sterckx 2011.

recent scholarship in China has seen a surge of interest in popular religion and ghost culture, yet most of these works are mainly interested in cataloguing and categorizing various types of deities and ghosts, and the theme of “expelling superstition” is still held as the goal of study.³¹ An exploration of ghosts in early China that encompasses the various social, cultural, gender, and religious ramifications, moreover, was even more rarely attempted.³² In the West, a study of the Six Dynasties’ *Anomaly Tales* (*zhiguai* 志怪) by Robert Campany extended the study of ghost stories from literary concern to a search for the interrelationship between literature, society, and religious beliefs.³³ Other studies mainly concentrated on the literary aspects of the *Anomaly Tales*, often from a gender perspective and highlighting a psychological reading of the factor of male sexual fantasy in stories concerning female ghosts.³⁴ Of course, there are also a number of studies on popular religion of the Tang and Song period, in which ghosts are featured.³⁵ Some of the more extensive studies in the Western scholarship, however, concentrate mostly on the ghost stories of the Ming–Qing period.³⁶

The present endeavor, in view of the works done in the Ming–Qing period, and the need to provide a fresh understanding of ghosts in early China, traces the presence of the idea of ghosts from the earliest time until the sixth century CE, before the reunification of the country under the Sui and Tang empires.

Methodologically, this study takes an interdisciplinary approach to the phenomenon of ghosts in early China. From the point of view of religious studies, I shall discuss the position of the concept of ghost within the belief system that it occupied. What is the significance of the concept of ghost in relation to the central tenets of the belief system? What role did ghosts play in the belief system? From the point of view of historical studies, issues to be discussed are the development of the concept of ghost as shown in different sources (textual, archaeological), and the social and cultural implications of the changing conception of ghosts. From a socio-theoretical point of view, how people imagine and deal with ghosts is

³¹ Among these Xu Hualong 1991, Wang Jinglin 1992, and Ma Shutian 2007 are better examples.

³² My previous studies of the ghost issues have been incorporated into the present book. See Bibliography.

³³ Campany 1991, 1995: 199–201.

³⁴ Yu 1987; Yan Huiqi 1994; Mei Jialing 1997: 95–127.

³⁵ Chan 1987; von Glahn 2004; Davis 2001.

³⁶ Such as Zeitlin 1993, 2007; Chan 1998; Kang 2006.

mostly formulated by the social and cultural context in which the conception of death and afterlife is nurtured. Thus the conception of ghosts can be examined as a social imaginary. From a psychological-cognitive point of view, we need to consider the issues of imagination and experience. Was the ghost a figment of the imagination? How to explain the claim that people have regarding their experience with ghosts? A story in *Xunzi*, to be discussed in the [next chapter](#), tells about a person who imagined his shadow to be a haunting ghost, which is an example of imagination fed by experience.³⁷

The formation of the concept of ghost, moreover, is not merely related to the issue of imagination, since imagination is closely related to experience. The question then is whether similar experience would forge similar imagination. The answer, again, could not be a simple one, since experience happens within the context of particular sociocultural environment as well as personal life stories. How people in general imagine the existence of ghosts and how individuals in society experience and react to ghosts, therefore, are not necessarily the same. Yet given the broadly similar cognitive function of the human mind, there should be no doubt that since experience is based on cognition, human experience shared certain characteristics conditioned by the cognitive functions.

What this book is trying to accomplish is to use the case of Chinese ghosts to serve as a basis toward building a comparative understanding for the phenomenon of ghosts in human societies. We shall try to examine the impact of the concept of ghosts on Chinese society in a historical context, as the evolution of the conception of ghosts could be an indication of the changing social and religious mentality. I shall also try to articulate the concept of ghost in early China by asking some key questions: Where did people think ghosts come from? What did they look like? How did people recognize and treat ghosts? How did they affect people's lives? How did people imagine their relationship with human beings? What was their role in the belief systems? How did they affect literature, art, and transform people's idea of the world? What makes ghosts terrifying? What makes them malicious? And what makes them also vulnerable? When did people begin to talk about ghosts in a benign manner, and why? By revealing the reasons behind these questions, we could appreciate even more the power of ghosts. They could not only exert certain influence on society and the human psyche, but also reveal to

³⁷ *Xunzi jijie* 270; cf. Watson 1963: 134–35. See [Chapter 2](#).

us the character of the society that produces such kinds of ghosts at a particular time. Thus I see the idea of ghosts not only as a cultural construct but also as an agent that constructs a culture, and there is a reciprocal relationship between the conception of ghosts and cultural development. To study ghosts, therefore, is really to study the culture that produced them from a particular angle.

The sources for this study range from the earliest oracle bone documents of the Shang Dynasty to the newly excavated texts of the late Warring States and Qin Han periods, and all the transmitted texts from early China until the Six Dynasties. There are the literary sources such as *The Book of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經), *The Commentary of Zuo* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳), the works of various philosophers and the Confucian Canons, and historical works such as *The Record of the Grand Scribe* (*Shiji* 史記), *The History of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書), *The History of Later Han* (*Houhanshu* 後漢書), and, most prominently, the Buddhist and Daoist texts and the *Anomaly Tales* (*zhiguai* 志怪) of the Six Dynasties period. These sources provide us with the basic outline of the development of the concept of ghost in early China. They provide stories or comments about ghosts that could be put to inquiry. There are also nonliterary sources such as the oracle bone divination records, funerary texts, and exorcistic texts such as the “Demonography” in the *Daybook* (*rishu* 日書) of Shuihudi. As the nature of the sources varies greatly from one to another, we need to consider each type of document with caution. The most important questions to ask about the sources are the problems of authorship and intentionality: Who produced the document, for what purposes, and for whom? Once these basic questions have been considered, we could then move to the next stage of deciding the significance of the documents: What kind of social stratum, cultural background, or even intellectual affiliation could these documents represent? What kind of social and religious message could they carry? What was the relationship of one type of document with another? What are the limitations of the documents? What could they not tell us? What could be our own biases? Although we could not interview the people who left the records, as researchers of parapsychological phenomena today could with their informants, we still need to consider the multiple factors that might have influenced the reporting, as the storytellers might have been motivated to tell ghost stories for a variety of reasons: to attract attention, to gain satisfaction, to make excuses, to establish certain authority, to confirm what the storyteller believes in, to make a point regarding morality, to have some fun, or a combination of these. By weighing the evidence with

these questions, we should perhaps be willing to take a less strict stand than insisting that there is only one possible way to interpret the sources. For, regarding the matter of ghosts, few of us could remain neutral.

1.4 THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

After the above consideration of the conceptual and methodological foundation of the study of ghosts, and after a cursory account of different types of ghosts in some ancient societies, [Chapter 2](#) examines pre-imperial documents that have to do with the origin, nature, function, and image of ghosts, and the reaction and accommodation ghosts received in the forms of ritual propitiation, prayer, or exorcism. It will be basically a text-oriented study of the ancient documents, from the Shang Dynasty oracle bones to the Classical texts to such excavated texts as the Shuihudi *Daybook* and the Baoshan bamboo text, to establish a basic outline of the phenomenon of ghosts in early China. This chapter shall also discuss the emergence of discourses of the significance of ghosts in society, mainly among thinkers such as Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Mozi. These discourses of ghosts should not be confused with the concept of ghosts in the minds of the ordinary people. Yet in order for the philosophical or literary representations to be effective and convincing, the thinkers' arguments or representations would have to be built on a commonly accepted, though not necessarily the only, concept of ghosts. Toward the late Warring States period, as shown in texts such as *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annal* (*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋) and *The Rite of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), there was an intellectual trend to systematize the conceptions of gods and ghosts into a more coherent structure. The texts foresaw a centralized structure of the spiritual world after the establishment of the universal empire. The world of the dead, in particular, would become a place that resembles the world of the living, with a comparable bureaucracy.

[Chapter 3](#) examines various textual and iconographical expressions of the idea of ghosts in the Qin and Han Dynasties, and investigates how the official and the private spheres interacted with one another and affected the development of ghosts and related ideas such as the netherworld. After the establishment of the imperial order, the official religious rituals were given a uniform – though still evolving – structure, yet the idea of ghosts persisted in people's daily life and developed according to local traditions. The case of witchcraft of Emperor Wu's reign (91 BCE) shows

a general fear of ghostly malice among court and common people alike.³⁸ The imperial cults that performed in the capital and at various locations throughout the country, therefore, was supplemented or even overshadowed by the belief in ghosts represented by various cults and practices, equally spread from the court to the various strata in society. It was also in this period that the ideas of the netherworld began to be more graphically represented in our sources, which provide some interesting new understanding of the nature of ghosts. In fact, the development of the concept of the netherworld as an underground bureaucracy also had a profound influence on the development of the concept of ghosts. This bureaucratic imagination of the spirit world, the netherworld, or the celestial world became a lasting model for the religious imagination of the Chinese in the following millennia.

Chapter 4 discusses the rise of literary representation of ghosts from the end of the Han dynasty to the era of disunity, the Six Dynasties period (third to sixth centuries CE). A special literary genre, the so-called *Anomaly Tales* (*zhiguai* 志怪), which emerged at the end of the Han dynasty and flourished during the subsequent Six Dynasties period, made ghost stories one of the central themes. The motif of ghosts in these stories received literary embellishment and conceptual refinement and had great influence on the idea of ghosts in the subsequent Chinese religion and culture. This chapter therefore explores this literary world of ghosts, studies their images and characters, and tries to account for their behavior, whether they are malicious or benevolent, and their possible influence on the worldview as well as the religious and emotional life of the period. I shall also try to uncover the intention of the authors of ghost stories: Who were they, and who was their intended audience? Moreover, by describing the world of ghosts and their relationship with the living, the authors also helped to shape that world and those relations. Ghost stories were not only material for entertainment, but also sources for critical comments on human nature and contemporary society. That ghosts are described as having all sorts of emotions and moral senses in the *Anomaly Tales* indicates that the imagination of ghostly existence was largely modeled after the living.

Since Daoist religion grew out of the soil of Qin–Han China, an examination of how it dealt with ghosts could serve as a useful indication of how and in what sense Daoist religion had become a distinctive

³⁸ Poo 2021.

religious tradition. In [Chapter 5](#), I concentrate particularly on a number of early Daoist texts, and also compare Daoist ideas of the nature and origin of ghosts, their images and functions, and the exorcistic rituals, with those of the pre-Daoist Chinese popular religion. This comparison could delineate more clearly the difference, or the lack thereof, between the Daoist religion and popular religious cults. The Daoist religion, in fact, claimed that society was plagued by all sorts of ghosts and that its mission was to contain and expel the ghosts for the benefit of the people. In sum, the idea of ghosts as represented in the early Daoist texts bears a certain similarity to the earlier idea of ghosts in pre-Qin and Han period. The similarities lie in the need of exorcism, the reasons for the appearance of the ghosts, and the images of the ghosts. There are also differences, however, which indicate a change of the intellectual foundation and social environment, and a changed worldview. The Daoist texts collectively show a conscious promotion of a worldview in which myriads of ghosts were actively engaging in the lives of the common people. This conceptual scheme of a vast space filled with ghosts had never been clearly spelled out before the end of the Han dynasty. By claiming their ability to control this world of ghosts, the Daoist priests tried to establish their authority as efficacious exorcists, with the help of the texts that contained the secrets of this malicious world.

[Chapter 6](#) discusses early Buddhist views and treatment of ghosts. When Buddhism came to China, it did not come into a religious vacuum. Besides trying to win over the attention of the literati class, Buddhist advocates also needed to confront whatever popular beliefs they set out to convert. Early Chinese Buddhist texts, therefore, also abound with references to popular religious activities, including the worshipping of ghosts and spirits. An examination of the idea of ghosts in early Buddhist literature and accounts about the activities of Buddhist monks could therefore provide a concrete focus for our understanding of at least part of the extent of the “Sinicization” of Buddhism. It is worth noticing that, when the forces of Buddhism and Daoism played out, both tried to use the framework of the popular conception of ghosts to further their own causes. Both, of course, claim to be able to handle the problem of ghosts for the people. Yet without really breaking away from that traditional framework but admitting the existence of ghosts, the culturally constructed idea of ghosts handed down from the pre-imperial period was never replaced, thus leaving open the possibility of the later development of popular religion with which both Daoism and Buddhism are deeply entangled.

Finally, since the phenomenon of ghosts is universal, this exploration of the significance of ghosts in early China could constitute a basis for further comparison with ghosts in other parts of the world. The similarities and differences among ghosts of China, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Greco-Roman world will be the subject of discussion in [Chapter 7](#). Because only through comparison, even in a limited way, can one appreciate the individual characteristics of each culture. If the story of ghosts in early China could serve as an extensive example of the power of ghosts in creating a culture of their own, with the major theme being the changing nature of ghost-human relations, could similar or different situations be found in other cultures? What would the findings tell us about the universal and the particular of religious beliefs in human societies? All these could be investigated profitably under the light of comparison.

Since ghosts constitute the other side of humanity, the nature of ghosts has multiple facets. There can and should be multiple ways to understand the meaning of ghosts as part of humanity. What we should not try is to give a single explanation of the origin, nature, function, and cultural significance of ghosts. The sources we have reflected the fear and hope of people in different times, places, and life situations. Thus, although the chapters in this study follow a chronological order, we do not suggest that there is a linear development of progressively complicated imagination of ghosts, although the sources at our disposal may suggest that at certain periods of time there seemed to be some special characteristics of the imagination regarding various features of ghosts and their relationship with humans. What we see in the sources are better understood as different manifestations of the imagination of ghosts at particular time and space.

On the other hand, of course, we are not giving up the opportunity to investigate the concept of ghosts as a cultural construct and product of history. If we agree that cultural change occurs with the progress of time and that each distinct cultural development brings about new ideas and new cultural phenomena, the investigation of the changing idea of ghosts may supply some particular windows for us to look into the character of that period.

As the Buddhist saying has it, one can see a world through a grain of sand. A study of the idea of ghosts in all its ramifications through history could reveal a world that is less known and not told in the usual cultural history that deals with the achievements of human beings: art, literature, philosophy, or even science. We shall try to enter the Dark City, or Yudu (幽都) – one of the names that was given to the netherworld in

pre-imperial China, and reveal the world of ghosts. By providing a fresh view of the significance of ghosts in early China, our understanding of the characteristics of Chinese society and mentality may become more nuanced. For the ghosts, although hidden in the Dark City, eventually have to come out into the light and reveal to us the dark corners of the hopes and anxieties of the living. We expect this study to contribute to the understanding of not only religious beliefs in general, but also the experiences of the people as reflected from a less explored aspect of their lives.

The Emergence of Ghosts in Early China

How abundantly do ghosts and spirits display the powers that belong to them! We look for them, but do not see them; we listen to, but do not hear them; yet they enter into all things, and there is nothing without them.¹

A painter who lived in the fourth century BCE once was asked to paint for the king of Qi, a state located in present-day Shangdong province in eastern China. The king asked: “What is most difficult to draw?” The painter answered: “Dogs and horses are the most difficult to draw.” The king asked again: “What is the easiest to draw?” The man answered: “Ghosts are the easiest to draw.” This, the author of the story explains, is because dogs and horses are well known to the people and are seen daily, thus it is easy for the people to detect any deficiency in the painter’s representation. On the other hand, since ghosts have never appeared to human eyes, any wildest scribble would not be inappropriate; therefore, they are easy to paint.² The author of the text was Han Fei (韓非, ?–233 BCE), the founder of the Legalist School of thought, which had a most profound influence on the development of law and statecraft in Chinese history. The original intention of this story, knowing the author’s interest and the context of the narrative, was to expound the idea that it is more difficult for one to perform within the confines of certain system of measurement than without any measurement. Thus the importance of

¹ *Liji zhengyi* 52:12.

² *Hanfeizi jijie* 11:202. A similar idea is found in *Huainanzi* 13:6a: “Nowadays painters like to draw ghosts and demons and dislike drawing dogs and horses. Why? This is because ghosts and demons never appeared on earth, while dogs and horses can be seen daily.”

law. Yet by using the example of ghost-painting to illustrate his point, the author inadvertently tells us that it was perhaps a commonly accepted view that ghosts were something formless and difficult to capture by human imagination. Indeed, Confucius himself was once heard saying:

How abundantly do spiritual beings (*guishen* 鬼神, i.e., ghosts and spirits) display the powers that belong to them! We look for them, but do not see them; we listen to, but do not hear them; yet they enter into all things, and there is nothing without them. They cause all people in the kingdom to fast and purify themselves, and array themselves in their richest dresses, in order to attend their sacrifices. Then, like overflowing water, they seem to be over the heads, and on the right and left [of their worshippers]. It is said in the *Book of Poetry*: “The Spirits come, but when and where, no one beforehand can declare. The more should we not Spirits slight, but ever feel as in their sight.”³

This passage is from the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), a collection of Confucian teachings and anecdotes probably collected and redacted during the third century BCE.⁴ It is difficult to know to what extent the followers of the Confucian teaching would subscribe to this view, yet by virtue of its being recorded in the prestigious canon and regarded as the saying of Confucius, this passage tends to leave the impression that Confucius (or his disciples) regarded ghosts and spirits as invisible beings. In the Confucian *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), Confucius once said that one should “revere the ghosts and spirits but keep a distance from them.”⁵ The rationale of this statement seems to be that, as a humanist, Confucius encourages his students to pay more attention to the affairs of living people based on secular principles, rather than following the instructions of ghosts and spirits as propagated through those religious personnel such as shamans. However, this statement, as well as the *Book of Rites* passage quoted above, makes it clear that Confucius did not deny the power and efficacy of ghosts and spirits. We should also recognize that Confucius and his followers constituted only an extremely small group of intellectuals in their contemporary society. The majority of the people in pre-imperial China, from the tenth century to the third century BCE, would probably have had some idea of how a ghost should look like, though they might not have agreed with each other. To trace the origin and development of the concept of ghosts, however, it is necessary that we go back to the earliest documents.

³ *Liji zhengyi* 52:12; trans. (with slight change) Legge 1960: vol. 2, 307–8.

⁴ Loewe 1993. ⁵ *Lunyu zhushu* 6:54.

2.1 THE MEANING AND ORIGIN OF *GUI*, OR GHOST

As discussed in the [previous chapter](#), the concept of ghost in the Chinese language context is often represented by the term *gui* 鬼. However, the term *gui*, just like the English term “ghost,” has more than one layer of meaning. Thus the *gui* = ghost equation is, strictly speaking, not unproblematic, as we shall see below.

The modern Chinese character of *gui*/ghost is a direct descendant of the oracle bone graph of *gui* (𩺰) of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1100 BCE). Attempts at explaining the original significance of this character vary from seeing it as the death mask to seeing it as the mask of a shaman, as originating from the idea of fear, *wei* 畏, or as connected with the word *gui* (歸, to return), as the dead return to the underground, as stated in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*): “All the sentient beings will eventually die, when they die they will definitely return to the earth, this is called ‘*gui*’ (ghost),”⁶ which is all inconclusive.⁷ The Eastern Han scholar Xu Shen (許慎, c. 30–124 CE), in his monumental etymological dictionary *Shuowen* (說文), explained the origin of the character *gui*: “What is [the meaning of] *gui* (鬼)? It is ‘to return’ (*gui* 歸) (鬼者歸也).” This rather terse explanation essentially agrees with the *Book of Rites* and assumes that the meaning of the character *gui*-ghost is connected with the idea of a person returning to the underground after death. Yet this connection is based merely on the phonetic semblance of the two characters, that is, *gui*-ghost and *gui*-return, while no explanation is given about the character *gui*-ghost itself. What can be certain is that when the oracle bone inscriptions were being used, the idea of certain spiritual beings that could inflict harm to humans had already been conceived and expressed with the graph, which later proved to be the word for *gui*-ghost. For example, *gui*-ghost appears in the dream of the Shang kings: “[It has been] divined, Ya [personal name] often dreamt of ghosts”;⁸ “Divined, often dreamt of ghosts”;⁹ although it is not clear whether the dreams were bad dreams or not, other appearances of *gui* suggest its malicious nature: “Divined, [will be] plagued by ghosts.”¹⁰ Or *gui* could be connected with sickness.¹¹ Thus the contexts in which these examples appeared seem to suggest that

⁶ Liji: 祭義: 眾生必死,死必歸土,此之謂鬼。

⁷ Ikeda 1981: 155–98; Shen Jianshi 1986; Guo Guanghong 1993. See also Lai Guolong, 2015: 36–37.

⁸ Yao 1989: 125, no. 17448.

⁹ Yao 1989: 125, no. 17450.

¹⁰ Yao 1989: 126, *tun* 4338.

¹¹ Yao 1989: 125, no. 14277.

gui was understood as a kind of malicious spirit that could cause harm or illness.

In addition, *gui* was also part of the name of a foreign tribe, the Guifang 鬼方 (literally, “the region of the ghosts”), which occurs a number of times in the oracle bone inscriptions as the place where the Shang kings attacked.¹² That the term carried a certain sense of denigration regarding the foreign tribe, similar to the later terms *man yi rong di* (蠻夷戎狄, i.e., the barbarians of four corners) can be reasonably assumed.¹³

As for the subsequent Zhou period (c. 1100–256 BCE), the contemporary documents, that is, the bronze inscriptions, present a mixed picture. The character of *gui* does not seem to appear in the bronze inscriptions of this period with the meaning of “ghost,” or the spirit of the dead, but was mostly used in the compound term of Guifang 鬼方, which already appeared in the oracle bone inscriptions. However, the graph of *gui* was used as part of some other characters, indicating that it had acquired a distinct meaning and could serve as an “ideogram” or “radical” in the formation of a character/concept. The characters that have *gui* as their “radical” suggest that the graph of *gui* representing a category of malicious spirits was not different from its use in the earlier Shang period.¹⁴

In the *Book of Poetry*, one of the earliest surviving canonical texts from the Zhou period, the word *gui* appeared only twice; one, again, as part of the term “Guifang,”¹⁵ the other as denoting an evil spirit or ghost:

Now I use these three creatures for sacrifice,
In order to secure a curse on you,
If you were a ghost (*gui*) or a short fox (*yu* 蜮),
Then I could not get you.¹⁶

Here *gui* is mentioned together with *yu* (蜮), a type of evil spirit in the water that was believed to be able to bring harm to people. This is also in concordance with the meaning of *gui* in the oracle inscriptions and the bronze inscriptions. In other passages in the *Book of Poetry*, the term *shen* 神, or spirit, is often used in the sense of the spirit of the ancestors¹⁷ or the deities in a honored and revered way.¹⁸ Thus the same word

¹² Yao 1989: 126, no. 8591–93. ¹³ Poo 2005a: chapter 3.

¹⁴ Zhou Fagao 1968: vol. 11, 5661–86. ¹⁵ *Maoshi Zhengyi* 18/1:5

¹⁶ *Maoshi Zhengyi* 12/3:18. ¹⁷ *Maoshi Zhengyi* 13/2:7.

¹⁸ *Maoshi Zhengyi* 17/4:3.

“shen” in the Chinese texts could be understood and translated as “god/deity” or “spirit/soul” in the English language.

Since both *shen* and *gui* denote spiritual beings, it seems natural that both would share some overlapping qualities. In fact, in many pre-Qin texts the concept of *gui* can be applied to various spiritual beings. For example, in *The Commentary of Zuo* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳), the first extensive historical chronicle probably compiled in the fourth century BCE, the term *gui* is associated with two meanings. First, when used in combination with *shen* to form compound terms, as in *guishen* 鬼神, it can be synonymous with *shen*, referring to the spirits of the deities.¹⁹ The same use of *gui* is also found in such early texts as the *Book of Change* (*Yijing* 易經),²⁰ the *Book of History* (*Shangshu* 尚書),²¹ or the Daoist philosophical work *Zhuangzi*.²² Moreover, a number of examples show that the terms *shen*, *guishen*, and *gui* are interchangeable, indicating that the concept of *gui* was regularly used in reference to the spirit of a deity.²³

Second, however, there are instances in *The Commentary of Zuo* in which the term *gui* clearly refers to the spirit of a deceased person, who is not a divine character.²⁴ A similar situation is found in the Confucian *Analects*. The few references to ghosts and spirits in the *Analects* show that the term *gui* could refer to one’s own ancestor,²⁵ and *guishen* as a composite term could either refer to spirits in general (including ancestral spirits and gods),²⁶ or be synonymous with *gui*/ghost.²⁷ This shifting of meanings suggests that the original meaning of *gui* was a generic term referring to the spirits or souls of human beings, deities, or even animals. The fact that in the oracle bone and bronze inscriptions as well as in the *Book of Poetry* the word *gui* seems to refer only to human ghosts of a malicious nature can be understood as limited representations of the possible wider semantic range of the concept of *gui*.

This mixed use of *gui* and *shen* suggests that the later distinction between *gui* as the spirit of the dead and *shen* as the spirit of the gods had not yet been clearly made. This is another reason why the concept of *gui* cannot be regarded as the exact equivalent of “ghost” in its modern English connotation. Here ethnological data on the conception of ghost and spirit in modern southwestern China may provide a meaningful comparison. It has been noted that in many minority groups there the

¹⁹ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 3:7; 4:24; 6:18. ²⁰ *Zhouyi zhushu* 2:33.

²¹ *Shangshu zhushu* 8:14; 13:8. ²² *Zhuangzi jishi* 150.

²³ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 12:23; 38:12; 49:12; 54:4. ²⁴ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 18:13

²⁵ *Lunyu zhushu* 2:10. ²⁶ *Lunyu zhushu* 6:8. ²⁷ *Lun-yu zhushu* 11:4.

concept of ghost – whether good or evil – was prevalent, but the concept of deity or god was relatively vague. In some cases it seems that the good or benevolent ghosts later could become gods (*shen*), while the unfriendly ghosts could become the “ghosts” that would harm people.²⁸ Similar cases could be found in early China.

The *Book of Rites* contains an explicit statement about the origin of *gui* that seems to limit the concept of *gui* to the human dead: when a person died, it is called *gui*.²⁹ In the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), the concept of *gui* is also clearly separated from the concept of *shen*, the “heavenly spirit (天神 *tianshen*),” and is referred to as the “*rengui* 人鬼,” the “human ghost.”³⁰ This, however, does not preclude the possibility that other spiritual beings could still be called *gui*.

In the *Mozi*, the book of the Warring States philosopher who propagated universal love, the author employs a common-sense approach to look at the existence of ghosts and spirits. The author insists that if people have seen and heard about ghosts and spirits, then ghosts and spirits must exist. Mozi cites one example to support this view:

If an example is to be given that shows a ghost seen by many and heard by many, then the story of Du Bo is one. The King Xuan of Zhou killed his subject Du Bo unjustly. Du Bo said, “My Lord kills me unjustly. If the dead has no sense, then that is the end. If, however, the dead possesses sense, then within three years I shall let my lord know about it.” After three years, King Xuan assembled the vassals and hunted at the ranch, with several hundred chariots and thousands of followers that filled the field. At noon, Du Bo appeared on a black chariot drawn by a white horse, dressed in red gown and cap, holding a red bow with red arrow, and chased King Xuan. He shot the king on his chariot, hit his heart and broke his spine. The king fell in the chariot and died prostrated on his armor. At the time, all the people who followed the king saw it, and those at the distance all heard about it, and it was written in the chronicle of Zhou. Thus kings could teach their subjects and fathers could warn their sons, saying: “Be very cautious and discreet! Whoever kills innocent people will receive inauspicious signs, and the punishment by ghosts and spirits will come as quickly as this!” Seeing from the saying of this book, who could doubt the existence of ghosts and spirits?³¹

It is clear that the author’s intention was to use the story as evidence of the power of ghosts and spirits to avenge for wrongdoing, so as to induce the fear of the common people and to promote moral values so that an orderly society could be maintained. *Mozi* further stated, “The ghosts and

²⁸ Xu Hualong 1991: 5–7. For details, see Harrell 1974; He Zhiwu et al. 1993.

²⁹ *Liji zhengyi* 46:6. ³⁰ *Zhouli zhengyi* 18:1.

³¹ *Mozi xiangyu* 8:153. The story also appears in *Guoyu* 1:11.

spirits (*guishen*) of past and present are of three kinds only: the ghosts of Heaven, the ghosts of the mountains and rivers, and the ghosts of men who have died.”³² Instead of using *shen*, here, as well as elsewhere, Mozi employed *gui* to refer to the spiritual beings of Heaven, earth, and human beings.³³ This might have been a deliberately archaic use of the term *gui* as “spirit” in a general sense.

In the *Hanfeizi*, the book of the Legalist philosopher we met at the beginning of this chapter, a clear idea of malicious ghost was also expressed, but *gui* and *shen* were still interchangeable concepts,³⁴ and the term *guishen* was employed synonymously with “spirits” in general.³⁵ Here we need to point out that these ancient texts reflect mainly the idea of the elite literary tradition, where the authors would use expressions with subtle twists of meanings by mixing old conceptions with the new, or even instilling intended archaism. Nonetheless, neither Mozi nor Han Fei’s arguments could carry any persuasive power if their stories did not sound credible enough to their intended readers/audiences. These readers/audiences were certainly the minority in society, yet we cannot exclude the possibility that their view of ghosts and spirits might not deviate from that of the common people.

Of course, if we wish to find a view that may represent ideas that belonged to a wider section of society, we should look at materials that originated from the nonelite social stratum. Thanks to archaeological discoveries in the past few decades, we now have some textual evidence that might have represented views that had a more popular basis. One of the most important new archaeologically excavated texts is the *Daybook* (日書 *rishu*) from Shuihudi, modern Hubei province, discovered in 1972 and dated to the late third century BCE. Written on bamboo slips, this is basically an almanac-like text that contains various methods for the user to choose appropriate days to conduct daily activities such as traveling, house construction, marriage, farming, commercial exchange, and the like.³⁶ Among various chapters that contain these methods, however, there is a chapter named *jie* (詰), which literally means “inquiry,” but the content suggests that it could be understood as a kind of “Demonography.”³⁷ Instead of selecting auspicious dates, it is a

³² Mozi *xianqu* 8:153; Watson 1967: 107.

³³ Mozi uses the term “ghost of Heaven, *tiangui*” several times; see Mozi *xianqu* 29, 50, 124.

³⁴ *Hanfeizi jijie* 104. ³⁵ *Hanfeizi jijie* 42–43, 89.

³⁶ Poo 1998: chapter 4; Harper and Kalinowski 2017.

³⁷ Harper 1985. For translation of the text, see Harper 1996.

collection of exorcistic methods to expel all sorts of ghosts and evil spirits that people encountered in their daily life. What is interesting is that this text lists the names of a few dozen “*gui*/ghosts,” where the term *gui* indiscriminately refers to the spirits of human beings, animals, or even inanimate things such as trees, rocks, wind, and fire. To give a few examples, there are the “ghost of the mound (*qiugui* 丘鬼),” “sad ghost (*aigui* 哀鬼),” “infant ghost (*airu zhi gui* 哀乳之鬼),” “ghost of the thorn bushes (*jigui* 棘鬼),” “innocent ghost (*bugu gui* 不辜鬼),” “violent ghost (*baogui* 暴鬼),” “hungry ghost (*egui* 餓鬼),” and so forth.³⁸ This use of the term *gui* indicates that in the conception of the wider populace – as the *Daybook* is arguably a product of the sociocultural environment of the lower-middle echelon of society at the end of the Warring States period³⁹ – *gui* could be used to refer to harmful spirits of a variety of origins. To the users of the *Daybook*, it seems, whether these spirits were of human or nonhuman origins was not really their main concern. The important thing was to be able to recognize the names of the evil spirits, because, similar to many early societies, knowing the names means having control of the entities, whether humans or spirits. Interestingly, the names of a few ghosts in the *Demonography* actually contained the word *shen* – such as *shengou* (神狗), possibly the “spirit-dog,” or *shencong* (神蟲), the “spirit-insect.”⁴⁰ It is clear from the context that these are malicious ghosts; thus, the use of the adjective *shen* in their names should be understood not as something divine but as the supernatural power that these demonic beings possessed.

Another important piece of evidence is the by now famous story of resurrection discovered in 1986 in a text found in a Qin tomb from Tianshui, Gansu province, dated to the third century BCE, which gives us an unexpected account of the characteristics of a ghost.⁴¹ The story tells about a person named Dan – a servant of an official by the name of Xiwu – who committed suicide because he had wounded someone in a fight, perhaps unintentionally. His body was exposed on the marketplace for three days before he was buried – obviously a kind of punishment for the crime that he had supposedly committed. Three years after his death, his former master Xiwu, for whatever reason, reopened the case, and found that Dan should not have deserved death for his crime. Thus Xiwu

³⁸ Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 212–16. For a list of the ghosts, see Harper and Kalinowski 2017: 245.

³⁹ Poo 1998: 84–92. ⁴⁰ Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 212, 213.

⁴¹ Li Xueqin 1990; Harper 1994; Gansusheng kaogu wenwu jianjiuso 2009.

reported this to the Secretary of Controller of Fate (*siming shi* 司命史), a divine official who kept the roster of human life span. The Controller of Fate, whose name was Gongsun Qiang, thus had a white dog dig Dan out from his tomb. Dan stood on top of the tomb for three days, then he went with the Controller of Fate to the northern region of Boqiu (Mound of Cypress). Four years later, he was able to hear the sound of dogs and chicken and to eat like an ordinary human being, while his limbs were still feeble. This extraordinary story provides a rare glimpse of the society, legal system, funerary customs, and vivid imagination and literary expression of the people at the lower echelon of the government in the late Warring States period. Our attention here shall focus on the idea of death and the netherworld.

According to the account, when the dead Dan comes to life again, he did not possess the normal bodily senses and functions as the living, and had to be resuscitated gradually. However, the dead were not without senses of their own. As Dan recounted after his resurrection, the dead, or ghosts, did not wish to put on much garments, and they favored white rushes, a medicinal plant with magic powers. Moreover, the ghosts would detest those relatives who came to the tomb to make offerings yet for the real purpose of eating the food, so much so that they would vomit by the tomb, presumably because they ate too much of the food. One can vividly imagine such an unwholesome scene by the grave side. The ghosts would also like their grave site be cleaned carefully. People should not pour broth over the offering, because ghosts would not eat it. These little details, in a sarcastic way, reveal a lot of the social reality of the day, and very interestingly complemented the famous story about a man of the Qi state who daily went about the graveyard and ate from the leftovers of people's food offerings, and yet told his wife and concubine that he was invited to dine with some dignitaries.⁴² The story was told by Mengzi (c. 372–289 BCE), who was a keen observer and critic of the social customs of his time.

It is interesting to note that the process of resurrection seems to be a gradual regaining of the senses, possibly a reverse of the situation when one dies, when bodily senses were gradually lost. What is unclear, however, is whether or at what point of time the ghost of the dead “returned” to the body when the dead was revived. The story did not elaborate on the “crossing line” of life and death, as we are not informed of how or when

⁴² Mengzi, Li Lou II: chapter 33, translation: Legge 1960: vol. 2, 340–41.

or if the ghost went back to or was reunited with the body. It merely says that when Dan was dug out of the tomb, he stood on top of the tomb for three days, then he went along with the Controller of Fate to the north. Indeed, we are not even sure if the ghost of the dead ever left his physical body. When it is mentioned that ghosts did not like to wear clothes, and did not like to eat soaked food, one logically must assume that the ghosts still possessed certain physical functions or mobility that was not together with the body, which should have lain motionless in the tomb.

It is also extraordinary that Xiwu the master could have access to the Controller of Fate, since the later should have been a divine officer who did not reside in the human world. The figure of Siming (Controller of Fate), moreover, appeared in the *Song of South (Chuci)*, a collection of ritual songs that could have been performed at various religious rites in the region of the Chu state, in which the poet portrayed a “Grand Controller of Fate (Da Siming)” and a “Junior Controller of Fate (Shao Siming).” Both of these were apparently heavenly deities. In the *Rite of Zhou (Zhouli)*, one of the duties of the Grand Master of Ceremony (*dazongbo* 大宗伯) was to make sacrifice to Siming, thus confirming the idea that Siming was a heavenly deity. What is interesting is that the story seems to suggest that the worlds of the living, the divine, and the dead could all be interacting with each other, since the dead in the tomb could see or know what people offered to the dead at the tomb. Viewing it from a literary point of view, the story betrays a literary motive that became prevalent in the Six Dynasties period, in which the worlds of the living and the dead often intermingled with each other. Moreover, we need not employ our modern sense of logical thinking to examine the narrative, such as whether the ghost was separated from the body, with the body in the tomb all the time, or if the ghost never left the body. We should not expect to find a scholarly essay about the nature of ghosts in this story. Instead, the story reveals to us some glimpses of the current perception of ghosts, of the possibility of finding justice for those who died of injustice, of the imagination of life in the netherworld, and a tongue-in-cheek comment on the ghost-human relationship.

The above discussion of the meaning of *gui* in early China based on received texts and newly excavated manuscripts demonstrates that by the late Warring States, or the third century BCE, the term *gui* could refer to spiritual beings of a variety of origins: some are human dead, some are other animate or inanimate things, some are even “gods.” Among these some are unfriendly to humans for various reasons. On the whole, it is widely accepted, among both the elite and the common people, that the

human dead usually would become a *gui*-ghost, whether an evil one or not. As we shall further discuss below, when a ghost receives proper burial and sacrifice, he becomes the ancestor of his descendants, and should theoretically rest in peace. Those that did not receive proper burial and sacrifice, or died of certain untimely or violent death, on the other hand, could become evil ghosts (*li* 厲) and have the potential to come back to the world and haunt or harm people. Moreover, throughout history, the term *guishen* was constantly used as a collective term for “spirits” in general. In later documents the terms *wu* (物) and *guai* (怪) are often used to denote spirits of nonhuman agents. The spirits of nonhuman agents, moreover, could often appear in the guise of human beings. This, presumably, causes some confusion as to the difference between a “human ghost” and a “nonhuman ghost/demon,” as they all look like human beings. In the Qin *Demonography* mentioned above, there is a passage about the spirit-insect: “A *gui*-ghost who is wont to follow men and women, and who goes away when it sees other people: it is the spirit-insect (*shencong* 神蟲) who disguises as a human being. Use a sharp sword to stab its neck, then it will cease to come.”⁴³ Thus in the imagination of the people there seemed to be no fixed pattern as to what a human ghost or a nonhuman spirit should look like, human being or otherwise. This brings us to the problem of the image of ghosts and spirits.

2.2 THE IMAGE OF GHOSTS

What does a ghost look like? This seemingly simple question has prompted endless imaginations and debates. Our evidence concerning ancient China must have represented only a small portion of what had actually existed in the minds of the people then. Nonetheless, by examining these incomplete samples one can still acquire a rough idea of what the entire picture might have looked like. The question also hints at the issue of the formation of the conception of ghosts as a collective imagination, and the relationship between cognition, experience, and imagination.

In the story of the avenging ghost of Du Bo mentioned earlier, we are told that when Du Bo’s ghost came to take his revenge, he appeared in bright daylight and rode on a chariot, shot an arrow, and killed the king.

⁴³ Shuihudi qinmu zhujian zhenli xiaozu 1990: 213.

The image of the ghost in this story is exactly the same as that of the deceased person himself. The action of the ghost is also exactly like that of an angry, living person seeking revenge. Thus the only criterion to judge if this figure is a ghost or not is the knowledge or the assumption that the person in question had died already. Similarly, a story in the *Lüshi chunqiu* (呂氏春秋 *Master Lü's Chronicle*) mentioned a naughty ghost who was able to disguise himself as the sons and brothers of the villagers and to play tricks on them. No one in the village could have known, simply by his appearance, that the ghost was not a "living person":

In the north of Liang there is a place called Liquiu Bu, where there was a strange ghost who liked to imitate the likeness of people's sons, nephews, and younger brothers. In the town there was an old man who went to the market and came back drunk, and the ghost of Liquiu turned into the form of his son and held him and tortured him on the way home. When the old man returned home and sobered up, he scolded his son and said: "I am your father, didn't I care for you? I was drunk, and you tortured me on the way, why?" His son cried, bowed to the ground and said: "This is wicked! There is no such thing. You can ask the people to the east of the town tomorrow." His father believed him and said: "Yes! This must have been the strange ghost. I have heard about this." The next day, he again went to the market and drank, thinking that he might meet the ghost and kill it. Thus he went to the market and got drunk. His real son feared that his father could not return safely, so he went to meet his father. The old man saw his real son, drew the sword and stabbed him. The old man's wit was confused by that which resembled his son and so killed his real son. So if one is confused by the false gentleman and misses the true gentleman, this is like having the wit of the old man of Liquiu.⁴⁴

Although the story seems to be a rather burlesque one showing the foolishness of the old man, it at least confirms our observation that among local societies the idea that a ghost looks like a living person was not at all uncommon. The author of *Lüshi chunqiu*, however, takes the opportunity to make it into an example of the importance of discretion in one's observation of people and things. This is another example that the elite utilized a story that could have originally circulated in society and made it a convenient example for moralization.

The *Demonography* in the *Daybook* also mentions a ghost who was wont to cohabit with women and called himself "the son of God on High."⁴⁵ This ghost must have assumed the physique of a human being.

⁴⁴ *Lüshi chunqiu* 22:5b. A similar story is found in Gan Bao, *Soushenji* 搜神記. See *Soushenji*, 198.

⁴⁵ Shuihudi qinmu zhujian zhenli xiaozu 1990: 215.

All these examples indicate a belief that saw no particular physical feature that could effectively distinguish a human-shaped ghost from an ordinary living person. Without the instruction of manuals such as the *Daybook*, it was impossible for people to know that the entity was actually a ghost. Whether people could later discover if they had seen a ghost or not, then, was not guaranteed.

Some ghosts, indeed, possessed certain unusual physical features, such as the ghost who appeared in the dream of the Duke of Jin, with disheveled hair spreading down to the ground.⁴⁶ The amusing story of an adulterer in *Hanfeizi* reveals the idea that a ghost might look like a naked man with disheveled hair.⁴⁷

A man of the state of Yan named Li Ji liked to travel afar. His wife had an affair with another man. One day Li Chi came back unexpectedly when the man was in the inner chamber. His wife was frightened. Her maid said: "Let the young gentleman be naked with disheveled hair and rush straight out through the door. Then we will pretend to have seen nothing." Thereupon the man followed her advice and ran out through the door. Ji said: "Who is that?" People in the house all replied "Nobody." Li Ji said, "Have I seen a ghost?" His wife replied: "Certainly!" "What shall I do then?" "Take the excrement of five kinds of animal and bathe in it." Ji said: "All right!" So he bathed in the excrement. [Another version says the man bathed in orchid soup.]

This story might hint at the idea of a ghost as a kind of spiritual existence of the person, which resonates with the resurrection story mentioned above, when Dan said that the dead did not like to wear clothes. However, this idea did not seem to have been widely circulated in the collective imagination of ghosts either in ancient China or anywhere else. The fact that most accounts of ghosts would show them dressed in proper garments – such as Du Bo in his red gown and cap – indicates a fundamental issue regarding the idea of ghosts: in order to recognize a ghost, it is necessary to have proper garments so that the ghost could be recognized in a normal and conventional fashion. A naked ghost might be equal to an anonymous ghost.

The ghosts in the above examples, however, are at least still in the shape of human beings. Other stories indicate the possibility that the ghost of a dead person could assume the shape of an animal,⁴⁸ or vice versa. Just as the shadow-like ghost in ancient Mesopotamia or in ancient

⁴⁶ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 26:29. See discussion below.

⁴⁷ *Hanfeizi jijie* 182–83; see Poo 1998: 58. ⁴⁸ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 8:17.

Greece (see [Chapter 7](#)), similar ideas were found in ancient China, as shown in another story about a neurotic and suspicious person:

There was a man named Juan Shuliang who lived south of Xiashou. He was stupid and easily frightened. One night he was walking under the moonlight when, glancing down and seeing his shadow, he took it for a crouching ghost. Looking up, he caught sight of his own hair and took it for a devil standing over him. He whirled around and started running, and when he reached his home he fell unconscious and died.⁴⁹

The story of poor Juan suggests a world haunted by shadow-like, formless ghosts, similar to some of the Mesopotamian and Greek ghosts that we shall discuss in [Chapter 7](#). Of course, when Xunzi recounted this story, he was not concerned with the appearance of ghosts, but only using this story to emphasize the importance of staying sane and rational. In the *Demonography* chapter in the *Daybook* of Qin, ghosts are described as having a variety of different shapes, some human, some animal, others inanimate things. One could well characterize the *Demonography* as a sort of catalogue of ghosts in a flourishing ghostly community.

The text in the *Demonography* further makes it clear that it has the authority to identify which ghosts are responsible for people's experience of certain strange phenomena, sicknesses, or other calamities. Sometimes even without the sight of a ghost, certain strange or disastrous events could be identified as the doings of ghosts; thus, ritual acts need to be applied to eradicate them:

Whenever people in a house are having nightmares and cannot rest, this is because a ___ ghost lives there. Take a club made of peach wood and thrust it at the four corners and the center of the house. Then hang a knife made of thorn on the wall, and pronounce: "Ho! Get out quickly! If you do not get out today, I shall use the thorn-knife to strip your garment." Then there should be no more trouble.⁵⁰

Thus, people's experience would have to be sanctioned by a certain authority (in this case the authority of the *Daybook*) to be recognized or imagined as related to the actions of ghosts. In other words, there was a correlation between experience, imagination, and cultural sanction. People often could not tell a ghost was a ghost simply by looking at its physical body, unless given certain attributes, such as disheveled hair and nakedness, or other obviously evil doings. For the invisible ghosts,

⁴⁹ Xunzi jijie 270; cf. Watson 1963: 134–35.

⁵⁰ The name of the ghost is missing. Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 214.

moreover, people's own experiences would have to be informed by imagination and authoritative interpretation.

It seems that in order to recognize a ghost, psychological factors such as fear of darkness, and physical experiences such as strange sounds, physical distress, or disease would all have to be subjected to interpretation. The interpretation could come from instruction manuals such as the *Demonography of Daybook* or those exorcistic texts mentioned in the *Treatise on Books* (*Yiwenzhi* 藝文志) of the *History of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) (see Chapter 3).

