

IMPERIAL ORDER AND LOCAL VARIATION: THE CULTURE OF GHOST IN EARLY IMPERIAL CHINA

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This paper proposes to provide an outline of the development of the concept of ghost in early Imperial China. I will first give a brief account of the emergence of a discourse on ghost in early China, then I will discuss the religious milieu of early imperial China, concentrating on both the establishment of the imperial order and official religious rituals, and the idea of ghost persisted in people's daily life that developed according to local traditions. I will examine how the official and the private idea of ghost interacted or overlapped with one another. Lastly, I will introduce the appearance of the literary ghost at the end of the Eastern Han, as a prelude to the Six Dynasty ghost literature.

Key words: ghost, official cult, private worship.

1. Introduction

The study of the religious life of the ancient Chinese gained certain momentum in recent years thanks to the discovery of a number of new textual and archaeological evidence. We begin to be able to construct a fresh view, though still largely based on traditional texts, of the religious piety of the ordinary people. In particular, we are able to discuss the idea of ghost in light of the new materials. This is significant because the idea of ghost has always been part of people's private consciousness. What we are used to quote from the traditional texts are mostly ideological explanations by the intellectual elites that are aimed at explicating particular ideological positions. The new materials, e.g., the Qin Dynasty bamboo texts from Shuihudi, Fangmatan, and a number of funerary texts from the Han, however, allow us to have a closer look at the daily religion and the role of ghost in this more private sphere of spiritual life.

The idea of ghost is probably a primordial concept in human society that came into being long before any of the formal belief systems were formed. It is not something that a religion, whether Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity or any other religion,

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had itself created, but something that these religions needed to deal with, to incorporate into their belief system. It is part of the world that religious systems tried to make sense of. Ghosts, just like human beings, need to be positioned in the cosmos that religion has defined. The problem of ghost, moreover, is not only a religious issue. For a study of the ways people constructed or imagined about the nature and function of ghost provide vital information on the relationship between the living and the dead, as well as attitudes toward life, the world, and all sorts of literary and artistic activities. As a cultural phenomenon, one can also regard the idea of ghost as a piece of collective memory. Through layered construction of time and space, the idea of ghost always contains a cluster of images that may reveal different meanings to different people. The present study tries to analyse the idea of ghost in ancient China as revealed in two layers of social settings: the central/official and the dispersed/local.

2. The emergence of a discourse of ghost in pre-imperial China

The religion of the Shang and Zhou periods, as revealed in the oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, could be characterised as a cluster of beliefs, including beliefs in the Supreme God (*shangdi*), Heaven (*tian*), the ancestral spirits, and various deities of nature; mountains, rivers, and natural phenomena (Poo 1998, pp. 23–40). These were loosely systematised in that the Supreme God on High or Heaven seem to be the final arbiter of everything, and that there was a certain hierarchical order among the various spirits. In this context, ghost, in the sense of the spirit of the dead, belongs to the system of ancestor worship, or at least partially so. The idea that people who died an unnatural death would become ghosts and come back to the world could be seen as originating from the need to take care of the ancestral spirits in ancestor worship. Only by providing the dead with proper burial, and regular sacrifice, would the ancestral spirit be at peace, thus their ghosts would not come back to haunt people. Form those who died a violent death or through injustice, however, ghostly vengeance seems often unavoidable. This was usually the case when ghosts appeared to people other than their descendants. In fact, since the concept of spirit and ghost probably existed in pre-historical times, there is no way for us to decide if the concept of the ghost grew from ancestor worship, or ancestor worship incorporated the idea of the ghost. We could only say that both are inseparably intertwined ever since the Shang (see Poo forthcoming).

