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]

1.1 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* 神出鬼没)." It is significant to note that when

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[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 Dynasty[5] 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]

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[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,

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[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

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[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

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[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

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[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 '*ôb* narrowly refers to the soul of the ancestors, thus could be seen as the closest concept to the idea of ghosts. The term *rĕpā'îm*, 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]

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[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*,

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[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

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,

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[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

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[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

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[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 over-shadowed 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

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[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 "Sinicizaton" 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.