The images and accounts associated with ghosts in the pre-Qin period, as they turned out, are mostly negative. In the book of *Zhuangzi*, there is a story about Duke Huan of Qi and the ghost of the marshes. Duke Huan of Qi saw a ghost while he was hunting in the marshes. When he returned, he became sick. People therefore assumed that the duke had been harmed by a ghost. A certain person by the name of Huangzi went to see Duke Huan and told him that he could not have been harmed by a ghost. Instead, Huangzi said, it was because the *qi*-energy in the Duke's body was not in balance. Still, the duke asked if ghosts indeed existed. Huangzi then answered yes and proceeded to describe the various ghosts that dwelled in all places. The ghost that dwelled in the marshes was called Weiyi, and "it is as large as the wheel, and as long as the axle, it wears purple clothes and a red cap. It hates to hear the sound of thunder-chariot. When it does, it will raise its head and stand up. Anyone who sees it may become a hegemon (*ba* 霸)." After hearing this, Duke Huan laughed and said: "This is what I have seen." Henceforth he straightened his garment and cap and sat up with Huangzi. In less than a day his sickness was gone.⁵¹

The story itself is of course a satire about the vanity and feeble-mindedness of Duke Huan, and a demonstration of the wit of the storyteller Huangzi, who might be qualified as a proto-psychotherapist, for he turned the bad omen of seeing a ghost into an auspicious one by manipulating the duke's pride and fear. Yet the background of the story was based on a common conception that the ghosts could be something with strange and horrific features. The story about Weiyi, moreover, most probably was not an invention of the writer but was based on existing beliefs, since a similar spirit was also mentioned in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a collection of geographic information about the

⁵¹ *Zhuangzi jishi* 650.

world that includes descriptions of local beliefs, compiled perhaps between the late Warring States and early Han Dynasty.⁵²

It is curious to notice that, witnessing all these descriptions of the images of ghosts, very few actual paintings of ghosts are available or remain for us to see today. As mentioned in [Chapter 1](#), there are some samples of the strange “deities” or “spirits” found in connection with funerary objects, including the painted coffins of Marquis Zeng and of Lady Dai from Mawangdui Tomb no. 1. Yet these figures are basically benign protective spirits and not “ghosts” in the sense of the souls of deceased persons. It was not until the early Tang Dynasty, it seems, that some painters were known to specialize in painting religious figures, deities, and ghosts. The famous Tang painter Wu Daozi (吳道子, c. 680–759 CE) was known to have painted a scene of *diyu* (Buddhist Hell) depicting suffering ghosts, for moralizing purposes. Zhang Yanyuan (張彥遠, c. 815–907 CE), in his *Notes on Famous Paintings in History* (*Lidai minghuaji* 歷代名畫記), mentioned the achievement of Wu Daozi, and that some Buddhist temples preserved paintings about “gods and ghosts,” painted by Wu Daozi and other painters.⁵³ None of these paintings has survived. In the history of Chinese art, it seems that “ghosts” are not a subject that people normally wanted to paint, perhaps exactly because of the evil or inauspicious associations that ghosts carried. The Qing Dynasty painter Luo Ping (羅聘, 1733–1799), known for his series of ghost paintings as a kind of social sarcasm, was apparently an exception that proves the rule.

To recognize a ghost and identify its name and behavior, to sum up, was the important first step in dealing with the ghost. While the ordinary people may, with the help of manuals such as the *Daybook*, be able to identify a ghost, the reality could be far more complicated, and certain authorities, that is, people who possessed the expertise to identify ghosts, would have to be invoked. Similar to the religious personnel who were authorities in matters concerning the worshipping of a deity, therefore, the business of recognizing ghosts produced certain specialists who could also become the interpreters of the ghostly sightings. They were the mediators of the relationship between ghosts and human beings after the ghosts were identified. As we shall see later, these would eventually include the shamans, Daoist masters, and Buddhist monks.

⁵² Poo 1998: 98.

⁵³ *Lidai minghuaji*: 31–33.

2.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GHOSTS AND HUMAN BEINGS

The above discussion shows that there was a general consensus that the term *gui*-ghosts referred basically to the spirits of dead human beings, although other nonhuman spirits could also be called *gui*. Theoretically, therefore, everyone would become a ghost after death and join the company of the ancestors. Yet not all the dead would stay with the rest of the ancestors, but would instead come back to haunt the living. Why did these ghosts appear, or what caused them to appear? A common conception is that people who died of violence or of an unnatural or untimely death would become haunting ghosts (*ligui* 厲鬼) and appear either to their kinsfolk or friends to demand a proper sacrifice and burial or to their enemies to avenge for the “injustice” (whether they deserved it or not) that they suffered.

A famous story in the *Zuozhuan* relates the haunting ghost of Boyou, a corrupt nobleman of the state of Zheng who was killed in civil strife. His ghost was later seen by the people, and allegedly several of his curses against his enemies seemed to have been fulfilled. Finally, it was the able minister Zichan who came up with the idea to grant an official title to Boyou’s son so that the ghost of Boyou was satisfied, because now his descendant could make sacrifice to him properly with official honor. Zichan’s explanation was “when the ghost has a place to return to, it will not become malicious. What I did was to give it a place to return to.” Later when Zichan was asked about the event – “Could Boyou *still* become a ghost?” – Zichan replied:

Yes. When a man is born, that which is first created is called the *po* (魄) and, when the *po* has been formed, its positive part (*yang*) is called *hun* (魂). If one is well provided for, his *hun* and *po* grow strong, and possess intelligence and clear mind, and could even reach the divine luminaries. When ordinary men and women die of violent death, their *hun* and *po* can still attach to the living and become licentious demons (*yinli* 淫厲), not to mention Liangxiao [i.e., Boyou], who was the descendant of our former lord, the grandson of Ziliang and son of Zier, the official of our estate – three generations of officials... And since he died of violence, it is appropriate that he should become a ghost.⁵⁴

Here is the idea that people who died a violent death could become revenging ghosts. Most scholars cite this passage to discuss the nature of *hun* and *po*, with *hun* being the *yang* part of the soul that goes up to

⁵⁴ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 44:13–14; cf. Legge 1960: vol. 5, 618, translation mine.

Heaven, and *po* being the *yin* part of the soul that stays in the tomb.⁵⁵ One point of this story, however, did not receive much attention in previous discussions. This is the question of “Could Boyou *still* become a ghost?” The very fact that this question was asked seems to indicate that since Boyou already received a proper burial, he should not come back to harm people. Zichan’s reply suggests that even though a burial was given to him, because Boyou died a violent death, it is proper that his ghost will come back for revenge. Thus the meaning of the question “Can Boyou still become a ghost?” should better be understood as “Can Boyou still become a malicious ghost?” That is to say, the term *weigui* 為鬼 should be understood as “making ghostly malice.” Despite some contradiction with the previous statement that after an heir was installed for Boyou his ghost would stop appearing, this passage can only suggest the idea that every person, commoner or nobleman alike, could become a haunting ghost when they had died a violent death. It is worth noting that the story was rather “neutral” about avenging ghosts; that is to say, any ghost of a person could seek for vengeance for itself, regardless of whether the person was a righteous one or not in the eyes of the living. Therefore, even the ghost of a morally deficient person (such as Boyou) could still come back to haunt people and claim his “right” of having a proper burial or funerary cult.

The interesting problem here is the idea that *hun* and *po* are something that grow within a person when they were still alive. That they are different from *gui*-ghost is also suggested by a passage in the *Hanfeizi*: “If a ghost (*gui*) does not afflict a person, his *hun* and *po* will not leave him.”⁵⁶ Here the text seems to suggest that before a person dies, he has *hun* and *po* within him; while according to Zichan, *hun* and *po* could become evil ghosts when a person dies a violent death. That is to say, *hun* and *po* could be separated from a person when they died, and became ghosts. Etymologically, both characters of *hun* and *po* are constructed with a *gui* graph, which indicates a close semantic affinity with *gui*-ghost; a certain ambiguity thus existed as to their difference. It is also worthwhile noticing here that there is a long scholarly tradition of overemphasizing the importance of this passage on the nature and difference of *hun* and *po*. We should recognize the fact that this passage was only one episode in the long career of Zichan, the able minister and shrewd politician of the small state of Zheng. Whether or not Zichan really said

⁵⁵ Yu Ying-shih 1987; Brashier 1996; Poo 1998: 62–66.

⁵⁶ *Hanfeizi jijie* 104.

those words, they should not be taken as an authoritative and philosophically well-thought-out argument about the nature of *hun* and *po*, as if Zichan's words could represent the meaning of *hun* and *po* in the entire Spring and Autumn period. In the Han period, the difference between *hun* and *po*, if any, was already disappearing, and *gui* and *hun* gradually became synonymous.⁵⁷

Let us return to the origins of the haunting ghosts. According to another story in the *Zuozhuan*, a haunting ghost could also appear to avenge not for himself but for injustice suffered by his kinsfolk:

The Marquis of Jin dreamt about a great demon (*dali* 大厲), with disheveled hair reaching to the ground, beating its breast while leaping, saying, "You have unjustly killed my grandson, and I have presented my request to the Emperor [*di*, i.e., the High God]." It then broke the great gate of the palace, advanced to the gate of the bed chamber, and entered. The duke was frightened and went into a chamber, the demon again broke the door of which. The duke then awoke, and called for the *wu*-shaman of Mulberry Field. The *wu*-shaman spoke everything according to what the duke had dreamt of. The duke asked, "What does this mean?" The *wu*-shaman answered: "You shall not have the chance to taste the next harvest."⁵⁸

It is clear that in these cases the interactions between ghosts and humans were built on the theme of seeking a solution for the plight of a violent or untimely death. That is to say, it was because there was unfinished business that the ghosts needed to take care of that they came back to find a settlement with their kinsfolk, or enemies. Thus the relationship could be said to be one-sided: the ghosts needed to engage the living for their needs. This idea is in fact common to many cultures,⁵⁹ which reflects a collective anxiety of the living that seeks to resolve conflicts within the community and ensure peaceful succession of generations for the stability of society, because accidental or violent death causes a breach in the social fabric and the smooth transition of life course from cradle to grave. The ordinary dead are those who have gone through the proper ritual process and are peacefully and quietly set aside, join the ancestors, and are forgotten. The unfortunate dead and their ghosts, on the other hand, touched on the unsettled conscience of the living. Not until the distressful situations of these dead are rectified, either by avenging the injustice done to them or by eradicating the lack of

⁵⁷ For discussion, see Yu 1987; Poo 1993a: 216–17; Brashier 1996.

⁵⁸ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 26:450–51. ⁵⁹ Schmitt 1998: 5–7.

proper burial and offering, would their ghosts recede to their proper places and stop bothering the living.

One should not, however, extend this interpretation to cover all accounts about ghosts, since some of the ghosts, such as the naughty ghost described in *Lüshi chunqiu*, were obviously not known for their vengefulness. In the early medieval (fourth- to sixth-century CE) *Anomaly Tales* (*zhiguai* 志怪), for instance, there are indeed examples of ghosts demanding proper burial or reburial, or taking revenge for the wrongs they had suffered. Yet there are also ghosts that are benevolent or basically harmless. These examples are admittedly from literary works that might have presented a more humanized account of the behavior of ghosts, perhaps to create dramatic effects, yet they could also have reflected ideas circulating in society, and even exerted certain influence on the popular imagination of ghosts in the later era. We shall explore these stories in [Chapter 4](#).

While the above investigation of the relationship between ghosts and human beings is based on direct descriptions of ghosts and their activities, there is another approach to this issue, namely, by examining the various religious rituals in which the relationship between the living and the dead was defined and articulated. In the following, therefore, we shall discuss rituals and exorcism in early China and try to provide some evidence regarding ghost-human relations.

2.4 RITUAL ACTS AND EXORCISM

Funerary Rituals

A funeral is basically a religious and social event that mediates between the deceased individual, the family, and the community. In early China it is certainly an event in which various sociopolitical elements are played out: the relationship between the living members of the family and the deceased needs to be displayed with proper paraphernalia, and the standing of the deceased and their family in the social hierarchy needs to be exhibited by proper funerary ceremony. The future of the deceased in the netherworld, furthermore, needs to be secured by supplying the funerary objects, so that the wealth of the family members still on earth could be demonstrated by all these arrangements. Besides preparing a tomb and all sorts of funerary objects, it is necessary that certain rituals be performed and protective spells pronounced, written down, and buried in the tomb. All these, one has to assume, are the result of a collective concern for the

well-being of the deceased and the harmonious relationship between the living and the ghosts.

Excavations of the Shang dynasty burials show evidence of certain funerary rituals in the form of human and animal sacrifice, which are closely related to the concept of ghosts and the netherworld. At the bottom of the tomb pit, animals such as dogs were buried in the so-called *yaokeng* (腰坑), or “waste pit.” After the coffins and caskets were installed, if it was a royal tomb, human sacrifice was performed and the head and beheaded bodies of the victims were buried on the steps of the ramps.⁶⁰ The exact process of the individual rituals, however, was unclear. Needless to say, the custom of human sacrifice, cruel as it was, indicates an early belief in the netherworld in which the ghosts of the sacrificial victims were expected to serve the dead rulers. An inscription from a bronze vessel dated to the Western Zhou may be the earliest textual evidence which mentions that the deceased owner of the vessel was supposed to follow his lord the Zhou King in the “underground.”⁶¹

The *Book of Poetry* contains some fragmentary information concerning funerary rituals and the idea of ghosts during the Western Zhou period. It was mentioned that when a man died, the family would select a young child, usually his grandson, to be dressed up in the guise of the deceased, in order to accept food and homage on behalf of the deceased. This custom of making a *shi*-尸, literally, “corpse,” as a living effigy of the deceased might have existed as early as the Shang period.⁶² For the Eastern Zhou, a collection of rituals performed during the funeral of a man of the *shi* 士-gentleman class, the Shisangli (士喪禮), or “Funeral Rites for the Gentleman,” can be found in the *Book of Ceremonies* (儀禮 *Yili*). Most of these rituals are devised for the purpose of differentiating various social relations and to give a guideline to proper conduct in the entire period from the moment of death to interment and the subsequent ritual sacrifices. In one instance, there is a passage related to the idea of ghosts:

When he has died in the principal room of the private apartments, he is covered with the coverlet used at the smaller dressing [part of the funeral]. A man is sent to call the soul back. He uses the clothes of the russet cap suit for the purpose, sewing the skirt to the coat. Then throwing them over his left shoulder, he takes the collar and the girdle together in his left hand. He then ascends by a ladder set against the front end of the east wall, and, going up to the center of the house, faces north,

⁶⁰ Chang 1980: 110–24; Huang 1990. ⁶¹ Zhang Zhenglang 1981.

⁶² Hu Xinsheng 1990; Fang Shuxin 2000; Ge Yinghui 2000; Lai Guolong 2015: 115–21.

and uses the clothes to invite the spirit to return to them, saying, “Ah! So-and-so, return!” This he does three times, and then throws the clothes down in front of the hall. The clothes are received in a basket, and taken up by the east steps for the clothing of the corpse. The man who went up to call back the soul descends by the back end of the west wall.⁶³

This ritual of recalling the soul of the dead was apparently a custom that was prevalent in the Warring States period. In the famous *Song of South* (楚辭 *Chuci*), a literary genre originating in the Chu area (modern Hubei and Hunan provinces) and made immortal by the poet Qu Yuan (屈原, 343–278 BCE), there is a chapter called “Recalling the Soul” (*Zhaohun* 招魂), which is a literary rendition of the ritual of recalling the soul. The poet warns the soul of the dead not to travel to the unknown world: not the heaven above nor the earth below, nor the four directions, for the world of the living is the only safe place to dwell.⁶⁴ The idea behind this ritual, apparently, is that the soul of the deceased should be united with the body and buried in the tomb. In other words, this is a magical ritual that aimed at returning the dead to life. There is therefore a certain affinity with the idea contained in the resurrection story of Dan. As the ghost of Dan was living in the tomb with the body, it allowed the possibility for him to come back to life.

This ritual and the abovementioned use of *shi*-corpse (living effigy) indicate two rather different attitudes regarding the possible relation of a ghost with his family members immediately after death – note that the female members of the family were not mentioned. The use of the *shi*-corpse, who acts on behalf of the deceased in the offering rituals, seems to suggest that there was a wish for the deceased to come to life and enjoy the offering. It is not clear, however, whether there was the wish that the ghost of the deceased would somehow cling to the grandson and thus enjoy the offering or, knowing the impossibility of this wish, the grandson was chosen to act for the deceased, thus it was a ritual that acknowledged that the ghost of the deceased would not come back. Therefore, there could be two opposing interpretations of the meaning and function of the *shi*. The soul-recalling ritual, on the other hand, suggests that the soul of the deceased would somehow fly to all directions; thus, the officiant actively tries to retrieve the ghost of the deceased into the clothes, and by dressing the deceased with the clothes, actually returned the soul/ghost of the deceased to the body.

⁶³ *Yili zhushu* 35:1–4; trans. Steele 1917: vol. 2, 45.

⁶⁴ Yu Ying-shih 1987.

Whether or not the rituals described or prescribed in the *Book of Ceremonies* were actually performed step-by-step at any point in time, it can be assumed that they represented to a certain degree the commonly agreed social customs among the ruling elites and their conception of ghosts. However, it is also clear that the *Book of Ceremonies* is not a field report and that its content is the result of numerous redactions, ideological embellishments, and perilous textual transmissions through time. When we look at the actual practice, deviations from the “norm” as described in the *Book of Ceremonies* seem to be the rule. This refers not only to the use of coffins and funerary objects but also to the rituals associated with the funeral. The soul-recalling ritual, for example, exists even today as a popular folk custom in some parts of China. In contemporary Taiwan, unlike the description in the *Shisangli*, the soul-recalling ritual is usually performed for accidental deaths, such as from traffic accidents, when the soul of the deceased needs to be recalled from the place where the accident happened and be guided back using a soul banner to their home for proper funeral. When the soul of the newly deceased is addressed as *hun*-soul and not as *gui*-ghost, there is an intended subtle distinction that shows a closer relationship between the descendants and the deceased, for *gui* carries more of an unfamiliar or even potentially malicious connotation. Different from the transmitted canonical texts, on the other hand, ritual texts found in archaeological excavations may provide us with a direct description of the local rituals performed at funerals and hence the local ideas of ghosts.⁶⁵

Funerary rituals were normally performed for those who died of natural causes; as for those who died an untimely death, on the battlefield, for example, different rituals would be required. An example of such rituals is a text dated to the late fourth century BCE, found in a tomb from Jiudian, Hubei province. The text seems to be a model text for people to write prayers to a local deity Wu Yi (武夷), who was referred to as being assigned by the Lord on High to take charge of the ghosts of the war dead, and to enable them to return home to receive food offerings from their family members. The somewhat obscure text reads as follows:

[Hao! I] dare to implore Wu Yi, the Son of _____. You reside at the bottom of Fu Mountain and in the wilderness of Buzhou. The Lord on High determined that since you have no occupation, he commanded you to take charge of those who

⁶⁵ A study of modern Chinese funerary customs claims that despite local variations, there was an overall unified funerary ritual, which was the result of age-old cultural homogenization. See Watson 1988.

died by weapons. Today, so-and-so [the deceased] wishes to eat. So-and-so [the invocator] dares to take his [the deceased's] wife to be your wife. Cut strips of silk and fragrant provisions are offered for the sake of so-and-so [the deceased] at the place of Wu Yi. Your Lordship in the past has received so-and-so's [the invocator's] cut strips of silk and fragrant provisions. Please deign to allow so-and-so [the deceased] to come back to eat as usual.⁶⁶

The text is wrought with difficult passages; the general meaning, however, is more or less certain. As a supplication to the deity Wu Yi, the function of the text was to ensure the safe return home of the ghosts of the soldiers who died on the battlefield. In a sense, therefore, this is also a kind of soul-recalling ritual for the war dead. The fact that such a model text existed indicates a wide acceptance of similar beliefs in society, which was already stated in the *Zuozhuan* passage: "When the ghost has a place to return, it will not cause any malice." The soul-recalling ritual described in the *Song of South* and the *Book of Ceremonies* was but one method to achieve this goal.

Protective Rituals against Ghosts in Daily Life

The funerary rituals, though aimed at taking care of the ghosts of the dead so that they can have a resting place, can also be seen as preventive measures to pacify the possible hostility caused by disgruntled ghosts. Yet this was obviously not enough in a world filled with innumerable potential disasters caused by malicious spirits. One needs to perform various daily rituals to prevent possible injuries caused by evil ghosts. These rituals and exorcistic methods demonstrate how people's mundane lives were intimately related to ghosts and the extra-human world.

The *Daybook* of Shuihudi, already mentioned above, preserved a collection of instructions that could give us some idea of the exorcistic rituals performed in people's daily life.⁶⁷ The text, with the original title of "Inquiry" (*jie* 詰), begins with a general introduction to the purpose of the ritual spells and actions:

Inquiry: Ghosts harm the people and, acting wantonly, treat the people unpropitiously. Pronounce spell to bind it and enable the people to avoid the baleful and

⁶⁶ Hubeisheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 1995: plate 113; Hubei sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo and Beijing daxue zhongwenxi 2000: 13, 50; Chen Songchang 1998; Zhou Fengwu 2001.

⁶⁷ Harper 1985; Kalinowski 1986; Poo 1993a; Liu Lexian 1994.

disastrous. What ghosts detest are namely: reclining in a crouch, sitting like a winnowing basket, linked steps, and standing on one foot.⁶⁸

With this introduction, the text continues with dozens of instructions for exorcistic rituals against various ghosts and demons. A few examples should suffice to illustrate the general nature of the rituals:

When without cause a ghost attacks a person and does not desist – this is the Stabbing Demon. Make a bow from peach wood; make arrows from non-fruiting jujube wood, and feather them with chicken feathers. When it appears, shoot it. Then it will desist.

When without cause a ghost lodges in a person's home – this is the ghost of mound. Take the earth from an old abandoned mound, and make effigies of people and dogs with it. Set them on the outside wall, one person and one dog every five paces, and encircle the home. When the ghost comes, scatter the ashes, strike a winnowing basket, and screech at it. Then it will stop.

When a ghost continually causes a person to have foul dreams, and after waking they cannot be divined – this is the Master of Diagrams. Make a mulberry-wood staff and prop it inside the doorway, and turn a cook pot upside-down outside the doorway. Then it will not come.⁶⁹

In general the text begins by describing the haunting situation, identifying the source of the trouble, and then providing a description of the necessary actions to be performed in order to expel the haunting ghost or demon. The actions usually consist of the use of certain objects or performing certain bodily acts, including the positions described in the introduction such as reclining, sitting in a posture like a winnowing basket, or standing on one foot, and occasionally assisted by spells. This is the reason why this text is often designated the “Demonography.”

It is noteworthy that no deities or divine spirits are invoked to help expel the demons and evil spirits listed in the *Daybook*. A survey of the various methods used in the rituals shows that people relied on the exorcistic power of certain objects, which can be grouped into several categories: (1) objects made of plants such as jujube wood, peach wood, mulberry wood, woolly grass, reeds, bamboo; (2) animal parts that include fox tails or cat tails; (3) objects with offensive smell, such as feces of dogs and pigs; (4) inanimate substances such as sand, ashes, yellow soil, white stone, water, and fire; and finally (5) manmade objects such as

⁶⁸ Harper 1996: 244. My translation differs from Harper's at several points; Poo 1998: 79–83.

⁶⁹ Harper 1996: 247.

arrows, drums, bells, swords, and shoes. Usually the actions taken are quite simple, yet sometimes the text says only something to the effect of “search for it and get rid of it” without specifying the exact method used in getting rid of the ghosts or demons. There are also examples where the exorcistic ritual consists of only actions, such as “unbind the hair and rush past it,” without the use of any instruments or objects.

The reasons why people considered these objects or actions efficacious in expelling the ghosts and evil spirits have not been entirely understood. Certain objects, such as peach wood or mulberry, have long been discussed. The Qing dynasty scholar Yu Zhengxie (1775–1840), for example, already collected considerable data concerning the popular belief in the magical power of peach wood and peach talismans.⁷⁰ Recent scholarship emphasizes the good taste of the peach as a precious and nutritious fruit, its medicinal effect, and its role in the ancient myth.⁷¹ The mulberry, on the other hand, was a symbol of fertility in ancient China, thus possessing certain potency.

The use of animal excrement as a deterrent against ghosts and demons can be corroborated by the famous story about the adulterous wife of Li Ji preserved in the *Han Feizi*, as well as in the much later Dunhuang text *Baize jingguai tu* 白澤精怪圖 (*Diagram of the Spirits and Demons of the White Marsh*) dated to the Tang Dynasty.⁷² This custom seems to have originated from people’s distaste for pollution and polluted objects. This dislike was then transposed on the ghosts, with the assumption that they too were afraid of such pollution. Corroboration for this view can be found in the story of resurrection mentioned above. According to the testimony of the protagonist in this story, in the world of the dead, ghosts did not like their graveyards being polluted by people vomiting or by other unclean objects.⁷³

The posture of sitting in the shape of a winnowing basket (with two legs stretched open) is seen as an offensive position probably because of the sexual implication. The classic reference to this idea was the story of Confucius’ reprimanding Yuan Rang for the latter’s sitting in a winnowing-basket style.⁷⁴ To use such a position to ward off evil spirits may therefore be a reasonable development, assuming that ghosts would

⁷⁰ Yu Zhengxie 1957: 359–61. ⁷¹ Luo Man 1989.

⁷² Huang Yungwu 1981–86: vol. 123.

⁷³ Li Xueqi 1990; Harper 1994. For a theoretical discussion of the idea of pollution, see Douglas 1966.

⁷⁴ *Lunyu zhushu* 14.18. See discussion in Li Ji 1953.

have a similar emotional response to the act as humans do. As for other positions, their common characteristics, as with sitting in a winnowing-basket style, is their irregularity as opposed to a normal daily bodily gesture. The performance of the Yu-steps (*Yubu* 禹步),⁷⁵ in this connection, may be seen as another such irregular bodily posture or movement that was seen as possessing great exorcistic power.

The objects of exorcism are various ghosts and demons. The terms used in the *Demonography* include *gui*-ghost, *yao* (妖)-demon, or *shen*-spirit (such as *shengou*, the spirit dog). As discussed before, the term *shen*-spirit referred more to the supernatural power of the ghost or demon than their being considered as “divine.” Moreover, various animals and insects, even natural phenomena such as thunder, clouds, fire, and wind could also be considered as malicious and needing to be exorcised. The mundane nature of these disasters is thought to have originated in the malicious acts of ghosts and demons and, moreover, speaks forcefully to the intimate relation between the daily life of the users of the *Demonography* and the various exorcistic rituals contained in the text. When unknown illnesses or natural disasters occur, as the text suggests, people sought causes outside themselves. In other words, personal morality was not considered as having anything to do with all these difficulties in life.

Another feature of exorcism described in the *Demonography* is that no ritual specialist such as the *wu*-shaman is needed in the performance of the ritual acts. Theoretically, anyone who has access to the *Daybook* and is able to read or be told what to do could perform the exorcistic rituals as instructed. It was, so to speak, a “do-it-yourself” manual of exorcism. The mentality behind this is quite revealing. If the ritual acts themselves – including the use of certain objects and the performance of certain bodily actions – were powerful and efficacious, and the human performer was only a neutral agent, without any “qualification” as a specialist such as a *wu*-shaman, who brought the sacred or powerful objects and actions together, there should be no direct relationship between the ritual act and the performer. In other words, the exorcistic rituals were understood as purely technical actions, much as using medicine to cure a disease. In fact, in the medical texts found in the early Han period, for example, the Mawangdui silk manuscript *Wushi'er bingfang* 五十二病方 (*Recipes for Fifty-Two Ailments*), exorcistic acts and spells are placed side by side with herbal recipes. A ritual to cure warts, for example, is as follows:

⁷⁵ Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 240; Schipper 1993: 85, 173–74.

On the last day of the month at the end of the late afternoon, take clods the size of a chicken egg – men seven and women twice seven. First set the clods down behind the house, arranging them in a line from south to north. When dark, go to the place where the clods are. Perform the Pace of Yu thrice. Starting from the southern quarter, pick up a clod and say: “Today is the last day of the month. I rub the warts to the north.” Rub the [warts] once with the clod. After rubbing, set the clod back in its place and leave without looking back.⁷⁶

The instruction is similar to that found in the *Demonography*. The person who performs the act could be anyone who can follow the instruction given in the text. The actions taken were regarded as a form of recipe, just like a medical recipe for a disease. In sum, the existence of ritual handbooks such as the *Demonography* clearly indicates that there was an urgent and common need in society to cope with the many haunting ghosts. The ghosts seemed to have existed in society as common pests that could be expelled by employing some simple (and cheap) methods. The exorcistic rituals in the *Demonography* were in general simple and did not need extensive preparation or expensive equipment, nor was a ritual expert required to perform the act, which is a sure sign that the users of these methods belonged to the lower level of the social echelon.

The cosmological significance of this mentality is very intriguing. If all the elements for exorcising the ghosts had already existed in the world, it seems that there would be no need of any divine spirit to help drive away the ghosts, and indeed the text enlisted no divine spirits for help. It further shows a materialistic understanding of the world, since the ghosts and spirits were conceived in terms of material existence, and were removable through materialistic or tangible methods. Of course, this mentality shown in the *Daybook* could have represented only a particular social group for certain specially defined situations. However, such a kind of amoral understanding of the world, in which the relationships between the living and the dead are defined by mutual obligations such as proper burial and sacrifice, means that there was little ambiguity left in the relationship between the living and the dead.

On the other hand, of course, we know that regarding the administering of ghosts in general there was the Controller of Fate, and there were the deities such as Wu Yi, who was responsible for retrieving the ghosts of the war dead to return to their native places. The picture of the world of ghosts, therefore, resembles somewhat the world of the living; at the local level, people tended to resolve their daily needs on their own, while on the

⁷⁶ Harper 1998: 244–45.

state or government level, officials needed to take control of the population and take account of the tallies. As for the bureaucratization of the netherworld, we shall return to that in the [next chapter](#).

2.5 THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE CONCEPT OF GHOSTS

The religious beliefs of the Shang and Zhou periods could be characterized as a cluster of beliefs, including the beliefs in the Supreme God (*shangdi*), Heaven (*tian*), various deities of nature – mountains, rivers, and various kinds of natural phenomena – and the ancestral spirits, as well as evil spirits of various origins. These were loosely systematized in that the Supreme God on High or Heaven seemed to be the final arbiter of everything, and that there was a certain hierarchical order among the various spirits. Among these, the haunting ghosts, though perhaps occupying the lower echelon of the spirit world, were no doubt what caused most anxiety to the common people. The idea that people who died of unnatural death and were deprived of proper burial would become haunting ghosts and come back to the world could be seen as originating from the desire to satisfy the communal need to take care of the ancestral spirits. Only by providing the dead with proper burial, and regular sacrifice, would the spirits be at peace and assume the proper status of ancestors, and thus not come back to haunt people. For those who died of violent death or injustice, however, ghostly vengeance seems often unavoidable. This was usually the case when ghosts appear to people other than their descendants.

In a way, the social and intellectual background from which our documents originated defined or conditioned our understanding of the emergence of a discourse on ghosts. In the elite texts, ghosts are mostly mentioned in the contexts that aimed at propagating certain ethical values. That is to say, the concept of ghost was appropriated to serve as a moralizing or theorizing device in the contexts of various world views or philosophical systems, be they Confucian, Daoist, Moist, or Legalist. The story in *Zhuangzi* about the ghost of a skull by the roadside is a perfect example:

On his way to the state of Chu, Zhuangzi saw a skull, with a distinct shape. He slashed it with horse whip and asked it, saying: “Was it because you were lusting for life and lost your sense of justice that you arrived at this state? Was it because you have met with the destruction of state and execution by axes that you arrived

at this? Was it because you had evil conduct and scandalous deeds that caused shame to your parents and wife that you arrived at this? Was it because you suffered from cold and hunger that you arrived at this? Was it because of your life span that you arrived at this?" After finishing this, he reached for the skull and used it as a pillow and slept on it. In the middle of the night, the skull showed up in his dream, saying, "Judging from your talk, you seem to be a person of rhetorical skill. What you have said are all things that bothered the living. When one is dead, then there is none of these. Do you wish to hear the saying about death?" Zhuangzi said, "Yes." The skull said, "In death, there is no sovereign above, no subjects below, neither things that need to be done over the four seasons. One pleasantly takes the eternal heaven and earth as life span, not even the pleasure of being a king could have exceeded this." Zhuangzi did not believe him, and said: "If I could ask the Controller of Fate to revive you, recover your bone with flesh and skin, and return to your family and old neighbourhood, would you want it?" The skull frowned deeply and said: "How can I abandon the joy of being a sovereign and return to the toil of the living?"⁷⁷

The author of *Zhuangzi* was obviously using the concept of ghost as a convenient literary device to propagate his idea that what was most important in life was freedom from the confinement of worldly affairs, which, ironically, only a ghost could enjoy. The story also shows that the idea that ghosts could appear in dreams was a prevailing belief in contemporary society.

By talking and writing about ghosts, then, people created a mental world, a make-believe world, that served some practical function. There is obviously the function of moral teaching, which is quite obvious when Confucius says: "To make sacrifice to a ghost that is not one's own ancestor, it is an act of sycophancy"⁷⁸ or "To devote oneself to the duties due to the people and pay respect to the ghosts and gods but keep aloof from them, may be called wise."⁷⁹ The ghost stories, moreover, could add authority to certain people in the belief system: the ancestors, the exorcists, and those who have the power to communicate with the ghosts. *Mozi* even expresses this bluntly in the chapter on "Explicating Ghosts (*minggui* 明鬼)," that the belief in ghosts can be a political tool to keep the people under certain restraint for fear of the ghosts so as to construct a better society: "Now all the kings and nobles and gentlemen of the world who wish to seek for increasing the benefit and eliminating the misery of the world, they should admit that ghosts and spirits do exist and they should not but revere and propagate their existence. This is the way of the sage-kings."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ *Zhuangzi jishi* 617–19.

⁷⁸ *Lunyu zhushu* 2:10.

⁷⁹ *Lunyu zhushu* 6:8.

⁸⁰ *Mozi xiangyu* 154.

This discourse about ghosts in philosophical or literary expositions certainly should not be confused with the concept of ghost in the mind of ordinary people in society. Yet in order for the philosophical or literary expositions to be effective and convincing, there is no denial that the authors' arguments or representations would have to be built on a commonly accepted, though not necessarily the only, concept of ghost. Thus although Zhuangzi might have made his idiosyncratic philosophical point by using the ghost story, we can still assume that the basic idea of the story, that is, ghostly visits in dreams, must have been a common one in contemporary society.

On the other hand, the reality of popular mentality may be better revealed in certain genres of texts that were closer to the everyday life of the people, such as the *Demonography* in the *Daybook*. Although the *Daybook* dates only to the mid-third century BCE, the fact that the text contains so many different sections to suit all kinds of daily needs indicates that the text we have on hand is already the product of a long development. Furthermore, since the Shuihudi tomb owner Xi possessed two versions of the *Daybook*, it seems that it was not anything unique or extraordinary. As the two versions are not identical, and did not seem to be copied from each other, both must have been based on other similar text or texts. Thus it seems logical to assume that different versions could have been copied in fair numbers and distributed throughout the land. In fact, so far archaeologists have discovered some twenty versions of the *Daybook*, all dated to the period between the third century BCE and the second century CE, and spread throughout the empire.⁸¹ For example, a version of the *Daybook* very close to the Shuihudi versions has been discovered as far as the Gansu province, 2,000 kilometers west of Shuihudi. The fact that such similar versions of texts could have appeared almost simultaneously at both ends of this vast stretch of land indicates the possibility of the existence of a common religious mentality and world view as represented by the *Daybook*. This fact reveals that in the transition from the Warring States to the unified empire, there was an aspect of a certain common cultural identity parallel or in addition to political and military measures that constituted the basis for a unified state.

An analysis of the daily activities that needed to be anchored in auspicious dates shows that the main users of the daybooks were most likely farmers, soldiers, craftsmen, and low-ranking government

⁸¹ Huang Ruxuan 2013.

officials, suggesting that the *Daybook* could have represented the mentality of the lower-middle social stratum.⁸² Of course, by “using” the *Daybook*, we mean not “reading” it in a literal sense, but following the instructions contained in it as conveyed by those who could read. The actual reading of the *Daybook* was probably the responsibility of some special qualified and literate persons, who served as transmitters of the knowledge presented in the *Daybook*. Given the rate of literacy during this period, that is, around the third century BCE, it is most likely that only a small number of people in society could read and write, and these were mostly government employees. The Shuihudi tomb owner Xi himself was such an employee at the county government level. It could have been that one of his jobs was to teach the local people about how to conduct their daily businesses. The *Daybooks* in his possession, therefore, are most likely references for choosing proper dates for all sorts of affairs that people needed to ask about. It is well known that one of the First Emperor of Qin’s most infamous measures was his burning of books related to the classics such as the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of History*, the various philosophical treatises, and histories of the various states except that of the Qin, but preserving those practical manuals related to medicine, divination, and agriculture.⁸³ The *Daybook* would have been regarded as one of those practical texts that were not censored by the government.

Yet government officials were probably not the only people who could have access to and use of the *Daybook*. There were at the time of Warring States period professional day-diviners who might also give instructions to exorcise the ghosts.⁸⁴ In sum, the various ghosts that we encounter in the *Demonography* in the *Daybook* or in the elite texts share one common feature: they did not seem to have belonged to any organized belief system, except loosely connected with a supreme deity and some intermediate deities such as the Controller of Fate. In one instance, in the *Demonography*, one of the ghosts assumed the name of “the son of Lord Above (*shangdi zi* 上帝子),” which points to the existence of the conception of a High God and his family. As for another term, “God Above (*shangshen* 上神), the context makes it clear that it is not really a lofty deity, but a rather “low ranking” ghost who could be killed by rushes:

⁸² Poo 1993b. For the issue of literacy of this time, see Harper and Kalinowski 2017: 97–110.

⁸³ *Shiji* 6: 255. ⁸⁴ *Shiji* 127: 3215–22; Poo 1998: 85–86; Kalinowski 2009.

A ghost constantly comes and tells people: “give me your woman!” and would not stop. It is the God Above who descends to take a wife. Hit it with rushes, it will die. If you do not fend against it, after it comes five times, the woman will die.⁸⁵

Obviously, the term *shen* here refers to nothing sacred or benevolent, and the fact that it could be killed betrays an idea that in the popular mentality, ghosts were like wild animals that could be killed. This points to a rather interesting conception about the nature of ghosts, that is: ghosts do not exist eternally in a spiritual world, but live in the human world, interact with human beings, and could be killed or driven away. In fact, the ghosts in the *Demonography* consist of the human dead as well as nonhuman agents. Here we see an imagined world inhabited by spirits of diverse origins, who could all be called “ghosts,” sometimes even “gods (*shen*),” but all with limited power. Moreover, this world of ghosts and spirits was actually interpenetrating with the human world, and local deities and local ghosts simply existed as part of the human social fabric. Thus we see that the supplication to the deity of Wu Yi was basically to deal with the war dead of the region under his control. For anyone who had some experience with governing the people, the idea of a world of ghosts that was unstructured must have seemed daunting. Such kinds of concern seemed to have congealed toward the late Warring States period, when an intellectual trend to systematize the gods and ghosts into a more coherent structure began to emerge. The “Monthly Ordinance (*Yueling*)” contained in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) as well as in the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Lord Lü* (*Lüshi chunqiu*) was an apparent case, which organizes the heavenly emperors and deities into the twelve-month cycle of cosmological structure.⁸⁶ The *Rite of Zhou* also shows a tremendous effort by constructing an entire system of official religion.⁸⁷ Even the author of *Mozi* asserts that there are three kinds of ghosts in the world, revealing an attempt at systematization. All these foresaw or reflected the structure of the spiritual world after the establishment of the universal empire. The world of the dead, in particular, would become a place that resembles the world of the living, with a comparable bureaucracy.⁸⁸

Returning to the resurrection story from the text discovered at Tianshui, it is a clear example of a popular conception of ghosts. What is most remarkable about this story, however, is not that the dead could return to life, but that the story described the feelings of the dead/ghosts,

⁸⁵ Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 215.

⁸⁶ *Liji Zhengyi* 6; *Lüshi chunqiu* 1–12. ⁸⁷ *Zhouli zhushu* 18:1–6.

⁸⁸ Poo 1998: 103–21, 157–77.

how they did not like to wear clothes, abhorred unclean sacrifice, and disliked food soaked with broth. This was probably the first example of a more sympathetic or humanistic rendering of the nature of ghosts, which would later be continued and articulated in the Six Dynasties ghost stories. We can sense a change of sentiment here: ghosts used to be something horrifying that one tried to avoid, as the image of ghosts only conjured up a feeling of fear and repulsion. Gradually, however, ghosts were “humanized,” so to speak, and were given more attention regarding their feelings and needs, and not necessarily regarding the vicious deeds that invoke only rejection or apprehension. The story about the ghost of Dan, for example, does not contain any terrifying scenario. Of course, the appearance of this sentiment does not mean that it was becoming prevalent, or even occupied a notable part of the entire picture at this time. It would take some time for it to germinate, and indeed it is only in the late Eastern Han that it again became evident in the available sources, such as the *Fengsu tongyi*, as we shall discuss in [Chapter 4](#).

It is interesting that in the context of more casual situations when ghosts were mentioned during a conversation, one could detect a prevailing common attitude in using the term *gui* as representing something fantastic, outlandish, crafty, or even ingenious. For example, in the *Records of the Warring States* (戰國策 *Zhanguoce*) (c. late third century BCE), the famous strategist Su Qin (蘇秦) was confronted by the person Li Dui (李兌), whom Su Qin wished to persuade: “If you come to see me [Dui] with the words of ghosts, that would be fine. But if you come and talk to me about matters of the human world, I already know them all.” Su replied: “I certainly have come to see you with the words of ghosts, not that of the human beings.”⁸⁹ He then proceeded with an allegorical story about a conversation between the spirits of the earthen embankment and the wooden embankment in the fields. Here the expression *gui zhi yan* 鬼之言, or “ghost talk,” is used in a matter-of-fact way, indicating that it was a commonly used phrase in people’s daily conversation. This certainly shows a shared view that the idea of *gui*-ghost represented certain unrealistic, bizarre, or extraordinary qualities. In the same linguistic environment, the use of the expression “Even a ghost would not know (*guiqie buzhi* 鬼且不知) [about the outcome of conflict between two states]”⁹⁰ indicated an underlying assumption that ghosts knew more than human beings regarding future events and that they somehow

⁸⁹ *Zhanguoce* 18. Similar expressions can be found in *Zhanguoce* 10.

⁹⁰ *Zhanguoce* 8.

possessed a certain ability to foretell the future. We are reminded of the custom of necromancy of the Greco-Roman world, which assumed that the ghosts somehow possessed a certain ability to prophesize.⁹¹ It is significant to note that, from a modern Chinese linguistic point of view, these expressions in the *Zhanguo* sound distinctively modern, as even in modern Chinese interjections such as “Only a ghost would know (*gui cai zhidao* 鬼才知道),” that is, no one except a ghost knows, or “ghost talk (*guihua* 鬼話),” that is, nonsense, are commonly used in daily conversations that the author of *Zhanguo* would have recognized easily. On the other hand, the term *gui* could also serve as an adjective that expresses a crafty character, as stated *Hanfeizi*: “Therefore the sagacious ruler dispenses measures of governance according to heavenly principles, and deploys personnel in a crafty way (*gui*). When following the principle of heaven, there shall be no mistake; when employing a crafty way, there shall be no obstacle.”⁹²

To sum up, beginning from the Shang dynasty, with the invention of the script and the character of *gui*, the idea of ghosts was registered in the documents. There was a steady expansion of the attributes of *gui*, usually associated with some undesirable elements in people’s lives, so that what people feared or hated, such as illnesses or other calamities, could be explained as caused by the agency of the *gui*. The idea of *gui*/ghost thus became a depository of those unpleasant, sinister, terrifying, or evil things that the world had brought about and that had been encountered in the collective social consciousness. It could have been in fact people’s comment on human nature itself, because, as the soul of the human being, *gui* was essentially human. In cases where the *gui* was the spirit of the nonhuman agent, it was mostly the result of anthropomorphic imagination. Moreover, there can at least be two levels of understanding of the concept of *gui*. Texts written by and for the elites talked about *gui* sometimes skeptically, such as Confucius; sometimes as a convenient tool for philosophical or moralistic discourses, such as Zhuangzi and Mozi, or even the author of the *Commentary of Zuo*. Texts that represented the daily concern of the wider populace, such as the *Daybook*, recognized *gui* as having a real existence that needed to be taken care of. There was a consensus that when the *gui* was taken care of by its descendants with burial and offering, it would no longer come back to bother people. It would not become a malicious ghost. Thus people in general wished that

⁹¹ Ogden 2001.

⁹² *Hanfeizi* 48.

their ancestors would be satisfied with their care and remain in the realm where the souls of the ancestors resided. Stories and dreams about the revenge of ghosts, however, were shared both in elite literature and in the texts of daily use such as the manual of exorcism contained in the *Demonography*, thus forming a common understanding of the relationship between the ghost and the human. What was not very clear in the texts of this period, that is, from the Shang to the Warring States, was the destination of the ghost. While the tomb was obviously the first stop of the deceased when they entered into that unknown realm, what exactly would happen and where would the dead eventually go was never asked conscientiously nor answered systematically by those intellectuals who had something to say about the ghosts. The ritual of recalling the soul, as we are reminded, assumes that the soul/ghost of the dead could travel to all directions. Studies of the evolution of tombs in the period note that there was a change in the construction of tombs, albeit a gradual one, that reflected a changing perception of what a tomb means, not only to the living but also to the deceased. This change, in a very general sense, was a change from the perception that the tomb was a place to hide away the body to the idea that it was a place where the deceased might have a living realm, which indicated the emergence of a more realistic imagination of the tomb as living quarters.⁹³ The question is, if the individual tomb is perceived as the abode of the dead, as the resurrection story of Dan indicates, and the collective tombs formed the community of the deceased, what was the next level beyond the immediate community of the deceased? What did the netherworld in general look like? This would be answered when more evidence became available, during the subsequent Han dynasty.

⁹³ Lai 2015 offers a view that sees the tomb as only a way station for the journey of the soul to the netherworld.

Imperial Order and Local Variations

The living belong to [the jurisdiction of] Changan to the west; the dead belong to [the jurisdiction of] Mount Tai to the east.¹

One way to probe the illusive phenomenon and the often vague idea of ghosts in people's daily life is to study the expressions about the world after death, since ghosts are supposed to be the residents of this nether-world. Yet in order to have some idea of this world, which is not well-articulated in the written sources, we have to do it in a roundabout way, studying funerary customs such as burials, funerary objects, and funerary rituals. We have discussed the soul-recalling ritual, which establishes for us some of the ideas concerning ghosts. Archaeological study of the evolution of tomb styles and funerary objects, furthermore, suggests that there was an increasing trend since the Warring States in the funerary setup to imitate the world of the living. For example, the changing tomb style from the vertical-pit wooden casket tomb to the horizontal brick tomb suggests that the imagined residence of the dead resembles the house of the living. The inclusion of increasing number of objects of daily use, surrogate or not, also hints at how people imagined what ghosts would need in the netherworld.² All these point to an assumption that the ghosts might need these amenities in order to have a comfortable

¹ Zhang and Bai 2006: 163.