In the *Book of Poetry*, the term *shen* 神 is often used in the sense of the spirit of the ancestors,¹ or the deities.² The difference between *gui* 鬼 and *shen* is not quite clear, but a sense of disrespect can be detected in the only appearance of the word *gui*:

¹ *Shijing zhushu* 詩經注疏 (1985, 13/2: 7), <楚茨> 先祖是皇，神保是饗。

² *Shijing zhushu* 詩經注疏 (1985, 17/4: 3), <卷阿> 俾爾彌爾性，百神爾主矣。

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 (*yü* 蜮),
 Then I could not get you.³

Here the word ghost (*gui*) is mentioned as something similar to *yü*, a type of evil spirit in the water that was thought to bring harm to people. This is also in concordance with the meaning of *gui* in the oracle bone inscriptions.

Since both *shen* and *gui* were spiritual beings, there were bound to be some overlapping qualities that both shared. In fact, as revealed in many pre-Qin texts, there were different shades of meanings associated with the concept of *gui*.

In the Eastern Zhou document *Zhuozhuan*, for example, there were two meanings associated the term *gui*. In the case of appearing in conjunction with *shen*, as in *gui-shen*, *gui* can be synonymous with *shen*, referring to the spirit of the deity.⁴ Similar use of *gui* is also found in such pre-Qin texts as the *Book of Change*, *zhouyi*,⁵ the *Book of History*, *Shangshu*,⁶ or *Zhuangzi*.⁷ Moreover, the terms *shen*, *gui-shen*, and *gui* are often interchangeable, indicating that the term *gui* was regularly used as an equivalent of the spirit of a deity.⁸

Other instances, however, show that the term *gui* clearly refers to the spirit of a deceased person, who is less of a divine character.⁹ The few references to ghost and spirit in the Confucian *Analects* also show that the term *gui* refers to one's own ancestor.¹⁰ *Gui-shen* can be used as a composite term that refers to spirits in general, including ancestral spirits and gods,¹¹ and could also be synonymous with *gui*.¹² These

³ *Shijing zhushu* 詩經注疏 (1985, 12/3: 18), <何人斯>: 出此三物, 以詛爾斯。爲鬼爲蜮, 則不可得。

⁴ *Zuozhuan zhushu* 左傳注疏 (1985, 3:7), 隱公三年: 可薦於鬼神, 可羞於王公; 4:24 隱公十一年: 鬼神實不逞于許君, 而假手于我寡人; 6:18 桓公六年: 故務其三時, 修其五教, 親其九族, 以致其禮祀, 於是乎民和而神降之福, 故動則有成。今民各有心, 而鬼神乏主。

⁵ *Zhouyi zhushu* 周易注疏 (1985, 2:33), <象> 曰: 鬼神害盈而福謙, 人道惡盈而好謙。

⁶ *Shangshu zhushu* 尚書注疏 (1985, 8:14), 山川鬼神, 亦莫不寧; 13:8 予仁若考, 能多材多藝, 能事鬼神。

⁷ Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1975, p. 150), 夫徇耳目內通而外於心知, 鬼神將來舍, 而況人乎。

⁸ *Zuozhuan zhushu* (1985, 12:23), 僖公五年 公曰: 「吾享祀豐潔, 神必據我。」對曰: 「臣聞之: 鬼神非人實親, 惟德是依。」 38:12 襄公二十七年: 子木問於趙孟曰: 「范武子之德 何如?」對曰: 「夫子之家事治, 言於晉國無隱情, 其祝史陳信於鬼神無愧辭。」 子木歸以語王。王曰: 「尚矣哉! 能敬神、人, 宜其光輔五君以爲盟主也。」 49:12 昭公二十年: 不 憚鬼神, 神怒民痛。 54:4 定公元年: 「縱子忘之, 山川鬼神其忘諸乎?」 士伯怒, 謂韓簡子曰: 「薛徵於人, 宋徵於鬼。宋罪大矣。且已無辭, 而抑我以神, 誣我也。」

⁹ *Zuozhuan zhushu* (1985, 18:13), 文公二年: 「吾見新鬼大, 故鬼小。先大後小, 順也。」 21:21 宣公四年: 「鬼猶求食, 若敖氏之鬼不其餒而!」

¹⁰ *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏 (1985, 2:10), 子曰: 「非其鬼而祭之, 諂也。見義不爲, 無勇也。」