² Arguments have been made regarding even earlier expressions of the tomb as symbolizing the house for the deceased, such as the great tombs of the Shang Dynasty kings with multiple compartments. My statement here refers to a more tangible general trend. For detailed studies, see Poo 1993a: chapter 7; Poo 1998: chapter 7.

next life. Since this trend of change in funerary customs was a gradual process from the late Warring States period to the Western Han, there is reason for us to believe that the popular conceptions of ghosts and the netherworld – however vague still – also evolved with this change. That is to say, from the pre-Qin era to the Eastern Han period, people in general believed in the existence of ghosts and assumed that the ghosts would have certain need for a life in the netherworld. Beyond this general belief, however, there could have existed a variety of different views regarding the nature and power of ghosts and ways to deal with them. If we look at the evidence representing beliefs regarding the extra-human forces, be they ghosts, spirits, deities, or demons, during the transitional period from late Warring States to the Han, it can be said that people in general accepted and participated in various forms of religious activities that involved communicating and placating with these extra-human forces. There were the official rituals and sacrifices in the capital as well as in the provincial cities, which were managed and maintained by the government; there were also those local activities that constituted part of people's daily life, such as the worshipping of certain local deities or negotiating with various kinds of spirits and ghosts. The latter originated from the primeval religious beliefs that went back to the remote past, thus were part of the cultural milieu that people grew up with. These activities were mainly targeted at solving various problems and issues in people's daily life, be they major ones such as birth, marriage, illness, and death, or minor ones such as planning a trip, building a house, making a new garment, or digging a well. People in general tended to believe that these activities were controlled or manipulated by certain extra-human powers. They also tended to believe that some of these powers were benevolent, and some others malevolent. The benevolent were usually perceived as gods, while the malevolent were seen as evil ghosts and spirits, although by now we should be quite clear that the term *shen* 神 (god or divine spirit) did not necessarily carry an inherent benevolent connotation. For the common people, therefore, the question one should ask about ghosts and spirits is not whether they existed or not, but whether they were benevolent or not, and how to recognize them and deal with them in an effective and proper way. There were of course always a number of intellectuals who doubted the existence of ghosts and spirits, yet their voices served only as exceptions that proved the rule, a telling sign that indicates the general mentality of the society in which they lived. Few in a traditional society could avoid encountering the need to deal with ghosts and spirits in various forms

and capacities. Rituals, sacrifices, and exorcistic methods were therefore developed to meet this demand.³

With the establishment of a unified empire under the Qin, various measures were deployed to facilitate the orderly operation of the ruling apparatus. For the physical aspects of the governance such as economic transaction, communication, or transportation, massive efforts were carried out by the Qin government, such as establishing a common currency, a common written script, and a standardized transportation system. For the superstructure, such as the establishing of various departments of the central government, the abolition of the Zhou vassal system and the promulgation of a centralized and hierarchical governing system that established a direct chain of command between the central and local governments, or the enforcement of an education system that excludes philosophical texts, the major concern was to ensure that a centralized control could effectively manage the vast land.⁴ Yet there were still areas for which it was not easy for the government to formulate an effective control system, especially those that concerned lifestyles and daily beliefs. Already in the *Daybook* found in the Shuihudi Qin tomb we have evidence of the government's effort in trying to exert its influence in people's daily life. We can also mention an anecdote in the *Records of the Grand Scribe (Shiji)* that talks about the competition among specialists of conflicting day-selection methods current at the time of Emperor Wu, seventy years after the establishment of the Han. After an expected dispute that certainly involved economic gains of the diviners, the emperor decided in favor of the Five Phases diviner.⁵ This story tells us two things: (1) the practice of day-selection was widespread in society – even the emperor sought advice from such an art and (2) the local variations were strong and alive. The declaration that the Five Phases theory was to be followed as the leading divination method was of course symbolic of the rise of the Five Phases theory in the Han period, and may have indicated an official effort to systematize or to regulate the different divination methods.

Yet if we look at the divination methods mentioned in that passage in the *Shiji*, we notice that most of them can be found in the *Daybook*, including the use of the Five Phases theory, the geomancy theory, and the calendrical day-selection methods. The Qin government, it seems, may have started to systematize the different divination traditions, yet it did

³ For the nature of Han “religious belief,” see the revisionist study of Marsili 2018.

⁴ Loewe and Twitchett 1986; Poo 2018a: chapter 2. ⁵ See Chapter 2.

not achieve the goal even long after the empire had fallen and been succeeded by the Han. This tension or tug-of-war between centralization and local variation could also be seen in the Han government's policy in regulating the institutions or cultic activities that had to do with ghosts and spirits.

3.1 THE NATURE OF THE QIN-HAN OFFICIAL RELIGION

The most important state cult, at least in the eyes of Sima Qian, was the ceremony of worshipping Heaven and Earth at Mount Tai. He commented at the beginning of his "Treatise on Ceremonies" (*Fengshan shu* 封禪書) in *The Records of the Grand Scribe* as follows:

Which of the emperors or kings since the ancient times who received the mandate of Heaven did not perform the grand ceremony for the worship of Heaven and Earth at Mount Tai? There may be those who gained power without corresponding omens, but never did those who had seen the appearance of auspicious omens fail to ascend Mount Tai.⁶

This passage indicates that in his mind there was an inseparable relationship between state-sanctioned religious activities and the establishment of political authority. The authority, moreover, was bestowed by Heaven by way of sending auspicious omens.⁷ As far as we can gather from the descriptions of Sima Qian, the Qin and Han governments were in agreement in constructing a system of official cult that aimed at ensuring the welfare of the state and the personal well-being of the emperor. This official cult included the worshipping of the spirits of the heavenly bodies as well as the forces of nature.⁸ Although one cannot say that at the time of Sima Qian there was an officially proclaimed theory about the ideology and system of the official religious activities, it seems that a passage in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) may serve as the general principle of the official cult worship:

He who owns the world should sacrifice to the hundred gods; those enfeoffed lords whose territory encompasses [the mountains and rivers] should make sacrifice [to the mountains and rivers]; those do not [possess mountains and rivers] should not make sacrifice.⁹

⁶ *Shiji* 28:1355.

⁷ For a discussion of the evolution of the *fengshan* ceremony, see Wechsler 1985: 170–94; Marsili 2018.

⁸ See Poo 1998: chapter 5; Poo 2014.

⁹ *Liji* 46:797. Similar statements, *Shiji* 28:1357; *Hanshu* 25a:1193–94.

In a word, each member of the ruling apparatus performed his proper duty according to his own political status in a hierarchical order. This seemingly orderly system, however, was not one that could be said to have a completely rational design, since often personal interests and preferences of the emperors and those who were influential at the court could and did make changes and reforms concerning the official cults. The reasons for the reform or change varied from case to case. As a consequence, what was “official” – that is, receiving government recognition and financial support – at one time might not be “official” and could become an “excessive cult (*yinsi* 淫祠)” that is, illegal cult – at another. Most of the changes, to be sure, had to do with those cults that were established at the local level. This did not exclude the fact that even those cultic activities performed in the capital were frequently under reform and restructuring.¹⁰

One can detect a sense of skepticism regarding the rationale behind the various religious activities from the way that Sima Qian describes how, since the time of the First Emperor of Qin until Emperor Wu’s time, the ritual celebration at Mount Tai was wrought in various courtly struggles between scholar-officials and characters such as the shamans or the Recipe Masters (*fangshi* 方士) – persons who claimed to have commanded various expertise in the art of divination, sometimes even magical power – who competed for the emperors’ attention and resources. Sima Qian’s own remark that “there may be those who gained power without corresponding omens,” in fact, effectively curtailed the paramount importance of the so-called mandate of Heaven.¹¹ The entire tone of expression in the “Treatise on Ceremony,” though written in a straightforward style laying out the history of the various cultic activities, with the sacrifice to Heaven on Mount Tai as the central subject, was sarcastic in an implicit way, digging at the various futile pursuits for the blessing of Heaven and searching for immortality, especially during the reigns of the First Emperor of Qin and Emperor Wu of Han. This can be deduced from the fact that Sima Qian never gave any corroboration on the efficaciousness of the various allegedly auspicious omens, yet he did not hesitate to report those ineffective cultic activities and the fraudulent charlatans who cheated their way into the favor of the emperors. His chronological account of the establishment of official cults from the Qin to the early Han shows clearly that it was basically an ad hoc process. It is clear from

¹⁰ Poo 1998: 114–17; Bujard 2009.

¹¹ Marsili 2018.

the evidence presented in the *Records of the Grand Scribe* and *History of Han* (*Hanshu*) that emperors and their advisors played an important role in setting up and abolishing the various cults.¹² Each emperor could add or eliminate any number of cults according to what he had learned from his advisors, including the court officials/literati and the Recipe Masters.¹³ The rationale for setting up the cults was simple: to ensure the peace and prosperity of the country, the longevity of the ruler, and the legitimacy of the royal house. Any cult that claimed to be able to fulfill these functions was likely to have the chance of gaining royal support. Those that were suspected to be ineffective or uncanonical, on the other hand, were duly abolished. Thus the official cults, except for the fact that they conformed to the basic principle of the veneration of Heaven, Earth, and the natural forces, could not really be regarded as based on a coherent, stable, or well-articulated theory, not to mention a systematic theology that provides a self-contained justification.

From a managerial point of view, the Han government followed a policy that tried to control the myriad cults in the country by several steps. First, beginning from Emperor Gaozu, various local cults represented by the *wu*-shamans were transported to the capital of Changan.¹⁴ Thus the capital became a symbol of the entire state by showcasing, however incompletely, the various local cults.¹⁵ This, of course, should not be seen as the extinction of the local cults at their home bases. Second, by providing support to certain cults, in the reigns of both Emperors Gaozu (202–195 BCE) and Wen (180–157 BCE), the government sought to take control of the local religious activities, which was part of the overall plan to incorporate the country into a unified state. When Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE) came to the throne, more cults were added to the official list. Third, by sanctioning the “official” from the “excessive” cults, the government tried to impose a set of value systems that was consistent with the official ideology, that is, Confucian social ethics in the framework of correlative cosmology, although the full bloom dominance of Confucian ideology developed only during the Eastern Han.¹⁶

The imperial order created by all these efforts, to be sure, was only the context in which local variations were taking place and measured against.

¹² For further discussion, see Poo 1998: chapter 5.

¹³ A classic study is Gu Jiegang 1957. Also see DeWoskin 1983; Bujard 2009.

¹⁴ *Shiji* 28: 1378. ¹⁵ Poo 1998: 117–19.

¹⁶ For a general introduction to the Confucian classics, see Nylan 2001. For “Confucian” learning, see Loewe 2012.

The belief in and worship of ghosts was one element that could show the interrelationship between the central order and the local variations.

3.2 BELIEF IN GHOSTS IN THE QIN-HAN PERIOD

As has been shown above, one of the objectives of the Han official cults was to ensure the personal welfare of the emperor. This objective could not have been accomplished, however, without additional help from various ghosts and spirits that were not necessarily incorporated or incorporable into the official cults. In other words, even at the beginning when official cults were established, there was simultaneous worshipping of ghosts and spirits at the court to serve the emperor and his entourage for more personal needs. The First Emperor of Qin was known for his intense interest in seeking for the elixir of immortality and the islands of immortals in the Eastern Ocean. In order for the immortals to come, according to Lusheng, a Recipe Master (*fangshi*) who gained the First Emperor's trust, the evil ghosts needed to be expelled.¹⁷ Thus the Recipe Masters would make themselves available as experts in exorcising the ghosts. As a result, the belief in ghosts became inextricably intertwined with the search for immortality. Needless to say, the First Emperor found none of the exotic elixirs.

The idea of seeking for immortality continued into the Han, and it is known that Emperor Wen was for some time enchanted by a Recipe Master by the name of Xin Yuanping, who claimed to have the ability to observe the divine ether and foretell the future. Xin was eventually proven as a fraud and duly executed by the emperor. Despite these unsuccessful precedents, Emperor Wu was notorious for his indulgence in the magical arts and his belief in the existence of ghosts. For example, when Lady Wang, one of Emperor Wu's favorite concubines, died, the emperor asked Recipe Master Shaoweng (literally, the Youthful Elder) to recall the ghost of Lady Wang, and was convinced that the figure he saw in the night from a distance reflected on the canvas of a tent was indeed her ghost.¹⁸ After the conquest of the kingdom of Southern Yue, it was reported to Emperor Wu that the Yue people believed in ghosts, and their cult worshipping of ghosts was effective. The former king of Dongou, a small state to the east, allegedly lived to 160 years because he worshipped

¹⁷ *Shiji* 6:257; similarly, 12:458.

¹⁸ *Shiji* 28:1387; *Hanshu* 25:1219–220.

ghosts. Emperor Wu immediately ordered the *wu*-shamans of Yue to set up a Yue-style cult in the capital.¹⁹

As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), *guishen* as a compound term was commonly employed to designate spirits in general, and the terms *gui* and *shen* could be used interchangeably. Thus the ghost of a woman from Changling, an ordinary woman who died in childbirth, whose ghost possessed her sister-in-law and presumably performed some magical deeds, was worshipped as “*shenjun* 神君,” or “Divine Mistress,” by the people because of her efficacious power. It was said that Emperor Wu’s maternal grandmother Princess Pingyuan also worshipped her, and that was why her descendants, including Emperor Wu himself, became illustrious grandees. After Emperor Wu was enthroned, he bestowed rich gifts to the shrine of this “Divine Mistress” and it was said that one could hear her voice, but could not see her in person.²⁰ The ghost of Dubo, the avenging general of King Xuan of Zhou, whom we met in the [previous chapter](#), was apparently very famous throughout history, and received a cult of his own during the Han period. The *Records of the Grand Scribe* describes his cult as “The Lord of Du, who was the Right-General of the former Zhou dynasty, and who was one of the most junior ghosts in Central Qin that showed efficacy (*shen*).”²¹ Here the word *shen* was used to qualify the supernatural power of the ghost. It is interesting to note that the “most junior ghost” was regarded as a *shen*-deity. Such use of the term *guishen* confirms our observation in [Chapter 2](#) regarding the pre-imperial situation that ghosts and spirits/gods were conceived as belonging to the same category of beings. We can observe a similar situation in the Roman belief in ghosts/*manus*, as we shall discuss in [Chapter 7](#). The difference is that *gui* usually refers to the ghost of a certain person, and *shen* refers to the spirit of a higher level, such as those of the natural forces or heavenly bodies. Ambiguity of course will occur when certain ghosts were elevated to a higher status because of their special power and efficacy. The “Divine Mistress” of Changling mentioned above is an example. Thus when one ghost was worshipped as a god by some people, others may still see it only as a ghost.

In the *Chronicle of Qin* in the *Records of the Grand Scribe*, there is an interesting anecdote:

The king of the Rong-babarian sent Youyu as an ambassador to the state of Qin. Youyu’s ancestor was from the state of Jin who had defected to the Rong-tribe,

¹⁹ *Shiji* 28:1399–400. See Wang Zijin 2005.

²⁰ *Shiji* 28:1384.

²¹ *Shiji* 28:1375.

thus he could speak the language of Jin. The king of Rong heard that Duke Miu of Qin was a good ruler, therefore he sent Youyu to observe and learn. Duke Miu showed Youyu his palaces and wealth. Youyu said: "If the ghosts were ordered to do this, then their spirits must be tiresome; if human beings were ordered to do this, then people were certainly hard-pressed."²²

This causal mentioning of ghosts shows that the idea of commanding ghosts to work in human affairs is common thinking. Youyu's words, of course, did not really mean that people could really command ghosts to work for humans. But the fact that such an expression could be used in a matter-of-fact way indicates that the idea was nothing unusual in the language of his time – or, to be precise, in Sima Qian's time. In the *Records of the Grand Scribe*, Sima Qian recorded another story.²³ When Tian Fen, Emperor Wu's uncle, was sick, he was seen in a mentally tortured condition and howling in agony. It was suspected that he was haunted by ghosts. A *wu*-shaman who could see ghosts was summoned and indeed saw that the ghosts of the two men were at his bedside trying to kill him. The two men were Weiqi and Guanfu, two high officials who were executed earlier by Tian as a result of court political power struggle. Tian died eventually. Now several observations could be made here. First, the purpose of the story was very likely meant to make an indirect moral judgment on the character of Tian Fen, since Sima Qian portrayed him as a cunning and manipulative person responsible for the death of Weiqi and Guanfu, two honorable officials who served the court well. It is reasonable to assume that the ghostly attack, whether a true story or not, was included in Tian Fen's biography by Sima Qian to demonstrate that his death was deserved. Second, in order to make the story more convincing, Sima Qian would not have included something that did not have at least some credibility in the common mentality of the time. Ghostly revenge by people who died of injustice was, according to this logic, part of this common mentality, just as the idea that ghosts could be invoked to work for humans in Youyu's words. The story of Tian Fen and the ghosts was apparently a well-known one, as even Wang Chong (c. 27–97 CE), who lived almost two hundred years after Sima Qian, still quoted it in his treatise on ghosts.²⁴

Near the end of his reign, Emperor Wu's indulgence in the belief of ghosts and spirits culminated in a disastrous event that almost toppled the dynasty. In the year 92 BCE, a case of witchcraft broke out in

²² *Shiji* 5:192.

²³ *Shiji* 47: 2854–55; *Hanshu* 52:2393.

²⁴ *Lunheng jijie* 448ff.

Changan when Emperor Wu was out of the city at the royal resort of Ganquan. It was basically the explosion of a long struggle for power between the heir apparent, Prince Wei, and other factions at court that competed for the emperor's favor. What triggered the event was an accusation against the heir apparent of performing witchcraft and conjuring ghosts in order to harm the emperor. It was launched by a favorite official of the emperor by the name of Jiang Chong, who had offended the heir apparent previously and was thus fearful of the latter's retribution. He utilized an opportunity of rumors of witchcraft that allegedly occurred earlier in the capital by contriving to dig up wooden effigies in the inner court as evidence of witchcraft against the emperor. The heir apparent, caught unprepared and unable to have direct communication with the emperor, who was not in the capital at the time, resorted to executing Jiang Chong and started an open rebellion against the royal guard. The event ended in the suicide of the heir apparent and the death of thousands of people. Although Emperor Wu's personal belief and ill mental state might have been the direct reason for the event, as later commentators often alleged,²⁵ the entire social atmosphere of believing in ghosts, witchcraft, and exorcism must have contributed to the momentum that led to the eruption of the event.²⁶

In the later years of Emperor Cheng's (51–7 BCE) reign he was said to indulge himself in the worshipping of *guishen*, which should be understood as worshipping all sorts of spiritual beings.²⁷ Wang Mang (9–23 CE), who put an end to the Han dynasty and ushered the short-lived New Dynasty (Xin), also feared death and promoted numerous cults dedicated to myriads of ghosts and spirits.²⁸ During the Eastern Han period, an annual ceremony of expelling evil ghosts (*Da Nuo* 大難), described below, was performed in the capital at the end of year, indicating a general fear of ghosts in people's lives and their living environment.²⁹

The above examples show that the belief in ghosts was very much an integrated part of the life of the ruling court. However, this cannot be viewed as reflecting only the culture of the ruling members, since evidence shows that often the ideas of specific cults were transmitted from the lower echelon of society to the court. The "Divine Mistress" of Changling is one such example; the *wu*-shamans from the kingdom of Southern Yue who were employed by the court were another. This culture of ghosts

²⁵ *Sanguozhi* 25:716.

²⁶ See Loewe 1974: 37–90; Poo 1987; Cai Liang 2013; Poo 2022.

²⁷ *Hanshu* 25b:1260.

²⁸ *Hanshu* 25b:1270.

²⁹ Bodde 1975: 165–88; Poo 1998: 132.

recognized that the power of certain ghosts could affect a person by either inflicting pain or sickness or providing secrets of longevity. Such influences, moreover, were basically on the personal level, since the larger concern of the welfare of the state was addressed to the responsible high deities worshipped by the state cult.

Sifting through evidence concerning the belief in the extra-human powers, one could see that a large portion of the daily life of the ordinary people was intimately related to the dealing with ghosts. The *Debate on Salt and Iron* (*Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論), composed during the Western Han period, points out the contemporary problem of the prevalence of *wu*-shaman activities: "Amongst the streets and alleys there are *wu*-shamans, and within each local community there are spell-chanters."³⁰ Even allowing possible exaggerations of the author, there is no counterevidence to dispute the widespread activities of the shamans and spell-chanters, as they were no doubt specialized in the dealings with ghosts and spirits in the areas of sickness, death, marriage, childbirth, and various daily activities.³¹ In the case of witchcraft in Emperor Wu's last years, as mentioned above, the charge of "making sacrifice at night and sighting ghosts" was connected with the activities of the *wugu*-witchcraft. There is of course no sure way to estimate the actual prevalence of the belief in ghosts in society, as there is equally no sure way to estimate the prevalence of the spread of *wu*-shamans in the country,³² though this need not be a hindrance for us to gain a general understanding regarding the state of religious life during the Han period. According to the available textual evidence, especially the *Treatise on Geography* in the *Hanshu*, among the thirteen geographic areas, the activities of *wu*-shamans were clearly found in the areas of the pre-imperial states of Qin, Han, Qi, Chu, Wu, and Yue. For the remaining seven areas, except for the region of Lu, the home of Confucius, there were also traces of the activities of *wu*-shamans, many of which descended from the pre-imperial period.³³ Since the existence of *wu*-shamans presupposes a need in society to handle issues and problems involving the exorcising and propitiating of ghosts, we may assume that such evidence corroborates our impression that people in general consent to the idea that ghosts constituted part of their social reality.

At times we can gain some insight into this social reality by examining its critics. The Eastern Han scholar Wang Chong was a fervent opponent

³⁰ *Yantielun jiaozhu* 352.

³¹ For discussion of daily religious activities, see Poo 1998: chapter 6.

³² See Lin Fu-shih 1999, 2009. ³³ Lin Fu-shih 1999: 170–71.

of popular beliefs and cults, and the essays contained in his *Lun Heng* confirm our impression that the belief in ghosts was a common phenomenon. From his description of contemporary customs and ideas, ghosts were basically conceived as evil beings that could cause nothing but pain and fear.³⁴ Wang Chong tried to dismiss such beliefs in ghosts by giving explanations based on his common sense and materialistic approach, such as his idea of *qi*. For example, “Human being is a kind of animal. An animal is also an animal. When an animal died it cannot become a ghost. Why should human being alone become a ghost after death?”³⁵ Wang Chong’s argument was of course not without flaws, for people certainly believed that animal ghosts existed. Nonetheless, he held a materialistic view of life, that what kept a person (or an animal for that matter) “alive” was the “essential *qi* (*jingqi* 精氣)”:

The reason for a human being to be alive is because of the essential *qi* (*jingqi* 精氣). When one dies, the essential *qi* is dispersed. What produces the essential *qi* is blood veins. When a person dies his blood veins dry up. When they dry up, the essential *qi* is no more. When the essential *qi* is no more, the body becomes decomposed, and when it is decomposed, it becomes dust. How could there be anything that becomes a ghost!³⁶

Wang Chong further substantiated his argument about the phenomenon of ghosts in his chapter on “Defining Ghosts (*Dinggui* 訂鬼)” by criticizing a number of contemporary views on the existence of ghosts. Here we quote only the beginning and the end of the chapter, which demonstrate his own position:

The ghosts that are in the world are not the vital spirits of the dead, they are evoked by intense thinking and meditating. Where do they originate? – with sick people. When people are sick, they are inclined to melancholy and easily frightened. In this state of mind they see ghosts appear. People who are not sick, are not apprehensive. Thus, when sick people lying on their pillows are haunted with fears, ghosts appear. Their fears set them pondering, and when they do so, their eyes have visions.³⁷

...

In short, what we call lucky or unlucky omens, ghosts and spirits, are all produced by the solar *qi*. The solar *qi* is identical with the heavenly *qi*. As Heaven can create the body of man, it can also imitate his appearance.³⁸

Thus Wang Chong offered two basic perspectives: (1) ghosts are illusions of the mind; (2) ghosts are caused by the solar *qi* that took

³⁴ *Lunheng jijie* 448–56, 465–72; Forke 1962: 239–49.

³⁶ *Lunheng jijie* 414.

³⁷ Forke 1962: vol. 1, 239.

³⁵ *Lunheng jijie* 414.

³⁸ Forke 1962: vol. 1, 239.

human shape. The former is a psychological explanation, while the latter is a materialistic one. While we need not debate this seemingly self-contradictory position, it is nevertheless notable that he tried very hard to dispel the idea of the existence of ghosts. His method of arguing against the existence of ghosts, moreover, was based on a logic that examines the general applicability of alleged cases of ghosts. If an individual case could not logically be applied to a general situation, it is not trustworthy. If an avenging ghost appears because he is not buried properly, then all those who were not buried properly should logically have become avenging ghosts and haunt the entire world. Yet it was not the case. If Bo You's ghost appeared because he died of injustice, then all those rulers who were assassinated should all have become avenging ghosts, but they did not.³⁹

Apparently, Wang Chong was among the minority whose voice was more a signal of the prevailing belief in ghosts and spirits than anything that could effectively change this situation. For the general psychology was exactly the opposite of Wang Chong's reasoning. The core of the problem is of course the very existence of the concept of ghost as something deeply rooted in the collective psyche, so that rational arguments to deny its existence, such as what Wang Chong and many other intellectuals throughout history had tried, were of no avail to curb the popular belief in ghostly vengeance. The famous event of the case of witchcraft in Emperor Wu's reign demonstrates the power of a general fear of ghosts that served as a catalyst to a bloody court struggle and factional fight. There is also no lack of stories and anecdotes in the biographies of the Recipe Masters and others in the *History of Later Han* in which the use of exorcism against evil ghosts was not an uncommon idea.⁴⁰

For example, a person named Fei Zhangfang once received from an immortal a magical staff and a talisman; the former could serve as vehicle that brings him instantly to any place – similar to a witch's broom – while the latter could be used to control ghosts and spirits. Fei was thus able to “cure difficult diseases, punish many hundreds of ghosts, and command the local deities to work for him.”⁴¹ Another person by the name of Qu Shengqing was known to be able to “make talismans written in red ink, and exorcise ghosts and spirits by giving them commands.”⁴² The idea of using the talismans points at a belief in the efficacy of written words as the

³⁹ *Lunheng jijie* 428. ⁴⁰ *Houhanshu* 82b:2744, 2746, 2749. See DeWoskin 1983.

⁴¹ *Houhanshu* 82b:2744.

⁴² *Houhanshu* 82b:2749. For other stories involved in the exorcism of ghosts, see *Houhanshu* 41:1441, 50:1676, 57:1841.

equivalent of magical spells. Such reliance on written documents, moreover, seems to be connected with the increasing bureaucratization in the Han period, as the government's commands were often transmitted through written messages that demanded strict obedience. Archaeological discoveries in recent decades have found in Eastern Han tombs many examples of talismans and spells for the purpose of driving away evil ghosts. The terminologies bear clear resemblance to texts later collected in the Daoist Canon, which led some scholars to argue that a kind of early Daoist organization might have existed before the conventionally recognized establishment of the Daoist religion at the end of Eastern Han, to which we shall return in [Chapter 5](#).⁴³ One example with spell and talisman can give us the gist of these texts.⁴⁴ In this example, the spell is written in a prose style, while the talisman is written with a combination of graphs and characters that only the initiated could decipher. Obviously, the person who wrote the spell and the talisman belonged to the class of Recipe Masters who made their appearance already in the late Warring States period. Without an organized religious church, the Recipe Masters could be regarded as "self-made priests" of a kind before the organized Daoist church appeared during the late Eastern Han.

Although the officials/literati of the Han period often sided with the government in curbing popular cults, their relationship with local cults could only be characterized as ambiguous. On the one hand, it was the imperial policy to abolish the "excessive cults" that were not under the jurisdiction of the government. As mentioned in a number of stories, Han officials often engaged in the struggle with local cults, and tried to abolish "superstitious" beliefs. Yet on the other hand, in practice, the officials were not entirely against the local cults.⁴⁵ It is important to realize that the closing down of a local cult could have caused great financial loss to the people who managed the cult, and great psychological loss to the common believers. Indeed, when we talk about the establishing or abolishing of certain cults, the issues at stake were probably not only the problem of whether the cults were considered as superstition by the government, but the procurement and control of resources by the local agents. The economic side of cult worship is not easy to discuss for lack of evidence, but we should be clear that it was an important aspect in

⁴³ See Zhang and Bai 2006: vol. 1.

⁴⁴ Zhang and Bai 2006: vol. 1, 110; for translation and discussion, see Poo 1998: 182–83.

⁴⁵ Poo 1998: chapter 8.

understanding the operation of religious establishments.⁴⁶ Without the sanction of the state, a cult had to support itself, and a certain degree of economic activity had to be assumed. The actions of the officials, therefore, might have to do with such kinds of economic issues, rather than the nature of worship: whether the “excessive cult” was “morally problematic” was not necessarily the main concern. This situation can be reflected in a story about a ghost complaining to the official who abolished his cult so that his source of income was curtailed and “not being able to receive blood sacrifice,” as we shall discuss in the [next chapter](#).

To follow the theme of the official efforts to impose order and eliminate local cults, an interesting story preserved in the *History of Later Han* exemplifies the kind of conflicts between the officials and the Recipe Masters:

Liu Gen was from the district of Yingchuan, who led a reclusive life in Mount Song. Many interested people from afar would come and learn from him the Dao. The Magistrate Shi Qi regarded him as a charlatan and arrested him. He said to him: “What kind of magic do you have so that you cheated and misled the people? If you indeed possess supernatural power, you can demonstrate with one example. Otherwise, you will immediately be executed.” Gen said: “I have no other special talent, but am good at letting people see ghosts.” Shi Qi said: “Call the ghosts immediately and let me see with my own eyes, then you shall be trusted.” Therefore Liu Gen looked to his left and howled. After a while, the deceased father and grandfather and a few dozens of close relatives of Shi Qi were all with arms tied in the back and knelt in front and kowtowed to Gen, saying: “Our son did not behave well, we ought to bear the blame.” Then they looked at Shi Qi and scolded him: “As a descendant, you not only could not be beneficial to your ancestors, but caused the dead souls to be troubled and humiliated! You should kowtow and apologize for us.” Shi Qi was in great fear and grief, and kowtowed until bleeding, and asked to be punished. Gen was silent and did not answer. Then suddenly he disappeared; no one knows his whereabouts.⁴⁷

The story was in favor of the Recipe Master Liu Gen, and the magistrate was described as acting too arrogantly for not believing in the art of the Recipe Master. The fact that stories such as these were included in the *History of Later Han* indicates that at least the activities of these specialists were regarded positively in the popular mentality. Given the fact that the author of the *History of Later Han*, Fan Ye (398–445), lived in the

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the economy of cult and sacrifice in early China, see Sterckx 2011. For scholars who are familiar with modern Chinese popular culture, the tremendous economic power of some of the popular temples, such as the Mazu temples in Taiwan, is common knowledge.

⁴⁷ *Houhanshu* 82b:2746.

Southern Dynasty of Song, at a time when ghost stories were beginning to be written down in great quantity, the inclusion of this kind of story can be seen as a reflection of the general atmosphere of his time.

A survey of the geographical origins of the Recipe Masters/*fangshi* in the *History of Later Han* shows that they were from various places of the Han state, ranging from Ba and Shu in the west to Langya in the east, Shangdang in the north, and Kuaiji and Danyang in the southeast. Such a wide range of distribution of these people with special talents who could deal with ghosts and perform exorcisms of various kinds again confirms the impression that the belief in ghosts and the need for exorcism were common phenomena in the country.

Funerary customs reveal the belief in ghosts from another angle. We mentioned the *Demonography* in the *Daybook* as testimony of popular belief in ghosts and spirits. It is also worth noting that the concern with the attack of ghosts was expressed not only here but throughout the *Daybook*.⁴⁸ This custom of including texts such as the *Daybook* in the tomb suggests that what people found useful against ghosts in their life was also considered beneficial to the dead in the netherworld. The existence and wide distribution of the *Daybook* can be corroborated by the *Treaties of Bibliography* (*Yiwenzhi* 藝文志) in *Hanshu*, wherein a number of exorcistic texts were mentioned in the collection of the royal library.⁴⁹ Moreover, exorcistic rituals against ghosts must have been performed during the funeral. This is not only mentioned in the Classic texts of *Yili* (儀禮) and *Zuo zhuan* (左傳),⁵⁰ but also confirmed by archaeological finds. A ritual text found in an Eastern Han tomb contains the following spell against evil ghosts:

He who died on the *yisi* day has the ghost-name “heavenly light” (*tienguang* 天光). The Heavenly Emperor and Sacred Teacher already know your name. Quickly go away 3,000 miles. If you do not go immediately, the ... [monster?] of the South Mountain is ordered to eat you. Hurry, as prescribed by the law and ordinance.⁵¹

The text reveals a certain belief in the existence of a sacred bureaucracy that consisted of a high god and high officials. Similar to the human court, the power holders could issue decrees to banish the unwanted members, that is, the ghosts, to a faraway place. Note, however, that the ghost

⁴⁸ Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 193, 245, 249, 254.

⁴⁹ *Hanshu* 30:1772. ⁵⁰ *Yili zhushu* 37:8; *Zuo zhuan zhushu* 39:3.

⁵¹ Jiangsusheng wenwu guanli weiyuanhui 1960.

mentioned in the text/spell was actually the deceased himself, and the text was meant to keep the deceased away from the living. Thus this text is also a testimony to at least one aspect of the relationship between the living and the dead, which can at best be described by the Confucian motto, “Revere the ghosts and spirits and keep a distance from them.” For another example, a group of wooden slips found in Hunan province and dated to 79 CE provide rich information on the rituals performed in connection with death and burial.⁵² The texts were written in the form of contracts detailing that when a person was about to die, the family members would employ a *wu*-shaman to pray and make ale and meat offerings for that person. When the person died, the family members would pray again to a variety of deities, including the Lord Hearth (*zaojun* 灶君), the Controller of Fate (*siming* 司命), and a number of local deities. Sacrifice to the deities was also ministered by local *wu*-shamans. When the prayer was finished, the content of the prayer and the offering was then written on wooden or bamboo slips, to be taken by the deceased as a kind of contract to the Heavenly Sire (*tiangong* 天公), to testify that indeed prayers and offerings had been performed on behalf of the deceased. It is unclear who this Heavenly Sire was, though he must have been one of the important deities in charge of the deceased. In fact, the term is still in use even in contemporary Taiwan, which is equivalent to the old term *shangdi*, or Emperor on High. This, of course, is another form of the bureaucratization of the afterworld, as official documents on earth were imitated in the world of the dead. It is particularly interesting that here the deceased, or the soul/ghost, was referred to as ascending to Heaven and descending to the Yellow Spring at the same time when death occurred. None of these rituals is recorded in classical canons such as *Book of Ceremonies*.

So far the kind of ghosts that we have seen were usually hostile toward humans, and the human attitudes toward them were either reconciliatory or antagonistic. For people who aspired to a prosperous life and longevity, dealing with the ghosts was inevitable: whatever hope one had for an ideal life or life hereafter could not be achieved without first settling the account with ghosts and spirits. It is only after ghosts were appeased that people’s hope could be realized. Whatever reverence toward the great cosmic forces as shown in the state rituals, therefore, was relegated to the background in people’s daily lives, when they had to solve their

⁵² Chen Songchang 2001; Harper 2004; Wataru Shimokura 2013.

immediate problems. The imperial order of official cults, mentioned in the *Treatise on Grand Ceremony* (*Fengshan shu* 封禪書) of *Shiji* or *Treatise on Sacrifice* (*Jiaosi zhi* 郊祀志) of *Hanshu*, and performed in the capital and at various locations throughout the country, therefore, was complemented or even overshadowed by the belief in ghosts represented by various cults and practices, equally spread from the court to the countryside. The following is a good example that shows the sharing of similar cult activities between the court and the local society.

3.3 THE *NUO*, OR EXORCISM

The term *nuo* (難, 難) refers to an ancient exorcistic ritual that was performed at various levels in society, and has survived in various forms until the present time, notably in the present-day southwestern provinces of China.⁵³ It has been suggested that a kind of *nuo*-exorcism against evil spirits was performed as early as the Shang period. One term in the oracle bone inscriptions has been identified as the term for Fangxiang (方相), the main exorcist in the *nuo*-exorcism known to the later era.⁵⁴ During the Eastern Zhou period it was known to have been performed at the village level, as Confucius was said to have once attended the performance of a *nuo*-ritual in a village.⁵⁵ Passages found in the *Liji*, *Zhouli*, *Lüshi chunqiu*, and *Houhanshu* testify that *nuo*-exorcism was an official ritual aimed at driving away evil spirits from the human sphere. It was usually performed as a seasonal ritual, initiated by the government, and participated in by the ruler and officials. According to the *Monthly Ordinance* (*Yueling*) preserved in the *Lüshi chunqiu*:

During the third month of the Spring, ... order the state to perform the *nuo*-ceremony, exorcising the evil spirits at the nine gates, in order to complete the spring *qi*-ether.

During the second month of the Fall, ... order the steward and diviner to perform sacrificial rituals, ... and the son of heaven performs the *nuo*-ceremony, in order to ward off diseases and to smooth the *qi*-ether of the Fall.

During the third month of the Winter, order the officials to perform the great *nuo*-ceremony and accompanied with exorcistic sacrifice, display the earth cattle, in order to send away the cold *qi*-ether.⁵⁶

⁵³ Qu Liuyi and Qian Fu 2003.

⁵⁴ Guo Moro 1983: No. 498; Qian Fu 1994; Qu Liuyi and Qian Fu 2003: 389–93.

⁵⁵ *Lunyu zhushu* 10:9. ⁵⁶ *Lüshi chunqiu* 2:3, 8:2, 11:2.

It seems that in the context of the *Monthly Ordinance* the term *nuo* refers to a special seasonal exorcistic ritual for expelling evil spirits of all sorts. The passages in the *Monthly Ordinance* did not specify the names of the evil spirits to be exorcised during the *nuo*-ritual. Nor can we tell from the text the actual procedures of the ritual performance. The *Zhouli* provides a description of the main exorcist, Fangxiang:

Fangxiang is . . . covered with bear skin, with four golden eyes, clad in black upper garment and red lower garment, grasps a lance and brandishes a shield. He leads the hundred participants and performs the seasonal *nuo*-ritual, to search the house and expel diseases. During a state funeral, he shall walk in front of the coffin, upon reaching the tomb, he shall enter the tomb pit and use the lance to beat the four corners and drive away the *Fangliang*⁵⁷.

The *Fangliang* is a certain kind of malicious spirit that was thought to be able to do harm to the human ghost in the tomb. Thus the Fangxiang, as an exorcist, was able to perform rituals to expel evil ghosts and spirits on various occasions other than the *nuo*-exorcism. The fact that his image was constructed with a deliberate intention to create terror and awe suggests that people perceived that ghosts would feel the same and thus be repelled.

It is only in the *History of Later Han* that we find more information concerning the ritual process of *nuo*-exorcism. The often cited passage in the "Treatise on Rituals and Ceremonies" gives a rather detailed description of the preparation and process of the *nuo*-ritual, and also a text pronounced during the ceremony:

One day before the La (腊) there is the Great Exorcism (*danuo* 大儺), which is called the "expulsion of pestilences." In this ceremony, one hundred and twenty lads from among the Palace Attendants of the Yellow Gates, aged ten to twelve, are selected to form a youthful troupe. They all wear red head cloths, black tunics, and hold large swirl-drums. The Exorcist (Fangxiangshi), [his head] covered with a bear skin, having four eyes of gold, and clad in black upper garment and red lower garment, holds a lance and brandishes a shield. Palace Attendants of the Yellow Gates act as twelve "animals," wearing fur, feathers and horns, and the Supervisor of the Retinue leads them to expel evil ghosts in the palace.

When the water is yet high in the night water-clock, the court officials assemble, with Palace Attendants, Masters of Writing, Imperial Clerks, Internuncios, and Generals of the As-Rapid-as-Tigers and Feathered Forest Gentlemen all wearing red head-cloths and on guard. The Emperor with his escort ride on carriage to the Front Hall of the palace, where the Prefect of the Yellow Gates memorializes,

⁵⁷ *Zhouli zhushu* 31:12.

saying: "The youthful troupe is in readiness. We beg permission to expel the pestilences."

Then the Palace Attendants of the Yellow Gates start a chant in which the troupe joins: "Jiazu, devour the baneful! Feiwei, devour tigers! Xiongbo, devour the Mei-demon! Tengqian, devour the inauspicious! Lanzhu, devour calamities! Boqi, devour dreams! Qiangliang and Zuming, together devour those who, having suffered execution with public exposure, now cling to the living! Weisui, devour visions! Cuoduan, devour giants! Qungqi and Tenggen, together devour the *gu*-poisons! There are altogether twelve spirits to drive away the evil and baneful. Let them roast your bodies, break your spines and joints, tear off your flesh, pull out your lungs and entrails. If you do not leave at once, those who stay behind will become their food."

As this takes place, the Exorcist and the twelve animals dance and shout, going everywhere through the front and rear palace apartments. They make three rounds, holding torches, with which they send the pestilences forth out of the Meridional Gate. Outside this gate, mounted horsemen take over the torches and go out of the palace through the Guard Tower Gate, outside of which horsemen of the Five Barracks Guards in turn take over the torches and hurl them into the Lo river.

In the various official bureaus, each official wears a wooden animal mask with which he can act as the leader of those participating in the exorcism. When this is all over, peachwood figurines of [Shenshu] and Yulu with rush cords are set up. When this has been done, the officers in attendance upon the throne stop their efforts. Rush spears and peachwood staffs are bestowed upon the Lords, the Ministers, the Generals, the Marquises of Special Merit, the other Marquises, and so on.⁵⁸

We quote this paragraph to show that the ritual must have been a most important one in the Han court, as the procedure of the ritual was recorded in considerable detail. The ritual objective was rather clear: it was to expel the evil spirits hidden in every corner of the human residence. Unlike the more simple methods of exorcism preserved in the *Demonography* of the Shuihudi *Daybook*, wherein no deities or spirits were needed to execute the rituals, the Great *Nuo*-ritual employed twelve animal-spirits (symbolically portrayed by the boys) to expel the evil ghosts. The ritual was apparently conducted more or less as a public event to celebrate the end of the year, thus it contains some dramatic elements that incorporated idea of ghost-eating spirits. Of the animal-spirits, the one that eats dreams, Boqi, might actually be the spirit

⁵⁸ *Houhanshu* 3127–28. Translation follows Bodde 1975: 81–82, with minor changes.

mentioned in the Shuihudi *Daybook* chapter of “Dream,” but with the name of Jinqi.⁵⁹ Thus there is reason to believe that these twelve animal-spirits all had their origins in the popular belief, just as the belief in the exorcistic efficacy of rush and peach wood, mentioned in the Great *Nuo*-ritual.

The use of fire torches in the act confirms the idea that fire was considered auspicious and efficacious in expelling evil spirits. It is interesting to note, however, that the evil ghosts were eventually not destroyed but expelled. When the ghosts were driven out, the expression used is “they [the Exorcist and the twelve animal-spirits] send the pestilences forth out of the Meridional Gate.” Thus although destructive threats were uttered in the chant, the assumption of this exorcistic ritual was not to destroy the evil ghosts, that is, the pestilence, but only to send them out of the human sphere. Implicitly, this means that the evil ghosts can come back next year, so that another exorcism has to be performed. The cosmological assumption behind this exorcistic act, therefore, is quite interesting: the evil ghosts, though malevolent and dangerous toward human beings, were part of the cosmic order. They could be expelled from the human sphere temporarily, yet there seems to be no way to destroy them once and for all. Thus yearly, or periodically, there arises the need to expel them. That the ghosts were to be driven away but not destroyed could be corroborated by the exorcistic spells found in the *Demonography* of Shuihudi and in the aforementioned Eastern Han tomb funerary text, in which the evil ghost was given the command to “go away quickly for three thousand miles, if you do not go immediately, the [monster] of the South Mountain is ordered to eat you.” This is similar to what was pronounced at the Great *Nuo*-Exorcism: “If you do not leave at once, those who stay behind will become their [the ghost-eating deities’] food.”

Although the *nuo*-exorcism recorded in the *History of Later Han* qualifies as a state ritual, since the purpose was to expel evil spirits from the palace, and many officials participated in the ritual, similar exorcistic rituals were also performed at the county and village level, which can still be found in modern times.⁶⁰ What were common to all these rituals were the pronouncement of spells and certain ritual actions. In other words, the basic elements in the exorcistic rituals are common to all.

⁵⁹ Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 210.

⁶⁰ Qu Liuyi and Qian Fu 2003: 159–99.

In the time of emperor Ho (94 CE) an edict was issued to make the *fu*-day of the sixth month a national recess day, for, according an old explanation, the *fu*-day was when myriads of ghosts would come out.⁶¹ Therefore, throughout the day people were ordered to close the door without doing any business. Thus this *fu*-day was close to an early version of the ghost-festival celebrated later at the mid-seventh month.⁶²

All these discussions about various activities that had to do with the belief in ghosts can only confirm what the society was like. For most commoners, there was no choice for them not to believe that ghosts and spirits existed. It was for the need of the bureaucracy that the intellectuals/officials were trying to create some order, some line of control to ensure that paying of taxes and corvée labor could be carried out smoothly, and that the worship of ghosts or deities would not interfere with the governmental duties. That is why we see Han officials/literati sometimes behaving inconsistently in that they could come out to prohibit the “superstitions” and “excessive cults,” but they also took part in local religious activities in some circumstances that they deemed appropriate.⁶³ One can argue, however, that they were consistent in the sense that they had a common goal of establishing a rational management system that could sustain the operation of the ruling apparatus and the financial need of the government. Archaeological discoveries of numerous Qin and Han administrative documents and legal texts in the past few decades all point to this effort of the government.⁶⁴ The imperial desire for order was there, but the local variation in beliefs was always an unruly reality.

3.4 GHOSTS AND THE NETHERWORLD

A funerary text of the Eastern Han period contains the following statement: “The living belong to [the jurisdiction of] Changan to the west, the dead belong to [the jurisdiction of] Mount Tai to the east.”⁶⁵ When this statement was made, it was probably common knowledge regarding the whereabouts of the netherworld and the destination of ghosts. The importance of Mount Tai as the abode of the dead originates most

⁶¹ *Houbanshu* 179: “on the day of *yichou*, the first order to command closing down business for the whole day, nothing shall be conducted.” It is stated in the *Old Institution of Han Officials* 漢官舊儀 that “on the *fu*-day myriads of ghosts would come out, therefore businesses were closed for the entire day; nothing would be done.”

⁶² See Bodde 1975: 317–25. ⁶³ I discussed this in Poo 1998: chapter 6.

⁶⁴ See Barbieri-Low and Yates 2015. ⁶⁵ Zhang and Bai 2006: 163.

probably from its status as the site of the state sacrifice to Heaven, although exactly how and when the change happened is still unclear.⁶⁶ Yet Mount Tai was not the only destination for the ghosts in the imaginary netherworld. Two small hills by the names of Gaoli and Liangfu that were at the foot of Mount Tai also became associated with the realm of the dead.⁶⁷ What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that the text points out two bureaucratic systems, one for the living and one for the dead, the latter being obviously the reflection of the former.

As the conception of the netherworld in early China has been studied quite frequently in recent years,⁶⁸ suffice it to say that the terms Yellow Spring (*huangquan*), Dark City (*youdu*), and the Underground (*dixia*) had been used to denote the netherworld already in the pre-Qin and early Han period. Yet so far little is known about this netherworld from the pre-imperial documents. The *Songs of the South* (*Chuci*) saw the netherworld or the Dark City as a place where dwelled a monstrous underground demon or official of some sort, the Lord of Earth (Tubo 土伯), who possessed the body of a horned python. The deceased soul, or the ghost, therefore, was actually advised not to go to this underground world, as if it had a choice:

O soul, Go not down to the City of Darkness, where the Lord Earth lies, nine-coiled, with dreadful horns on his forehead, and a great humped back and bloody thumbs, pursuing men, swift-footed: Three eyes he has in his tiger's head, and his body is like a bull's.⁶⁹

Besides this monster-demon, however, little is known about the other aspects of this City of Darkness. The most significant development of the conception of the netherworld in the Han dynasty was its bureaucratization, although it should be noticed that the idea of a netherworld bureaucracy was probably there already in the earlier imagination. For example, the existence of some late Warring States deities such as the Controller of Fate (*Siming*), or the deity Wuyi, whom we met in the [previous chapter](#), and who were in charge of the ghosts of the war-dead, implies a certain kind of governing organization in the world of the dead. It is not quite clear, however, whether these deities belonged to a “heavenly court” or an “underground government.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ For Mount Tai, in addition to the classic studies of Chavannes 1910 and Sakai Tadao 1937, see Yu Ying-shih 1987; Liu Tseng-gui 1997.

⁶⁷ Yu Ying-shih 1987; Poo 1998: chapter 7.

⁶⁸ Pirazzoli-T'Serstevens 2009; Poo 2011; Lai Guolong 2015. ⁶⁹ Hawkes 1959: 105.

⁷⁰ Lai Guolong 2015: 154–59.

The bureaucratization of the netherworld was further and unambiguously developed in the Han, as witnessed in abundant documents. For example, a text found in an early Western Han tomb dated to 176 BCE relates the following:

In the fourth year, the ninth month, day of *xinhai*, the *wufu* (五夫) of Pingli, Zhang Yan dares to tell the Lord of the Underworld (*dixiazhu* 地下主): the garments and objects of Yan, each are dispatched according to the laws and ordinances.⁷¹

Wufu is a low-level official in charge of the affairs of the hamlet (*li*) in the Han local administration. The Lord of the Underworld seems to be an equivalent of a district magistrate in the netherworld bureaucracy. The text seems to indicate that the above-ground local officials could be communicating with the underground bureaucracy with corresponding bureaucratic regulations such as a system of property registration. A text dated a few years later records a similar bureaucratic organization for the netherworld:

In the twelfth year, the second month, day of *wuchen*, Fen, the Assistant of the House (*jiacheng* 家丞) dispatches to the Assistant in charge of the tomb (*zhucang langzhong* 主藏郎中) a list of funerary objects, the list is written to present to the Lord of the Grave (*zhucang jun* 主藏君).⁷²

This would be the communication between the household assistant of the deceased and the netherworld official in charge of the registration and reception of the property that the deceased brought with them. Another text dated to 167 BCE states:

On the thirteenth year, the fifth month, day of Gengchen, the Assistant Magistrate (*cheng* 丞) of Jiangling District dares to tell the Assistant Magistrate of the Underworld (*dixiacheng* 地下丞) that the *wufu* of Shiyang, Sui Shaoyan, and the slave Liang and others, a total of twenty-eight persons, . . . and four riding-horses, can be used to serve. (I) hereby dare to report to the Lord.⁷³

In these texts we found various titles of the netherworld officials, such as the Assistant Magistrate of the Underworld, or the Lord of the Underworld, who were carrying out some administrative duties in dispatching and receiving documents related to the deceased persons and the arrangement of their funerary objects. These officials were presumably

⁷¹ Qiu Xigui 1974: 49.

⁷² Hunan sheng bowuguan and Zhongguo kexueyuan kaogu yianjiusuo 1974: 43.

⁷³ Wenwu Jinancheng fenghunagshan 168 hao hanmu fajue zhenglizu 1975: 4.

also part of the ghost community – that is, they themselves were ghosts – although how they became the officials of the netherworld is not known. Later, and mostly in the ghost stories, it was assumed that when a person died, they could be summoned to serve in the netherworld bureaucracy. By the Eastern Han, this process had progressed to a degree where imagined offices occupied a central position in this netherworld bureaucracy, as witnessed in a funerary text:

The Heavenly Emperor [issued] a decree, to secure the tomb of the local dead Xu Wentai. Command the Assistant of the Mount, the Lord of the Tomb, the Two-thousand-bushel of Underground, [who are] above, below, in the middle, to the left and right of the tomb, the Officer of the Tomb Gate, the Elders of Gaoli thus: Let the family and descendants of Xu Wentai not die again in the future. The heaven above is blue, the earth below is misty. The dead return to Yin, the living return to Yang. The living have neighborhood district, the dead have village. The living belong to [the jurisdiction of] Changan to the West, the dead belong to [the jurisdiction of] Mount Tai to the East. In happiness you should not miss each other, in distress you should not long for each other. When the [god] of Mount Tai is to summon, use the ginseng to answer the call. If there should be punishment of a culprit in the underground, the “honey figurine” should be substituted for the dead. For thousands of years the living should never be [inculped]. To help the living family members and descendants of Xu to become rich and powerful, with billions of wealth, and numerous descendants. Hereby I present gold and silver to satisfy the tomb owner, and seal the tomb . . . [?] The ancestors of the Xu family tombs and the grandparents [shall not] leave the tomb, and not . . . cause any damage, and each at peace in his place. When the tomb gate is sealed, the names pass on to later generations, and not causing [further] death. The rest is as what the Heavenly Emperor [used to] decree.⁷⁴

The text provides us with an extraordinary view of the structure of the netherworld in the imagination of the Han people. It not only refers to the various officials who were involved in making sure the deceased was secure in his tomb; it also stipulated various ways to help the deceased handle the requirements of the netherworld bureaucracy. Most importantly, the text draws a distinction between the world of the living and the world of the dead, thus, “The living belong to [the jurisdiction of] Changan to the West, the dead belong to [the jurisdiction of] Mount Tai to the East.” It is, therefore, a document that protects both the living and the dead.

It has been suggested that this development of the bureaucratized netherworld under a general jurisdiction of Mount Tai could be related

⁷⁴ Zhang and Bai 2006: 163.

to the development of the secular government since the establishment of the universal empire.⁷⁵ The assumption is that the knowledge of a universal government might have inspired the idea of a netherworld that operates along similar practices. Moreover, this development also had a profound influence on the development of the concept of ghost. Thus although the sprawling worship of ghosts of all sorts was not at all controllable by the imperial government, which aimed at implementing order in the empire, the actual development of an imagined netherworld bureaucracy nonetheless gained control of the ghosts and put them under the charge of the netherworld officials. Ironically, one may suggest, what the secular government failed to achieve in this world, the underground government did in the next world. Bureaucratization defined the world of ghosts and set a framework for the collective imagination of the netherworld. The man-eating demon in the *Chuci* was now replaced by a group of bureaucrats.

This also provides the reason why in the *Anomaly Tales* (*zhiguai*), which will be discussed in the [next chapter](#), ghosts could appear more and more as human beings in every aspect, for the collective imagination of the ghostly existence became more and more like the bureaucratic environment that people experienced on earth. A story about Jiang Ji's deceased son petitioning for a better position in the netherworld is a good example that shows how people imagined the workings of this netherworld bureaucracy.⁷⁶ This bureaucratized netherworld, therefore, might have provided the mental environment for the rise of ghost stories. It also became a final and unbreakable spell for the religious imagination of the Chinese people until the modern time.

3.5 THE CHANGING IMAGE OF GHOSTS

The idea of ghosts could be understood as the manifestation of people's imagination of life after death, as well as their feelings and even comments about the world of the living. The imagined activities of ghosts could reveal the social ethics of a given age, or at least hint at certain characteristics that are otherwise less easy to recognize. One may have the assumption that since most ghosts were originally humans, the descriptions of their character would naturally imitate their earthly existence. Looking back from the Shang dynasty onward, however, we notice that

⁷⁵ Poo 1998: chapter 7; Lai Goulong 2015: 154–59.

⁷⁶ Lu Xun 1986: 139.

descriptions and stories about ghosts generally lacked details on their individual characters. One exception, as we have seen in [Chapter 2](#), may be the story of resurrection preserved in the Fangmatan Qin text in which the habits of the ghosts were described in some detail. Here, however, what the text presented was a general picture of the nature of ghosts, not that of a particular ghost.⁷⁷ Very rarely, moreover, do we have a story in which the ghost spoke in a first-person voice. When a ghost was mentioned in a narrative, it was usually treated as “it,” as a “thing.” The assumption was perhaps that no communication between ghosts and human beings was possible or necessary. The ghosts rarely talked in the manner or voice of an ordinary human being to whomever they appeared to. In other words, there were no “personal stories” about these ghosts, although they might be part of a story.

A famous example in the pre-Qin documents about a revenging ghost was probably the story of Peng Sheng:

When Duke of Qi was traveling to Gufen and hunted at Beiqiu, he saw a large boar. The attendants said, it is Master Peng Sheng. The Duke became angry and said, “How dare Peng Sheng show himself!” He then shot at it, whilst the boar stood up like a man and howled. The Duke was terrified and fell off the chariot, hurt his foot, and lost his shoes.⁷⁸

In the story, we are not told why the boar was taken to be the ghost of Peng Sheng, nor did the boar identify itself as Peng Sheng, but the Duke of Qi apparently believed it, as he shot at the boar, intending to kill the ghost. According to the *Zuo zhuan*,⁷⁹ about eight years earlier, the Duke of Qi ordered Peng Sheng, a gallant knight, to murder the Duke of Lu. Afterward, under the pressure of the petition of the Lu officials, the Duke of Qi had Peng Sheng executed to take the blame. Thus there must have been certain grievances among the people on behalf of Peng Sheng against the Duke of Qi for the injustice that he had done to his own subjects who worked under his command. The reason why the great boar was taken as the ghost of Peng Sheng, therefore, was probably because Peng Sheng was a strong and robust person, and the great boar might have reminded people of his character. The angry reaction of Duke of Qi, moreover, was clearly out of an existing anxiety about the death of Peng Sheng and the fear of ghostly retribution, so that when the attendants pointed out that the boar was the ghost of Peng Sheng, his anxiety quickly turned into a rage and violent reaction, to counter his fear. Note that despite the rather

⁷⁷ Harper 1994.

⁷⁸ *Zuo zhuan zhushu* 8:17.

⁷⁹ *Zuo zhuan zhushu* 7:25–26.

complete story about the ghostly vengeance of Peng Sheng, the “ghost” himself did not speak a word in the account, thus was not articulating whatever vengeance that he might have possessed.

The only one example in the pre-Qin texts where the ghost spoke in a first-person voice is probably the story of the great demonic ghost (*dali* 大厲), whom we have seen in [Chapter 2](#), that the Marquis of Jin dreamt of in his dream. There the ghost said, “You have unjustly killed my grandson, and I have presented my request to the Emperor.”⁸⁰ These words, of course, describe a basic relation between the living and the dead, or what the collective social morality upheld and expected, that is to say, that justice be done to the wronged, in life or in death. Yet most of the time ghosts in the pre-Qin period did not interact with humans verbally, and there was little exchange of ideas in a “person to person” fashion between the ghosts and the living. If we believe that Wang Chong’s presentation of the conceptions of ghosts reflected the common attitudes not only of his contemporaries but those of the people in general, it can be said that when ghosts were mentioned, it was mostly in a negative way in the context of their causing fear and horror.⁸¹ The relationship between ghosts and human beings, therefore, could be conceived as mutually antagonistic. The ability to exorcise ghosts was to become one of the outstanding characteristics of some famous people with magical power, including those known as Recipe Masters (*fangshi* 方士), mentioned earlier.⁸² It seems that, as an element in early Chinese literary tradition, the ghost had not yet developed a certain independent character into which writers could inject their own thoughts and imagination. In other words, the ghost had not yet become a vehicle for the storytellers to express and elaborate particular ideas or emotions besides the basic idea of revenge. The philosopher Zhuangzi’s story about the witty and sarcastic ghost of the roadside skull was probably an exception that proves the rule (see [Chapter 2](#)).

This impersonal imagination of ghosts, wherein ghosts are to be either expelled or pacified, remains a predominant attitude in the popular mentality throughout later Chinese history. Yet we can also observe a certain trend, beginning more clearly during the Eastern Han, wherein people began to imagine or describe the nature or character of ghosts in a

⁸⁰ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 26:450–51.

⁸¹ *Lunheng ji-jie* 448–56, 465–72. Forke 1962: 239–49.

⁸² See DeWoskin 1983. One has to remember, however, that *Houhanshu* was compiled in the Song Dynasty, therefore the stories could have been influenced by the *zhiguai* tradition of the period.

more “personable” fashion. Gradually, we see more and more “human” aspects being injected or infused into the description of ghosts, as they began to be endowed with “human” nature and were given personalities approximating those of living human beings. The process of this recognition of the human nature of ghosts, to be sure, cannot be established with any precision. We can only rely on whatever evidence we can find and place the Eastern Han as a possible starting point. Some of the more plausible evidence we have, excepting the Tianshui Fangmatan text of resurrection mentioned above, are the stories preserved in Ying Shao’s (c. 165–204 C.E.) *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 (*A Penetrating Account of Manners and Customs*).

One such story tells about a certain Zhang Hanzhi from the state of Chen, who left home to study. Several months after he left home, a ghost possessed his younger sister and spoke to the family members in his voice, explaining that he had taken ill and died on the road, and that he wished his family to take care of several chores at home that he had not finished before leaving home. Since even his wife did not know about these things, and his younger sister, who had just come from somewhere else, could not have known either, his family believed that it was indeed his ghost who spoke through his younger sister. This reflects a belief that, as Ying Shao says, “There are many cases in the world in which a dead man’s spirit takes possession of a family member and speaks through him.”⁸³ Curiously, in the account it turns out that Zhang Hanzhi had not in fact died but later returned home safely. People thus concluded that his sister was possessed by an anonymous ghost. The rationale for the ghost’s action remains puzzling. What can be observed is that the story presented the character of the ghost in a totally human fashion. That the ghost did not inflict any harm on the living, however, may not be taken as typical of the ghost stories of this period. Another story about a certain Lai Jide presents a trouble-making ghost:

[Lai] was lying in state in his coffin when suddenly he sat up on the bier. His complexion, dress and voice were all familiar. In an orderly fashion he gave systematic instructions to each of the family members according to their standing. Next he beat each of the slaves for his or her faults with fairness. When he had eaten and drunk his fill, he bade them good-bye and departed. The family, absolutely heartbroken, fainted with grief. After the same thing happened three or four more times, the family grew increasingly wretched. Later Lai Jide got drunk and his body rotted. [In its place] they merely found an old dog which they

⁸³ *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 409; for translation of this story, see Nylan 1982: 535–37.

immediately caned to death. Inquiries in the neighborhood [showed it was] the wine seller's dog.⁸⁴

Ying Shao's comment on the story is that "there are many cases in the world in which the dead appear as spirits. They talk, eat and drink. As [their families believe] the apparitions [to be real,] they are all the more distressed."⁸⁵ For us, this story shows that people then believed that a ghost, whether of the dead or of another person, could appear in human form through a nonhuman medium, and that this medium could be killed to expel the ghost. Thus one possible explanation of this story is that the ghost of Lai possessed a dog and appeared in his own image. When the dog was beaten to death, Lai's ghost must have gone away, for there was no medium for it to cling to. However, it is also possible to see the dog as a demon that appeared in the form of the deceased and bedeviled the household. Although given the story line, this demon did not seem to be very powerful or capable of doing evil things, and could be easily "killed," which indicates a particular mentality of the people then regarding the nature of some ghosts or spirits who are almost like some mundane thieves or charlatans who could be dealt with easily. What was unsettled by the story was this: since the ghost-possessed dog was killed and revealed its original form, where was the corpse of Lai? Similar stories about dog-demons and snake-demons are reported elsewhere in the *Fengsu tongyi*.⁸⁶

This kind of belief, if we review what we found in the [previous chapter](#), was nothing new to this period, since similar cases of possession by various ghosts or spirits are found already in the *Shuihudi Daybook*.⁸⁷ There ghosts or spirits could also be "killed" easily with the guidance of an exorcistic manual. What was new was that the stories now began to provide details about the "personality" of the ghosts and their intentions, to an extent unparalleled in previous documents. The ghosts were now to be conceived and described with a human character: their action, concern, emotion, intention, and love or hate were all woven into the narratives. In other words, these are stories about the individual ghost that are not found in the earlier material. This is not to say that previous writers did not or could not engage in the description of personalities or intentions, only that ghosts had not been a subject of such treatment. Although Ying Shao's collection of ghost stories was only a small part of the *Fengsu*

⁸⁴ *Fengsu tongyi jiaoju* 416; cf. Nylan 1982: 538–39.

⁸⁶ *Fengsu tongyi jiaoju* 423.

⁸⁷ Poo 1993a. Karl Kao, in the context of making typological analysis, also traces this "animistic phenomena" into earlier cultural traditions; see Kao 1985: 5–9.

⁸⁵ *Fengsu tongyi jiaoju* 416.

tongyi, it is clear that these stories were important precursors of the ghost stories of the Six Dynasties.⁸⁸

This humanizing tendency in the ghost stories received further development in the Six Dynasties *Anomaly Tales*, or *zhiguai*. A number of factors can be accounted for this tendency: the rise of the genre of short stories that demanded more vivid literary portraits of the characters, whether human or ghost; a certain passion in society that pursued exotic and fantastic stories; and the prevalence of Buddhist and Daoist proselytizing.⁸⁹ On the whole, the humanizing tendency could be seen as part of a collective effort to create an ideal world, since, as I shall argue in the [next chapter](#), the world of the ghosts was in a sense more ideal than the human world, for many of the restrictions to the living could be trespassed or absolved in the world of the ghosts, therefore creating some conditions that could alleviate the pain or difficulties that the living had suffered.

This rise of the literary representation of ghosts since the late Han contributed to the growth of the culture of ghosts in Chinese society. These more humanly rendered images of ghosts, to be sure, did not replace the previous idea of ghosts, yet they added a rich color to the character of the ghosts. After their characteristics were ingrained in the popular mentality, these embellished or enriched images of ghosts gradually became a natural part of people's collective imagination. We could therefore observe two ways to portray ghosts in Chinese society: on the one hand, the ancient concept of malicious ghosts that needed to be dealt with effectively persisted throughout the centuries; on the other hand, when people are in a more relaxed or speculative mood, the more colorful ghosts found in the popular novels and stories, the ones with all sorts of exotic powers and fabulous deeds, are likely to capture people's attention.

The culture of ghosts, therefore, can best be grasped by looking at how people imagined what ghosts looked like, what they could or would do to people, how they could be controlled by people, and why all these happened the way they did. This chapter started with the goal of investigating the culture of ghosts in early imperial China, especially with regard to the possible dichotomy between the official and the private religious

⁸⁸ At least three stories in the *Fengsu tongyi* were incorporated into *Lieyijuan* 列異傳, the first collection of ghost stories in the Six Dynasties period, said to have been compiled by Cao Pi, emperor Wen of Wei. See Wang Guoliang 1988. For a study of the relationship between *Fengsu tongyi* and the Six Dynasties *jiguai*, see Cao Daoheng 1994. Campany 1995: 101–26 emphasizes the tradition of cosmological collecting as the origin of the anomaly accounts.

⁸⁹ Poo 2000.

activities. I pointed out that the imperial cult activities were aimed at ensuring the prosperity of the country and the personal welfare of the rulers. These official cults usually had to do with some of the higher deities, though sometimes “small ghosts” could also be listed. The belief in ghosts, on the other hand, was usually conducted in private spheres, from the emperor in court to the ordinary people in their household. In a sense, the belief in ghosts was mostly a local phenomenon, for the interaction of ghosts with humans tended to be on a personal, therefore local, level. The religious milieu of early imperial China was framed by the official cults, but stuffed with private worship of ghosts and spirits.

Contrary to the common idea that ghosts always cause fear and create terrifying experiences, it can be argued that the very idea of the existence of ghosts may serve to relieve certain tensions in society. It relieves tension because people knew that ghosts were responsible for certain unfortunate events and that there were ways to handle the attacks of ghosts. The textual evidence no doubt gives us some information concerning how the ancient Chinese talked about ghosts. The question is, Did people actually “believe” in the stories? Some degree of uncertainty was perhaps always part of the picture, as one passage in *Zhuangzi* puts it: “When one has contact with the spirit, how could one say that ghosts do not exist? Yet when one has no contact with the spirit, how could one claim that ghosts do exist?”⁹⁰ In the elite texts, ghosts were mostly mentioned to serve certain didactic purposes and as a means to construct a worldview or philosophical system, whether Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, or Legalism. The story in *Zhuangzi* about the person who dreamt about the ghost of a skull by the roadside is a perfect example.⁹¹

The belief in ghosts could also offer some psychological benefits: it could satisfy curiosity, intensify and release emotions, and it could even be entertaining, as many of the ghost stories show. The talk about ghosts, in fact, was a perfect gray area for people to negotiate with their belief: one can never be completely certain if ghosts really exist or not; thus, there is always room for religious piety to take roots. The following chapter, therefore, explores the multifarious functions of the ghost stories, as entertainment literature, as records of marvelous phenomena, as reflections of the human condition, or as attempts to construct an ideal world.

⁹⁰ *Zhuangzi jishi* 958. ⁹¹ *Zhuangzi jishi* 617–19.

Stories That Reveal the Dark Corner

Believing in ghosts meant speaking about them and creating images of them. It also meant attempting to have others believe in them, by using those texts and images for quite real efficacious ends that benefit the living and above all, the powerful.¹

4.1 PURSUING GHOSTS IN THE *ZHIGUAI*

This chapter discusses ghosts in early Medieval China (Six Dynasties period) as mainly represented in the *zhiguai* 志怪, or *Anomaly Tales*. In these stories, ghosts were either human beings before death or, more often than not, nonhuman spirits, goblins, or demons that behaved or looked like human beings. We have already encountered a variety of ghosts from the pre-imperial period to the Han dynasty. However, as we have hinted in the [previous chapter](#), there was a qualitative change in the role ghosts played in the literary creations of the Six Dynasties Period. That is to say, ghosts evolved from playing a supporting role with little elaboration on their characters to becoming the main protagonists of the stories with fully developed personalities. The Six Dynasties period, moreover, was an era in which the Buddhist and Daoist religions were beginning to gain widespread influence among the populace and were, each in its own fashion, integrating preexisting beliefs into their systems.² The idea of

¹ Schmitt 1998: 8.

² For a general account of the intellectual atmosphere at the beginning of this period, see Tang Changru 1955; Holzman 1956, 1957, 1976; DeWoskin, 1977; Wu Hungyi 1977; Li Jianguo 1984: 238–40; Wang Guoliang 1984: 13–36; Wang Yao 1986: 44–79; Holcombe

ghosts was inevitably one of the central religious themes that both religions needed to address with care. The result of this encounter was to have profound significance for the formation of a religious mentality in Chinese society. For the understanding of the development of religious life in China, I would argue, the idea of ghosts in the Six Dynasties period occupies a crucial position. Previous studies on the theme of ghosts in the medieval period mainly concentrate on literary expressions and the typology of the *Anomaly Tales*, with less emphasis on its religious significance.³ It was to the credit of R. Campamy that a new appreciation of the religious significance of *Anomaly Tales* was aroused. Campamy sees the *Anomaly Tales* stories involving ghosts as explorations of new types of concerns and questions regarding the relationship between the living and the dead,⁴ as many authors portrayed for their readers a wide variety of situations in which the “living and the dead individuals who began as strangers ended up ... bound to one another with moral and, often, emotional cords despite the chasm that still separated them.”⁵ Here we shall try to further explore the religious aspects of the *Anomaly Tales* by discussing the images of the ghosts and the significance that these literary representations embodied.

Scholars of Chinese religion have noted that, whether in the modern or in the early imperial period, the netherworld was to a large extent conceived on the model of this world.⁶ Our discussion in the previous chapters also largely corroborated such a view. However, this could best be said as referring to the similarity between the bureaucratic structures of the two worlds. Concerning the more nuanced issues such as the psychological and emotional states of the characters, the term “mirror image” could hardly describe the complex relations between social reality and

1994; Lu Xun 2013. Also see Tian 2010 for an account of the literary background of this period. For historical background of the period, see Lewis 2009.

³ For a typological and literary-structural analysis of the *zhiguai*, see DeWoskin 1977; Kao 1985: 1–53; Yu 1987. Li Jianguo 1984 offers a most comprehensive discussion of the origins and development of the *zhiguai* before the Tang dynasty. Wang Guoliang 1984 offers a topical analysis of the *zhiguai* as well as a bibliographical introduction. Yie 1985 offers a discussion of the literary image of ghosts without going into the religious aspect. Jin 1984 discusses the images of gods (*shen*) and ghosts (*gui*) in the *zhiguai* and concludes that since the world of ghosts and spirits was an imaginary world based on the human world, when one eliminates the supernatural imaginations in the stories, the behaviors of the ghosts and spirits are no different from that of humans. Wu 1989, 1991 gave a simplified picture and maintained that the *zhiguai* was a “literarized religious activity,” that its goal was to advocate superstitions, with a concern of practical benefits in secular life.

⁴ Campamy 1990, 1991.

⁵ Campamy 1995: 384.

⁶ Wolf 1974; Poo 1998: 167–70.

literary representations of the world of ghosts. My basic assumption is that the ghost stories represented imaginative expressions of a craving for some elements of life that were restricted or prohibited in reality. The writers, consciously or not, were constructing an ideal world through the telling of ghost stories. For, in the world of ghosts, restrictions and taboos in the real world could be transgressed or transcended.⁷ On the other hand, one could also argue that this imagined world was unimaginable outside the context of the real world of early medieval China. This is because the authors could not have created the collective psychological condition and the collective imagination that were the main motors for producing and propagating their versions of ghosts. The literary imagination of the world of ghosts, moreover, had to depend on the nonliterate or lay imagination that already existed in society. For readers, the stories not only provided thrilling and entertaining experiences, but could also have served as a kind of confirmation of what they believed or were inclined to believe, and thus relieved some psychological tensions.

The *Anomaly Tales* have been intensively studied for their structure, content, and literary-historical significance. The political, economic, and intellectual climate of the Six Dynasties provided opportunities for the development of *Anomaly Tales*, but at the same time conditioned the character of its content. The historical trends contributing to the rise and development of *Anomaly Tales* can be described as the following. First, the rise of the Daoist and Buddhist religions, which generated a massive production of religious literature on a scale unprecedented in China. From the extant texts, both the Daoist Canon and the Buddhist Sutras contain a substantial number of texts that deal with ghosts and spirits. These are exorcistic spells or apotropaic ritual texts that are designed to help the adepts. Second, the fashion of “pure talk (清談 *qingtán*),” as literati gathered together to exchange philosophical or literary and lofty observations of the world and humanities.⁸ Although these were mostly exchanges of high-flown ideas, various legends and stories about ghosts and strange events could also be disseminated in the high literary society, and later were collected into books. Third, the general flourishing of historical and literary works during this period,⁹ facilitated undoubtedly by the increasingly wide use of paper since the Eastern Han, which cannot be emphasized enough.¹⁰

⁷ Campany 1995: 365ff.

⁸ Tang Changru 1955; Holzman 1956, 1957, 1976; Wang Yao 1986.

⁹ Wu Hongyi 1977; Li Jianguo 1984: 220–37; Lu Xun 2013. ¹⁰ Tsien 1962.

While there is a certain truth to the view that literature, in one way or another, inevitably reflects the reality of the time, whether political, social, intellectual, or religious, such observations often remain impressionistic truisms. As Campany pointed out, these observations do not really explain why these particular sorts of texts came to be written during this era.¹¹ Concerning the *Anomaly Tales*, especially the ghost stories, we need to make detailed analyses of individual stories to extract whatever significance they carried and try to comprehend not only the full meaning of the stories, but also the mentality of the storytellers and the readers. For us, the more interesting questions are: What are the purposes of the authors? How did such stories get circulated? Why did people like to read, talk about, and listen to them? No matter whether or not the stories were created by believers and proponents of the existence of ghosts and spirits, it seems that the social need and the mentality of the audience were what kept the stories circulating. By searching for this social need and mentality, we can perhaps shed some light on the meaning of the *Anomaly Tales* in the context of contemporary religion and culture. In the following I shall first make a typological analysis of ghosts as presented in the *Anomaly Tales*. By extracting the “types” of ghosts out of the context of the stories, however, one could run the risk of missing some of the rhetoric and nuances of social criticism that the stories might carry. The typological analysis in no way replaces a detailed reading of each story for its various implications, and thus is no more than a convenience to look at the collective image of ghosts in a general fashion to help us approach the mentality of the writers and readers, which is my second theme to pursue in this chapter.

4.2 THE TYPOLOGY OF GHOSTS

Ghosts Who Speak Their Minds

One outstanding common characteristic of the ghosts is their straightforwardness, or even simple-mindedness. One story is about Zong Dai (宗岱), a governor of Qingzhou, who was famous for denouncing the existence of ghosts. One night a local ghost whose cult was abolished by Zong appeared to him in the guise of a scholar. When they were discussing whether ghosts existed or not, the ghost became angry, and said that he

¹¹ Campany 1995: 168, 199–201.

was going to take revenge on Zong for abolishing the ghost cults.¹² We shall discuss this case further later in this chapter. A similar plot is found in the story of Ruan Zhan, who also wrote a treatise on the nonexistence of ghosts. One day a ghost disguised as a scholar came to Ruan and challenged his treatise, revealing that he himself was a ghost.¹³

In these stories the ghosts demonstrated their existence by appearing directly to those who did not believe in them. The fact that even ghosts could not argue and win the debate about the reality of their own existence is interesting: their existence is a case of belief versus reason. Apparently, the moral of the story is that reason alone cannot explain everything in a world where belief in the existence of ghosts and spirits was prevalent. In another story, the ghost of Zheng Xuan (鄭玄 127–200 CE), the Han dynasty scholar famous for his commentaries on the Confucian classics, appeared to the talented young scholar Wang Bi (王弼 226–249) – whose commentary on Laozi established the study of Daoist philosophy in the subsequent eras – and scolded him for his disrespect to the senior scholar, that is, Zheng himself.¹⁴ One cannot but sense the hidden conflict between the long established Confucian tradition and the newly risen interest in the Daoist philosophy. In all these stories, the ghosts were straightforwardly presenting their protests, and the results were all the same; that is, the men who showed disrespect to the ghosts soon met their fate. It may even be said that the ghosts were almost self-righteously defending their right of existence.

Vulnerable Ghosts

At times the ghosts may even appear rather simple-minded. A story about Zong Dingbo (宗定伯), to be elaborated later in this chapter, describes how Zong tricked a ghost into carrying him, and revealing to him the method to catch a ghost. The ghost was finally seized in the form of a goat by Zong and was sold on the market.¹⁵ In another story, a certain Liu Dun (劉遁) was visited by a ghost, who stole his food from the pot. Expecting that the ghost would come again, he made a pot of poisonous porridge. Sure enough, the ghost came again and swallowed the porridge. When Liu found the empty pot, he could still hear the ghost vomiting.¹⁶

¹² Lu Xun 1986: 28.

¹³ Lu Xun 1986: 119, 257. This story is quoted in his biography in the *History of Jin* (*Jinshu* 49:1364).

¹⁴ Lu Xun 1986: 114.

¹⁵ Lu Xun 1986: 141–42.

¹⁶ Lu Xun 1986: 172.

In yet another story, a naughty ghost was wont to disturb a Yü family by throwing dirty things into their food. The distressed Yü finally conceived a plot. He pronounced loudly that he was not afraid of dirty things, but if the ghost were to throw money at him, then he would really be distressed. The ghost heard and believed him, and thereupon threw money at him, so that he soon collected a little fortune.¹⁷ One common feature in these stories is that although the ghosts might have played tricks on men, the point of the stories was that it was men who outsmarted the ghosts. Sometimes the ghosts were even portrayed as rather weak in character, such as the story of Ruan Deru (阮德如), who shamed a shy and harmless ghost away, as we shall see below.¹⁸

This simple-minded or even naive character was not restricted to male ghosts. A certain Zhong Yao (鍾繇) once had an affair with a woman who, as he later found out, was actually a ghost. He therefore secretly plotted to kill her. Although she had already sensed that Zhong had ill intentions, she still trusted in Zhong's love and believed in him when he said that he would not harm her.¹⁹ Eventually, she was hurt by the suspicious and ungrateful Zhong. Many more stories have similar plots: the female ghosts are portrayed not only as physically attractive but as single-mindedly devoted to the men they love, even though some men may turn out to be ungrateful.²⁰ According to a study, among twenty-three stories about man-female ghost marriages told in the *Anomaly Tales* of this period, only one female ghost did harm to a man, namely, her "unfaithful" husband who married another woman after she (the ghost) had died. All other female ghosts were depicted as faithful lovers.²¹

What are we to make of the significance of the character of these ghosts? One approach from the theory of psychological compensation would be to explain such types of female ghosts as the product of the fantasy of sexually dissatisfied male storytellers who craved for an ideal female partner.²² In other words, it was a reflection of the social reality where relations between the sexes were still under very strict supervision by the prevalent etiquette in society. Here it might be relevant to quote Anthony Yu's remark on the "amorous ghost": "The male is the 'normal' human protagonist, whereas the female is almost always depicted as the incredibly beautiful, talented, sensual, and sometimes virtuous figure of another realm."²³ Yu further says that the female in the ghost stories is

¹⁷ Lu Xun 1986: 184–85. ¹⁸ Lu Xun 1986: 115, 257. ¹⁹ Lu Xun 1986: 385.

²⁰ For example, Lu Xun 1986: 144–45 (Tan Sheng), 158 (Qin Shu), 190–91 (Cui Ji).

²¹ Yan Huiqi 1994: 86–103.

²² Lai Fang-ling 1982.

²³ Yu 1987.

“a creature of fantasy – both affectionate and threatening, both desired and feared.” Although he did not select many examples from the Six Dynasties *Anomaly Tales* genre, his observations are suggestive.²⁴ A point worth mentioning, however, is that during the Six Dynasties period, male ghosts also figured prominently in woman–male ghost marriages or love stories.²⁵ Furthermore, it is also debatable if the male sexual fantasy explanation always works in the case of *Anomaly Tales*, as we shall discuss below.

To return to our subject, ghosts in *Anomaly Tales* are often depicted as having a simple character, that is, as being less complex in their intentions and emotions than human beings. Does this reflect a mentality that perceived the nature of man as more intelligent than ghosts? Such an attitude would have appealed to readers anxious to gain an upper hand in the contest between men and ghosts. We recall that even today in colloquial Chinese such familiar expressions as “You’re cheating the ghost” or “Only a ghost would believe this” clearly indicate that ghosts are more easily deceived than men. On the other hand, one could also argue that the intention of the writers was actually using the stories to criticize some social vices – people at times are more treacherous than ghosts. The naïve and trusting character of the ghosts is probably what true humanity should have.

Female Ghosts

To follow up the theme of female ghost mentioned above, it is a theoretically attractive claim that the “ideal type” of the amorous female ghost, or even women who were in love with male ghosts, reflects suppressed male sexual fantasies of something lacking in real life. According to this explanation, the amorous encounters between men and female ghosts, or vice versa, as depicted in the stories, not only were projections of the conscious thoughts, ideas, or beliefs of the authors but were more fundamentally an unconscious way to express deeply ingrained desires, instincts, and emotions. The plots and images satisfied the frustrated desire for lust, romance, curiosity, or simply excitement and thrill. It was, furthermore, a desire to escape from the socially and morally

²⁴ For similar stories concerning love affairs between human beings and ghosts in the Tang dynasty, see Dudbridge 1995: 154–73.

²⁵ Yan Huiqi 1994: 86–103.

conditioned and stereotyped virtuous, hard-working females men encountered in real life that inspired the portrayal of certain amorous female ghosts who could ignore social etiquette and offer their unabashed love to a man for no particular reason. It is notable that in these stories there is no discernible causal relationship between these men's personal achievements, moral integrity, or social status and their being chosen by the amorous female ghosts. Instead of going through all the necessary procedures in obtaining a spouse, not to mention an ideal lover, the men in these stories were given free access to unconditioned affections and enjoyment of the company of ravishing beauties. A study of the fox fairies in the Qing dynasty novels shows that in most cases the personal characters and achievements of the men who had amorous encounters with female fox fairies or ghosts were not mentioned, which indicates that such information was not essential to the story.²⁶

This observation doubtlessly needs the support of detailed study of gender relations and the images of women in the Six Dynasties period. As has been discussed elsewhere, it suffices to say that women of the Six Dynasties period in general seem to have enjoyed a remarkable degree of freedom in social activities.²⁷ In the *Baopuzi*, for example, Ge Hong (葛洪, c. 283–343) criticized some of the women in his time who were free to go out, visit temples and friends' homes, roam the streets singing and drinking freely, stay out until late in the evening, and even spend the night at a friend's house.²⁸ We shall have more to say about Ge Hong, one of the early Daoist propagators and theorists, in the [next chapter](#). Such a social atmosphere should have been familiar to contemporary authors of the *Anomaly Tales*. Thus we could at least say that the "amorous female ghost" type not only arose from a male psychology of compensation, but could also be a reflection of social reality, even if only partially.

Vengeful Ghosts

For the male ghosts, and some female ghosts as well, revenge for the wrongs they had suffered when alive seems to be one of their deeds most often related in the stories. In a typical story of ghostly vengeance that resonated with the story of Peng Sheng discussed in the [previous chapter](#), a man, unjustly executed by a certain magistrate, came back as a ghost to

²⁶ Yang and Yü 1992; Chan 1998.

²⁷ Lee 1993; Poo 1997.

²⁸ *Baopuzi* 148.

seek his revenge.²⁹ Another story tells of the ghost of a jealous husband who harmed his widow because she broke her promise of staying chaste after his death.³⁰ On the other hand, female ghosts could also seek revenge for their sufferings, although examples are not as many as those of male avenging ghosts. It has been suggested that these tales played out the principle of reciprocity and emphasized the commonality of moral principles across social and ontological boundaries.³¹ This being said, however, we also notice that not all the vengeful actions were so “rational.” In one story, a jealous wife appeared as a ghost after death and caused the death of her unfaithful husband. Her anger was so great that even her own sons could not escape her destruction.³² We have also mentioned the story of Wang Bi. When he was working on a commentary on *Yijing*, the *Book of Changes*, he laughed at Zheng Xuan’s opinion and said, “This old fellow was not very intelligent regarding [the essence of] time.” That evening, the ghost of Zheng Xuan came to him and scolded him in grave anger: “You are a young man, why are you making distorted explanations of the texts and groundlessly criticizing a senior scholar?” Not long after this, Wang died a sudden death.³³ On the surface, this is a story about a ghost who sought revenge because he was insulted, not in his lifetime, but long after he was dead. This very fact is in itself unusual, as most of the ghosts in the stories are the newly dead. Moreover, we may suppose that in this particular case the story may reflect certain debate among the scholarly community of Wang Bi’s time and that the storyteller probably supported the Han scholar’s tradition in interpreting the *Yijing*. Rather than expressing his opinion directly, he created the story and used the ghost of Zheng to vent his displeasure with Wang.

It is interesting to note that, although examples in the *Demonography* of Shuihudi show that small children who died of misfortune could become ghosts to haunt people,³⁴ one can hardly find any child ghost in the *Anomaly Tales*. The world of the ghosts in the Six Dynasties was therefore a world largely of adults, and this is not peculiar to the Chinese ghosts. Across different cultures in history, we see a general lack of child ghosts in most of the ghost narratives. In the Chinese case, the only mention of a child ghost from the pre-imperial time until our period was found in the *Demonography* chapter of the Shuihudi *Qin Daybook* (see [Chapter 2](#)). In Daoist texts such as the *Taishangzhengyi zhonguijing*,

²⁹ Lu Xun 1986: 182–83. ³⁰ Lu Xun 1986: 157. ³¹ Campamy 1995: 378–79.

³² Lu Xun 1986: 187. ³³ Lu Xun 1986: 114.

³⁴ Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 214–15.

as we shall see in [Chapter 6](#), many different kinds of ghosts are listed, yet none of them can be identified as a child ghost. In other cultures such as those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, or Rome, there are no mentions of child ghosts either. A possible explanation would be that since children in ancient societies are not considered full members of society, they are less likely to be mentioned. This does not mean, however, that the death of a child was not mourned by the parents in these societies. The funerary inscription of an Eastern Han tomb that commemorates a five-year-old Xu Ah-qu³⁵ is very much comparable with the tomb inscription of a certain Thothrekh, son of Petosiris of Ptolemaic Egypt;³⁶ both mourn the loss of a young child before the prospect of a full life could be realized.

Benevolent Ghosts

Besides causing trouble for people, at times ghosts could also be benevolent. In quite a few stories ghosts not only are harmless but also help people in various ways. Most commonly, a ghost may appear to their family and render various kinds of assistance, as we have seen in the story of Zhang Hanzhi. In another story, when a certain Liu Shamen died, he left a poor wife and a young son. One night a severe storm destroyed their house, and his wife hugged her son and cried: "If your dad were still alive, we would not have suffered this fate!" That night, she dreamt that her husband called in dozens of people to help repair the house, and it was indeed restored by the next morning.³⁷ It is understandable that a ghost would want to help his own relatives and friends, but sometimes their motives were not so obvious. A certain Zhang Mu was assisted by a young female ghost who made sure that his poor family had enough food every day. In the end, the family was made wealthy.³⁸ The ghost was not related to Zhang's family, and we are not told of the reason why she wanted to help the poor family. The story was not trying to moralize on any merit of Zhang Mu, unless it was simply saying that his poverty deserved sympathy.

Ghosts in Need of Help

Besides causing trouble to the living or helping them, sometimes ghosts were in need of help. A maid of a certain Zhou family once went into a forest to fetch wood. While she was resting, a woman came to her in a

³⁵ Nanyangshi Bowuguan 1974. Translation: Kinney 1995: 79–80.

³⁶ Lichtheim 1980: 52–53. ³⁷ Lu Xun 1986: 159. ³⁸ Lu Xun 1986: 157–58.

dream and asked her to remove the thorn in her eye. When the maid woke up, she indeed found a coffin nearby, with grass growing through the skull of the skeleton. After she removed the grass, she discovered a pair of golden rings under the skull, which she understood to be a gift from the ghost.³⁹ A similar story tells that a ghost asked a man to re-bury his coffin so that he could be released from confinement.⁴⁰ Another account relates the story of a female ghost asking a man to help her in taking revenge against her husband's new concubine for the latter's mistreatment of the ghost's children.⁴¹ A reversed situation happened to a man who was asked by a male ghost to help him take revenge on his wife, who had committed adultery and murdered him.⁴² The mentality behind stories such as these was probably the assumption that the living and the dead should be on the same moral scale – the ghosts were only human beings in a different stage or state of existence.

Self-Asserting Ghosts

One of the characteristics of the behavior of ghosts was the uncertainty of their intentions. With revenging ghosts or helping ghosts, one could at least sense the rationale behind their actions. In some other stories, however, the ghosts were described as acting out of their own vicious whims, with no obvious relation to the deeds of the people that they plagued. Examples include the Huangfu ghost who caused plagues and raped young maids,⁴³ the child-swallowing ghost,⁴⁴ or the ghost who terrified an innocent and decent person.⁴⁵ No conceivable explanations for these attacks can be found in the morality, character, or conditions of life of the victims. It seems that the only purpose of these stories was to tell the reader that the world of the ghosts is unpredictable and that the human fate is at the mercy of these malicious specters.

Ghosts could also appear to people to prove the reality of their existence so that people would not ignore them. Several stories relate a common theme: a ghost, disguised as a human, engages in a debate with a man who does not believe in the existence of ghosts. Unable to win the debate, the frustrated ghost is finally forced to admit that he is actually a ghost, in order to end the apparent embarrassment.⁴⁶ Of course we can

³⁹ Lu Xun 1986: 190.

⁴⁰ Lu Xun 1986: 281.

⁴¹ Lu Xun 1986: 423–24.

⁴² Lu Xun 1986: 306.

⁴³ Lu Xun 1986: 183.

⁴⁴ Lu Xun 1986: 201.

⁴⁵ Lu Xun 1986: 413, the story of Yang Tu.

⁴⁶ Lu Xun 1986: 119, 257.

also read such kind of stories both ways: from the storyteller's point of view, it was to prove that ghosts did exist, that the world was filled with miraculous phenomena; on the other hand, there is also the sense that ghosts have certain power, yet not necessarily intelligence, over human beings. At times a ghost appears, performs some feats, and then leaves.⁴⁷ Such ghosts are basically harmless, and the purpose of their appearance can only be understood as fulfilling their desire to do something they are fond of. The intentionality of the stories, if one wishes to identify it, needs to be deciphered individually, if it is possible at all. A story relates that the famous scholar-musician Ji Kang (嵇康, c. 224–263) once was playing zither at night:

Suddenly a ghost with hand-cuffs appeared to him, applauded at Ji's dexterous fingers, and said: "One string on your zither is not in tune." Ji Kang then let the ghost tune the zither, after which the zither's sound became even more pure and pleasant. When asked his name, the ghost did not answer. People later suspected that it was the ghost of Cai Yung. When he was about to be executed, his hands were also cuffed.⁴⁸

Cai Yong (蔡邕, 133–192) was a famous scholar because of his knowledge of astronomy and music theory, besides the Confucian classics. He was persecuted by his political opponent and died in prison. The story seems to suggest that his ill-fate was not forgotten by later authors. In this story, the ghost's visit not only did not cause any fear, but on the contrary brought certain romantic and nostalgic feelings. It also carries a particular message: that Ji Kang not only feared no ghost, but was in the company of a famous scholar. This in turn demonstrates that he was also a man of refined taste. The main purpose of this story was therefore to show not only the ghost's expertise on the zither, but also the caliber of Ji Kang's character and taste, as he was one of the most highly revered literati of his time. The author, moreover, demonstrated his own erudition by telling his reader that Cai Yung was versed in playing the zither, and that he died wearing handcuffs, that is, in prison. Thus a ghost story became a deliberate show of erudition of whoever told or wrote it. Such a story, moreover, might have appealed to the literati, but may not have a resonance among the common people as some other, more exciting, stories did. In the end, one can see that this ghost story is not about ghosts but about

⁴⁷ Lu Xun 1986: 253–54, the stories of Sun Chuan, Chen Xien, and an unknown official of Wu.

⁴⁸ Lu Xun 1986: 20, 119–20.

social justice, scholarly comradeship, and how the literati use the idea of ghosts to make their point.