¹¹ *Lunyu zhushu* (1985, 6:8), 樊遲問知。子曰: 「務民之義, 敬鬼神而遠之, 可謂知矣。」 8:8 子曰: 「禹, 吾無間然矣! 菲飲食, 而致孝乎鬼神。」

¹² *Lunyu zhushu* (1985, 11:4), 季路問事鬼神。子曰: 「未能事人, 焉能事鬼?」

examples show that at this time there is still no commonly agreed used of the term *gui*. This suggests that perhaps the original meaning of *gui* was a generic term referring to the spirit or soul of either human, deity, or animal. The interchangeability of *gui* and *shen* indicates that the two concepts are not yet clearly distinguished from each other. It was only later that *gui* referred exclusively to the spirit of the dead, and that *shen* the spirit of the gods.

In the text of *Xunzi*, when the term *gui* was mentioned, the meaning was always clearly that of the spirit of the dead, and often in a negative connotation (Wang Xianqian 王先謙 1981, pp. 250, 270). In *Yanzi* 晏子, on the other hand, the term *gui* was always mentioned together with *shen*, thus *guishen* became a composite term that referred to spiritual beings in general (Wu Zeyu 吳則虞 1961, pp. 155, 230, 264, 446).

Another Warring States text *Mozi*, however, apparently used the archaic meaning of *gui* as representing “spirit” when he says that “the ghosts and 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” (Sun Yirang 1972, 8:153; Watson 1967, p. 107). *Mozi* uses *gui* to refer to the spirits of the gods, which seems to be an effort to bring the status of the lofty gods down to a more personable level.¹³ In the book of *Hanfeizi*, *gui* and *shen* are still interchangeable concepts,¹⁴ and the term *gui-shen* was still synonymous with “spirits” in general.¹⁵

In the *Book of Rites (Liji)* there is an explicit statement concerning the origin of *gui*: “when a person has died, it is called *gui*”.¹⁶ This of course does not necessarily mean that everyone at this time has agreed upon a clear definition, but it at least indicates the beginning of a more differentiated understanding of the meaning of *gui*. In the *Rite of Zhou (Zhouli)*, the concept of *gui* is also clearly separated from the concept of *shen*, the “heavenly spirit (*shen*)” and is referred to as “the *rengui* 人鬼”, the “human ghost”.¹⁷ There is of course the problem of the dates of *Zhouli* and *Liji*, but we can do no better than assigning a general date of late Warring States period. Towards the late Warring States period, moreover, there was a trend in the intellectual circle to systematise the gods and ghosts into a more coherent structure. The “Monthly Ordinance (*Yueling*)” of the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Lord Lü (Lüshi chunqiu)* was an apparent case, organising the heavenly emperors and deities into a twelve-month cosmological structure. The *Rite of Zhou* also shows a tremendous effort by constructing an entire system of official religion (*Zhouli zhushu* 1985, 18:1–6). Even *Mozi*, when he asserts that there are three kinds of ghosts, reveals an attempt at

¹³ *Mozi* uses the term “ghost of heaven *tiangu*” several times, see Sun Yirang, *Mozi xiangqu*, p. 29: 上有以絜為酒醴粢盛，以祭天鬼；p. 50: 故古者聖王，明天鬼之所欲，而避天鬼之所憎；p. 124: 若國家治，財用足，則內有以潔為酒醴粢盛，以祭天鬼。

¹⁴ Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (1962, p. 104): 以道蒞天下其鬼不神。治世之民不與鬼神相害也，故曰：非其鬼不神也，其神不傷人也。

¹⁵ Wang Xianshen (1962, pp. 42–43): 衛靈公... 曰：「有鼓新聲者，使人問左右，盡報弗聞，其狀似鬼神，子為我聽而寫之。」；p. 89: 故恃鬼神者慢於法，恃諸侯者危其國。

¹⁶ *Liji zhushu* 禮記注疏 (1985, 46:6), 大凡生於天地之間者，皆曰命。其萬物死，皆曰折；人死，曰鬼；此五代之所不變也。

¹⁷ *Zhouli zhushu* 周禮注疏 (1985, 18: 1), 大宗伯之職，掌建邦之天神，人鬼，地示之禮。

systematising. The systems of the *Rite of Zhou* and the “Monthly Ordinance” foresee 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 (Poo 1998, pp. 103–121; 157–177).