4.3 THE INTENTIONALITY OF GHOST-STORY WRITERS

The above examples show the rich messages behind the stories that we could unveil when the intentionality of the stories is put into question. What was the purpose of the ghost-story writers? Were they true believers of ghosts? Were they trying to entertain the readers while also moralizing a little? The evidence we have contains various possibilities. It is abundantly clear, however, that there will not be a single explanation for the purpose or intention of the *Anomaly Tales*.

So far as we can tell, the writers of the *Anomaly Tales* in the Six Dynasties period can be roughly divided into three categories: literati with no particular religious inclination, Buddhist literati and monks, and Daoist advocates.⁴⁹ At least some of the writers might have been true believers who wanted to persuade their readers of the existence of ghosts. Others may not have believed in ghosts, but used the stories to express their feelings or comment on the human world. They adhered to a strand of thought current among the literati that was deeply fascinated with ideas that were nontraditional, nonmoral, nonpolitical (at least on the surface), aloof, and transcendental. Although some of the known authors had written other more “serious” and practical works such as poetry or history, the fact that they also composed works in the *Anomaly Tales* genre indicates the complexity of their mental world. In a sense, writing ghost stories might have been a way to pronounce their intellectual affiliation with the “pure talk” intellectual style current in their day. In any case, we cannot assume that the records reflect only one intention or one attitude toward the supernatural. The appearance of the *Anomaly Tales*, furthermore, could be symbolic of a change in the perception of the relationship between the living and the dead,⁵⁰ but it would be difficult to prove that the authors had written or collected these stories with such an aim in mind. One can, moreover, agree with the assertion that the *Anomaly Tales* authors not only described the world of the dead and its relationship with the living, but also “helped to shape that world and

⁴⁹ For detailed discussion, see Kominami 1982; Wang Guoliang 1984: 37–52; Campany 1995: 168–79.

⁵⁰ As Campany 1991: 16–18 suggests.

those relations.”⁵¹ Yet we should also be aware of the possibility that the world surrounding the storytellers or the authors consisted of many people who were interested in these stories mainly for the fun of reading or hearing the fantastic plots. A number of stories or their variations were repeatedly included in various collections, which indicates their popularity.⁵² The attraction of a good story with dramatic plot-twists and ironic turns of event may well have exerted considerable influence on the writers in choosing their subjects and styles. The writers, whatever their intentions, could not have operated only according to their own idiosyncrasy. In other words, the telling and writing of ghost stories was not one-way; it was a reciprocal process in which the writers and storytellers received feedback from their audience among the literary circles or from society at large.

The world of ordinary people in this period that was filled with storytelling and gossip-exchanging activities is vividly described by Ge Hong in the *Baopuzi* (抱朴子). He mentions that people in his time were fond of telling stories and exchanging gossip, “some concerning their ancestors, some concerning women.”⁵³ These people included not only the commoners, but also people with literary talents. Cao Zhi (曹植, 192–232), the famous poet, writer and brother of Emperor Wen of Wei (Cao Pi 曹丕, 187–226), once performed a dance in a foreign style and recited several thousand words of vulgar but entertaining stories at a party, all to vie with a learned guest of his.⁵⁴ This shows that the telling of stories originating from the commoner class could be appreciated by men of high literary talents. Indeed, Emperor Wen himself was said to have compiled one of the earliest *Anomaly Tales*, namely, the *Lieyizhuan* 列異傳 (*Arrayed Marvels*).⁵⁵ A story in *History of the Chen Dynasty* (*Chenshu* 陳書) mentions that the king of Shixing often stayed up overnight and invited guests to exchange all sorts of trivial stories that circulated among the common people.⁵⁶ These are all examples of the contact and exchange of information between the literary elite and the commoners. Activities such as these were certainly an important source of the *Anomaly Tales*. Besides using stories recorded in all sorts of earlier texts as well as copying each other, the *Anomaly Tales* authors also included stories that they

⁵¹ Campany 1991: 16; 1995: 199–201. ⁵² Campany 1995: 21ff.

⁵³ *Baopuzi* 146–47. ⁵⁴ Quoted in the commentary of Pei Songzhi; see *Sanguozhi* 603.

⁵⁵ See Li Jianguo 1984: 244–51; Wang Kuo-liang 1984: 315–16; Campany 1995: 47.

⁵⁶ *Chen shu* 36:494. See Li Jianguo 1984: 229–35.

heard or collected from local legends and traditions.⁵⁷ In view of this, we have to be reminded of the possibility that the main purpose of at least some of the ghost story writers might have been merely to provide strange tales for people's after-dinner entertainment. In cases such as these, any religious or moral significance the stories carried would, for the writers, have been secondary to the demands of a gripping narrative.

This difficulty of determining the intentionality of the authors could be exemplified by the case of Gan Bao (干寶, 286–336), who wrote the *Records of an Inquest into the Spirit-Realm* (*Soushenji* 搜神記). In the preface he said that his purpose in compiling this work was to “prove that the way of the spirits is not false.”⁵⁸ Yet are we to believe that Gan himself was a true believer in the existence of ghosts and spirits and that his intention in collecting the stories was out of his belief in the supernatural? After all, one should notice that Gan himself was a typical Confucian scholar-official, known for his many works on history and commentaries on the Confucian Classics. Gan Bao's case is in fact similar to that of Ying Shao, whose *Fengsu tongyi* could be seen as the earliest example of the *Anomaly Tales* genre of story collections. It is therefore not entirely appropriate to characterize his intention as propagating the existence of ghosts from a believer's point of view, or from an utilitarian point of view, that is, to use the fear of ghosts as a deterrence against corruption and injustice.

Moreover, since quite a number of ghost story collections, such as *Xuanyanji* or *Mingxiangji*, involved such Buddhist concepts as Hell and retribution, one would come to the conclusion that these works were aimed at promoting Buddhism.⁵⁹ Indeed, the motivations of these *Anomaly Tales* authors, as has been suggested, are at times “explicitly tendentious.”⁶⁰ On the other hand, it was also due to the audience's tendency to believe in the existence of ghosts and their world that allowed these writers such convenience in propagating Buddhism through a medium familiar to the Chinese. The influence of Buddhist ideas on a wider public through such works must have been considerable in the early days of Buddhism. It was perhaps not a coincidence that during this period the ghost festival (Yulanpen 盂蘭盆) began to emerge

⁵⁷ Kominami Ichirō 1982; Wang Guo-liang 1984: 53–64; Campany 1995: 179–99.

⁵⁸ As pointed out, among others, by DeWoskin 1977. Yu 1987: 403–5 referred to this mentality as “The Ghostly Apology.” Also Kao 1985: 20–21; Campany 1991: 23–24; 1995: 148.

⁵⁹ DeWoskin 1977: 50; Kao 1985: 11; Lu Xun 1986: 43 sff. ⁶⁰ Kao 1985: 20.

as an important element in folk Buddhism.⁶¹ We have to admit, however, that the detailed life stories of many of the authors or editors of the *Anomaly Tales* are almost unknown and that their motivations are far from clear.⁶² It might be more fruitful to try to analyze individual stories to reveal the mentality behind them. We therefore concentrate on several themes that the authors of the *Anomaly Tales* might have expressed in their narratives.

Justice

As a convenient and powerful tool in constructing a narrative, ghost stories helped the narrator to develop the necessary plot so as to convey some important messages. These messages may have to do with the issue of justice or moral principles under various circumstances. There are also stories that cannot be easily categorized into any single type, since, as can be seen from the stories below, the ghostly condition, much like the human condition, can be nothing but complicated in terms of expressions of hatred, love, anxiety, irony, sarcasm, or skepticism. Before attempting a general assessment, therefore, we should try to analyze the individual elements that may lead to an understanding of the complexity of the messages contained in the stories.

There are two kinds of ghost stories that concern the administering of justice by ghosts. The first kind is told as anecdotes of real persons or known historical figures. The second kind is more or less timeless stories, whose significance lies in the stories themselves, and the identities of the people involved are not of vital importance. Consequently, the justice sought by ghosts may vary in nature. As an example of the first kind, a story in *Huanyuan zhi* (還冤志) reads as follows:

In the Jin dynasty, Yu Liang executed Tao Cheng. Later, during the winter festival in the fifth year of the Xiankang period [339], dozens of civil and military officials rose suddenly and bowed toward the stairway. Yu was surprised and asked for the reason. They all replied, "Duke Tao is here." Duke Tao was actually the father of Tao Cheng, the famous general Tao Kan. Yu also arose and welcomed him. Duke Tao was accompanied by two persons who were Yu's old enemies, and there were dozens of guards holding spears beside him. Tao said to Yu, "This old servant of yours recommended you to replace myself [in office]. You did not try to repay this favor but on the contrary executed my son. That is why I came to find out what crime Tao Cheng had committed. I have already lodged a complaint with the

⁶¹ Teiser 1988.

⁶² Wang Guo-liang 1984: 37–52.

[heavenly] Emperor.” Yu was speechless and became sick. He died in the first month of the eighth year.⁶³

The story is obviously about a ghostly revenge of injustice. Since it is cast in a historical context, the meaning of the story needs to be understood, however partially, in that context. As far as we can tell from Tao Kan’s biography in the *Jinshu* (晉書), Tao Kan and Yu Liang had some unpleasant confrontations in their service to the Jin court.⁶⁴ Both Tao and Yu were famous for their personal charm, yet Tao was a conservative Confucian known for his loyalty and benevolence, while Yu was a more fashionable “pure-conversation” literati-type of person who was skilled at delivering persuasive rhetoric.⁶⁵ Tao Kan was the most important pillar of the Jin military establishment, and when he died in 332, his post was taken over by Yu Liang. Tao Kan’s son, Tao Cheng, served under Yu Liang as a mid-ranking military officer. According to the *Jinshu*, Yu Liang had him summarily executed in 339 during a military operation on charges of improper conduct and conspiracy for mutiny.⁶⁶ Whether Tao Cheng’s crime, if any, deserves punishment by death is not our concern here. Suffice it to say that Tao Kan was recognized as an upright person by his contemporaries and later generations, while Yu Liang did not seem to have been highly regarded after his death, as he was a member of the powerful but notorious clan of the empress of Emperor Ming. Thus the story might have been inspired by a social sentiment among the sympathizers of the Tao clan who, soon after the execution of Tao Cheng, sought to attribute the cause of Yu Liang’s death to the avenging ghost of Tao Kan. According to the *Jinshu*, Yu Liang died in 340, barely one year after the execution of Tao Cheng, and this can well explain the appearance of the ghost of Tao Kan.⁶⁷ In other words, although the official accounts of Tao and Yu in the *Jinshu* do not specifically deal with the issue of justice in the case of Tao Cheng’s death, the private story in the *Huanyuan zhi* offers its judgment by attributing Yu’s death to his unjust execution of Tao Cheng and consequently to the revenge of the ghost of Tao Kan.

According to another story preserved in the *Soushenji* (搜神記) of Gan Bao (干寶), moreover, Yu Liang died because he saw a demonic figure in the toilet.⁶⁸ The reason for the appearance of this demon given by Recipe

⁶³ *Huanyuanzhi* 21. For a translation, see Cohen 1982: 62. ⁶⁴ *Jinshu* 66:1774–75.

⁶⁵ *Jinshu* 73:1915. ⁶⁶ *Jinshu* 66:1780–81. ⁶⁷ *Jinshu* 73:1923–24.

⁶⁸ *Soushenji* 120.

Master Dai Yang (戴洋) was that Yu failed to fulfill his vow to a local shrine named “White Stone” after his prayers were answered. This story to a certain degree corroborated with the *Huanyuan zhi* story in depicting Yu Liang as a man of lesser integrity and honesty. Furthermore, Gan Bao was a contemporary of Tao Kan,⁶⁹ while the author of *Huanyuan zhi*, Yan Zhitui, lived in the Sui Dynasty (589–618). Thus it is possible that the *Huanyuan zhi* story represented a further development of Gan Bao’s account.

The story of Yu Liang’s death illustrates how, in the popular psyche, storytellers and the readers collectively cast their votes on having ghosts execute postmortem justice. We can even suspect that it was a form of political criticism geared toward readers who were familiar with the history in question. For without knowledge of the historical background as well as the political confrontations and maneuverings at the Jin court, the meaning of the revenge of the ghost of Tao Kan cannot be fully appreciated. The nature of justice here is closely related to political opinion. Here we can detect a close relationship between the seemingly lighthearted story and the contemporary intellectual concern about court politics.

On the other hand, ghostly revenge can also be simple retribution for unjust acts. In one story, a woman executed wrongly by a county magistrate later came back and sought her revenge:

At the end of the Yuanjia period [424–452], Tao Jizhi was the magistrate of Moling. Once he executed some bandits, but one of them was a musician, rather than a bandit. Tao executed her regardless. When the musician was about to die, she said, “I am indeed not a bandit, yet I am going to die an unjust death. When I become a ghost, I will certainly make an accusation.” Not long after, Tao dreamt that the musician came to him and said, “I was killed unjustly, and I have brought my case to heaven and received vindication. Therefore I’m coming to get you now.” She thus jumped into Tao’s mouth and fell into his stomach. After a while she came out, and said, “If I just take Tao alone, it will be of little use. I should try to take Wang Danyang as well.” As soon as she finished, she disappeared. Tao died soon afterward, and Wang Danyang died, too.⁷⁰

We do not know the connection between Tao and Wang, but the basic message of the story is clear: injustice will receive retribution. This is a timeless belief; thus the characters involved in such stories matter less as

⁶⁹ *Jinshu* 82:2149–50.

⁷⁰ *Shuyiji* 述異記, in Lu Xun 1986: 182–83. A longer version is found in *Huanyuanzhi*. Cf. Cohen 1982: 15–16.

historical figures. However, we should probably not compare this story with the stories of Peng Sheng and Du Bo, mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), since as far as we can tell from the use of these two stories in later eras, the reason for the fame of the ghosts of Peng Sheng and Du Bo is precisely because they became “heroes” who took revenge on the unjust rulers; thus their stories became politically charged and served as warnings to those rulers who might not behave in a just manner.⁷¹

At times, however, the disparity in justice between men and ghosts became difficult to reconcile, since each world operates according to its own moral system. The story of Gu Shao (顧劭, 184–219), governor of Yuzhang commandery, seems to be a typical case in the *Anomaly Tales* about the fate of officials who “persecuted” ghosts:

When Gu Shao was governor of Yuzhang, he established schools and abolished excessive cults, and people’s morality was greatly improved. He destroyed temples everywhere, and when he came to the Lushan Temple, everyone in the commandery pleaded against it, but he would not listen. One night, he suddenly heard that someone was pushing at the gate, and he found it odd. Then suddenly a man opened the gate and came directly in front of him. He looked like a *fangxiang*, a fearful looking deity whose function was to exorcise evil spirits, and called himself Lord of Lushan. Shao faced him alone and invited him to come in for a seat. The ghost immediately came in and sat down. As Shao was versed with the *Zuozhuan*, the ghost thereupon discussed with him the *Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn Annals*) for the entire night,⁷² and Shao could not win the debate. Shao marveled at the fine rhetoric of the ghost and said, “The *Zuozhuan* records that Duke Jing of Jin had dreamt of an enormous demon. Did it really exist then as it does now?” The ghost laughed and replied, “Now I may be big, but I am not demonic.” When the light was out, Shao did not ask for light but burned the book of *Zuozhuan* to keep the light on. The ghost asked to leave repeatedly, yet Shao insisted on him staying. The ghost was originally trying to overwhelm Shao, yet Shao was in full spirit, and the ghost could not gain any advantage. Thus he became modest and asked with utmost sincerity to have the temple rebuilt. Shao smiled but did not answer. Angered, the ghost withdrew, but turning back his head, he said to Shao, “I could not take revenge on you tonight. But within three years you will become powerless, and I will come back for revenge then.” Shao said, “What’s the hurry? Stay on and let us talk again.” The ghost then disappeared, and when Shao examined the doors, they were all shut as before. When the day came, Shao indeed was seriously ill, and [thereafter] often dreamt of this ghost attacking him and asking

⁷¹ The ghosts of Peng Sheng and Du Bo are perhaps the most famous ghosts in ancient China that represented justified vengeance against those rulers who lacked moral rectitude. See [Chapter 2](#).

⁷² The *Chunqiu* 春秋 (*Spring and Autumn Annals*) and the *Zuo zhuan* are the two most important texts that could show the erudition of the scholar.

him to rebuild the temple, but Shao said, "How could the evil prevail over the righteous!" He never did comply, and died subsequently.⁷³

Anecdotes about Gu Shao can be found in the *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi* 三國志)⁷⁴ and *A New Account of the Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語),⁷⁵ as he was known as one of the elite literati in his time. The first thing we should notice is that, in this story, a spirit or god (*shen*) that possessed a temple could still be regarded as a ghost (*gui*). This is another example that corroborates our view that the two terms can be interchangeable, because the difference between a god and a ghost is not their nature, but their power. In the story the spirit/ghost/god of Lushan presented himself as a learned person, and the purpose of his visit was to ask Gu to reestablish the Lushan Temple, that is, the Lushan spirit's own "residence," which had been abolished by Gu even though it was evidently a very popular cult. Here the spirit, or ghost, was not violent, but acted in a polite and polished manner. Gu, on his part, remained calm, and by burning the book of *Zuozhuan* he was determined to continue the conversation without any fear. The act of burning the classics also shows that Gu had access to classical learning, which was a sign of social and intellectual status. Judging from the story, both Gu and the ghost seem to be quite candid in that they debated over the *Chunqiu*, perhaps in reference to their own positions. Since the *Chunqiu* was known to be very subtle in commenting about people's moral behavior, one can imagine that they must have debated over Gu's abolition of the temple, in light of the *Chunqiu*. The conflict between the two, therefore, became an unsolvable tragedy. For Gu Shao, the abolition of excessive cults was a righteous act that befitted a Confucian scholar-official, while for the ghost, it was also a just cause to try to reestablish his own residence. The end of the story seems to suggest that the writer gave more leniency to the justice of ghosts. The hidden intention behind the story, if one can postulate further, seems to be a reflection of the community opinion to keep the Lushan shrine, and the story could have been composed to vent the grievances of the people who were running the shrine, for it was these caretakers of the shrine whose livelihood was impacted by the abolition of the temple. The voice of the ghost was to all intents and purposes the voice of the keepers of the shrine and, of course, the local people who believed in the efficacy of the spirit. The story

⁷³ Lu Xun 1986: 422–23; a shorter and laconic version is found in Lu Xun 1986: 116.

⁷⁴ *Sanguozhi* 37:953. ⁷⁵ Yu Jiaxi 1993: 500.

suggests a worldview in which the living and the dead coexisted and could interact with each other in spite of the gulf that stood between them.

Morality

Although revenge or vindication of justice is a common theme in accounts about ghosts ever since the pre-Qin era, new themes emerge in the *Anomaly Tales*. Often, complex plots develop in the stories, which require detailed readings. A story in the *Fengsu tongyi* is sufficient to illustrate that multiple lines of understanding are necessary in order to reveal its full meaning:

In Ximen ward, Ruyang prefecture, Runan commandery, there was a wraith. A number of travelers who stayed there died, while some lost their hair and became impotent. When asked about the cause, the answer was: "Some strange things had happened previously." Later, Zheng Qi of Yilu, an assistant to the Bureau of Attendance in the commandery, was on his way to Ximen. When he was still about six or seven li from the public hostel in the ward, a beautiful woman came to beg him for a ride. At first Qi was unwilling, but later allowed her to mount the wagon. When they entered the hostel and came to the stairs, the guard said, "You cannot go upstairs." Qi said, "I am not afraid." As it was dusk, he went upstairs and spent the night with the woman. Before dawn he left. When the guard went upstairs and cleaned the floor, he saw a dead woman. He was greatly frightened and ran to tell the chief of the hostel. The chief beat the drum and gathered the local officials to examine the body. It turned out to be a woman of the Wu family who had just died in a village eight li northwest of the ward. When the family was notified, they reported, "Last night just as we came to ready the corpse, the light went off. By the time the light resumed, she had vanished." The family then took the corpse away. After Zheng Qi had gone several li from the ward, his belly began to hurt. Upon arriving in Liyang ward of Nandun, the pain grew severe and he died. Thereafter, no one dared to ascend the stairs.⁷⁶

Afterward, as the story continues, another person named Zhi Boyi came to the hostel, and despite the warning of the guard, was able to reveal and kill the wraith that haunted it. It was in fact an old fox.

This rather complex story, in a way, challenges our attempts at understanding the intentionality of the writer. Several points, however, need to be clarified before we can discuss the meaning of the story. First, according to the report, there were earlier occurrences of some "strange things," referring to the activities of a certain unknown ghost or demon.

⁷⁶ *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 425. Translation follows Nylan 1982: 544-45, with minor changes.

The woman who Zheng met was snatched from her funeral bed and possessed by this demon, who at the end of the story turned out to be an old fox spirit. This is to say, it was the fox spirit, not the dead woman, who was haunting the people. Second, the sequence of events is that the body of the woman disappeared from her family, then reappeared as a live person before Zheng Qi, presumably possessed and impersonated by the spirit, and finally laid on the upper floor of the hostel after Zheng's departure. Thus what Zheng saw was not her ghost but her body possessed by the fox spirit. When Zheng left the hostel, the fox spirit also left the body of the woman. Third, Zheng's sudden death does not seem to be retribution for any evil deed that he had committed. He carried the woman in his wagon to the hostel apparently with good intentions, and we do not know if he had actually desired to take advantage of this elegant woman who was traveling alone. That Zheng spent the night with her on the upper floor suggests that improper conduct, probably sexual in nature, might have taken place. The expression *qisu* 棲宿 used in the story implies that sexual conduct was involved. Some versions of the story have the variant expression *jiesu* 接宿 instead,⁷⁷ which seems to allude to coitus, if we explain *jie* 接 as *jiaojie* 交接 (intercourse). Yet the term *jiesu* is not found in earlier literature, while *qisu* is a very common expression. One can in any case interpret *qisu* ("sleeping together") to mean "having sex." In many other stories involving female ghosts, as we know, the element of eroticism is often present. But it should be noted that in this story the sexual overtone is only insinuated, rather than factually stated. For according to the third-person narrative, no one really knew what had happened upstairs that evening. Fourth, after Zheng's visit, the hostel continued to be haunted and visitors often died or suffered from "loss of hair and became impotent." This suggests some sort of erotic encounter with a female ghost, since the description of hair loss and impotence fits the symptom of a man exhausted by wanton sex.

What is the intention of the story writer here, or, what is the moral of this story? I suggest that, not excluding other ways of interpretation, it demonstrates a certain sense of apprehension about meeting female strangers traveling alone in the night. Even with good intentions, one cannot guarantee any happy outcome if one is to have contact with a woman traveling alone at night. A respectable-looking woman may turn out to be a ghost or a walking corpse. This of course also implies that a

⁷⁷ *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 247, n. 15.

man should not, even with the best intentions, try to spend a night alone with a female stranger. The story also indicates that there were sexually aggressive demons/fox spirits that are wont to seduce men who cannot uphold moral conduct. It seems somewhat unfair to blame Zheng Qi's death on his own conduct, since he was in a sense set up by the fox spirit. The story suggests that the two elements, namely, a lonely woman and nighttime travel, constitute a dangerous liaison in the popular imagination. The story ends with the killing of the fox spirit, thus providing a sense of the final triumph of man over ghosts and demons. Nevertheless, the fact that similar ghost stories continue to be told again and again indicates that the belief in the existence of ghosts and demons serves certain important functions in society and in literary expressions.

Last, the fact that the fox spirit in the story was never referred to as a ghost shows that the main attraction of the story was not whether ghosts were involved, but the intricate plot itself. As mentioned earlier, the collections of stories in the *Anomaly Tales* genre do not discriminate human ghosts from nonhuman spirits, so long as the stories are strange enough to be worth recording.

One example shows how the plot of ghostly intervention in a person's fate can reveal the social reality of favoritism and corruption. Whether the author in fact aimed at criticizing such evil intervention or promoting upright moral integrity, however, can be sought only in the conscience of each reader.

In the second year of the Jianwu period [318] Zhang Kai returned home from the countryside, and saw a person lying on the roadside. He inquired about it, and the person answered, "My feet hurt and I cannot walk anymore. My home is in the south of Chu, but I have no place to beg for help." Kai took pity on him. He cast away the cargo in the back of his wagon and carried the person instead. When they reached his home, this person showed no sense of gratitude, but said to Kai, "I was actually not sick. I just wanted to test you." Kai was outraged and said, "Who are you? And how dare you to play tricks on me!" The person answered, "I am a ghost! I was sent by the Northern Office to take you away. You appear to be an honorable man, and I could not bear to take you, so I pretended to be sick and lay on the roadside. When you abandoned your cargo and carried me home, I really appreciated your kindness. Yet I came with my order and cannot do as I wish. What can I do?" Kai was frightened and invited the ghost to stay and offered him meat and wine. The ghost took the offer, and Zhang Kai cried and begged for help persistently. The ghost said, "Is there anyone who has the same name as yours?" Kai said, "There is a migrant [here] whose name is Huang Kai." The ghost said, "You can visit him, and I will go by myself." When Zhang Kai reached the home of Huang Kai, the host came out to meet him. Meanwhile, the ghost put a red sign on Huang's forehead and stabbed his heart with a small

dagger. Huang Kai felt the pain, and the ghost immediately stepped out. He then told Zhang Kai, "You have a noble physiognomy, and I felt sorry for you, so I broke the law to save you. Yet the way of the spirits is a secret, so you should not divulge it to anyone." After Zhang Kai left, Huang Kai had a sudden heart pain, and died in the middle of the night. Zhang Kai lived to sixty years old and rose to the position of Minister of the Interior.⁷⁸

The message of this story is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, the author seems to suggest that a person with an upright character and a kind heart could be blessed with a good fate and lives to an old age. Zhang Kai, indeed, was praised as an upright official at the Jin court, and lived to sixty-four years old.⁷⁹ On the other hand, the story also shows that the law and ordinance of the government, whether of this world or of the netherworld, are often violated by officials who were supposed to execute the orders, and innocent people such as Huang Kai could be victimized without any justification. The fact that Zhang Kai saved his own life by letting the ghost take the life of an innocent person, moreover, casts serious doubt on his moral integrity. In a similar story, a person by the name of Fei Qingbo bribed the netherworld envoys who came to summon him. He was set free. Yet because he did not keep the secret, he eventually died of a sudden disease, presumably caused by the ghosts:

Fei Qingbo was the Provincial Assistant Governor during the Xiaojian era [454–456]. When he returned home on leave, he suddenly saw three horse-riding envoys, each wearing a red cap, approaching him saying, "The office is summoning you." Qingbo replied, "I have just returned from the office. How could I be summoned again? Moreover, you usually wear black hats, why are you all wearing red caps today?" The envoys answered, "We are not officials from this world." Qingbo then knew that they were not living people, so he begged the three envoys for mercy. Then they promised to change the order, and said, "Four days from now, we shall come back again, and you should prepare some wine and food and wait for us. Don't you tell anyone about this!" When the appointed time came, they indeed arrived as promised, and said, "We have already taken care of it." Qingbo was very happy and bowed to them in gratitude. He then served wine and food. The ghosts drank and ate just like the living people. Before they left, they said, "We did all this because we took pity on you, so please keep it a secret." Qingbo's wife was a suspicious and jealous person, and she said to her husband, "This must be the trick of some demons." When pressed, Qingbo told her all about it. Soon after, he saw the three envoys standing in front of him in anger, having been beaten up and bleeding. They said, "Why did you get us in trouble?" As soon as they finished, they disappeared. Qingbo then became seriously ill and died before dawn.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Lu Xun 1986: 155–56. The first character is missing in the original text.

⁷⁹ Jinshu 76:2018–19. ⁸⁰ Lu Xun 1986: 183–84.

The story makes it explicit that one should keep one's promises, even to ghosts. Yet if we exclude the element of ghosts, the story also reflects the social reality vividly and perhaps inadvertently. That is, in a bureaucratic system, even that of the netherworld, corruption is normal and expected. In the end, however, justice is served not only to Fei Qingbo for breaking his promise, but also to the ghosts who failed to carry out their original mission, for they altered the death call in exchange for wine and food. A small crime perhaps it is, because they did not take the life of another innocent person. Yet such kinds of extortion must have been common in the daily life of the living, so that it appears in the narrative in a natural and convincing manner. This is basically an account cast in the form of a ghost story that promotes morality and justice. The effects achieved by this ghost narrative could be multifarious. On the one hand, the element of ghosts produces sensational psychological excitement for the readers; on the other hand, the ghostly retribution comes swiftly, which also satisfies the reader's urge for quick justice. Thus the narrative blends together the common and the extraordinary, and what is anomalous is actually a recast of the normal human condition.

Humor and Skepticism

Ghost stories sometimes can be humorous about the naïve behavior of some ghosts, and the story about Ruan Deru (阮德如) is one such example:

Once Deru saw a ghost in the toilet; it was about ten feet tall, with dark complexion and large eyes, wearing a white dress and a flat headcloth, and standing about a few feet away. Calm and composed, Deru smiled casually and said to the ghost, "People say that ghosts are despicable. It surely is true!" The ghost was ashamed and retreated.⁸¹

Ruan Deru was a friend of Ji Kang (嵇康), who was featured in a story mentioned above.⁸² His unorthodox behavior was typical of the literati who frequented "pure conversation" sessions;⁸³ thus this anecdote is very much in the style of the anecdotes in the *Shishuo xinyu* that celebrate the

⁸¹ Lu Xun 1986: 115.

⁸² Ruan was known to have written two famous essays debating with Ji Kang and refuting the validity of geomancy concerning houses. See *Ji Kang ji: juan* 8–9. A poem given to Ruan by Ji Kang is preserved in Lu Qinli 1983: 487.

⁸³ Lu Xun 1986: 115.

quick wit of the literati. The ghost in this story is a supporting character that helps to bring out the elegant style of Ruan Deru's witticism.⁸⁴

Some other stories may be skeptical about the existence of ghosts while casting a sarcastic view about the hypocritical and treacherous world of the living. In the story about Zong Dingbo mentioned briefly earlier, we see an interesting case in which the ghost was portrayed as innocent and even foolish:

When Zong Dingbo of Nanyang Province was young, he once traveled in the night and met a ghost. He asked, "Who are you?" The ghost said, "I am a ghost." And the ghost asked, "And who are you?" Dingbo lied and said, "I am also a ghost." The ghost asked, "Where are you going?" "I am going to Wan market." The ghost said, "I also am going to Wan market." They then traveled several li together. The ghost said, "It is too tiresome walking. We can take turns carrying each other." Dingbo said, "Very well!" The ghost carried Dingbo for several li, and said, "You are very heavy! Are you not a ghost?" Dingbo said, "I have just died, that is why I am heavy." Dingbo then took turns and carried the ghost, and found it almost weightless. Thus they took three turns. Dingbo spoke again, "I have just died and do not know what ghosts are afraid of." The ghost said, "The only thing we do not like is people spitting on us." They then came to a stream. Dingbo asked the ghost to cross first, and it did so without making a noise. When Dingbo crossed, he made splashing sounds. The ghost again said, "Why do you make all this noise?" Dingbo replied, "It is because the newly dead are not used to crossing the water. Don't find it strange!" When they approached Wan market, Dingbo carried the ghost over his head and held it tight. The ghost cried out loudly in a squeaky voice and asked to be let down, but Dingbo would not listen. They went into Wan market where the ghost came down and changed into a goat. Dingbo sold it immediately. Afraid that the ghost might change again, he spit on it. He received fifteen hundred coins for the sale and left. At that time people remarked, "Dingbo sold a ghost and got fifteen hundred coins."⁸⁵

One can read this story from many angles. But above all else, it is entertaining. The entertaining effect, however, is not only caused by the clever liar Zong Dingbo but also by the innocent, naïve, or even foolish ghost. By presenting the ghost as an innocent soul, the story portrays the treacherous human world with cynical humor.⁸⁶ In fact, in a number of *Anomaly Tales*, when justice and morality are compromised, either in the human world or in the world of ghosts, sarcasm and skepticism can be found between the lines. Stories about nonbelievers of ghosts often have a

⁸⁴ This is very much like the story about Ruan's sister who was married to a shallow and flamboyant character. See Lu Xun 1986: 49.

⁸⁵ Lu Xun 1986: 141-42. ⁸⁶ For more examples, see Poo 1997.

sarcastic or skeptical air, as illustrated in an often quoted story about Zong Dai:

Zong Dai was the Inspector of the Commandery of Qingzhou. He abolished the excessive cults and wrote a fine treatise on the non-existence of ghosts, which no one could refute. One day a scholar wearing a grey headcloth and carrying a name card came to visit Dai. They discussed various issues and when they began to talk about the non-existence of ghosts, the scholar shook his robe and left, saying, "You have terminated our blood offering for twenty some years, but since you had a black cow and a bearded servant, we could not bother you. Now your servant has abandoned you and the cow is dead, today we are able to get the better of you." As soon as he finished speaking, he disappeared. Dai died the next day.⁸⁷

On the surface, the most important message of this story is perhaps to show, in a humorous way, that the existence of ghosts is an undeniable fact, even though human reasoning sometimes cannot accept it. Yet the story also reveals some subtle messages that are difficult to interpret. First is the death of Zong Dai. His abolition of the excessive cults was obviously the act of a responsible Confucian scholar-official, which was often recorded in history,⁸⁸ and Zong Dai's death was the result of the revenge of the ghosts who were denied their offering. As far as Confucian ethics is concerned, Zong Dai's death was unjustified. Yet for a believer in ghosts, Zong Dai deserved his death, since he had made livelihood difficult for the ghosts. According to the *History of Jin*, Zong Dai served as inspector of Jingzhou⁸⁹ and governor of Xiangyang,⁹⁰ and authored numerous works, though his treatise "On the Nonexistence of Ghosts" (*Wugui lun* 無鬼論) was not listed in the *History of Jin*.⁹¹ His reputation as a nonbeliever is partly confirmed since he was mentioned in the same caliber as Guo Xiang (郭象, 252–312) in the famous work of literary criticism by Liu Xie (劉勰, 465–520), the *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍).⁹² His image as a successful scholar-official in the narrative tradition of official historiography does not seem to warrant an unjustified death; thus we can assume that the anecdotal story was a private view of Zong Dai's personal style in governing: he might be too self-righteous or too hasty in abolishing local cults without being sympathetic to the local people's sentiment and emotional attachment to them. The story can thus be understood as a sarcastic view of self-righteous official-scholars who took away people's livelihood in the name

⁸⁷ Lu Xun 1986: 28.

⁸⁸ See discussion in Poo 1998: chapter 6.

⁸⁹ *Jinshu* 43:1241.

⁹⁰ *Jinshu* 60:1634.

⁹¹ *Suishu* 35:1087.

⁹² Shih 1983: 203.

of high-sounding moral principles. The ghost, therefore, stands for the suffering people who came for revenge. This story resonates with the story of Gu Shao mentioned above, as both involve the abolition of local cults that were deemed improper in the eyes of the Confucian officials yet not necessarily so from the perspective of the common people. We are thus reminded of the one-sided perception of China being a “Confucian” state.

At times, skeptical views about the existence of ghosts are defeated by actual experiences, yet this does not necessarily mean that ghosts would gain any respect from man, as the following story illustrates:

Liu Daoxi and his cousin Kangzu did not believe in ghosts ever since their childhood. Their elder cousin Xingbo could see ghosts since he was young, but he could not convince Daoxi and Kangzu. Once he saw a fearsome ghost on the eastern fence to the east of the house at Changguang Bridge of Jingkou. Daoxi laughed and asked where the ghost was, and he took Xingbo with him and held a sword to hack the ghost. Xingbo called from behind him and said, “The ghost is going to hit you!” Before Daoxi could get at the ghost, he heard a thud like being struck by a thick cane, and fell to the ground. He woke up the next day, and recovered after a month. [Later,] Xingbo warned again, “There is a ghost on the mulberry tree to the east of the hall. Although its size is still small, when it grows up, it will certainly harm people.” Kangzu did not believe it, and asked the exact position of the ghost on the tree. More than ten days later, on a moonless night, Daoxi hid in the darkness and stabbed where the ghost was with a halberd. He returned without being seen. The next morning Xingbo came, and suddenly he said in surprise, “Who stabbed this ghost last night? It is dead and cannot move again. It died not long ago.” Kangzu broke into loud laughter.⁹³

Here the ghost seems to be just a small animal that can be killed easily. Daoxi and Kangzu, who at first did not believe in the existence of ghosts, seem to have been convinced after Daoxi was struck by one. Yet this does not mean that they were afraid of them. On the contrary, they planned and finally killed a ghost. The story shows a certain sense of skepticism about the existence of ghosts. Here the ghost turned out to be an animal spirit. For the people in the story, however, whether the ghost was a human ghost or not did not seem to make any difference.

Proselytizing

Last but not least, it is well known that many of the *Anomaly Tales* show both Buddhist and Daoist influences in that the Buddhist and Daoist

⁹³ Lu Xun 1986: 300.

adepts tried to use the stories to demonstrate their power and ability to control ghosts so as to reinforce their authority.⁹⁴ One story involves a person named Zhou Zichang, a Buddhist disciple who could recite Buddhist sutras. One night, coming home from a friend's house, he was seized by a ghost. He told the ghost that he was a Buddhist adept, whereupon it asked him to recite Buddhist sutras. After reciting several sutras, and after scolding the ghost, he was let go. Before he reached home, he was stopped by the ghost again. This time he seized the ghost by its chest, and scolded it, saying that he was going to drag it to the temple before the monks and settle the account with it. The ghost also seized him by the chest, and they struggled on the road before the ghost finally gave up and let go of him.⁹⁵ The story depicts a moment in the history of early Buddhist activities in China during the Jin period when ghosts were part of the Chinese mental terrain that Buddhism needed to conquer. The plot of the story was apparently motivated by Buddhist proselytism to advertise the religion's ability to control ghosts. The Buddhist adept, however, did not enjoy a complete triumph in the story. Although Zhou was finally able to get rid of the harassment of the ghost, he was nevertheless exhausted in wrangling with it, and the story ends with a sarcastic laugh from the ghost: "You have seen [i.e., consulted with] the monk in the east of the city, why have you failed [in driving me away effectively]?" The intention of the storyteller, if one may fathom, cannot be seen as wholeheartedly pro-Buddhist. One can sense a sentiment of pride of Zhou Zichang for his being a Buddhist disciple, yet this pride gained a somewhat arrogant air in his confrontation with the ghost. The indecisive position of the storyteller, that is, his seemingly pro-Buddhist description of the power of the sutras, on the one hand, and his unwillingness to disparage the ghost completely, on the other, is perhaps an indication of the still murky situation of the intellectual and religious sentiment of the time.

There are also other types of proselytic writings, as the following story shows:

There was a newly dead ghost who was thin and destitute. He met a friend who had been dead for twenty years, and was fat and strong. They greeted each other, and [his friend] asked, "What happened to you?" "I was hungry and cannot sustain myself. If you know how to help me, please let me know." The ghost friend said, "This is easy. You only need to haunt people, and they will certainly be frightened and give you food." The new ghost went to the east of the village, there

⁹⁴ See Campany 1995: 321ff.

⁹⁵ Lu Xun 1986: 199.

was a Buddhist family, and in the west chamber there was a mill. The ghost thus pushed the mill the way people did it. The head of this family told his sons, "The Buddha takes pity on our family for being poor, and sent a ghost to push the mill for us." He thus fetched wheat for the ghost, and at the end of the day the ghost had milled several sacks, and left with fatigue. He scolded his friend, "Why did you lie to me?" The friend said, "You just go again and I'm sure you'll have your food." The ghost then entered a family to the west of the village. This family practiced Daoism, and there was a pound beside the door. The ghost then began to pound as one would pound rice. The man of the house said, "Yesterday a ghost helped the other family, today he comes again to help me, let us give him grain to pound." He also gave the maid a sieve [to help out]. When the day ended, the ghost was exhausted, yet he was not given any food. The ghost returned at dusk and spoke to his friend in great anger, "You and I are matrimonial relatives, and nobody else is as close as we are. How could you fool me? I helped people for two days but did not get a bowl of food!" The friend replied, "You are just out of luck. These two families worship the Buddha and practice the Dao, their emotions naturally are difficult to disturb. Now you can go find an ordinary household and wreak havoc on them. You will get whatever you want." The ghost went again and found a family with a bamboo stick on the door. He went into the doorway and saw a group of women eating together in front of the window. He walked into the yard and saw a white dog. He carried it and [made it look like] it was walking on air. When the family saw this, they were greatly frightened, and said that they had never seen such a strange thing. They then performed an oracle, and it said, "There is a guest asking for food. You should kill the dog, and offer it to him together with sweet fruits and wine and food in the yard. This should prevent further misfortune." The family followed the advice, and the ghost indeed was treated to a feast. Thereafter, he always harassed people, as his friend had taught him.⁹⁶

On the surface, this story seems to be another piece of proselytic writing that propagates the power of Buddhism and Daoism by claiming that their followers did not fear the pestering of ghosts. However, the story goes on to provide an alternative for the ghost; that is, there were people who practiced neither Buddhism nor Daoism and who were prone to accept the belief in ghosts and their power. If so, the story should perhaps not be read as straightforward proselytic writing, but rather as a story that reflects how traditional religious beliefs tried to survive under the onslaught of Buddhism and Daoism. One also senses a satirical criticism of the hypocrisy of the Buddhist and Daoist families in the story who were uncompassionate and exploited the innocent ghost for his free labor. In terms of seeking for justice, the ghost was indeed wronged by the Buddhist and Daoist families but got his compensation by harassing the

⁹⁶ Lu Xun 1986: 316-17.

people who believed in ghosts. In this regard, his trickery was neither honorable nor justifiable, though understandable. When it comes to evaluating the moral of the story in the end, it is somewhat perplexing for the reader. Should we admire the Buddhist and Daoist families or despise them? Should we pity the ghost or feel fortunate for him? Should we feel sorry for the poor family that had to provide for the ghost or should we laugh at their superstition? One cannot say that there is any justice about their plight, unless we agree that what they feared was erroneous. One may still read the story as proselytic, but then, of what? What is the intention of the storyteller? Should we expect a simple answer? The story ends with a ghost happily provisioned by fearful families. If the ending hints at the moral of the story, we may see it as a propagation of the native concept of ghosts under the guise of Buddhist and Daoist proselytism. This reading, moreover, could resolve the difficult issue of why Buddhism and Daoism were equally promoted yet somehow disparaged in the same story. An even more tongue-in-cheek reading of this story, furthermore, is to see the storyteller as a subtle critic of all three belief systems: the facile acknowledgment of the power of Buddhism and Daoism was in fact a sarcastic revelation of how both beliefs could not really reform the heart of the adepts. As for the family that believed in the ghosts, it was only their “false” belief that got the family trapped.

4.4 THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF GHOST STORIES

It has become clear now that the ghost stories we discussed not only reflect different aspects of the world of the living, but also aspire to depict how the world should be. They can often be seen as reflections of reality; at times, however, they are prescriptions for an ideal world.

It has been suggested that “to judge from extant examples, we can safely generalize that the *zhiguai* were not burdened with discourse and argumentation, but were records of events set forth in plain, unencumbered narrative style.”⁹⁷ I would not argue with the claim that the *Anomaly Tales* were generally written with plain, unencumbered narrative style. The individual stories, furthermore, were not burdened with argumentation. Yet this does not mean that the stories were written down or collected without an underlying discourse. Based on the above

⁹⁷ DeWoskin 1977: 39.

observations, I propose that the *Anomaly Tales* of the Six Dynasties were collectively presenting a discourse of a certain sentiment about the time and the world experienced by the people who collected, wrote, reported, and enjoyed reading and listening to these stories.

In some of the ghost stories, it seems that there was a tendency to depict the ghosts as somewhat less intricate than men, although their sincerity and sense of justice were something that men could not resist or defile. Therefore, although we hear that ghosts were sometimes taken advantage of by some cunning men, eventually justice was done to those who had wronged them. The justice of the ghosts, moreover, might not be understandable entirely in human terms, as sometimes they exerted their power on people and took their lives without obvious reason. Though one should perhaps not be surprised at this, as there are plenty of senseless killings in the human world. On the other hand, we also hear that the world of ghosts was very similar to that of the living in that various vices such as bribery, deception, or jealousy were common phenomena among ghosts.⁹⁸ Thus the image of the ghost in the *Anomaly Tales* grew from the featureless and malicious existence of pre-Han and early Han to a colorful and humanized character of the Six Dynasties period.

From stories contained in other texts of the Six Dynasties period, as expected, one can see that the belief in the existence of ghosts and spirits was widespread in society.⁹⁹ The ghost stories in the *Anomaly Tales* genre of literature, therefore, should be placed in the context of this mental environment. Comparing the *Anomaly Tales* with ghost stories contained in other texts, such as the story of Gao Li in the *History of Jin Dynasty*, it seems that in the latter case the ghost itself was not the focus of the story as it was often found in the *Anomaly Tales*.¹⁰⁰ This is understandable since the *History of Jin Dynasty* was a historical work, and it is only natural that here the attention was on humans rather than on ghosts.

A special note should be mentioned concerning the ghosts in the *Biographies of the Immortals* (*shenxianzhuan*), attributed to Ge Hong. There ghosts appear mostly in an unfavorable position: they are always causing trouble, inflicting pain on people, so that they are subject to the exorcistic acts of the immortals. The difference between the ghosts in the

⁹⁸ Yu 1987: 413: "Bribery, illicit gifts, and pay-offs are, in these tales, as common as bumbling litigators and venal judges, and in this way, the tales serve as much as any other kind of Chinese fiction to reflect the basic realities of its context."

⁹⁹ See, for example, the stories collected in the *Yishuzhuan* of *Jinshu* 95:2467-505.

¹⁰⁰ *Jinshu* 95:2484.

Biographies of the Immortals and the *Anomaly Tales* is that the *Anomaly Tales* authors, whether or not true believers, explicitly or implicitly took a position to promote a world of ghosts that was not at all incompatible with the human world, whereas the author of *Biographies of the Immortals* was a proponent of the power of the immortals and the efficacy of the Daoist belief. The world of ghosts was therefore unacceptable or unimportant. A similar case can be made for the *Gaosengzhuan*, the *Biographies of the Eminent Monks*, where certain monks with supernatural powers were said to be able to expel evil ghosts. These ghosts were without exception abominable creatures that only needed to be exorcised.¹⁰¹ We shall return to the treatment of ghosts in Daoism and Buddhism in the following chapters.

In light of the above comparison, the *Anomaly Tales* stories should be considered as the most important field for the growth and formation of the literary image of ghosts in this period, which had an important impact on the development of religious beliefs hereafter. When people believed that ghosts existed, and could enter the world of the living freely, it logically led to the assumption that communication was possible between the living and the dead because their two worlds overlapped. Thus we have stories of people visiting the realm of the dead as well as ghosts visiting the world of the living.¹⁰² The consequence of this worldview was the lack of a transcendental idea, which was also true for the world of the immortals. Although some scholars render the term *xianren* (immortal) as “transcendent,”¹⁰³ it is clear that the entire phenomenon of the belief in *xianren*-immortals operated in a conceptual framework that closely followed the mundane world.

Evidence shows that as early as the Shang dynasty, people used all sorts of methods to propitiate or ward off ghosts. Such actions reflected people’s conception of their own position in comparison with that of the spirits and gods: one was inferior only with respect to one’s power to battle the demons or to affect the cosmos. But one could choose to employ whatever forces, divine or magical, that one could muster to suppress, to overcome, or to evade the powers of the ghosts and spirits, as we have seen in the previous chapters.

¹⁰¹ Poo 1995; Kieschnick 1997: 84–87. The same situation is found in the Buddhist-influenced *zhiguai*, although even there the ghosts were depicted in a vein similar to that in other anomaly accounts. See Kominami 1982.

¹⁰² Campany 1990. ¹⁰³ For example, Russell 1994.

In this connection, an intriguing aspect of the nature of ghosts and spirits deserves to be discussed. This is the idea that a ghost or spirit can be “killed.” This idea first appeared in pre-Han documents¹⁰⁴ and was also found in the *Anomaly Tales* stories.¹⁰⁵ If the basic rationale of witchcraft is that one can actively control or threaten ghosts and spirits, then the idea of “killing the spirits and ghosts” could be seen as a mentality based on this rationale. It seems that such an idea implies that the power of ghosts and spirits is limited. They are limited by their existence and forms, and they have beginnings and endings. Their power may be stronger than that of ordinary human beings, yet men can still control them through magical and ritual acts. This is to say that there existed in the world other powers that could be utilized by men against ghosts and spirits. The idea that ghosts and spirits were “mortal” suggests that, although people imagined that ghosts and spirits existed in a purely spiritual state that could break all the material and physical restraints imposed on human beings by nature, they could not but use their own state of existence as reference to imagine the world of ghosts and spirits: since human beings are mortal, it follows that ghosts and spirits can be killed. The various apotropaic methods described in the *Demonography* of Shuihudi, as well as in the *Anomaly Tales*, show that people believed that ghosts and spirits would respond to the physical acts of man. Thus the human world is accessible to the “divine beings,” and vice versa.

It is also noteworthy that, in the realm of popular religion, the ancient Chinese had devoted much thought to one’s fate after death, including the idea of ghosts, but relatively less speculation was paid to the question of the origin of life. This also bespeaks of a this-worldly oriented attitude toward life, since death and the life beyond are much more important issues for those still living than questions concerning the origin of their lives, which in any case are already in existence.

In sum, the ghost stories constitute a useful literary device in disseminating certain ideas and sentiments about social justice and morality. Being powerful, unpredictable, malicious, righteous, benevolent, naughty, compassionate, even helpless, but always capable of bridging this and the other world, ghosts render themselves very versatile in the creation of an imaginary or liminal space in the mental world of the readers. It is a world with references to all the vices and virtues of

¹⁰⁴ See Poo 1998: chapters 4 and 9.

¹⁰⁵ Lu Xun 1986: 300.

the real world. At the same time, the concept of ghosts allows the storytellers to construct plots that cannot be done otherwise and often with surprising results, which is probably what appeals to readers. So far as the discussions in this chapter are concerned, one of the intentions of the stories may be to create a venue to critique social justice and morality – not that such critique is unique to the *Anomaly Tales* stories. We also see that because of the intervention of ghosts the stories could develop unexpected plots that can be humorous or sobering, often with a sarcastic eye. It is important to realize that, precisely because of the multifarious readings that we can extract from the ghost stories, they should be tapped thoroughly to reveal, however partially, the world that nurtured the genre of *Anomaly Tales*.

The ghost stories, written and collected by the elite, were based on the concept of ghosts and spirits circulating in society, and served to articulate or even to refashion the image of the ghost. This reworked, literary image of the ghost was then redistributed to the populace through reading and retelling, not only among the literary elite, but perhaps also among ordinary people. A culture of ghosts was therefore being shaped through this process. With the emergence of this culture of ghosts came the articulation of a world where the living and the dead could interact with each other. What was lacking in the realm of the living, such as honesty, justice, and unabashed love, could be found in the world of the ghosts depicted in the *Anomaly Tales*. In a sense, this constructed world could also be understood as a refuge – as in the case of the world of “pure talk” – into which troubled literati escaped.

It should be remembered that the ghost stories constitute only part of the *Anomaly Tales*. I have not dealt with all the *guai*-stories, that is, those that involve prodigies or spirits of beings other than humans, as well as strange events. In general these prodigies or spirits are more or less anthropomorphic; therefore sometimes it is difficult to tell them apart from the “human ghosts.” On the whole these stories represent a mentality that recognized the existence of the fantastic, that the world was composed of humans, spirits, and ghosts. When one considers the reciprocal relationship between the reader and the texts, the fantastic element implies, to borrow the words of Todorov, “an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated.”¹⁰⁶ The reader’s hesitation

¹⁰⁶ Todorov 1975: 31.

and interest between the natural and the supernatural, his curiosity in probing the gray area between the world of the living and that of the dead, was perhaps one of the prime forces that pushed the circulation of these stories.

It is worth stressing that, behind all such stories of the fantastic, there existed a common psychological need for things thrilling, therefore entertaining. Human beings as a species had not only a sense of fear toward the unknown – which some argue resulted in the rise of religion that helped man seek for happiness and the avoidance of misfortune – but also a need to seek out exciting, extraordinary experiences. Such experiences could sometimes be gained in religious activities. The telling, creating, and sharing of ghost or other fantastic stories, as we have seen in the Six Dynasties *Anomaly Tales*, besides providing entertainment, can be understood partly as the product of this hunger for the exotic that tied in with the religious mentality of the time. Here it might be relevant to quote from Felton, who wrote about Greco-Roman ghosts:

In many respects [the supernatural and the humorous] . . . are fraternal twins. Both serve to entertain, both depend on exaggeration, distortion, or some unusual or magnified quality. . . . A thread of comedy may appear in the most terrifying tale of terror, and the existence of a great body of jokes, anecdotes, and folk pranks about the supernatural confirms the common root of humorous and supernatural folk tales.¹⁰⁷

To elaborate more, the ghost stories not only alleviated the readers' psychological need for entertainment and provided opportunities for people to cast a sarcastic eye on human nature, but also allowed the readers to have contact with some deeply ingrained religious beliefs that permeated society. This psychological need and belief in ghosts and spirits was certainly there before the Six Dynasties. The combined forces of social development, political change, and literary and religious activities of the Six Dynasties period, however, culminated in the explosion of the *Anomaly Tales* genre, and gave the writers and readers an unprecedented chance to explore and exploit the power of ghosts. The literary images of ghosts portrayed in the *Anomaly Tales* henceforth were carved in people's mental scenery, whether or not one was a believer. Whether we speak of the possibilities of narrative expression, religious doctrine, or the more nebulous concept of the psychology of a people, China was never the

¹⁰⁷ Felton 1999: 3–4.

same again. Added to this change, moreover, was the rise of Daoist beliefs and the coming of Buddhism into China. How did Buddhism and Daoism deal with what was already in the religious terrain of China, what was their strategy, and how did they succeed in dealing with the ghosts that had been articulated in the Six Dynasty *Anomaly Tales*? We shall explore these questions in the following chapters.

Ghosts in Early Daoist Culture

The Dao says, you people of latter generations are not observing the great Dao. The vulgar teachers beat the drums and, worshipping the gods, they kill pigs and dogs and chicken as three kinds of sacrifice over grass and water. They call for a hundred ghosts and worship the wild deities. This is all preposterous and wicked.¹

This chapter discusses the treatment of ghosts in early Daoist literature, including the origin of ghosts (*gui*), their images and functions, the exorcistic rituals, and their relationship with the people. A short introduction to the Daoist religion, however, is in order here so as to place our discussion of ghosts in a proper socioreligious context. Daoism, “The Teaching of the Dao” (*Daojiao* 道教), is a belief system that emerged at the end of the Han Dynasty, gathering various elements from Chinese culture at various stages of historical development, such as the belief in the efficacy of talismans and magical spells in treating diseases and exorcizing ghosts and spirits. Such concerns were mostly related to people’s daily life, be they commoners or those high up on the social ladder. Another strand of belief related to the formation of early Daoism was the idea of immortality, which was formed and transmitted from the late Warring States period down and pursued by rulers such as the First Emperor of Qin and the Emperor Wu of Han, and continued to inspire many in the literati circles of the Six Dynasties period. The development of Daoism during this period gradually incorporated these two strands into a more or less self-contained belief system, advocating a cosmology that saw the creation of the world as due to the action of Dao – the

¹ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* = *Daozang* 6:30.

Supreme Deity – and a value system that supported the effort to attain immortality for the believers, to help the common people to avoid misfortune and attain happiness, and to assist the world to achieve the state of Great Peace. This value system, to summarize it in a simplistic way, includes (1) the acceptance of the moral values already advocated by the Confucians, that is, observing the hierarchical social ethics based on the Five Relations – those between the sovereign and subjects, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, and between brothers and friends; (2) various methods for self-cultivation, physical exercises, and meditation techniques; and (3) the use of rituals, spells, talismans, and medicine to cure illnesses and drive away harmful ghosts and spirits from people's life. Given this background understanding, it is important to note that the ability to deal with ghosts and demons in people's daily life was always an indispensable part of the Daoist mission, from the time when it emerged as the “Way of Heavenly Master” (*Tianshi dao* 天師道) in Sichuan during the chaotic period that led to the fall of the Han until now.² The most salient aspects of the “Way of Heavenly Master” are the use of spells and talismans to cure illnesses and drive away ghosts and evil spirits. Archaeological discoveries in the last century have produced abundant material that indicates that such exorcistic activities, especially used in connection with funerary rituals, were prevalent in society across the Han empire, which gave support to the view that the Way of Heavenly Masters that we know of from historical sources such as the *History of the Three Kingdoms* or the *History of Later Han* probably had a much earlier origin that could perhaps be traced to the first century CE. It should also be stressed that the Way of Heavenly Master, later simply the Teaching of Dao (*Daojiao*), was not “established” by one person in one place, and might not have been known as such in its early history, but could best be described as a collective religious activity that combined various beliefs in people's daily life and developed over a long period of time. Along with the development it adopted a hierarchical organization that was based on the secular government, with a moral teaching that emphasized good behavior as the condition for healing.³

It is useful to be aware of the fact that many of the Daoist texts discussed below, now collected into the “Daoist Canon” or *Daozang*

² For a general introduction to Daoism, see Schipper 1993; Robinet 1997; Lagerwey 2010: 57ff. For the early history of Daoism, see Kleeman 2016.

³ For an excellent study of this rather complicated early history of Daoism, see Zhang and Bai 2006.

(道藏), were written or compiled at various times by different authors and were made for audiences of various levels of literacy and social and cultural background.⁴ The authors of the texts were of varied literary ability; thus, the messages that come across in the texts might not necessarily be totally coherent. Different emphases could have been given at different locations, different times, for different purposes and audiences. It is important to remember these different possibilities, whenever we can, and not insist on trying to find a coherent interpretation for all the texts.

5.1 THE ORIGIN OF GHOSTS ACCORDING TO DAOIST BELIEF

While it is a common conception that ghosts originate from the deceased people, our investigation of the early Chinese documents reveals a wide variety of sources that could produce ghosts or evil spirits. We have seen human ghosts in the context of the relationship between the living and the dead, thus the descriptions of the nature of ghosts were to a large extent the reflections of people's collective understanding of the correct actions one should be taking when confronted with a ghost. Because ghosts were once human beings, it would be logical to assume that the operating morality in the relationship between the human and the ghost was similar to that in the human world. When we look at the records, however, it should be clear that what bothered ordinary people in their daily life were not only ghosts of human origin, but all sorts of nonhuman spirits. These nonhuman agents were conceived as engaging in various interactions with human beings, according to what was imaginably possible for human understanding, thus often similar to what human ghosts would do. This is why in the *Daybook* of Shuihudi human ghosts and nonhuman spirits are mentioned without categorical difference. To the users of the *Daybook*, the important thing was not quite the origins of the ghosts or spirits, but how to deal with them effectively. When the genre of *Anomaly Tales* (*zhiguai*) was developing during the late Eastern Han period, stories about both human and nonhuman ghosts were recorded. This corroborated with the original meaning of the term *gui*, which could refer to spirits of both human and nonhuman origins. Considering the examples seen in the Daoist texts, therefore, we should allow a wider definition of the term "ghost" and include all the nonhuman spirits in our discussion as part of

⁴ For an introduction, see Schipper and Verellen 2004.

the ghost culture. Thus terms such as *mei* 魅, *wu* 物 or *guai* 怪,⁵ mentioned in Chapter 1 above, which are often found in the literary texts as well as religious texts of the Six Dynasties period, are also our concern, as long as they interacted with or posed a threat to people.

For example, we can look at an early Daoist text, the *Baopuzi* (抱朴子) by Ge Hong (葛洪, c. 283–343). As one of the most prominent early Daoists, Ge Hong's description of ghosts and spirits should carry a certain weight as representing a general consensus prevalent in his time, just as Wang Chong did in his *Lunheng* on the contemporary popular conceptions on ghosts. In the chapter entitled "Into Mountains and Crossing Streams (*Dengshe* 登涉)," Ge Hong provided an animistic explanation about the origins of the malicious spirits that one could encounter when entering the mountains or dangerous terrain:

The spirits in old objects are capable of assuming human shape, for the purpose of confusing human vision and constantly putting human beings to a test. It is only when reflected in a mirror that they are unable to alter their true form. Therefore, in the old days, all Daoist adepts entering the mountains suspended on their backs a mirror measuring nine inches or more in diameter, so that aged demons would not dare approach them.⁶

The so-called aged demons (老魅 *laomei*) that Ge Hong referred to include various animals such as deer, dog, snake, monkey, tiger, fox, even inanimate trees, and so on. This idea about the origin of ghosts and spirits thus corroborates with what was found in the Six Dynasty *Anomaly Tales*. In fact, one can trace it to the *Daybook* of Shuihudi, written some six hundred years earlier, in which similar kinds of haunting spirits are found. One thing we can be sure of is that Ge Hong's description of the ghosts and spirits was certainly not his own imagination or invention but part of the general belief of the time that had very deep roots in the popular mentality (see Chapter 2). One can also sense an intense anxiety that loomed behind the description, an anxiety that originated from the daily life of the ordinary people regarding the boundary between the space of human activities and the space of the spirits and the unknown. Ge Hong's writing seems to indicate that this boundary could be drawn between the wild and uninhabited mountains and forests, on the one side, and the agricultural land, on the other. Yet of course plenty of other evidence could show that the ghosts and spirits would not limit their

⁵ For a discussion of the concept of *wu* 物, see Du Cheng-sheng 2001; for the idea of *mei*, see Lin Fu-shih 2005.

⁶ *Baopuzi* 17; trans. Ware 1966: 281.

activities to the mountains and forests, which is exactly why all the stories of human–ghost interactions would be generated.

Different from Ge Hong, The *Taipingjing* (太平經), one of the earliest Daoist texts that was written before the end of Eastern Han, therefore before Ge Hong,⁷ has its own explanation of the origin of ghosts based on the theory of yin–yang balance:

The living person is *yang*, the dead person is *yin*. One should not serve the *yin* more than one serves the *yang*. *Yang* is the sovereign and *yin* is the subject. One should not serve the subject more than one serves the sovereign. If one serves the *yin* more than *yang*, it will cause the adverse ether to arrive, . . . the harm would be that the *yin* ether conquers the *yang*, the subject deceives the overlord, ghosts and gods and evil things flourish greatly, and they ride together on the road, and often walk in the daytime and do not avoid people. If diseases cannot be extinguished, the many ghosts will not stop to appear. . . . The living persons are *yang*, ghosts and spirits are *yin*, the living belongs to day, while the ghosts and spirits belong to night. . . . When *yang* rises, it will overcome the *yin*, so that *yin* be hidden and does not dare to appear at will, as a consequence ghosts and spirits become hidden. If *yin* rises, it will overcome *yang*, and when *yang* is hidden, ghosts and spirits could be seen in daylight. Thus when *yin* overcomes, it means that ghosts and spirits will cause harm.⁸

The idea of yin–yang was of course the basis of early Daoist philosophy; what is interesting here is that the relationship between *yin* and *yang* is compared with that between the subject and the sovereign. It is a clear indication that by this time the Confucian idea of the Five Relations, particularly those between the sovereign and the subject, the father and the son, and the husband and the wife, was integrated with the yin–yang theory. The Daoist application of the yin–yang theory, therefore, was very much intertwined with Confucian ideologies that had developed during the Han period. Moreover, in accordance with the ancient Daoist philosophy that everything in the universe is the gathering of ether, or *qi*, the evil ghosts and spirits can also be explained as originated from the “old ether (*gu qi* 故氣)” and the dead soldiers and generals, according to Lu Xiuqing (陸修靜, 406–77), the most important Daoist theorist of early medieval China:

The old ether of Six Heavens claimed to be officials and assumed titles and associated with hundreds of spirits and the five harmful ghosts. There are also the dead generals of defeated armies, the dead soldiers of the disarrayed troops, those males who called themselves generals, and those females who called

⁷ Lin Fu-shih 2008a.

⁸ Wang Ming 1960: 49–51.

themselves ladies. They led the ghost soldiers and followed the army and roamed the world, acting in a whimsical way that threatened the people and took away their fortune, disturbing the temples and demanding sacrifices.⁹

Obviously, the author sees no inherent contradiction when he states that ghosts could be a kind of personification of the “old ether of Six Heaven,” while at the same time they could also be simply dead people. Such an understanding of the origins of ghosts was consistent with the position that human ghosts were but part of the spirit world, therefore part of the cosmic ether. This view also reflects the sorry situation of a time of incessant wars and plagues since the end of the Eastern Han when many soldiers as well as common people died by weapons and from illnesses.¹⁰ In fact, the range of the origins of ghosts extended far more than those who died of military actions or sicknesses. The *Taipingjing* itself provided another view of the origin of some evil ghosts:

There often existed in the world ferocious ghosts, evil spirits, brutal disease, guilty corpses and people who died of crime. When they come to attach to people, it was like the poisonous weapons and arrows that strike the body; the pain was unbearable.¹¹

It is interesting to note that these malicious ghosts would harm people for no obvious justifiable reasons, and such understanding was taken for granted. However, since the *Taipingjing* propagates the concept of *chengfu* 承負, that is, the inherited evil fate of a person from the wrong deeds of their own ancestors, it is possible that the attack of the malicious ghosts could be explained in the *chengfu* system, and be given a moral explanation of the seemingly random ghostly attacks and ill fates.¹²

It is in the Daoist Canon of the Sixth Dynasties period that we encounter a further development of the idea of ghosts. *The Scripture of Supreme Correct and Unitary Incantation against Ghosts* (*Taishang zhengyi zhou-guijing* 太上正一咒鬼經), composed probably during the Six Dynasties period, provided several extensive lists of ghosts that indicate their origins. One of them reads as the following:

The Master of Zhengyi said to the libationer disciples: if you can accept this sutra of mine, and if you experience headache, dizzy eyesight, imbalance of heat and cold, you should recite this sutra often, the demons and ghosts will be shattered and dare not to resist my spell. If there are disasters like imprisonment and fire and

⁹ *Luxiansheng daomen kelue* = *Daozang* 24:779. ¹⁰ Lin Fu-shih 1995.

¹¹ Wang Ming 1960: 295.

¹² Lin Fu-shih 2008b. For *chengfu*, see, for example, Liu Zhaorui 2007: 131–74.

flood, recite this sutra. If there are ghosts in the house, also recite this sutra... Ghosts and Spirits: There are ... ghosts of thinking, ghosts of disabilities, ghosts of Wang-liang, the ghost of the constellation Ying-huo, ghosts of roaming, ghosts of exorcism, ghosts of dead bodies, ghosts who died of illness of anus, ghosts who died of sexual excess, ghosts who died of old age, ghosts of the official residence, ghosts of the travel lodges, ghosts of the army camps, ghosts who died in prisons, ghosts who were publicly executed, ghosts who frightened people, ghosts who died of wood, ghosts who died of fire, ghosts who died of water, ghosts who died when traveling, ghosts of the unburied, ghosts of the road, ghosts killed by weapons, ghosts of those who died because of their constellation, ghosts who died because of blood, ghosts who died of beating [?], ghosts of the beheaded, ghosts of the hanged, ghosts of the offended, ghosts of those who killed themselves, ghosts of those who are afraid of people, ghosts of those who died unnaturally, two-headed ghosts, horse ghosts, chariot ghosts, mountain ghosts, godly ghosts, earth ghosts, mountain peak ghosts, ghosts in the water, ghosts of the ceiling-beams, road ghosts, ghosts of the Qiang and Hu barbarians, ghosts of the Manyi barbarians, ghosts of taboos, ghosts provoked by insects, ghosts of spirits, ghosts of various insects, ghosts of wells, stoves, ponds, and marshes, ghosts of ten thousand roads, hidden ghosts, the not-efficacious ghosts, ghosts of false claims, and all the hundreds of great and small spirits and ghosts, they should not infest the males and females of such and such family. The ghosts shall not resist the spell, and their heads shall be broken into ten pieces, and the body and head will be smashed. When you recite this sutra, and recite the names of the ghosts, the illness will be alleviated, and it will be effective everywhere. The beneficence of this sutra and its divine power is unmeasurable. Then all the libationers marveled at the divine writ, receiving the worthy teaching, vowed to uphold the sutra, and bowed and retreated.¹³

We quote this lengthy paragraph here to show the extent of the author's obsession with the fantastic world of a flourishing ghost community. As the text makes it clear, the way to expel the evil ghosts is to recite the spell, particularly the names of the ghosts. Thus it is understandable that the author wished to list all the types of ghosts that could possibly be named. What is striking is that the author listed not only those kind of ghosts that we have encountered before, such as dead human beings, people who died of untimely or violent death, or animate or inanimate things, but also some new categories, like the ghost of the constellations, the ghost of false claims, or the ghost of thinking. The last two kinds of ghosts are particularly interesting, as it seems to indicate that the human thinking mind could become an independent entity that has its own ghost. Yet this list of ghosts does not describe what these ghosts look like. For this we shall turn to other texts.

¹³ *Taishang zhengyi zhouguijing*= *Daozang* 28:370.

5.2 IMAGES OF GHOSTS

As we have already discussed in the previous chapters, the images of ghosts, just like their origins, are multifarious, as they could appear in a human shape, in an animal form, or even in the form of nonanimate things. Literary texts of the Six Dynasties period portray a number of fearsome-looking ghosts, such as the one Ruan Deru met in the toilet one night: “the ghost was about 10 feet high, with black skin and big eyes, wearing a white dress and a flat headdress.”¹⁴ Another ghost in a story about Yu Liang also appeared in the toilet and was described as “having the shape of Fang Xiang [a demon-expelling deity in the Great Exorcism ritual], with two red eyes and shining body, emerging slowly from the earth.”¹⁵ The reason why ghosts often appear at night in the toilet is probably because at that time toilets were separated from the main residence, out in the field or the dark yard, and thus were an ideal location for ghosts to appear. Of course, ghosts could also be perfectly human-like, such as the female ghost in the Tan Sheng story who lived together with Tan and even had children with him.¹⁶ In the early Daoist text of *Scripture of Divine Incantation of the Abyssal Caverns* (*Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing*), a collection of various texts or spells dated to the early fifth century that are supposed to be able to expel or exterminate evil ghosts, we can find a large number of descriptions of the physical features of various ghosts:

The Dao says: In the year of Wuyin, there is a giant ghost with a red nose whose name is Fuzi. His height is nine feet, and he has three faces and one eye. There is another ghost who has two heads and one body, three feet tall. They all have red eyes. There is again another ghost whose name is Daye, with three heads and one body, seven feet tall. They go together carrying white knives, roaming the world to take the lives of small children. They fly about in the clouds and produce red *qi* and cause people to suffer cold and heat and vomit blood, with swelling heart and discomfort in the chest. At this time, if one could have the master of the Three Caverns come and recite the scripture, then the sick will be healed and trouble with the government will be resolved. If the sickness is not healed, the ghost-king shall be held responsible.¹⁷

Although on first sight the descriptions of these ghosts may seem rather fantastic, they were most likely not created out of pure imagination of the author of this time, but had a long tradition in society. In the *Classics of Mountains and Seas*, dated to the Warring States period, we can also find

¹⁴ Lu Xun 1986: 115. ¹⁵ Lu Xun 1986: 156–57. ¹⁶ Lu Xun 1986: 144.

¹⁷ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 8:2b = *Daozang* 6:28.

“*shen*-spirits” with all sorts of strange features. There were, for example, spirits with “the head of a dragon and the face of a man,” “the face of a man and the body of a horse,” or “the face of a man with tiger’s claws,” and so on.¹⁸ We can also refer to the protective spirit on the coffin of Marquis Zeng (Zenghou Yi), dated to the early Warring States period,¹⁹ or the three-headed spirit on a late Warring States period Chu silk painting,²⁰ as well as the strange spirits/demons on the famous painted lacquer coffins found in Mawangdui tomb no. 3.²¹ The hybrid principle of composing fearsome or outlandish features of spirits and ghosts was therefore an established practice in early Chinese imagination and representation.

Reading through the texts, it seems that the texts became a stage where the author demonstrates their talent of ghost-portraying, and that there was even a certain entertaining effect for the readers: the myriads of life-threatening, ferocious-looking, blood-thirsty demonic soldiers and ghost-generals were like characters of a horror drama in a thrilling, though imaginary, world.

The Daoist texts, not infrequently, also tried to create the impression that the harmful ghosts were under the command of a number of ghost-kings, or Mara (*mowang* 魔王), who ordered a series of actions carried out by their ghost soldiers:

The Dao says: “From now on, if there will be in the world yearly attack of plagues, these are all caused by the ghostly followers of the Mara Wumingjiu. They roam the world, and walk together with the seven generations of people’s ancestors, and causing fatal plagues.”²²

Here we witness the borrowing of a concept from Buddhism, since the term “Mara” was a Buddhist term.²³ One can also see obvious influence of the Buddhist sutras on the style of Daoist texts in describing these ghosts.²⁴ One feature worthwhile noticing is the progressive change in the descriptions of the numbers, features, and actions of the evil ghosts and spirits in the Daoist literature. The hyper-exaggeration of the names and numbers of the malicious ghosts and spirits was not seen in the earliest Daoist texts

¹⁸ Poo 1998: 93ff. ¹⁹ Hubeisheng bowuguan 1989: vol. 1, 28–45.

²⁰ Rao Zongyi and Zeng Xiantong 1985, pls. 1–7.

²¹ Hunan sheng bowuguan and Zhongguo kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 1973.

²² *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 14:11 = *Daozang* 6:54.

²³ Yoshioka Yoshitoyo 1959–70; Zürcher 1980; Bokenkamp 1997; Strickmann 2002: 58ff.; Mollier 2008.

²⁴ For a collection of Daoist texts with Buddhist influence, see Kamada Shigeo 1986.

such as the *Baopuzi*. In the *Baopuzi*, the evil ghosts and malicious spirits were mentioned by their different origins: animals such as deer, tiger, monkey, dog, as well as dead humans. But the descriptions of these ghosts and spirits did not dwell on their particular features or numbers. In the later texts such as the *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing*, clear emphasis was placed on the astronomical number of the ghosts, which also resonates with what was found in the Buddhist texts, which often use astronomical numbers to describe years of the *kalpa* (eon of time) and various deities, and thus could be an indication of Buddhist influence.

In the Daoist texts quoted above, the descriptions of ghosts do not constitute extensive narratives about individual ghosts and their interactions with living people, as is often found in the *Anomaly Tales*. However, their images and their acts, that is, their ruthless slaughtering in the world, are given in vivid language. In other words, the ghosts in the texts usually do not have individual characters; they exist only as a category. The function of these ghosts in the Daoist texts could be said to be rather simple and straightforward. They are malicious all through, and they could only do harm to people. The fact that they are mentioned time and again in the texts indicates an intention to demonstrate that the world is plagued by these evil ghosts and spirits, and that the Dao or the Daoist priests are the only hope of salvation for the people. The salvation, as expected, often comes in the form of exorcistic rituals.

5.3 EXORCISTIC RITUALS

While the literati were collecting ghost stories in their *zhiguai*, or *Anomaly Tales*, either as moral lessons or for entertainment, the early Daoist advocates of the Six Dynasties period had to confront ghosts in ordinary people's daily lives and tried to conquer the unwelcome ghosts and spirits and establish the authority of the Daoist teaching.²⁵ During the early years of the development of Daoist religion, in the third and fourth centuries CE, Daoist advocates often had to confront the so-called excessive cults and forbid their followers to worship local ghosts and spirits with blood sacrifices.²⁶ In this regard, the Daoist masters were

²⁵ For Daoist rituals in general, see Lagerwey 1987, and for Daoist demonology, see Mollier 2006.

²⁶ For arguments concerning whether the Daoist religion was different from the "popular cults" only in the degree in which they worshipped ghosts, or in a more fundamental way, see Stein 1979; Lai 1998.

somewhat like the scholar-officials in the Han period, who took as their responsibility to teach the common people how to distinguish the proper way of revering the spirits from the improper or corrupted ways. In order to curtail evil spirits, early Daoist texts include a large portion of exorcist texts for the use of the adepts. Ge Hong, for example, gave his advice on the methods to avoid or overcome evil ghosts and spirits:

Someone asked how to rout the various ghosts haunting the mountains, rivers and shrines. Baopuzi says: The Daoist adepts who always carry the talismans, such as *Heavenly Water*, *Bamboo Envoy of Lord on High*, *Left Contract of Laozi*, and who practice True Unity and contemplate the Three Generals, the ghosts would not dare to come close. Next one can use the *Roster of the Hundred Ghosts* so as to know the names of ghosts in the world, as well as those in the *White Marsh Graph* and the *Nine Ding-Tripod Record*, then all the ghosts will desist. Next one can take quail-egg-hematite pills, and malachite-torch powders, onion-seed-crow-eye pills, and swallow some white-quartz-praying-mother powders, all of which will enable a man to see the ghosts, so that they will straightway stand in awe of him. . . . There are forty-nine true and secret Laojun Yellow-Court Middle-Fetus talismans. When entering the mountains, choose the *jiayin* day, and write them [the talismans] in red on a piece of plain silk, place them at night on a table, and as you face the Northern Dipper, offer them sacrifices of wine and salted meat. To each of them introduce yourself briefly by name, bow twice, and then place them in the neck of your garment. This will drive from you the many ghosts and spirits and tigers, wolves, snakes and vermin of the mountains and rivers. Not only the Daoist adepts, but those who seek refuge in the mountains during time of turmoil should also know this method.²⁷

What is interesting in this passage is that the exorcistic talismans could be used to drive away evil ghosts and demons of all sorts, and they could be employed by ordinary people. They can wear the talisman on their garment, take the magical drug, or recite the names of the ghosts, just as taking medicine to cure diseases. In fact, the idea was exactly this: all abnormalities in the world, be they caused by malicious spirits and ghosts or wild animals and diseases, belonged to the same category of beings as opposed to the human self, that is, external interferences that could be dealt with by applying magical spells, talismans, ritual prayers and actions, and drugs of all sorts, prescribed by the Daoist masters. Here we also notice the amoral aspect of the Daoist exorcism: there is no moral explanation for why a person is infested by evil spirits. That is, the appearance of evil spirits did not have to do with the personal morality or behavior of those who were affected by them. Moreover, when Ge

²⁷ Wang Ming 1985: 299–314; Ware 1966: 295–96, with minor changes.

Hong advocated the importance of “Preserving the One (*shouyi* 守一)” as a most important method to expel all evil spirits, there is no mention of personal moral integrity as a prerequisite of the person who aspires to try these methods.²⁸ The same situation can be found with the making and taking of elixirs in the *Baopuzi*.²⁹ Thus one can say that the Daoist idea of the origin of evil spirits and diseases was by and large rather materialistic.

Of course, this materialistic understanding can only be part of the story. The *Baopuzi* did advocate the fundamental Daoist philosophy of keeping a simple mind and expunging desires that could pollute one’s pure spirit, so as to reach the ultimate state of unification with the Dao. Still, such perseverance of the mind and body did not involve one’s social obligation and ethical relationship with other members of the community, for which the Confucian values placed great emphasis.

In spite of this difference between the Daoist and the Confucian emphasis on personal and social obligations, the Daoist texts did advocate certain moral values that are in tune with building a harmonious society. For example, in the *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing*, the text is cast in a story-like plot, in which the “Dao” (the personification of the supreme Way) gives a sermon to the people and predicts that in the coming *kalpa*, or *jie* 劫, a great disaster will destroy mankind. The use of the term *kalpa*, with the basic meaning of “eon” of time, and often with disasters ending at each *kalpa*, is further evidence of Buddhist influence. The spiritual beings that will bring about the disaster are ghosts and the demon-king (Mara 魔王). Thus begins a series of prophecies concerning how the ghosts would come down and exterminate the people, and how those who accept texts such as the *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* would be protected from the demons and ghosts and be saved. The text abounds with assertions stating that the world is coming to an end because people had committed various crimes, such as not following the Dao, doing evil deeds, or being covetous of worldly wealth and enjoyment. Thus, although it is obvious that the text was composed to help people exorcise the ghosts, it also served to transmit various moral and ethical values. One passage in the *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* reads:

The Dao says: The name of the ghost of mountains and forests is called Xuanzidu. He leads twenty million nine hundred thousand ghosts who often suddenly kill people, young and old. They enter into people’s houses and scare people and chickens and dogs. Then again there are thirty nine thousand ghosts with red

²⁸ Ware 1966: 301ff.

²⁹ Poo 2005b.

turbans who enter into people's houses and take away their animals. Then again there are eight hundred thousand Green Worm Ghosts, with a length of three feet and six inches. With heavenly fire they burn people's houses and cause people to get involved in litigation. Then again there are four hundred and ninety thousand Great Fortune Green Ghosts, thirty feet high, who beat people with red clubs. If a good person believes in the [Daoist] teaching, they would not dare to get close to him. As for the evil person who upholds no justice and kills people and defiles the Dao, and who does not care for his parents, who cheats the Daoist adepts, and who insults teachers and disciples, he shall be executed without pardon.³⁰

The Dao explains in another passage the use of the text:

There are many evil people in the world; therefore there exist such evil ghosts who kill people. From now on, when encountering anyone, male or female, who would accept the Three Caverns [i.e., the text], the ghost king would be reverent and dare not to do harm.³¹

The logic here is simple: do no evil, be good, respect one's parents, and one could be protected. There are various ways to expel unwelcome ghosts, but reciting spells was the most common method, as we have shown above. Yet the act of recitation required some procedures so that the divine power could be appropriated.

In the *Biographies of the Immortals* (*Shenxianzhuan*), attributed to Ge Hong, the ability to control ghosts and spirits was already one of the prominent powers that the immortals possessed. The phrase "control and command ghosts and spirits (*yishi guishen* 役使鬼神)" was often given to describe the ability of the immortals. The legendary founder of the Daoist order Zhang Daoling, for example, was described in the *Biographies of the Immortals* as having subdued tens of thousands of ghosts in Szechuan before he established his theocratic regime.³² The subduing of ghosts was also related to the curing of illnesses, since in the popular mentality illnesses were often inflicted by evil ghosts. Thus the immortals were often versed in the art of medicine and exorcism.³³ Understandably, these ghosts categorically belonged to the malicious ones that should be exorcised. However, the *Biographies of the Immortals* did not give detailed descriptions about the talismans and spells employed by the immortals to drive away the ghosts. For these we need to delve into the Daoist Canon. For example, the "Northern Emperor's Method of Killing Ghosts (*Beidi shagui fa* 北帝殺鬼法),"

³⁰ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 8:5b–6a= *Daozang* 6:29.

³¹ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 6:7a= *Daozang* 6:22. ³² *Shenxianzhuan* 5.

³³ Poo 1995.

recorded in Tao Hongjing's (陶弘景, 456–536) *Secret Instructions for the Ascent as a Perfected* (*Dengzhen yinjue* 登真隱訣) reads as follows:

One should first grind one's teeth thirty-six times and chant: Heavenly tent, heavenly tent, nine elements that kill the child, the commander of five soldiers, the high knife and the northern elder, seven righteous [ones] and eight spirits, the supreme and great villain, long-headed monster, holding the cup of the emperor, the three gods of the white owl, whose spirits ride on the dragon, who bravely kill the divine king, with purple *qi* rise up to heaven as red clouds gush forth, swallow Mara and consume the ghosts. The Red Emperor will drain the blood and the Big Dipper will burn the bone. The Four Luminaries will break the skeleton, and the Heavenly General will extinguish their ilk. As the divine knife strikes, myriads of ghosts will desist.³⁴

Such precise prescriptions of recitation, moreover, is only part of all that is required for it to become effective. For example, one should not only follow the exact wordings of recitation, but also recite it in a fasting ritual, giving alms to the poor and performing meditation, and to practice the Dao at all times.³⁵ Thus the exorcistic spells are used in a complex ritual performances as well as daily actions. The *Code of the Blue Lady for Controlling Ghosts* (*Nüqing Guilü* 女青鬼律), another early Daoist text, also lists a long string of names of ghosts and provides various methods to exorcise the ghosts: pronouncing the names of the ghosts, carrying talismans with the names of the ghosts written on them, or hanging talismans over the doorway.³⁶ There are also specific exorcistic ritual spells for the Daoist practitioners who might encounter evil spirits in their daily lives or during their meditation practice. For example:

When a Daoist adept comes to spend the night in a place plagued with malicious spirits and evil ghosts, he should clap his left teeth 36 times, hold the breath, and pray in a low voice: "The Supreme Emperor . . . if myriad of evil spirits dare to come in front of me, they will be devoured by giant beasts, their belly will be gutted, and the divine envoys and guards and soldiers with yellow garments will slaughter the evil ghosts and extinguish the thousands of demons. They will destroy the evil doers and exterminate them all. Such is the supreme decree of the Jade Emperor to sweep clean the world." When finished, again clap the teeth 36 times.³⁷

The spells are basically built on the idea that the spiritual world was a form of celestial government and all the Daoist priest had to do was to

³⁴ *Dengzhen yinjue* = *Daozang* 6:613.

³⁵ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 7:12b = *Daozang* 6:929.

³⁶ *Nüqing Guilü* = *Daozang* 18:239–52.

³⁷ *Shangqing xiushen yaoshi jing* = *Daozang* 32:562.

invoke the proper celestial officials to descend and deal with the demons and ghosts. The Daoist priest can also assume the role of a heavenly official, as seen in another example: "People who know the names of the palace gates of Six Heaven of Fengdu city will not be harmed by the hundred ghosts. When one intends to sleep, one should face north and recite three times in low voice." The spell goes on:

I am the disciple of the Supreme Lord, and overseeing the Six Heaven. The palace of the Six Heaven is under my control, and not only is it under my control, it is by the command of the Supreme Lord. I know the palace of the Six Heaven, therefore I have acquired immortality. Anyone who dares to offend me, the Supreme Lord will cut your body [in half].³⁸

The texts thus propagate the idea that evil spirits and ghosts exist in the same spiritual world as the most esteemed heavenly emperor, and are subject to the rule of the celestial officials, just as the bandits and thieves of the human world are supposed to be subjected to the rule of the secular government. In other words, the Daoist idea of the structure of the divine world was very much modeled on the human world.

The actual procedures of the exorcistic rituals are often described in the texts. One of such texts, the "The Method of Performing the Divine Staff," shows what was going on in the mind of the Daoist priest who performs the ritual:

When a Daoist master wishes to perform the "Divine staff method" he should clap the teeth 36 times, meditating about the Five Emperors' officials on duty, each official is dressed in the color that coordinates with the color of the direction, then there will be five-color light shining on the staff, and there will be the Jade Maidens of the Five Emperors presiding by the left and right of the staff, then he shall pray in a low voice: "The mountain of the Sun, the supreme spirit of the Primordial One, opening the heaven and expanding the earth, the sweet bamboo that communicates with the spirit, the guarding official on duty, commanding the divine soldiers. The five colors shine on red garments and golden bells, supporting the supreme purity, entering and exiting the netherworld. When the staff waves at heaven, heaven obeys, when it points at earth, the earth comes in submission. When it points at ghosts, ghosts will be exterminated, and the evil spirits would be subdued. The efficacious talisman and the divine staff can conquer a hundred places and are succeeding and living with me. After ten thousand *kalpa*, they will replace my body. The shadow will be dissolved into five [colors?], the spirit will rise up to the supreme purity, receiving the talismans and pronouncing commands that all will reverently hear." When finished praying, he should inhale the ether from five directions twenty times. Pointing at heaven with the staff, the heavenly

³⁸ *Zhengao* = *Daozang* 20:579.

gods will pay respect; pointing at earth, the Earth God will come welcome; pointing at north and east, myriads of ghosts will be subdued.³⁹

The text indicates that the priest was to imagine the coming of the Jade Maidens as representatives of the Five Emperors in helping him to pronounce the exorcistic spells and perform the necessary ritual acts. The principle of the prayer/spell is to summon the heavenly deities and officials to come and subdue the ghosts and demons on behalf of the Daoist priest. The rationale behind such principle was the belief that by performing the necessary actions such as clapping the teeth and pronouncing the names and commands, things will happen and ghosts and demons will be subdued. Such belief, therefore, can be considered as a kind of sympathetic magic in that words match and produce actions. Again, this is not an exclusively Chinese phenomenon, as similar ways of exorcism could be found across different cultures.

Some of the exorcistic spells, moreover, can be employed in a wide variety of situations. The *Jade Emperor's Supreme Method of Exorcising Ghosts and Protecting Spirits* has the following description:

If someone travels in the night and is afraid, with pounding heart and fearing mind, or when having a nightmare, or the devil is trying people and invading one's essence and interfering [with] the breath, and planning to plague people with diseases, one should immediately perform the *Jade Emperor's Method of Exorcising Ghosts and Protecting Spirits*, and one should contain the supreme Dao in the heart and ask for the help from the One Emperor. One should face the north, clap the teeth 30 times, hold breath and pray in silence. When done, clap the teeth again as before, and swallow the saliva ten times. Then evil will be destroyed, and all the demons will be subdued.... One can also recite the spell every day in a loud voice while sitting and lying at will, to stop the attack of many evils and curtail the malicious deeds of the ghosts. One can also recite the spell when sleeping, which will allow one's spirit to be at peace, without nightmares and the many venoms.⁴⁰

The method of clapping one's teeth was thought to be particularly useful for expelling ghosts and evil spirits, as stated in another text:

When traveling in the night one should often clap one's teeth, and there is no particular limit as to how many times [one should clap]. Malicious and evil ghosts always fear the sound of teeth clapping, therefore they would not attack people. If one adds to the clapping by rinsing his mouth with saliva, it will be even better for pronouncing the spell.⁴¹

³⁹ *Shangqing xiushen yaoshi jing* = *Daozang* 32:566.

⁴⁰ *Shangqing xiushen yaoshi jing* = *Daozang* 32:568.

⁴¹ *Zhengao* = *Daozang* 20:582.

The expected effect of the exorcistic spells, according to the *Taishang zhengyi zhouguijing*, was to fulfill people's wishes to do the following:

To practice the Dao, to cultivate one's self, to cure illness, to prolong life, to deliver one from disasters, to ascend to heaven in daylight, to ask for peace in the household, to ask for successful harvest, to gain profit in business, to have many slaves and servants, to be promoted to high office, to win litigation, to have longevity for men and women, to protect offspring, and to have safe pregnancy for women.⁴²

Such a list of expected benefits clearly laid out the main goal of the Daoist belief, which was to obtain happiness in life, as these wishes demonstrated.

When Lu Xiuqing was trying to reform the Daoist rituals and practices, he claimed that he had "Issued one thousand and two hundred official edicts and ten thousand talismans to attack the temples and to kill the ghosts, so that the people were cleansed and the universe was illuminated with justice, the entire world was no longer haunted by lascivious ghosts."⁴³ This claim clearly indicates just how much the Daoists relied on the performing of exorcist rituals, spells, and talismans to conduct their business and gain the confidence of the adepts. We are reminded of Zhang Daoling's legendary act of subduing thousands of ghosts before he established his Daoist regime.

It is true that the Daoists denounced those common people who employed certain exorcistic rituals and sacrifices to ward off the attack of ghosts as being vulgar and mistaken:

The Dao says, you people of latter generations are not observing the great Dao. The vulgar teachers beat the drums and, worshipping the gods, they kill pigs and dogs and chickens as three kinds of sacrifice over grass and water. They call for a hundred ghosts and worship the wild deities. This is all preposterous and wicked.⁴⁴

This paragraph points out the confrontation that the early Daoists had with the so-called popular belief: the Daoists despise those "vulgar teachers," probably local shamans, who worshipped all sorts of ghosts and spirits.⁴⁵ The problem, however, is that at the time when the Daoist religious order was developing, it was probably not clear to the common

⁴² *Taishang zhengyi zhouguijing* = *Daozang* 28:368.

⁴³ *Lu Xiansheng daomen kelue* = *Daozang* 24:779.

⁴⁴ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* = *Daozang* 6:30.

⁴⁵ For an in-depth discussion, see Kleeman 2016: 96ff.

people how the Daoist way was different from what people used to do in local practice. Thus no matter how hard the Daoist priests tried to curtail the belief in ghosts among the people, their methods of curtailing were mostly self-defeating, for they allowed the belief in the existence of ghosts in the first place. Once the existence of ghosts is admitted, there is no way to stop people from believing in the power of ghosts, evil or not. In other words, the various magnificent plans and methods to exorcise all the evil spirits provided by the Daoist priests had probably achieved the opposite goal: the confirmation that evil spirits would continue to haunt the world. For example, when the text mentions that the entire heavenly court was mobilized to fight the evil ghosts, one is uncertain if the description adds to the confidence of the believer or, not improbably, adds to the impression that the evil spirits are after all formidable opponents of the heavenly army.⁴⁶ As an old Chinese saying has it, if the Dao is one foot high, the Mara will be ten feet high. Of course, there is also the possibility that it was exactly what the Daoist masters wanted, that there were always innumerable ghosts and spirits in the world that needed to be exorcised, so that the Daoist masters will be busily employed.

As indicated before, when rituals are performed by the Daoist priests, what draws people together was not simply their wish to have a blessed life, but also the attraction of the complicated and mysterious language of the spells, the enchanting music, the splendid costumes, and the physical actions such as the “Pace of Yü” that the priests acted out. The Pace of Yü was an ancient ritual act found already in the third-century BCE text the *Daybook of Shuihudi*.⁴⁷ Its essential characteristic is for the performer to walk along a diagram of the Northern Dipper with two feet alternating walking, one foot in front of another, so that the action looks like certain exotic dance.⁴⁸ This performance had become one of the most enduring parts of the Daoist ritual until today.

⁴⁶ *Wushang sanyuan zhenzhai linglu* = *Daozang* 11:677.

⁴⁷ *Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu* 1990: 223.

⁴⁸ Ge Hong mentioned the Pace of Yü in *Baopuzi* chapter 17: “Stand upright, right foot in front, left foot behind, then move right foot forward, and left foot follows the right foot until the two feet stand together. This is one pace. Next again move the right foot forward, then move the left foot in front, then let the right foot follow the left foot until the two feet stand together. This is the second pace. Next again move the right foot forward, and let the left foot follow the right foot until the two feet stand together. This is the third pace. Such is the whole method of the Pace of Yü. Whenever one performs all sorts of rituals, one should learn the Pace of Yü and not only for this single event [i.e., the ritual for entering the mountains and crossing the streams]. Translation mine. Cf. Ware 1966: 286.

Reading separately, therefore, the spells contained in the Daoist Canon appear to be serious exorcistic texts, yet when they were pronounced in a ritual context and enhanced by the performance, they could have assumed a more entertaining role to the participating audience, thus generating more enthusiasm.⁴⁹ The public display of ritual acts was not merely a Daoist phenomenon but has been a time-honored practice in Chinese society.⁵⁰

On the other hand, however, since the text was supposed to be read to the people during ritual gatherings, it is not surprising to see that various stories, poems, and lyrics that could attract people's attention were also included in the text. A typical passage describing the carnage carried out by the evil ghosts reads as follows:

The Dao says: The great disaster is coming, as the government is not in order, people are in distress, the wind and rain do not come in time, and the five grains do not mature. People have hatched evil intentions and become rebellious. Fathers, sons and brothers will try to take advantage of each other and cause their death. Angry bandits will roam about and kill innocent people. During this time, plagues will permeate the world and there will be ninety kinds of illnesses that kill evil people. There is also the Red-headed "Ghost-Killing Ghost King," a hundred thousand feet tall, who will lead thirty-six hundred million "ghost-killing ghosts," each carrying a red club and traveling around in the world, with the special intention of taking the lives of people.⁵¹

We do not have detailed information on exactly how these texts were accessed by the adepts. It makes sense only to assume that the content of the texts was communicated at least verbally by the priests to the general adepts. In addition to such kinds of generic descriptions of the actions of ghosts, there are sometimes "real" stories to be found in the exorcistic ritual texts. In another Daoist text, the author included an elaborate fox story in order to expound the difference between the orthodox and the evil.⁵² The story was very likely an imitation of the Buddhist sutra in which proselytic stories were inserted to provide a much-needed distraction from more serious rituals and regulations.

In addition to the use of exorcistic ritual texts, which emphasize using forces external to oneself to remove the ghosts, one could also rely on the cultivation of personal hygiene and the nurturing of life:

⁴⁹ Poo 2000. ⁵⁰ Lagerwey 1987.

⁵¹ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* = *Daozang* 6:3.

⁵² *Yaoxiu keyi jiehlucuo* = *Daozang* 6:929.

The way that could allow one to last long with Dao is to nurture life. The way that could allow one to enjoy long life is to inhale ether (*qi*). When the ether is complete then life can be preserved, and the superior [life] could be nurtured. When the superior life could be nurtured, one could then unite with truth, and to ascend to the two abodes of life and ether, watching the tranquility of nurturing the complete life, and look at the myriad things as all temporal illusions, how could one not be diligent about it? When ether is complete, the evil ghosts are expelled, when life is nurtured, then all the harms can be avoided. This is to say that one can enter the battlefield and not be harmed by the weapon, and enter the mountain and not encounter tigers and beasts.⁵³

By cultivating the internal life force, or *qi*, another important trait of the Daoist belief system, one could reach immortality, therefore become invincible to all external attacks, including that of ghosts.⁵⁴ However, it seems that the methods of inner cultivation, including meditation, fasting, and physical exercise, were only suited for the privileged upper class literati for whom fear of hunger was never an issue. In other words, it could not have been a practical way to expel the attack of ghosts for the common people who needed urgent and immediate help.

Through descriptions of the origin and the image of the ghosts, and the exorcistic rituals designed to subdue them, we gain an impression that in the Daoist world ghosts were basically the enemies of human beings. Their interaction with human beings was something that people most often would rather not have. Yet they appear to people nonetheless, for reasons we have already described above: they came to avenge for the wrongs they suffered, to take care of unfinished business, to help or to haunt people, for good reasons or not. Sometimes they may even need the assistance of the living. In addition, ghosts could be seen as the agents of the celestial court to carry out justice sanctioned by the Heavenly Emperor:

Whenever people conduct evil or good deeds in their daily life, it will be known by Heaven and Earth. If someone murders a life, the god will expose his form. When one has something to express either in mind or through mouth, the ghost will hear his voice. If one made one hundred offenses, the ghost will seize his spirit; if one made one thousand offenses, the Earth will record his figure. If one commits all sorts of evil daily, there will be immediate cuffs on him. This is the retribution of *yin* and *yang*. The Heavenly Emperor issued the admonitions, and should someone take offense, the ghosts and spirits and Heaven and Earth will cast disaster on him.⁵⁵

⁵³ Zhengao = Daozang 20:525. ⁵⁴ Schipper 1993: 130–59.

⁵⁵ Chisongzi zhongjie jing = Daozang 3:445.

Here the text makes it clear that the attack of the ghosts and spirits has a legal reason, which is to carry out the punishment of Heaven on those who committed wrongdoing. Thus the ghosts would be the instrument of the divine will of the Heavenly Emperor. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that such an idea might have given the existence of ghosts a legitimate reason, and that human morality, at least that which concerns outward behavior, could be sanctioned by the existence of ghosts. This might sound incompatible with the idea that some evil spirits and ghosts were acting on their own initiative regardless of the moral character of their victims, yet both ideas obviously could be accepted by the believers. Either way, ghosts and spirits should best be curtailed by all sorts of exorcistic rituals and spells.

In addition to these, of course, the Daoist masters could also prescribe medications to the people who were infested by ghosts. One of the terminologies for indicating such kinds of illness caused by ghosts was *guizhu* (鬼注), or “infected by ghosts.” Evidence of such belief and actions was found already in some Han Dynasty tombs where spells for exorcism and *materia medica* such as cinnabar coexisted.⁵⁶ Ge Hong’s *Baopuzi*, while elaborating on various exorcistic rituals, as mentioned above, also recorded a number of medical recipes to cure diseases caused by ghosts. His medical work, the *Zhouhou beijifang* (肘後備急方), or *Recipes at Hand for Emergencies*, contains a number of recipes for curing diseases caused by the attack of ghosts.⁵⁷ While here is not the place to launch a more in-depth discussion of the Daoist medicine, one should note that in the long history of Chinese medicine, the Daoists’ contribution was an important chapter that has fascinated generations of scholars of religion as well as medicine.⁵⁸

5.4 NEW GHOSTS OR OLD?

The question that confronts us now is whether there is any difference between the ghosts in pre-Daoist Chinese society and what we have seen in the Daoist texts. In terms of the origin of ghosts, the Daoist texts reveal to us a new development of people’s imagination of the different types and shapes of ghosts that are far beyond what we have seen in earlier texts

⁵⁶ A detailed discussion of *guizhu* can be found in Zhang and Bai 2006: 3–52; for medicine found in tombs, see Zhang and Bai 2006: 244–45.

⁵⁷ *Zhouhou beijifang* 1955: 8–15.

⁵⁸ See Strickmann 2002. For a general introduction to Chinese medicine, see Sivin 2000.

or representations. The actions of the ghosts, such as to revenge for the wrongs that they suffered while alive, to punish people because of what they had done, or for no obvious reasons, were not new in principle because we have seen them all in the previous period and in the *Anomaly Tales*. But the scale of the actions and the number of the ghosts described in the Daoist texts are again unseen in the earlier period. What, then, is the historical significance of such a phenomenon? What kind of messages do they carry? And what is the cultural background or foundation of the messages?

One could take several angles to consider these questions. The socio-political disaster after the fall of the Han is certainly one major factor that affected the lives of millions of people, and thus fostered the narratives about large-scale disasters such as wars and plagues that reduced the population drastically. Historical and literary texts of the period between the third and sixth centuries show the devastating result of these disasters.⁵⁹ The horror of mass extinction brought about by wars and diseases could easily have become the raw material for the authors to compose the kind of early Daoist texts mentioned above. The description of the actions of millions of ghosts who slaughtered their way through the land, therefore, could have been based on or inspired by the historical reality of the time. The extravagant list of the names of ghosts, moreover, was most likely not created out of someone's wild imagination only to impress the readers, but was probably based on the incredible devastation that society as a whole had experienced. It vividly portrays a society torn and destroyed by wars and diseases, as almost all things under Heaven had become ghosts, because they all suffered. Not only did human beings suffer atrocious fates, but all physical objects – such as official residences, travel lodges, army camps, ceiling beams, horses, carriages, roads, wells, stoves, ponds, and marshes – were destroyed and became ghosts. The ghosts in the earlier sources were individuals who expressed their own grievances, who wanted their own revenge, or who were taking care of their own unfinished business. The ghosts in the Daoist texts, however, represented not individuals but the grievances, grief, pain, and fear of the entire society. The appearance of such texts, therefore, represented the collective need of reconciliation and yearning to grapple with the horrible reality. Unlike the earlier ghosts, who were a small part of the belief system, the ghosts of the Daoist texts seemed to have dominated the belief

⁵⁹ Lin Fu-shih 1995.

system so to have shaped a new cosmology. The idea of a large number of ghosts roaming the world thus gained a place in the religious imagination of the people, which could have paved the foundation for the ghost festival of the medieval period.⁶⁰ Of course, for the Daoist belief, to contain the activities of the ghosts so that people could be protected is always one of the main objectives. By placing the phenomenon of ghosts in a structured and regulated cosmological system, which we have witnessed in the Daoist texts, there is the hope of having control over them. In fact, the Daoist cosmology, with a heavenly court presided over by the Jade Emperor or the Three Pure Ones and any number of heavenly officials, commanding generals, and soldiers to fight the myriads of evil ghosts, leads one to see it as an imitation, albeit not literally, of the human political structure. This “imperial metaphor,” to borrow the expression of Stephan Feuchtwang,⁶¹ was of course not invented by the Daoists, as the origin of such an idea could be found even in the *Zuozhuan*, in the story of the Duke of Jin and an avenging ghost mentioned in [Chapter 2](#). In the story the giant devilish ghost said to the Duke, “You have unjustly killed my grandson, and I have presented my request to the Emperor.”⁶² The request was of course to seek justice, which was indeed granted. The Emperor here probably refers to the Heavenly Emperor, whose origin could be traced back even to the Shang oracle bone inscriptions,⁶³ which of course implies that in the world of demons and ghosts there was a hierarchical order consisting of the Heavenly Emperor and the rest of the bureaucracy. There was also the netherworld bureaucracy, under which the residents of the netherworld would have to live, which could be seen most clearly in the Han funerary texts.⁶⁴ Thus we see a long tradition in Chinese history to construct a heavenly court or netherworld bureaucracy to preside over all the deceased souls in the hope that they would be subject to the control of such an order. The new development of the Daoist belief, then, is the importance of controlling ghosts in the belief system. In many texts contained in the Daoist Canon, the subduing of ghosts and demons is mentioned as one of the main functions of the text. This emphasis on the controlling of ghosts was unseen in the previous eras, not that ghosts were not important in people’s mind. Meanwhile, we also noticed a certain affinity between Daoist texts and Buddhist texts, especially those later categorized as the *Lingbao* (*Numinous Treasure*) texts.⁶⁵ The descriptions of ghosts in some Daoist texts were obviously

⁶⁰ Teiser 1988. ⁶¹ Feuchtwang 2001. ⁶² *Zuozhuan*, Duke Cheng, year 10.

⁶³ Eno 2009. ⁶⁴ Cedzich 1993; Poo 2017b. ⁶⁵ Bokenkamp 1997.

influenced by the style of Buddhist texts. On the other hand, it is also a fact that medieval Chinese Buddhists tried to incorporate Daoist texts into the Buddhist corpus. Thus both Daoists and Buddhists borrowed and copied and, in the modern parlance, plagiarized from each other.⁶⁶ It would be necessary, therefore, to examine the description of ghosts in the Buddhist tradition, at least in its earlier period, to complete our portrait of the ghosts in early China.

⁶⁶ Mollier 2008.

The Taming of Ghosts in Early Chinese Buddhism

Tanwuchan once told Mengxun: “There are ghosts coming into the settlement, and disasters and plagues are due to occur.... It is better that we should purify ourselves and fast and use divine spells to expel them.” Then he recited the spells for three days and told Mengxun: “The ghosts are gone.” At the time, people at the border saw ghosts and reported that a few hundred plague ghosts scurried away from the district.¹

The presence of Buddhism in China has by now been regarded as a natural component of Chinese society. Yet the cultural landscape of China would be vastly different had Buddhism not entered China at a crucial time when Chinese society was in a great turmoil and transition with the end of the Eastern Han. There was nothing then to ensure a smooth passage for Buddhism to occupy a position in Chinese society. How Buddhism established itself in China, therefore, has long been a subject of scholarly discussion.² Although the earliest reference to Buddhist activities in China could be traced back to the first century CE, the more reliable records of some of the earliest activities of Buddhist monks could only be confirmed as to have come from the late second century.³ This new religion not only challenged and transformed the cosmological assumptions and philosophical reflections on human nature, the foundation of morality, the purpose of life, and so on that Chinese intellectuals had been operating with for centuries; it also gradually infiltrated the entire society and nurtured the growth of a new type of population that consisted of a

¹ *Gaosengzhuan*, T 50, no. 2059, p. 336.

² For a latest effort, see Poo et al. 2017. This chapter is based largely on Poo 2017a.

³ See Ch'en 1973: chapter 31; Zürcher 2007: chapter 2.

community of professional religious specialists and their followers who provided them with material support and legal protection. Some of the followers were from the elite ruling class who might have been converted to the new faith for its philosophical sophistication and its potential for enhancing a useful ruling ideology; some were from the common people who were attracted to it by its message of salvation. To be sure, this was a gradual process, and piecemeal at best.⁴ In the long run, indeed, some Buddhist concepts, parlance, and customs were fused into Chinese mentality, language, literature, and art. One could say, benefiting from hindsight, that Buddhism had finally become an organic and inseparable part of the ever-changing Chinese culture.

However, this does not mean that Buddhism assumed a dominating position in Chinese culture, in comparison with Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, for example. There was no guarantee at the end of the third century CE that the Chinese people would have unconditionally accepted Buddhist teachings and given up the life that they were familiar with. In fact, never at any given moment did the entire Chinese society “convert” to Buddhism even when the rulers declared their own devotion to the faith. For a long period of time, even several hundred years after it had been accepted or, better put, had established a foothold in China, the teaching and practice of Buddhism – an Indian religion that grew out of a very different soil – were resisted by the majority of the Chinese, intellectuals as well as commoners, as fundamentally foreign to their mindset, as something that had denied the basis of their cultural identity represented by such elements as correlative cosmology, reverence of Heaven and Earth, ancestor worship, family and social ethics based on Confucian ideals, and the authority of the imperial government over people’s lives. To give up these seemed tantamount to abandoning the identity of being Chinese. The resistance sometimes even became outright persecution. Monasteries were closed; monks were forced to return to secular life. Some of these misgivings toward Buddhism persisted even into the modern day. This had to do, among other reasons, with the nature of the Chinese state. If we follow the argument to see the Chinese state as a form of religious regime,⁵ since the emperor is pronounced the “Son of Heaven,” an inherent conflict or competition for power would inevitably ensue between the state and the religious groups, even if the ruler declared his affiliation with a certain belief, Buddhist or otherwise. Thus the issue is far more complicated than simple resistance and reception.

⁴ Campamy 2017.

⁵ See Lagerwey 2010.

On the other hand, however, if one could be allowed to speculate a little, the Buddhist masters probably would not want to see a society filled with monks and without common people who would be the main supporters of the livelihood of the monks. There was clearly a symbiotic relationship between the Buddhists (or the Daoists, for that matter) and the people that they tried to convert. Complete conversion, even it is possible, should not be the goal of the early propagators of Buddhism. In any case, when Buddhism first entered China, it was most likely as the practicing faith of certain merchants from the Western Regions, that is, Central Asia. A conscious introduction of Buddhism to the Chinese people was probably not the first intention of those merchants whose purpose was doing business rather than spreading religious tenets. As these earliest Buddhists came into contact with and even settled down among the Chinese population, they created opportunities for the Chinese to become familiar with their foreign behavior and their faith, and for themselves and their families to learn the Chinese way of thinking. A number of famous monks in this early stage were descendants of Central Asian merchants who settled in China.

Thus when Buddhist monks – some from Central Asia or India, some descendants of Central Asian merchants, or some Chinese converts – began to actively introduce Buddhism into China, they were definitely not the first Buddhists to have come to China, and they surely must have had certain knowledge of the main features of the Chinese cultural tradition. However, it is unlikely that they possessed anything like a unified theology or tenet that could define what “Buddhism” was. There was no unified church, so to speak, for the early Buddhists advocates to rely on. Thus the incursion of Buddhist ideas into China could only be described as piecemeal, as each propagator would have to fight his own battle in the task of communicating and persuasion. Simply put, the major tasks that lay before most of them were two-fold. First, they needed to win over the attention of the elite/literati class, including the rulers. They understood that to gain goodwill and support from the ruling elites was vital for them to take root in Chinese society. For this, they utilized the indigenous conceptions to interpret the tenets of their belief, to translate their texts, and even to argue with Chinese intellectuals using Chinese terminologies to propagate Buddhism.⁶ Second, the Buddhist monks also

⁶ This has been extensively studied. See Zürcher 2007: chapter 2. The documents of their discussions and debates with Chinese literati are collected in the *Hongmingji* and *Guang hongmingji*.

needed to confront those popular beliefs in society that people were engaged in or accustomed to, and to show how they, the Buddhist monks, could provide people with reliable services, to expel evil spirits and ghosts from their lives, and to ensure a happy future, whether in this world or in the netherworld. Early Buddhist texts, therefore, abound with references to popular religious activities, including the worshipping of ghosts and spirits. This is best illustrated by the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳), compiled by Huijiao (慧皎, 497–554 CE) of the Liang Dynasty. Many stories recorded in the *Biographies* portrayed the monks as having special talents or power to exorcize ghosts.⁷ Additionally, a number of the *Anomaly Tales* (*zhiguai*) of the Six Dynasties period, obviously written or compiled by Buddhist believers or sympathizers, utilized ghost stories as a means to show the magic power of Buddhist monks.⁸ The Tang Dynasty encyclopedic text *Fayuan zhulin* (法苑珠林) contains a large number of ghost stories, many of which are excerpts from the Six Dynasty *Anomaly Tales* that were aimed at propagating Buddhist teachings.⁹ It is this second aspect of the Buddhist effort, that is, their dealing with the Chinese traditional conceptions of ghosts and belief in the validity of exorcistic rituals, to which this chapter is devoted.

6.1 THE TERM *GUI*, OR GHOST, IN EARLY BUDDHIST TEXTS

When we talk about the concept of ghost in early China, we are already confronting a problem of translation. The usual equation of the English term “ghost” (and other related terms such as phantom, apparition, or spirit) and the Chinese term *gui* (鬼), as we have tried to demonstrate in Chapter 1, was not without some problem, as “ghost” – in the Western world – usually refers to the spirits of the dead human beings, whereas *gui* in the Chinese linguistic context could include the spirits of both human and nonhuman beings. Thus when the translators of the early Buddhist texts rendered some Sanskrit terms of spiritual beings, of both benevolent and malicious nature, using the same character *gui*, it inherited the

⁷ See Poo 1995; Kieschnick 1997: 107–9.

⁸ Texts such as *Zaguishen zhiguai* 雜鬼神志怪, *Xuanyanji* 宣驗記, *Mingxiangji* 冥祥記, and *Jingyiji* 旌異記 can be found in Lu Xun 1986. See Campany 2012.

⁹ Teiser 1985. *Fayuan zhulin* was compiled by the monk Daoshi, from 659 to 668. See particularly *juan* 31 and 32.

ambiguities of the term that could have some effect on the readers' understanding of the Chinese Buddhist sutras.

In the Chinese Buddhist sutras the term *gui* is used to denote various beings: dead humans and various kinds of demons with such original Sanskrit terms as *yakṣa* (spirits of the dead who fly swiftly, or demons who devour humans), *rākṣasa* (a kind of man-eating demon), or *vitāla* (a demon that resides in a dead body to make it rise). Without having to explain laboriously the original meanings of these spiritual beings, sometimes their names were transliterated using Chinese characters and added a *gui* to show that they were hostile or spiritual in nature. Thus the term *yakṣa* was transliterated as *yiecha-gui* (夜叉鬼, 閼叉鬼). *Rākṣasa* was transliterated as *luosha-gui* 羅刹鬼, while *vitāla* was transliterated as *bituoluo* 毘陀羅 or *qishi-gui* 起尸鬼. Alternatively, the term *yakṣa* could also be rendered as *yiecha guishen* (夜叉鬼神, 閼叉鬼神), in which the meaning of *guishen* is the same as *gui*, that is, ghost/spirit, of either nonhuman or human origins. Apparently, the translator of these terms followed the Chinese usage of *gui* = *guishen* to denote spiritual beings. For our discussion, to translate *gui* simply as demon may cause more confusion than necessary.¹⁰

For example, in a passage found in one of the earliest translated sutras, the *Daoxing banrojing* (道行般若經), the term *guishen* obviously refers to the harmful ghosts. The method to drive away these ghosts was to apply the magical mani-bead:

There is nothing better than having this precious thing. If one takes it, wherever one places it, ghosts (*guishen*) would be inconvenienced, and one will not be harmed by ghosts (*guishen*). If man and woman take the mani-beads and wear it, ghosts will immediately run away.¹¹

On the other hand, spirits of heaven, which usually would be called “gods” or *shen* in Chinese, could also be rendered as “*guishen*” in the Chinese sutras. The sutras often mention the Eight Kinds of Beings (*babuzhong*; 八部眾, Sanskrit *aṣṭa-gatyaḥ*, *aṣṭauparśadaḥ*) as *tianlong guishen* (天龍鬼神), thus clearly the term *guishen* here refers to all the spiritual beings, that is, gods, dragons, *yakṣa*, the hungry ghosts (*preta*), and so forth, without necessarily carrying any evil connotations. There are numerous terms that are translated with the word *guishen* attached to the transliterations. Some of these, such as *gandhara* (乾陀羅鬼神, a demigod), *mahoraga* (摩睺勒鬼神, a great serpent-demon), *kimnara*

¹⁰ See Strickmann 2002: 58ff.

¹¹ T 8, no. 224, pp. 435c–436a.

demon (甄陀羅鬼神, a half-horse, half-human demon), are actually various mythical demigods or demons that are not exactly “human ghosts,” and some of them could more or less be compared to the Chinese concepts of *wu-guai* (物怪) and *mei* (魅), that is, spirits of the natural world.¹²

By and large in most cases the use of the terms *gui* or *guishen* in Chinese sutras could refer to either malicious or benevolent spirits; thus it would not be too far off the mark to say that the terms *guilguishen* mainly signify spiritual beings, without denoting the inherent nature of such beings. Whether such a being is malicious or not, therefore, depends on the context in which it appears. This is in agreement with the Chinese idea of spiritual beings, as has been discussed above in Chapter 2.

In some of the early sutras, such as *Banzhou sanmei jing* (般舟三昧經), the authors employed conceptions that were in tune with traditional Chinese, in particular, Confucian social ethics, and warned the reader not to worship ghosts and spirits: “You should not serve the other cults, not pay homage to heaven, not make offering to ghosts and spirits (*guishen*), not look for auspicious days, not fornicate, not act lewd and have lascivious thoughts, not possess a covetous mind.”¹³

It should be clear that the *guishen* mentioned in this context refers to the malicious ghosts and spirits only, since there are plenty of other examples in which *guishen* are positive beings.

An interesting case, in the *Za piyujing* (雜譬喻經), involving the alternating use of the terms of *gui* and *shen* for a same spiritual being, shows that the Buddhist writer could choose to use the two terms to suit different situations in a story:

In the former time, a hundred years after the Buddha entered nirvana, there was King Asoka who was fond of the teachings of Buddha. In his country there were twenty thousand monks and the king always provided for them. Thus those ninety-six kinds of non-believers became jealous and sought to destroy the teaching of the Buddha. They gathered together and tried to devise a way to do it. One among them was capable of magical transformation. He said to the people: “I shall change into the form of an evil ghost. When the monks hear this, they will certainly escape. When they know their deficiency, they will certainly come to follow our way.” The god (*shen*) that these other cults worshipped was called Mahēśvara (king of the devas), with one head, four faces, and eight arms, the most fearsome of the ghosts. The Brahman thus changed to this form, and led over two hundred ugly ghosts and roamed about in the city. As they approached the gate of

¹² For discussions of the concepts of *wu* and *guai*, see Liu Zhongyu 1997; Du Zhengsheng 2001. For the idea of *mei*, see Lin Fu-shih 2005. More general treatments include Wu Kang 1992; Liu Zhongyu 1997.

¹³ T 13, no. 417, p. 901b.

the royal palace, everyone in the city was terrified. The king went out to meet the great fearsome ghost (*gui*), bowed and asked, saying: “May I ask what you, the great god (*shen*), wish?” The ghost (*gui*) said to the king: “I wish to eat people.” The king said: “You may not.” The ghost said: “If you care about the people, give me those in the country that are not useful to you to eat.” The king said, “There are none.” The ghost said: “Those monks who did not farm, did not join the army, and did not obey the king, these are the useless people, and you can give them to me to eat.”¹⁴

It is significant that the king used the expression “great god/*shen*” to refer to the “great fearsome ghost/*gui*,” which could be interpreted as indicating the king’s wish to be courteous and to pacify the ghost. The assumption behind this expression, then, would be that a ghost was considered as a spiritual being that, under certain circumstances, could also be called a “god.” We do not know the wording of the original Sanskrit, but the interchangeable use of *gui* and *shen* here could have been a deliberate choice made by the translator. It seems that the translator agreed with the idea that there was no basic difference between the nature of ghost and god; the only difference is the power that they possessed. A *shen*-god would be more powerful than a ghost. In other words, for a Chinese reader, the interchangeable use of *gui* and *shen* in this story should be quite familiar and acceptable. In this way, the translated Buddhist sutra found certain connection with native Chinese conceptions that could have helped the acceptance of the sutra.

One of the most often-mentioned human ghost in the Buddhist sutras are the hungry ghosts (*preta*), that is, those people who received punishment in Hell for their wanton and greedy behavior when alive. The various evil or wrong behaviors for a person to become a hungry ghost are given in many occasions in the sutras, as this was one of the most important messages that the Buddhist monks wished to convey to the common people. One good example is the *Foshuo guiwen mulian jing* (佛說鬼問目連經), one of the earlier Buddhist texts translated into Chinese by the famous Parthian monk An Shigao (安世高, c. late second century CE). In the text the bodhisattva Mulian explains the reasons why a person would become a hungry ghost after death. As a punishment for wrongdoing, a person would be reborn as a hungry ghost and suffer all kinds of pain in Hell (*diyu* 地獄).¹⁵ The wrongdoings are mostly concrete actions or thoughts; a couple of examples suffice to illustrate the general tone:

¹⁴ T 4, no. 205, p. 502a.

¹⁵ The concept of Hell (*naraka*, *niraya*) in Buddhism is usually translated as *diyu* 地獄 in Chinese, literally “underground prison.” See Braarvig 2009.

One ghost asks: "I have always had a headache, what crime have I committed?" Mulian answers: "When you were still a human, you enjoyed beating people's head with a stick. Now you have received the fruit of retribution, and resulted in Hell." One ghost asks: "I have abundant wealth but still love to wear rags, what crime have I committed?" Mulian answers: "When you were still a human, you gave alimony to the poor as a show-off, and afterward you regretted it. Now you have received the flower of retribution, and resulted in Hell."¹⁶

The hungry ghost, therefore, is a general term that refers to a large number of ghosts who fell into the miserable condition for the various wrongdoings that they committed, and suffered from different kinds of miseries and hardships. Being eternally in a state of hunger was but one of the sufferings that some had to endure.

However, when the term *preta* was translated as *egui*, or hungry ghost, in Chinese, it was not an invention but an adoption of a concept that had already existed in China long before the coming of Buddhism. As early as the third century BCE, the term *egui* had already been listed as one of the common ghosts that could appear to people. In the "Inquiry" chapter in the *Daybook* mentioned previously, there is the following passage: "If a ghost always holds a bamboo rice basket and enters into people's house, saying, 'Give me food!' – this is the hungry ghost (*egui* 餓鬼). Throw a shoe at it, then it will desist."¹⁷ This indicates the idea that when a person died of hunger, they could become a hungry ghost, constantly asking for food. Yet a distinctive difference between this hungry ghost and the hungry ghost in the Buddhist sutras is its origin. As a contrast to the Buddhist hungry ghost who falls into that condition because of crimes (being greedy, gluttonous, rapacious, etc.) that the person committed on earth, the hungry ghost in the *Daybook* originates from a person who did not commit any crimes or moral deficiencies but because the person was hungry and died of hunger. The Buddhist hungry ghost is a punishment for the sinner; the *Daybook* hungry ghost is a reflection of the condition of the ghost before the person died. In combination with what we have seen in the previous chapters, and will be discussing further below, here is evidence to support the view that before the onslaught of Buddhism, the Chinese popular conception of the origin of ghosts was not necessarily related to any strong moral or ethical values.

It should also be noted that the term *gui* was not the only term used by the translators of sutras to render the human ghosts or spiritual beings.

¹⁶ T 17, no. 734, p. 535.

¹⁷ Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990: 214. See Poo 1998: 80.

I refer to the term *hun*/soul (魂), which is often used to denote the ghost of a deceased human being. In the *Foshuo yanluowang wutian shizhe jing* (佛說閻羅王五天使者經), translated by Hui Jian of the Song Dynasty (421–479 CE), the Buddha says: “I have seen that when people die, their *hun*/soul will leave the body.”¹⁸ Theoretically, when this *hun*-soul falls into Hell because of its own wrongdoing while alive, it could become one of the hungry ghosts who were condemned to suffer in Hell. As the *Foshuo jianwang jing* (佛說諫王經) has it:

The Buddha told the king: “The king should rule with justice and not to deviate from propriety, and often show compassion and nourish the people, so that he could rule with authority. Those who could become king are all due to their good deed in the previous life, and when they deal with the affairs of the people they should not be partial. When officials and subjects as well as common people all have complaints, and the king’s rule is unjust so that the world is full of anger, when he dies his ghost (*hunshen* 魂神) will surely enter Hell at Mount Tai, and it would be too late to regret. When the king rules the country with justice and propriety, the subjects and people with praise his virtue and the four seas with one heart, the *tianlong guishen* all heard the benevolent deeds of the king. When he dies he shall go up to heaven, and shall have no regret.”¹⁹

Several interesting points should be noted in this paragraph. The translation appears to have employed traditional Confucian persuasion in Buddha’s advice to the king. The Hell that the king will go to, should he fail as a good ruler, was located at Mount Tai, known to the Chinese since the Han as a place where the ghosts of deceased people would gather.²⁰ This again would be the adaptation or interpolation of the Chinese translator, for the original Indian sutra could not possibly have contained this tradition. Moreover, the term soul/spirit (*hunshen*) is used to denote the ghost of the dead human being, as a contrast to the *tianlong guishen*, the spiritual beings. This seems to suggest that for the translator, it was *hun* that was the equivalent of human ghost, while *tianlong guishen* was a term that referred to spiritual beings in general. From the contexts in which the term *hunshen* appears, one could also observe that it refers to the immaterial soul of the deceased that did not seem to have the malicious intentions or abilities that *gui*-ghosts would have. For example, a passage in *Foshuo anan sishi jing* (佛說阿難四事經) has the following:

¹⁸ T 1, no. 43.

¹⁹ T 14, no. 514, p. 785, translated by Juqu Jingshen 沮渠京聲 of the Song (320–479) Dynasty.

²⁰ For Mount Tai, in addition to the classic study of Chavannes 1910; Sakai Tadaō 1937; see Liu Tseng-gui 1997.

“When a person was first born, the soul (*hunshen*) came as a void, and relied on the ether of the passion of the parents to form their own body... At the end of life, the soul (*hunshen*) does not extinguish, but seeks for another life.”²¹

In other words, the term *hun* seems to be a neutral designation of the state of postmortem existence of a person, while the use of *gui* would most likely associate the ghost with certain actions or intentions that could affect the living.

Because the ghosts and demons in the original Sanskrit all have their meanings, mere transliteration might not be enough to produce the effect that sometimes was needed for the text. In addition to the most common *preta*, or *egui* (餓鬼) in Chinese translation, many more were also given meaningful Chinese names. These translations, similar to the Hungry Ghost, represent various special qualities or abilities, for evil or for good. To give a few examples, there were “ghost of exorcism (厭禱鬼, a rendering of *vitāla*),” “stinking ghost (奇臭鬼 *kaṭapūtana*),” “malevolent ghost (厲鬼),” “swift ghost (捷疾鬼, another rendering of *yakṣa*),” or “devourer of energy (食精氣鬼, *ojohāra* or *ojāhāra*),” and so forth. Without exhausting all the examples, suffice it to say that, in the Chinese sutras, the translators rendered the Indian ideas of ghosts, deities, spirits, or demons either by using the terms *gui* and *guishen* or by transliterating the terms using Chinese characters as phonetic signs. Sometimes the transliterated terms are attached with *gui* or *guishen* to remind the reader of the nature of these beings. The sutras, as is well known, were translated into Chinese by various translators, some foreign monks, some Chinese, often collaborating, and over a long period time. This explains the unsystematic way that terminologies were translated or rendered into Chinese script. In the end, however, the collected effect of these translations regarding the rendering of ghosts and spirits produced two effects that the translators might not have foreseen. On the one hand, their use of the Chinese terms such as *gui*, *shen*, and *hun* might have allowed readers to have certain sense of familiarity and thus connection with the new belief system; on the other hand, the use of transliteration for the names of the ghosts and spirits retains a certain exotic and mysterious aura that, similar to the various spells transliterated into Chinese texts, could have created a sense of awe and respect for the sutras. Eventually, these terms, such as the *egui* (*preta*), the

²¹ T 14, no. 493.

yiecha (*yakṣa*), or *losha* (*rākṣasa*), would become part of the Chinese terminology of daily use.

6.2 THE TAMING OF GHOSTS IN EARLY BUDDHISM

Having gone through the translation problems related to the conception of ghost/*gui* in the Buddhist sutras, we can see that the sutras that were introduced into the Chinese world contained some new elements; the purpose, if one may make a very general observation, was to inform readers that all the malicious ghosts or demons could be controlled by the power of the Buddhist faith, as manifested in the many kinds of devotional activities. These abilities to control or to tame the ghosts was for the Buddhist propagators one of their justifications to enter into Chinese society and compete for legitimacy in the religious life of the people. For this purpose, texts outside the sutras written in Chinese by Chinese authors propagating Buddhism also carried out some important functions in pushing for the acceptance of Buddhism in society. Because these texts were not sutras that were limited to the inner circle of the adepts and monks, they could circulate more widely in society and among the literary circles of the educated, who might not be affiliated with Buddhism. The long-term effect would be for the general educated public to have more contact with the activities of the Buddhist monks, through stories and anecdotes. Eventually, the messages carried by these writings would be absorbed by even larger populations as the process of collecting, telling, and circulating of stories formed a reciprocal circle in society.

In the process, of course, Buddhist ideas would come across indigenous beliefs such as Daoism or other folk cults, and resulted in mutual influencing and borrowing, and even competition or confrontation. It can be seen that when it comes to asking which faith is more powerful, concrete results would have to be provided to demonstrate the power of these faiths and to convince the people that one is greater than the other. It is from the various proselytic texts that we could deduce the Buddhist ways to expel ghosts and demons employed by the monks when they came into contact with the Chinese people. These ways could basically be divided into several kinds: (1) worshipping the Buddha and Bodhisattvas by calling their names, reciting the sutras, or reciting exorcistic spells contained in the sutras, (2) using sacred objects or performing some rituals, and (3) monks with deep wisdom and mastery of the Dharma could become the incarnation of the power of Buddha himself and could expel

the evil ghosts by their presence. All these had to be tested and proven effective to the people. Besides by word of mouth, the way to spread the message was by circulating stories and producing texts containing those stories for all social levels. The proselytizing intention of the texts should be recognized.

Calling Names and Reciting Sutras

It needs no elaboration that repeating the names of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas was the most common form of devotional acts of Chinese Buddhism. To give an example, one of the most important Chinese Buddhist texts, the Lotus Sutra (*Fahua jing* 法華經) assures the readers that by the power of Avalokitesvara, the omnipresence of ghosts and demons will be curtailed:

As for all the ghosts and spirits of the three thousand worlds and those evil demons who wish to harm people, if one concentrates on calling the name of Avalokitesvara, they will naturally be subdued and cannot make wanton offence. Malevolent intension will not rise, and there shall be no evil perspective.²²

As for exorcistic acts mentioned in early Buddhist texts, spell casting appears to be a well-established practice in early Buddhism.²³ The famous monk Fotucheng (佛圖澄, d. 348) was known to be able to recite spells and control ghosts and spirits.²⁴ Another monk, Dharmarakṣa (Tanwuchan 曇無讖, Dharmakṣema, 385–433 CE), was also described as having an extraordinary ability to exorcise ghosts:

Tanwuchan once told Mengxun: “There are ghosts coming into the settlement, and disasters and plagues are due to occur... It is better that we should purify ourselves and fast and use divine spells (*shenzhou* 神咒) to expel them.” Then he recited the spells for three days and told Mengxun: “The ghosts are gone.” At the time, people at the border saw ghosts and reported that a few hundred plague ghosts scurried away from the district.²⁵

The ubiquitous *jie* 偈 (Sanskrit *gatha*), or rhymed chants in Buddhist texts, although a vehicle to convey Buddhist teachings, were often employed as exorcistic spells. Otherwise, Buddhist scriptures in general were often regarded as having magical power, and could be used as a tool to exorcise ghosts and spirits.²⁶

²² T 9, no. 263, p. 128. ²³ Kieschnick 1997: 84–87.

²⁴ *Gaosengzhuan*, T 50, no. 2059, p. 383. ²⁵ *Gaosengzhuan*, T 50, no. 2059, p. 336.

²⁶ Kieschnick 1997: 90–92.

Using Sacred Objects and Performing Rituals

In addition to recitation of names and sutras, there are also more material ways to achieve similar goals. To make oneself clean, for example, is efficacious in preventing the attack of the ghosts and spirits.²⁷ One can also rely on certain sacred objects that could deter the encroachment of ghosts and spirits: “If a man or a woman takes the Mani-bead and wears it, ghosts and spirits will immediately run away. If one is hit by fever, take the Mani-bead and wears it, the fever will be gone immediately.”²⁸ The function of the Mani beads is much like the recitation beads that could “eliminate the obstacles of affliction and bad karmic consequences,” as described in an early Buddhist sutra.²⁹

Monks as Incarnation of Dharma

Moreover, monks with a high caliber of learning could expel the malicious ghosts merely by their appearance without even casting a spell:

Lady Liu, the wife of Xiao Sihua, was sick and often saw ghosts coming to haunt her. At the time, they happened to invite the monk Zhiyan to give a lecture on the Dharma. As soon as Zhiyan arrived at the outer hall, Lady Liu saw a flock of ghosts scurry away.³⁰

The monks themselves, moreover, were thought to possess exorcistic power, as the ability to recite sutras and to cast spells was internalized and became part of the essence of a monk. Thus, by the mere presence of a well-revered monk, the ghosts would be deterred and would retreat from the wrongdoings they were conducting. A story about a monk Falang (法朗, c. second half of the sixth century) illustrates this quite vividly:

A nun was possessed by a ghost, and became exceedingly enlightened and wise, and propagated the sutras with superior explanation. All marveled at her brilliant intelligence. When Falang heard about this, he said: “This is an evil ghost imposed on the nun, what authentic teaching could there be? One should examine this later.” On another day, in the morning, Falang came to the lecture hall, and the nun was still giving lectures. Falang therefore scolded loudly, saying, “Little maid! Now I have come, why don’t you come off the seat?” As soon as the nun heard his voice, she scurried off the seat and stood in front of Falang without moving from morning till dusk, in silence, her sweat dripped to the ground. When she heard Falang’s exposition of the sutras, she was like a deaf person, and only returned to her original self after a hundred days.³¹

²⁷ T 8, no. 224, p. 435c. ²⁸ T 8, no. 224, p. 435c. ²⁹ Kieschnick 2003: 118ff.

³⁰ *Gaosengzhuan* = T 50, no. 2059, p. 339b. ³¹ T 50, no. 2064, p. 981.

The fact that the possessed nun was first thought to be a wise and enlightened Buddhist indicates that people around her did not know how to distinguish the “true way” from the “devious way.” The intended purpose of the story, presumably, was to demonstrate that the power of Falang, a true possessor of the wisdom of Buddhist Dharma, was superior to that of the false ghost. The unintended effect of the story, however, shows that when Buddhism was making its way into Chinese society, it was not always clear to the common people what the “true way” should have been. In a way, this story symbolizes the difficulties that Buddhism encountered in the process of its incursion into China. One success story might have been the result of many failed attempts.

6.3 COMPETITION WITH INDIGENOUS BELIEF SYSTEMS

Thus when early Buddhist monks tried to gain their acceptance in Chinese communities, it was not enough simply to demonstrate their ability to exorcise ghosts and evil spirits. They also needed to show that their power was stronger than that of the indigenous cults, including Daoism. Take the story of the monk Daoxian (道仙, c. late fifth to early sixth century CE), for example:

Once there was a drought, and people implored for help. Daoxian thus went to the cave of dragons and knocked on the door with his staff, and blamed the dragons, saying: “Why do you folks indulge in sleeping in such a manner?” Immediately after he spoke, dark clouds gathered and heavy rain poured down. As people were relieved by the rain they all came and offered prayers and sacrifices, and revered him as if he were a heavenly deity.³²

The story shows that not only could the monk control the local spirits (the dragons), but he also utilized the indigenous cults to promote his reputation. That is to say, to gain faith from the people, the monks needed to allow those devious spirits to exist and even to cooperate with them. For the local people, one cannot say that they had abandoned their belief in the power of the dragons to produce rain, but they recognized the fact that the monks had even stronger power to command the dragons.

Sometimes direct competition and confrontation between the monks and the Daoists were necessary parts of the stories in order to demonstrate the power of Buddhism. In the biography of Huisi (慧思), who lived during the southern Chen Dynasty (557–589 CE), it is said that he was

³² T 50, no. 2064, p. 977.

famous for his learning of the Dharma, thus local Daoist priests were jealous of his success among the people. They secretly accused Huisi to the emperor, saying that he was a monk from the northern Qi Dynasty, the enemy state to the north, and thus was conspiring against the Chen Dynasty. Yet the magical power that Huisi demonstrated was enough for the Chen emperor to be totally convinced of his integrity, which also eventually caused the demise of Daoist priests.³³ Of course, we do not need to believe the story to be true to realize that the competition between Buddhists and Daoists was real and could be quite vicious.

In addition to what the Buddhists themselves wrote, in the sutras and biographies, about the power of the monks to deal with ghosts and spirits, there is also a wealth of literary works, mostly in the form of collections of stories that were written or edited by Buddhist adepts to propagate Buddhist teachings. These stories are part of the *Anomaly Tales* that we have mentioned in the previous chapters. Among the number of Buddhist-inclined works, we can also observe the competition between Daoist and Buddhist proselytes. In a collection of stories entitled “An Account of Strange Events” (*Shu Yi ji* 述異記), there is the following story:

In the Song period, Hu Bizhi of Yuzhang prefecture used to be the minister of Wuchang prefecture. In the year 449, [one night] when he went to the outhouse, in the middle of the night with full moon, a ghost appeared. Then the door became slightly ajar, and he saw a person leaning outside the door, looking like a child. When the door was closed, he heard a person walking as if wearing wooden slippers. When he looked, he saw nothing. This repeated many times. In the third month of 451, his entire family contracted influenza. They heard people speaking in the air, and stones, roof tiles, and dirt were thrown at them... They asked Daoist priests to come and perform rituals and recite scriptures. Yet the stones and roof tiles and dirt came pouring down even heavier, except they did not hit the Daoist priest and the scriptures.... Bizhi invited a Daoist priest to present petitions to Heaven and to cast talismans, and the phenomenon disappeared gradually. The next year, the ghost came again and things became worse than before... [Another ghost came and spoke to Bizhi]: “All the haunting events were the doing of Mr. Shen. As this used to be his house, he came back to take a look and played some jokes. But you performed the exorcism in access, and asked a Daoist priest to present petitions to the Heaven to accuse him. This matter was known throughout the heavenly court. Now Mr. Shen went to Heaven and said, You [i.e., Bizhi] are a disciple of the Buddha, why didn’t you follow the Buddhist way to seek blessing, instead of asking a Daoist priest to present petitions? From now on you should concentrate on devotion to the Dharma, without doing evil things [i.e., asking a Daoist priest to perform rituals], then the ghost shall not come to disturb you.”³⁴

³³ T 50, no. 2064, p. 976.

³⁴ Lu Xun 1986: 181.

This rather long and complicated account of a haunting ghost fully demonstrates the religious mentality of the people during this period of religious competition. The relationship between Buddhism and Daoism in this story is rather intriguing. The story clearly indicates that it is possible for a Buddhist adept to follow other forms of belief when it comes to solving the problem of ghostly attacks. On the surface, because Bizhi was urged to concentrate on his devotion to the Dharma, it seems to imply that Buddhism was more powerful than Daoism. Yet the story did not deny the power of the Daoist priest to curb the ghost, nor did it explicitly denounce the Daoist rituals. Instead, the author recognized the effectiveness of the Daoist ritual of sending petitions to the heavenly court, because the court accepted the petition of the Daoist priest. In this Daoist heavenly court, however, Bizhi had a weak case against the ghost of Mr. Shen, who accused him for being too harsh by performing excessive exorcistic rituals. In other words, Bizhi's exorcistic actions were effective against the ghost, so that the ghost complained to the heavenly court. It turned out that the heavenly court was in favor of the ghost, that is why the second ghost, a messenger from the court, came to instruct Bizhi to go back to seek asylum in Buddhism. For if he did not follow the advice, he could be haunted by the ghost again. Thus, it appears that Buddhism and Daoism acted as two opposing powers, each protecting its true followers. We could surmise that because this story was included in the Tang Dynasty Buddhist encyclopedia *Fayuan zhulin*, it must have been regarded as a story that could propagate the effectiveness of Buddhist power. Yet our reading shows that even if the story was written down with the intention of helping to proselytize Buddhism, it unwittingly revealed the religious environment of the time. It is exactly because of this recognition of both the Daoist and Buddhist power to exorcise ghosts, instead of straightforwardly supporting one and denouncing the other, that we could detect the reality of the religious mentality of the time.

There was of course no lack of evidence for a clear pro-Buddhist position, and we could look for it in such works as the *Records of Dark Signs* (*Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記).³⁵ In the following example, it is explicit about which religion is more powerful:

Shi Juan was a learned person who followed the Dao and despised Buddhism. He often told people: "Buddha is a small god who is not worthwhile to follow."

³⁵ Campany 2012.

Whenever he saw the statue of Buddha he would ridicule it. Later he was sick and his leg swelled up. Various ways to pray for a cure were all useless. His friend Zhao Wen said to him: "It is said that the blessing of the Buddha is the foremost. You can try to build a statue of Avalokitesvara." Since Juan was suffering greatly, he decided to follow the advice and built a statue. When the statue was finished, he dreamt of Avalokitesvara, and indeed he soon recovered from the illness.³⁶

It should be noted that within Buddhism, different sources could carry different explanations and interpretations regarding the origin of ghosts and the way to expel them. In the sutras, a more sophisticated explanation of the origin of ghosts could be expounded, as the following example from *Foshuo pumenpinjing* (佛說普門品經) shows:

Where did ghosts and spirits come from? There are those inner ghosts and spirits that numbered hundreds and thousands; those from outside are the same. If there is no fear inside, there should be no apprehension without. If there is no sadness within, then there should be no tear to shed. If one begins to think about ghosts and spirits, there will be many hundreds and thousands of ghosts and spirits from without; they all come to him, which is the cause for sickness, and some end up dead and suffer numerous hardships. All these are because the heart is not upright. The Bodhisattva realizes the emptiness of void and the nonexistence of ghosts and spirits, and everything arises from the mind.³⁷

One can see that this explanation of the power of one's own inner resolution and revelation is rather similar to the Daoist inner cultivation discussed in the [previous chapter](#), except in this particular case the ghosts and spirits are seen as the illusion of the mind rather than "real." When addressing the common people in society, however, the appeal to philosophical reflection of a person's inner self was probably not an effective way of proselytizing. Thus, a more direct and easily understood way was chosen to represent Buddhism as a superior power that people could rely on. In fact, an extraordinary document, written by a monk named Baolin, shows how Buddhists tried to employ the concepts of the indigenous popular cults as a means to demonstrate the power of Buddhism. A learned person active during the Song Dynasty (420–479), Baolin once wrote an "Edict to Mount Tai" in the fashion of an imperial denouncement against rebels. The basic thrust of his discourse was that the so-called deities in the popular cults, including those on the Mount Tai, were not true gods but incarnations of all sorts of evil ghosts, demons, and spirits of animals:

³⁶ Lu Xun 1986: 438.

³⁷ T 11, no. 315a, p. 772.

Those who call themselves mountain gods must be pythons. Those who call themselves gods of river and sea must be turtles and fish. Those who call themselves gods of heavenly father and earthly mother must be wild cats and raccoons. Those who call themselves gods of generals must be bears, tigers, and leopards. Those who call themselves gods of gentlemen must be monkeys and orangutans. Those who call themselves gods of the house must be dogs, sheep, pigs, calves, doors, wells, stoves, broken vessels, and the like. These are ghosts and demons who in their pretension all call themselves gods. They frightened the people and emit the ether of lascivious ghosts. These facts have been recorded in the canons and have been transmitted and proven true.³⁸

We can see a close affinity of Baolin's ideas to the traditional Chinese concept of the origin of ghosts and demons that could be found already in *Daybook* ever since the third century BCE. He further addresses the Record Keeper of the Eastern Mountain, to whom the edict was dispatched, and pronounces him a false god, a minor ghost:

You are a minor ghost. If you dare to touch the three lights, it would be like a feather of the crane that is thrown into the fire, or like a fish that is swimming in the hot soup. It would be like pouring the water of the river to extinguish a fire, or like the morning dew that sees the sun. I have a kind heart and pity what you have done, and divined for this perilous situation which upon consideration would be sorrowful. You should immediately resume your original form before me and return to the faraway seashore, and linger no more. You should accept and obey this command.³⁹

The consequence of not obeying his order was destruction by the Buddhist gods and divine army. The intriguing point is that Baolin's attack on the local cults did not really deny their existence as being mere illusions of the mind, as expounded in the *Foshuo pumenpinjing* quoted previously. Instead, he utilized the indigenous concepts of the origin of animal spirits, which could be called *wuguai* (物怪) according to Chinese custom, to explain why the local deities are false gods. This example again allows us to gain some insight into the nature of the battleground that Buddhist monks engaged in. On the one hand, they needed to demonstrate their superior power over the Daoists; on the other hand, they also needed to recognize the traditional cosmological assumptions about the origins of ghosts and spirits in the wider populace. Without first letting these beliefs exist, they would have a hard time engaging in a dialogue that could begin to be understood by the common people.

³⁸ Yen Kejun 1982: vol. 6, *juan* 64:1–3.

³⁹ Yen Kejun 1982: vol. 6, *juan* 64:1–3.

6.4 THE ORIGINS OF GHOSTS IN BUDDHISM COMPARED

In the earlier chapters in this volume we have discussed the origin of ghosts in pre-Buddhist Chinese sources. In general the ghosts that appeared to the people usually originated from those who died an untimely death, were killed unjustly, or did not receive a proper burial. In other words, although everyone should become a ghost after death, only those with unfinished business with the world, for good or for bad, would come back to haunt people.

In the same spirit, many of the human ghosts mentioned in early Daoist texts were ghosts of those who died of different situations, such as violence, accidents, illnesses, or even simply old age, as we have seen in the [previous chapter](#). It can be deduced that very often the reasons for them to become ghosts were not because of their individual characters or behaviors, but because of their life situations, some more precarious than others, that caused their death. The example from the *Taishang zhengyi zhonguijing* quoted in the [previous chapter](#) demonstrates this situation most emphatically.

Compared with the Daoist idea of the origin of ghosts, especially the hungry ghosts, one could say that in general the Buddhist ghosts originated from morally degenerated human beings. To become a ghost is to be punished for one's own moral deficiency, such as being greedy, jealous, manipulative, stingy, flattering, or deceptive. In Daoism, as inherited from the early Chinese conception, only those who died an unnatural or untimely death – such as injustice, accidents, illnesses, or warfare – would come back to the world and interact with the living. These haunting ghosts might perform evil deeds, or they might not. One thing for certain is that they did not become evil ghosts simply because of their own moral deficiency while alive on earth. Their malicious behavior, if it happens that way, originated from their desire of revenge for the wrongs that they suffered. While both would insist that justice be done in the world, the deeds of Daoist ghosts reflect the injustice they suffered on earth; the deeds of Buddhist ghosts reflect the vice or injustice they themselves had committed. Here one could detect a very significant difference between Buddhism and Daoism, not by looking at their purported tenets, but simply by looking at these different origins of ghosts.

The different understanding of the origin of ghosts in Buddhism and Daoism was also a significant factor in differentiating the proselytic strategies that they adopted. Buddhism used the idea of a suffering ghost in Hell to encourage people to follow the correct path and lead a just life

lest they fall into that miserable condition. Daoism, on the other hand, employed the idea of the revenging ghosts to persuade people to follow the lead of the Daoist priest in exorcising the ghosts. In the process of persuasion, both had to make some compromise with the existing popular ideas of ghosts. It was by allowing the indigenous idea of ghosts to exist, whether by translating the various spirits and demons as *gui*-ghost, or by engaging in dialogues with the local cults, that Buddhism was able to incorporate the pre-Buddhist Chinese ghosts into its system, a system that could also be regarded as “Chinese Buddhism.” The overlapping with Daoism in compromising with the indigenous ideas of ghosts, on the other hand, would be the common ground for Buddhism to share with Daoism, which also formed the foundation for the development of “popular religion” in the subsequent eras.

Chinese Ghosts in Comparative Perspective

A ghost story succeeds only when the narrator has managed to persuade her audience to suspend their disbelief, at least temporarily.... [A] properly constructed story will provide glimpses into the real world's system of beliefs because it will adhere to rules that resemble those of the real world.¹

At the beginning of this study we briefly mentioned the idea of the postmortem existence of humans in different ancient societies. With some variations, most societies possessed similar imaginations about such an existence, which, for convenience's sake, we used the term “ghost” to refer to this existence.

As has been discussed in [Chapter 1](#), we consider ghosts as cultural constructions, yet they also helped to construct the cultural landscape that they belonged to. Although ghosts have an imaginary existence, the world would not be complete without them. Some of the most important messages and most profound reflections about life are done with the agency of ghosts. The descriptions about the nature and behavior of ghosts, whether in literary texts or in religious documents, help us to trace and identify these messages and reflections. These reflections could be understood as comments on ethical or moral values, or the fairness of justice. They could also express specific personal grievances or general remarks on worldly affairs, and they often could not avoid the themes of the love of life or the meaning of death. Although these reflections may be generally found in and are applicable to many cultures, their specific contexts dictate how they were formulated. Each culture therefore constructs its own types of

¹ Johnston 1999: 4.

ghost according to its predilections. By studying these, and comparing one with the others, it is possible to dig deeper into the cultural psychology and gain some understanding of certain aspects of the uniqueness of each culture, and, moreover, through the identification of shared values, to appreciate this uniqueness within the context of a common humanity.

The previous chapters traced the development of the culture of ghosts in early China, including the conception of ghosts, the ghost-human relationship, the function of ghosts in daily life and literature, and, of course, ghosts as part of belief systems, whether Daoism, Buddhism, or the so-called popular or common beliefs. In terms of written records, ghosts received attention as early as in the oracle inscriptions. There ghosts were perceived as malicious spirits that caused pain and illness to people. This image of malicious ghosts, whether as avenging spirits that sought justice, naughty ghosts that were bent on causing pain to people, or disgruntled and wandering spirits that looked for a resting place, continued to appear in the subsequent documents, forming one major strand of the idea of ghosts. As the sources show, although in general people regarded ghosts as malicious, most of the time the trouble caused by ghosts could be solved one way or another. That is to say, as evil spirits, ghosts could indeed cause fear, yet people did not despair or give up when ghosts attacked. Exorcistic methods or ritual acts were what people would resort to in order to solve the problems caused by ghosts. Of course, this is not to say that people were not terrified by ghosts. The existence of exorcistic manuals such as the *Demonography* chapter in the *Daybook* of Shuihudi or the apotropaic books recorded in the "Bibliographical Treatise" of the *History of Han*, as well as the writings of scholars such as Wang Chong, testify to the fact that the need to exorcise was a common phenomenon in society. One can say that people learned to live with ghosts, since the appearance of ghosts was considered by the common people as a fact of life.

It is also important to remember that the discourses on ghosts were mostly made in a social context in which religious beliefs and activities were part of daily life. The reference to ghosts was not an isolated phenomenon, but part of the entire religious environment. Belief in the existence of various deities who could exert influence on human life, as well as the blessings or curses of the ancestral spirits, were all part of the religious, cultural, and intellectual environment to which the idea of ghosts also belonged.

When people believed that ghosts were the cause of certain problems for the living, they would often try to identify the reasons for their

appearance and take necessary measures to ameliorate the situation. These, as mentioned above, may include various propitiatory rituals to appease the ghosts, or exorcistic actions to expel them. The reasons why ghosts appeared, if they could be identified, usually fell into the category of “right the wrongs”; that is, the living believed that the deceased were unsatisfied with the condition of their existence, or with the cause of their death, and demanded certain compensation for their grievances. This reflects an ethical concern of the living, perhaps out of a group consciousness, that people should not die with regrets or suffer injustice. On the other hand, we also notice that, depending on the sources, not all ghosts were imagined as malicious. In literary sources, in particular, as part of the narrative to create a dramatic effect, ghosts could be described as having complex emotions, just like the living, and may behave erratically, but not always maliciously. We call this the “humanizing” tendency in the descriptions of ghosts. One may of course ask to what extent could such kinds of literary representation of ghosts bear testimony to the religiosity of the authors or the readers of the stories. On the whole, we can differentiate two types of ghost narratives: those contained in religious texts and those contained in literary texts. Ghosts in these two types of texts could serve different functions, and reflect different understandings of human-ghost relationships. Both could reveal to us some aspects of the cultural and religious environment that produced them. The descriptions of ghosts, if it is not too bold to presume, can thus be understood as a kind of commentary on the relationship between the living and the dead.

Regarding the cultural and religious environment in which ghost narratives existed, we should also recognize that often the educated elites would claim that they did not believe in the existence of ghosts. Yet this does not mean that they did not respect or tolerate what the common people believed. Most of the time, in fact, it was the intellectuals who played an important role to keep the tradition, the memory, and the legend about ghosts in society. It was the intellectuals, or at least people with a certain level of literacy, who composed the exorcistic texts, the tomb-protecting spells, and the ghost stories, not to mention the numerous records of ghosts in the historical records, the Daoist texts, and the Buddhist sutras. After all, people could have believed in ghosts in different degrees, because no one, not even Confucius, could declare with absolute confidence that ghosts do not exist. Some crucial questions to ask, then, include the following: Who promoted or endorsed the idea of ghosts? Who had authority over ghosts? And what does this say about the culture and the nature of the belief system? In short, we need to consider the

question of the power relationship between the sources about ghosts and the intended audience of the sources.

If we follow the information revealed by the texts, it would not be too far off the mark to say that those who created the texts can be regarded as the promoters of the idea of ghosts, since texts were written down with a purpose, whether it was spelled out or not. The authors of the texts also created the circumstances and the characters that had the authority over ghosts: the exorcistic rituals, the performers of the rituals, and the reciters of spells. This is not to say that what the intellectuals wrote about ghosts were literary creations that had no relation to the mentality and reality of the common people. As with the issue of “popular religion,” most of what we know about what the common people thought and did is based on sources that are often the creation of the literati. Yet we can say with a degree of certainty that, based on the principle of reading “unintentional evidence,” we believe that the textual representations about ghosts can reflect the gist of what common people in society believed.² This is because it is impossible for a story or narrative about ghosts to be convincing to its audience without a certain degree of overlapping with the contemporary commonly accepted views about what a ghost is, how a ghost should look, and how a ghost will behave. This view is corroborated by Sara I. Johnston regarding Greek ghosts:

A ghost story succeeds only when the narrator has managed to persuade her audience to suspend their disbelief, at least temporarily... [A] properly constructed story will provide glimpses into the real world's system of beliefs because it will adhere to rules that resemble those of the real world.³

The question of whether one can reasonably rely on the available evidence to construct a history of the evolution of the idea of ghosts, in particular, the ghost-human relationship, has to depend on a careful evaluation of the sources. Take the ancient Greek ghost, for example. Johnston has argued that the Greeks in the Homeric poems did not have the idea of invoking ghosts to come back to earth on behalf of the living, either to avenge or to help with the living. The dead, or ghosts, were powerless and passive, and they never could be invoked to return to the world, except in cases in which they voluntarily appeared to the living, such as the ghost of Patroclus to Achilles. Whether this situation can be explained as due to the lack of written evidence in the Homeric poems needs to be determined by looking into Homer in more detail. As Johnston

² Poo 1998: chapter 1. ³ Johnston 1999: 4.

argues, it is hard to imagine that the author knew about the practice of invoking ghosts and yet purposefully suppressed such knowledge in the poem so thoroughly. It is more reasonable, according to Johnston, to admit that the author simply did not have the idea. It was in the fifth-century literature that invoking ghosts became a common phenomenon.⁴ According to another scholar, the ghosts in the Homeric poems are passive, while in the course of the fifth century, with all its extraordinary cultural development, ghosts became more “real”; that is, they began to actively engage in human affairs, for good or for evil purposes.⁵ Such explanations point to a trend of development of the idea of ghosts in ancient Greece, from a more indistinct portrayal of a shadowy existence to a more vivid and individualized figure, which can be compared to the Chinese case, when a more “humanized” image of ghosts was being forged in the *Anomaly Tales*.

Yet what do all these ghost narratives mean in terms of our understanding of humanity in general? To answer this, we need to look at multiple examples. How to explain the reasons for the appearance of the ghosts, we believe, could be the central issue in the human-ghost relationship. When an explanation is found, people could then proceed to take all sorts of measures to deal with the ghosts. It is crucial, therefore, to identify the explanations given by each culture for the appearance of ghosts. It is the reciprocal relationship between the idea of ghosts and society, and the cultural constructs that developed around this relationship, that could reveal the special characteristics of the culture, its temperament, its moral thrust, and its imagination of the netherworld. In the end, it is the function of the idea of ghosts in each culture and society that the present inquiry aims at comparing.

We have mentioned in [Chapter 1](#) the ancient Mesopotamian conception of the soul, or the ghost, of a dead person, the *eṭemmu*. Mention has also been made that according to one account, the *eṭemmu* was released from the person at the time of death, and that all the *eṭemmu* will go into the underground world of the dead. Presumably, the ghosts who went there could never return to this world. According to a famous poem, *Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld*:

To the netherworld, land of n[o return],
Ishtar, daughter of sin, [set] her mind.
Indeed the daughter of Sin did set [her] mind.

⁴ Johnston 1999: 30–35.

⁵ Finucane 1996: 4–5.

To the gloomy house, the seat of the ne[therworld],
 To the house which none leaves who enters,
 To the road whose journey has no return
 To the house whose entrants are bereft of light,
 Where dust is their sustenance and clay their food.
 They see no light but dwell in darkness,
 They are clothed like birds in wings for garments,
 And dust has gathered on the door and bolt.⁶

The description of this netherworld is bleak indeed. However, one should perhaps read this passage more as a literary and dramatic expression of an inhospitable netherworld than a serious discussion of the nature of the netherworld or the fate of the deceased.⁷ As other texts reveal, the ghosts in fact often return to the world and cause trouble for the living.⁸ According to a magical incantation:

The ghost which has set upon me, keeps harassing me,
 And [does not quit me] day or [nig]ht,
 Be it a stranger ghost,
 Be it a forgotten ghost,
 Be it a ghost without a name,
 Be it a ghost which has no one to provide for it,
 Be it a ghost of someone who [has no one to invoke his name],
 Be it a ghost of someone killed by a weapon,
 Be it a ghost of someone who died for a sin against a god
 or for a crime against a king,
 [Place] it [in the care of the ghosts of its family],
 May it accept this and let me go free!⁹

The incantation gives us a hint of what people in general might have imagined to be the causes for the appearance of the ghosts. It seems that a ghost who was not remembered and given proper provision or prayer could cause trouble for the living, and those who died on the battlefield, received no burial, or committed a crime and were executed were also prone to appear to the living.¹⁰ The rationale of the incantation is to amend the situation by placing the ghost in the care of its family, that is, to provide proper burial and offerings. Such understanding of the causes for the apparition of ghosts seems in line with examples from other places, China included. The interesting aspect of the Mesopotamian case is that some incantations address the ghost in second person:

⁶ Foster 1996: 403.

⁷ Jacobsen 1976: 52, 67.

⁸ Bottéro 1983.

⁹ Foster 1996: 858.

¹⁰ Bottéro 2001: 110; Cooper 2009.

O dead people, why do you keep appearing to me,
 People whose cities are ruin heaps,
 Who themselves are just bones?
 I don't go to Cutha [i.e., the cult city of Nergal, king of the
 netherworld], where ghosts congregate,
 Be conjured by Abatu the queen and Ereshkigal,
 By Ningeshtinanna, scribe of the gods,
 Whose stylus is lapis and carnelian!¹¹

Thus the ghosts of the dead people are not welcome. Yet the ghosts of one's family members might not be feared and could even be invoked to render help to their living descendants:

O ghosts of my family, progenitors in the grave,
 My father, my grandfather, my mother, my grandmother,
 my brother, my sister
 My family, kith and kin, as many as are asleep in the netherworld,
 I have made my funerary offering
 I have libated water to you, I have cherished you
 I have glorified you, I have honored you.
 Stand this day before the Sun God and Gilgamesh,
 Judge my case, render my verdict!
 Hand over to Fate, messenger of the netherworld,
 The evil(s) present in my body, flesh, and sinews!¹²

Here there is an inherent assumption to perceive the ghosts not as having a powerless and shadowy existence but as beings with certain power and ability to engage in the affairs of the living. When compared with the Egyptian *Letter to the Dead*, to be discussed below, we see that the desire to communicate with the deceased family members was not unusual at all.

Thus regarding the function of ghosts in the Mesopotamian religion, we could single out several points: the reasons for the appearance of ghosts indicate a concern for ritual propriety between the living and the dead. That is to say, proper care of the dead is regarded as a communal responsibility, whether or not from a familial standpoint. It is important, therefore, to have a proper burial for the dead, to provide regular funerary offerings, so that ghosts are satisfied. The ghosts appear mainly as a warning or reminder of the injustice in society – injustice done to the ghosts while they were on earth, in particular. In a word, people believed that the ghost of the deceased persons appeared always with a malicious intention, because they were not supposed to appear to the living. When they do appear, that means something wrong had happened to the ideally

¹¹ Foster 1996: 859.

¹² Cooper 2009: 26.

balanced relationship between the living and the dead. As mentioned above, sometimes they could also be invoked to appear and help their family members, which, in the eyes of the other people, could be potentially malicious. Beyond this, however, ghosts did not engage in human affairs extensively, nor did they evolve into collective beings who carry complicated ethical values. Unlike the worship of gods and the belief in the absolute subordination of the human fate to divine willpower,¹³ the imagination of the nature of ghosts mainly as a weak and shadowy existence in the netherworld or malicious when they appeared to the living seems to have limited the development of ghosts into more active players in the religious culture of Mesopotamia. Their function, therefore, could be described as rather marginalized, and their place in the Mesopotamian religion was largely overshadowed by the multifarious characters of the numerous deities. Of course, due to the paucity of evidence, our understanding of the Mesopotamian ideas of ghosts can only be provisional.¹⁴

Unlike the Mesopotamians, the ancient Egyptian concept of ghosts may seem rather complicated. As we have briefly mentioned in [Chapter 1](#), studies on the Egyptian religion have in general admitted that there were three different “souls” of the dead: the *ba*, *ka*, and *akh*. Unlike the Mesopotamians, again, these souls of the dead did not originate from any deity, but were part of the elements that constituted the person. They were released from the body when death occurred, each with its own function. The *ba*, for example, protects a person when the person is alive, and may represent the soul or spirit of the body in the tomb.¹⁵ Sometimes the *ba* was described as leaving the body of a person in extreme agitation, such as when the fugitive Sinuhe was granted an audience with the king: “I was like a man seized by darkness. My *ba* was gone, my limbs trembled, my heart was not in my body, I did not know life from death.”¹⁶ This description of the *ba* leaving the body, interestingly, is very much in line with the Chinese concept of the *hun*-soul being scared away from a person when something horrifying happened. That is, the *ba* or *hun* could be leaving the body while the person is still “alive.” Of course, there is always the caution that we need to separate the literary exaggeration or metaphorical use of the concept of *ba* from the actual

¹³ For the explication of the theme of god as rulers, see Jacobsen 1976; Bottéro 2001.

¹⁴ Bottéro 2001: 105–10.

¹⁵ For a monographic study of the concept of *ba*, see Žabkar 1968.

¹⁶ Lichtheim 1973: 231.

religious belief, yet in reality people tend to use what is in the religious repertoire as material for metaphorical and literary expressions.¹⁷ As for the *ka*, it seems that, since it was represented by the person's *ka*-statue in the offering chamber, it could be understood as the person himself and was responsible for all their actions, behaviors, powers, and achievements. Moreover, it takes care of the sustenance of the deceased in the tomb, as it can receive offerings made in the offering chamber. The word *ka*, moreover, is etymologically connected with the meaning of "sustenance" and "life force." In his study of the conceptions of the various elements of a person after death, Jan Assmann made a distinction between the *ba* and the *ka*: "the *ba* belonged to the physical sphere of the deceased, restoring his movement and his ability to take one form, while the *ka* belonged to his social sphere and restored his status, honor, and dignity."¹⁸ Such distinction certainly can make some general sense for the understanding of the Egyptian concept of the postmortem existence of the person, though Assmann refrained from calling the *ba* and *ka* "ghosts." Yet one wonders how much the Egyptians actually made any meaningful distinction between the *ba* and the *ka*. For example, in the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* we find the following sentences:

The nobleman, when he is behind food, behaves as his *ka* commands him.

...

Do not malign anyone, great or small, the *ka* abhors it.

...

If you are a man of worth and produce a son by the grace of god, ...

He is your son, your *ka* begot him.¹⁹

In all the uses of *ka* here, the context makes it clear that the first two *kas* could reasonably be understood as something like "mind" or "character," while the third, the *ka* that begot a son, can be understood as either the "physical body" or the "spirit." Here all of the three references to the *ka* are in a literary text and in the context when the person is still alive; thus, we should probably not understand them in the same way as when they appear in funerary texts. It is also very difficult to draw a distinction between the *ka* that abhors improper behavior and the *ba* that was scared away by extreme danger. Both seem to respond to an external situation that was unpleasant or dangerous. In an extraordinary text, "The Dispute between a Man and His *ba*," the *ba* represents a conscious

¹⁷ For the concept of religious repertoire, see Campany 2017.

¹⁸ Assmann 2005: 97.

¹⁹ Lichtheim 1973: 65–66.

mind that could formulate moral judgment and a logical argument.²⁰ Here again one can hardly make any differentiation between this *ba* and the *ka* in *Ptahhotep* that abhors improper behaviors.

Akh, another soul of the dead, has been regarded as the closest concept to the ghost, as mentioned in [Chapter 1](#). We hear that the *akh* could be understood, despite of the difficulty of translating such an illusive term into modern parlance, as an “illuminated spirit” or a “transfigured ancestral spirit.”²¹ This *akh*, being one of the members of the ancestors, could be faraway, joining the ancestral spirits, even conversing with the divine spirits. Thus the *akh* could travel from the tomb, while the *ba* and *ka* stay in or near the tomb. On the other hand, it has been argued that in ancient Egypt the souls, ghosts, demons, and gods are not distinct categories, but contextualized manifestations of the nonmaterial.²² The *ba*, therefore, can sometimes refer to the spirit of a deity, such as “the living *Ba* of the All-Lord (Re-Atum).”²³ This is somewhat comparable to the Chinese situation, when the term “*gui*/ghost” can also refer to the spirit of a deity.

On the whole, the Egyptian expressions of the spirits/souls of the dead did not carry any inherent malicious meaning or intention; they represent simply what becomes of a person after they died. The *ba*, *ka*, and *akh* each played their role in representing some aspects of the person, and have always been represented as a normal parts of the funerary cult. Thus their appearance was not to address any specific grievances or correct any wrongs. The Egyptians did not seem to express much worry about the attack of the dissatisfied dead, except that in the Old Kingdom tomb inscriptions the living were reminded to give water and prayer to the dead, and that the dead would cast a curse on those who would desecrate their tombs: “As for any people who would enter this tomb unclean and do something evil to it, there will be judgment against them by the great god.”²⁴ Or “with regard to any man who shall enter this my tomb not having purified himself, I shall seize his neck like a bird’s so that the living see [it] and are fearful of an excellent and equipped *akh* who knows the rites. I shall be judged with him in the tribunal of the Great God.”²⁵ Such a threat was basically a measure to protect the tomb from the living, rather than actively trying to harm the living.

The function of ghosts/*ba*, *ka*, *akh* in Egyptian religion was not to bring attention to any injustice that a person had suffered in life or after

²⁰ Goedicke 1970; Lichtheim 1976: 163–69. ²¹ Assmann 2005: 88. ²² Eyre 2009.

²³ Lichtheim 1976: 215. ²⁴ Lichtheim 1973: 16.

²⁵ Sturdivick 2005: 287; similarly, 264.

death. With the system of the postmortem judgment of Osiris, each person was theoretically guaranteed a justified status in the netherworld, for everyone was expected to pass the judgment and become an “excellent spirt (*3ḥ ikr*)” or “true of claims (*m^{3c} ḥrw*),” that is, one who did not lie.

One might argue that it is because of this rather optimistic belief in the judgment after death – with the help of the *Book of the Dead* – that the Egyptian ghosts did not play a significant role that could incite group consciousness about injustice done to the individual or the society, nor did they play any role in using any special supernatural quality to make comments about worldly affairs or to address problems regarding religious beliefs. This is not to say that the fear of death was not a real concern for the ordinary people.²⁶ The numerous wailing women depicted in the funeral scenes throughout Egyptian history clearly indicate that death and the loss of a family member was as painful as in any other culture. Yet all these did not seem to have lessened the strong belief for a blessed afterlife available to all. In the long history of Egyptian literature, it is only in the last stage, in the Demotic literature, in particular, the story of *Setne Khaemwaset*, that we encounter an extensive account of a ghost as a protagonist in a complex plot.²⁷ Although there is doubt as to the extent of Greek influence in this story, the Egyptian originality cannot be denied. Moreover, the literary style of the story of Setne was geared toward the fantastic magical world, much as the story of *King Cheops and the Magicians* or the *Shipwrecked Sailor*,²⁸ rather than emphasizing the role of ghosts and their relationship to the living. The story reminds us that the Egyptian imagination regarding ghosts and revenants might not be very different from other cultures, except that the strong traditional belief system might have provided some alternatives to the development of such an imagination.

Thus, unlike the Chinese ghosts, who seemed to be able to act freely, of their own volition, the function of Egyptian ghosts was much more restricted by their religious system. They indeed represented the individuals in their different ways, yet there did not seem to be any individuality to them, as they did not seem to be able to break away from the confinement of their existence and make an impact on the world of the living. Their roles were tightly fixed within the imagined world of the dead. In other words, Egyptian ghosts were not free agents like the Chinese ghosts, who could roam the world to make whatever impact or trouble as they

²⁶ Zandee 1960.

²⁷ Lichtheim 1980: 127ff.

²⁸ Lichtheim 1973: 211–22.

wished. The relationship of the Egyptian ghosts to the divine force was unambiguous, unlike the Chinese ghosts, whose behavior could be unpredictable. Thus the major Chinese religious systems, whether Buddhism, Daoism, or indigenous local cults, were all keen to have control over the ghosts, which was not the case in Egypt.

The Egyptians seemed to have no need to control unruly ghosts due to the strong divine sanction. Those deceased who passed the judgment shall stay in the “Beautiful West,” the realm of the blessed dead. As for those who could not pass the judgment, it was believed that their hearts would be devoured by the monster Amit, who waits beside the balance when the heart of the dead is weighted against Maat/truth. Without the heart, the dead will die a second time and disappear from the world; thus, there would be no chance of them causing any trouble to the living. In the Egyptian netherworld, the Land of Osiris, therefore, there were no suffering spirits like the Mesopotamian or the Greek ghosts whose fate was miserable, not due to their sins or wrongdoings while alive, but due to the respective cultural understandings of the nature of death and the world of the dead.

It is, however, interesting to note that in terms of the relationship between the living and the dead, the Egyptians did have certain expectations of their deceased relatives, as shown by a genre of texts called *Letter to the Dead*.²⁹ Already in the Old Kingdom there is evidence showing that the living could write letters to their deceased kinsfolk and ask for their assistance, obviously assuming that the dead possessed certain powers that could be of help to the living.³⁰ Nevertheless, it seems that such letters were basically one-way communication, as we can hardly find any evidence about if and how the receivers of the letters, that is, the ghosts, reacted to the requests.

The Chinese ghost, in its fully developed conceptual form, is identical to the living human being in its conscious self, except in an immaterial existence. This indicates that the Chinese imagination of the postmortem existence closely follows the model of the living, whereas the Egyptian imagination of the existence of the *ba* and *ka* are quite extraordinary, as they do not fully represent the deceased. Some Egyptologists are of the opinion that when the *ba* is reunited with the dead, then the dead could become an *akh*, as an ancestral spirit.³¹ What is interesting, and perhaps of significant importance, is that the dead could, in the funerary texts such

²⁹ Gardiner 1928; Wente 1990: 210–19; Troche 2018.

³⁰ Assmann 2005: 158–63.

³¹ Assmann 2005: 87–102; Taylor 2010: 16–25.

as those found in tomb inscriptions, identify themselves as an *akh*: “I am an equipped *akh*.” But the dead would rarely say, “I am a *ba* (or *ka*),” as the *ba* and *ka* are often addressed in opposition to the dead: “May your *ba* go to heaven,” “May you go to your *ka*,” or “May your *ka* follow you.”³² That is to say, although the Egyptian concepts of the *ba* and the *ka* represented some elements of the personal character of the deceased, they were not seen as representing the “self,” the “I,” or the “ego” of the dead. The *ba* and the *ka* were something separated from the self of the deceased. It is therefore crucial to find out, when the Egyptian addressed the dead thus: “May **your** *ba* go to heaven” or “May **your** *ka* follow you,” what exactly is this “**you**.” Is this “**you**” the *akh*, since the dead could refer to themselves as “I am a well-equipped *akh*”? When a person passed the judgment before Osiris and entered into the Beautiful West, what was the existential state of this person? In the *Coffin Texts* (Spell 1031), the dead says: “For I am the *akh* who passes by the guards” – meaning the dead had entered the world of Osiris as a *akh*, but did the dead’s *ba* and *ka* accompany them into that new world? Or did they stay in the tomb? As this “self” was expected to perform all sorts of activities in the Field of Rushes, as this new world is called, just like what they used to perform while alive on earth, does it mean that the *ba*, *ka*, and *akh* were all united inside the self again? In Assmann’s words, the “I” was “an organizing personal center”³³ that has to connect and reunite the *ba*, *ka*, heart, and corpse, in order that the deceased could enter the perfect state of immortality. In short, as the Egyptian funerary texts such as the *Book of the Dead* reveal, the first-person independent pronoun “I” was the subjective voice of the deceased, yet we could not identify this “I” as the *ka*, *ba*, or *akh* (until the deceased has become one). It is perhaps best to see this “I” as representing the deceased in their own voice as a living person, and the Egyptians probably did not make further distinction between this living person and the “I” in the netherworld. For example, in the tomb biographies the deceased often use the first person to describe their deeds while alive: “I came forth from my town, I went down into the afterlife; I carried out Maat for her lord; I satisfied him with regard to that which he loves.”³⁴

It is indeed very difficult for the living to imagine the state of being of the dead, for the use of the language to describe this state is inevitably that of the living. The Egyptians had very imaginatively and ingeniously come

³² For references, see Assmann 2005: 87–102.

³³ Assmann 2005: 101–2.

³⁴ Sturdivick 2005: 301.

up with the concepts of *ba*, *ka*, and *akh* to describe what is probably indescribable, and left for the posterity of human society some mysterious and perhaps truly eternal formulations of the world after death.

Last, we need to acknowledge that much remains unclear regarding the concept of postmortem existence in the Egyptian belief system. Many different expressions, often contradicting each other, regarding the whereabouts of these souls could be found in the texts, and it will take volumes to sort out the contexts of each of the expressions. The abundance of references to the concepts of *ba*, *ka*, and *akh* could be both a blessing and an embarrassment for the modern observers who wish to have a clear view, which may turn out to be too ambitious.

In the early Greek texts, as mentioned in [Chapter 1](#), the soul of the dead is referred to as *psuchē*, *eidōlon*, or *phasma*. The *psuchē* represents the individual personality, but manifests itself only at death.³⁵ It flies away from the body permanently when the person is dead. In Greek vase paintings from the seventh century to the fifth century BCE there are many examples of the soul/*psuchē* in the form of a miniature person with wings, hovering about the deceased person.³⁶ The *eidōlon*, meaning “image,” stresses the idea that the ghost of the dead looked exactly like the living. In the *Iliad*, when the ghost of Patroclus appeared to Achilles, it was referred to as *eidōlon*, and he conversed with Achilles just as a living person would (*Iliad* 23.101). The ghost of Darius in Aeschylus’ *Persians* is also referred to as *eidōlon* (Aeschylus, *Persians*, 681).

As there are numerous studies on Greek ghosts, some from folklore study’s point of view, some from a literary-historical point of view, here our focus will be on the function of ghosts in Greek religious beliefs and the comparison with those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. First, there seems no doubt that there was no universally accepted view in ancient Greece of the exact nature of ghosts, what the ghosts could do, or whether they possessed any ability or power of action. Views vary depending on which source and which time period one picks.³⁷ We hear that the ghosts of the dead generally existed in the darkness of Hades, or in the chamber of Persephone, leading a shadowy life with no effect on the living.³⁸ Yet we also hear that certain ghosts of the dead would appear to the living for some reason: Patroclus demanding a funeral (*Iliad* 23.101)

³⁵ See a classic study, Rohde 1925. For a collection of ghost stories in the Greek and Roman world, see Ogden 2001: 219ff.; Ogden 2002.

³⁶ Vermeule 1979: 7–11, 18–19. ³⁷ Finucane 1996: 4–26.

³⁸ Mikalson 1983: 74–82.

or the ghost of Melissa appearing to her husband Periander to ask for proper clothes (*Herodotus* 5.92G). The majority of the accounts of ghosts in literature are in one way or another about the need of the ghosts to avenge the wrongs that they suffered. This is in accord with the universal theme of ghosts seeking justice.

For example, in the *Eumenides*, the ghost (*eidōlon*) of Clytemnestra was made to give an appealing speech about her suffering in the nether-world (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 94). Such literary use of the idea of ghost was comparable to the ghosts in the Chinese Six Dynasty ghost stories. In such stories, ghosts were the protagonists, carrying some intended message from the author, and the audience and the readers presumably would also know that the actions of the ghosts were the embodiment of the author's intention. What is certain is that both the writer and the expected audience accepted the idea that the ghost of a person could carry some message and come back to the living to make a case. It is difficult to imagine an intellectual environment that does not believe, even half-heartedly, in the existence of ghosts yet accepts the effectiveness of ghost stories. There is of course the element of entertainment and literary creation; that is, the ghosts could be made to speak elaborately, philosophically, or to perform certain extraordinary acts that are clearly created by the author for dramatic effect and plot necessity. Yet the fundamental idea of the existence of ghosts and their abilities is doubtless the common assumption behind the texts. These literary representations of ghosts, to be sure, should be understood separately from the accounts of ghosts in religious or funerary texts. Exorcistic spells against ghosts, for example, did not contain any extensive explanation or elaboration on the stories of individual ghosts, but are more likely to serve the practical function of warding off ghost attacks.³⁹ Thus we have the literary ghosts and the religious ghosts. The literary ghosts are protagonists and mouth-piece of the authors; the religious ghosts are mostly daily menaces that need to be managed. They send a community-based message to the members of society: take good care of the dead.

One issue worth considering is the possibility that people in ancient times did not distinguish between the spirit of deceased human beings and other kinds of sentient beings or even inanimate things. The theory of animism proposed by nineteenth-century anthropologists may still be worth considering to a certain extent. At least, the interchangeable use

³⁹ Ogden 2002: 162–64 (directions for the laying of attacking ghosts: sections 1 and 2).

of terms denoting the human as well as nonhuman spirits suggests that what the ancient people cared about was mostly the nature or power of the spirits, and less about the origin of these powers. As Felton puts it: "This lack of specific categorization is largely due to the ancients' perception of the supernatural. There were often no functional distinctions between the gods and other types of supernatural being, and many phenomena that modern folklore attributes specifically to ghosts were, in antiquity, considered communications from the gods."⁴⁰ The gradual transformation of the concept of daimon to demon is a good example.⁴¹ Felton's observation is certainly supported by the Chinese evidence, as the term *gui* can equally be applied to the spirit of the heavenly deities, other nonhuman beings, as well as human ghosts.⁴²

In sum, the function of ghosts in Greek society can be said to be two-fold: as a literary character, ghosts were mainly part of the plot to create a line of narrative that could correct the wrongs that they suffered, or supplement what the living could not have done. Here ghosts were given human character and sentiments and could speak and act as normal human beings. They could be appreciated by readers as carrying certain messages and thus opportunities for reflection about the human condition. In texts that have to do with exorcism, however, ghosts were simply unwelcome evil beings that did not warrant any positive sentiments, or were nonsubjective spirits to be summoned by necromancy.⁴³ Yet they can also be understood as serving the function of catharsis of social anxiety: to explain the origins of certain misfortunes, for example, or to promote correct social norms and justice. In the context of Greek religious culture, the netherworld, or Hades, was not a place that the living paid serious attention to. The Greeks did not put too much imagination into creating a topography of Hades except that it was dark and windy, with a great river. As Garland says: "the Greeks were as much in the dark about Hades as they have left us."⁴⁴ Since one can hardly talk about ancestor worship in ancient Greece, the ancestral ghosts and their involvement in the human affairs were far less important than in the Chinese context.⁴⁵ This observation is in agreement with the view that, in terms of daily religious life, the Athenians expected neither rewards nor punishments in the afterlife for their deeds in this life, because there is little evidence in the

⁴⁰ Felton 1999: xii. ⁴¹ Wan 2017. ⁴² See Chapter 2 above.

⁴³ For example, Odysseus consulting the ghost of Tiresias (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.90–151). See Ogden 2002: 179–82.

⁴⁴ Garland 1985: 51. ⁴⁵ Bremmer 1983: 202.

vast number of tomb epitaphs where such ideas are most likely to be expected.⁴⁶ The idea of ghosts, therefore, did not seem to have played a significant role in shaping the moral consciousness, such as what the Egyptians did with their idea of the judgment of the dead, or the image of a netherworld based on the world of the living, as what the Chinese imagined and prepared for with elaborate care.

The relationship between the Romans and their ghosts was also relatively uncomplicated. The funerary ritual established the first interaction between the living and the dead. An offering was usually made to the deceased after the body was moved to the necropolis. After the ashes or body was laid in the tomb, and after the eighth day of mourning, the relatives gathered to have a second feast to treat the *manes*. This marked the formal separation of the living and the dead. After this the dead joins the collective divinity, the *manes*.⁴⁷ The principle of sacrificing to the dead, that is, by burning the victim, was not very different from the sacrificing to the divinities. The Romans had the custom of paying homage to their ancestors by visiting the tombs and offering food and wine on February 13, the Parentalia. There were also public holidays to honor the ancestors and the family gods. The purpose of these was to keep a good relationship with the dead, as the Romans in general regarded the dead as a source of pollution and thus the tombs were located outside the city where the living dwelled.⁴⁸

The Romans believed that there were myriads of malicious supernatural beings in the world, including ghosts; thus, various apotropaic methods or exorcistic acts were prevalent.⁴⁹ However, despite the possibility that human ghosts could become haunting spirits that came back to bother people, the relationship between the living and the dead did not seem to have developed beyond that of making timely offerings and keeping a safe distance from each other. As everyday religious actions and devotions to the gods for health, success, and happiness already supplied the Roman people with plenty of protection,⁵⁰ ghosts occupied, as a consequence, a rather restricted role, as they formed a class of family deities (*manes*, *lares*) that were treated much the same as the greater deities.⁵¹ In the capacity of family deities, *manes*'s function was no more than protecting and prolonging the life of the heirs, and guarding their actions to ensure their good fortune. Occasionally, the *manes* would be asked to harm the enemies of their relatives, or to appear in dreams to

⁴⁶ Mikalson 1983: 82. ⁴⁷ Rüpke 2007: 271. ⁴⁸ Rüpke 2007: 115–16.

⁴⁹ Dickie 2001. ⁵⁰ Belayche 2007. ⁵¹ King 2009.

give instructions.⁵² The Roman ghosts, therefore, seem to have performed mere instrumental functions and did not assume the role as agents to carry some special message, moralizing or otherwise.

In sum, this cursory comparison of the role of ghosts in ancient China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome is not meant to be a comprehensive study of the phenomenon of ghosts in human societies, as only experts in each of these areas could do the subject justice. It is always a risky business to make some generalizations, and the overarching terms used, such as “the ancient Chinese” or the “ancient Egyptians,” can always be a hindrance to a more nuanced understanding of the different strands of tradition within the culture. Nevertheless, this comparison affords us with a chance to position the differences and similarities of the role of ghosts in each of these societies, as a way to better understand the individual characteristics of the religious systems and ultimately sharpen a bit our understanding of each culture.

It is important to realize that, unlike those of us who had been given a rich deposit of cultural assets and thus are able to look at the phenomenon of ghosts in early history in a dispassionate way, our subjects, who lived in a time when all the cultural sediments had not yet been accumulated and – arguably – had less information or comparative data at their disposal, and who had a closer relationship with nature and all the powers that manifested through this relationship, could not have taken the phenomenon of ghosts – and therefore death – lightly. Thus we need to try every angle to evaluate the available sources so as to have a fuller picture. Yet since there are theoretically infinite shades of such relationships, the concepts and images that are created out of this could potentially also be infinite. Any single-perspective understanding of this relationship would therefore not be able to grasp its complexity.

Our task, therefore, must be to try our best to understand the cultural milieu in which our subjects were situated. That is, we are not only looking at the various sources that contain information about people’s idea of ghosts, but also paying attention to the cultural environment within which the idea of ghosts developed. Only by so doing can we establish an organic understanding of the phenomenon of ghosts and its significance in relation to the history and culture of a given society.

The revelation from all the Chinese sources that we have examined in this volume shows that there was a world of ghosts that was not apparent

⁵² King 2009: 111–12.

from the received cultural discourse or the Grand Narrative. This dark world of ghosts was always part of the Chinese past, although there was insufficient effort to connect this world to the world that was constructed for us by generations of scholars and writers on the cultural achievement of this past or, for that matter, any past. It would be a challenging task to evaluate exactly how much of this dark world has contributed to the world of light. Yet if we open any book on Chinese culture, one can hardly find any reference to ghosts. The most likely place to find such references would be ghost stories as a form of literary genre, or writings on religion – to be more specific, on the “popular religion” – and even there it would not occupy much space.

Of course, it is also a fact that traces of this dark world have not been totally kept underground, so to say, but could surface here and there throughout history and through various media, which gives us the chance to write this book. One special aspect of the ancient Chinese idea of ghosts is the extent to which people were willing to engage in dealing with them, in deliberating about the nature and the relationship between humans and ghosts, and the extent to which ghosts are featured in literary expressions. We have discussed how the idea of ghosts formed part of people’s conception of the netherworld, how the imagination of ghosts could be a force to shape people’s morality and social responsibility, and how narratives of ghosts could have given the development of literature a twist and enriched the literary imagination and sense of aesthetics. This dark side of the culture, just like the dark side of the personal conscience, could have molded the outward expressions, as either “cultural achievements” or “personal accomplishments” in any number of imperceptible ways. That is why even today the Chinese expression, “There is a ghost in your heart” is still a vivid way to convey the situation where an unspoken, or unspeakable, but real, underlying intention might be the foundation of a sunny facade. The world of ghosts in early China that we studied here, therefore, could be understood as metaphorically the “ghost” in the heart of Chinese history and culture. Here the alleged saying of Confucius – “How abundantly do ghosts and spirits display the powers that belong to them! We look for them, but do not see them; we listen to, but do not hear them; yet they enter into all things, and there is nothing without them” – can be seen as a prophetic pronouncement of the importance of ghosts in Chinese culture.

The Chinese language, which until today still uses the word ghost/*gui* frequently in daily life, is the only surviving culture among all the ancient cultures studied here. Although Chinese society is rapidly modernizing in

the sense of scientific and technological development, the continuous use of the term “ghost” as an effective expression to invoke something strange, wonderful, ridiculous, incredible, sinister, horrifying, or even comic indicates the rich history of ghosts in Chinese culture and the deep connection between modern China and its past. Our study of the earlier part of this history may serve as a prologue for the entire story.

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