Despite all these examples, we cannot overlook the fact that they reflect mainly the idea of an elite literary tradition, where the use of language often shows more subtle twists in meaning, or a tendency to mix old concepts with the new, or even intended archaism. When we look at materials that purport to contain the views of the common people, on the other hand, the use of the terms becomes less ambiguous.

In the by now well known *Rishu* 日書 or *Daybook*, a genre of literature which is represented by its earliest example in the Qin dynasty tomb from Shuihudi, we can gain an overview of various ghosts that existed in the daily lives of the middle-lower echelons of society at the end of the Warring States period (see Poo 1998, chapter 4). There does not seem to be any indication in the text that suggests an implicit order among the various ghosts or demons that are causing trouble for people. In other words, the world of the ghosts here was quite chaotic and unpredictable, and all that people could do was to avoid the attack of ghosts and spirits by employing all sorts of exorcistic rituals. Sacrifice, of course, was still commonly performed at certain fixed times and locations, as the cosmological assumptions of the progress of time according to the sexagenic system and four cardinal directions dictated. One salient aspect of this world of the ghosts is the apparent lack of an explicit moral sanction with regard to the attack of ghosts. In other words, whereas the elite tried to systematise the world of ghosts and spirits and to find a certain rationale for the behavior and preference of the ghosts, the common people did not seem to regard the attack of ghosts as connected with the victims’ moral character. What they cared about was trying to survive among the swarm of ghosts and spirits by using certain practical methods.

3. The nature of Qin-Han official religion

The Grand Historian Sima Qian comments at the beginning of his “Treatise on Ceremonies” (*fengshan shu* 封禪書) in *Shiji* 史記 as follows:

Since ancient times, which of the emperors or kings who received the mandate of heaven did not perform the grand ceremony for the worship of Heaven and Earth on 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 (*Shiji* 28:1355).

This passage states clearly that there is an inseparable relationship between state sanctioned religious activities and the establishment of political authority.¹⁸ The Qin and Han governments are in agreement in constructing a system of official cult-worship that is aimed at ensuring the welfare of the state and the personal well being of the emperor. As has been shown previously, this official cult included the worship of the Heavenly bodies as well as the forces of nature (see Poo 1998, chapter 5). The general principle of cult worship was defined by a passage in the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*):

He who owns the world should sacrifice to the hundred gods; those enfeoffed lords whose territory encompasses [the mountains and rivers] should make sacrifice; those who do not [possess mountains and rivers], should not sacrifice. (*Liji* 46:797)¹⁹

In a word, each worshipped according to his own political status. This seemingly orderly system, however, was not one that could be said to have a careful 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. As a consequence, what was “official” – i.e., receiving government recognition and financial support – at one time might not be “official” and became a “lascivious cult (*yinsi* 淫祠)” – i.e., excessive cult – at another (Poo 1998, pp. 114–117). Most of the changes, to be sure, concerned those cults that were established at the local level. This does not exclude the fact that even those cultic activities performed in the capital were frequently under reform and re-structure.

Thus the establishment of a set of official cults from the Qin to the early Han was basically an ad hoc process. It is clear from the evidence presented in *Shiji* and *Hanshu* that emperors played an important role in the setting up and abolishing of the various cults.²⁰ Each emperor could add or abolish any number of cults according to what he had learned from his advisors, including official-literati and *fangshi*-magicians. The rationale for the setting up of the cults was simple: to ensure the peace and prosperity of the country and the longevity of the ruler. Any cult that could fulfill these functions was likely to be established. Those that were suspected to be ineffective, on the other hand, were duly abolished. Thus it can be seen that the official cults, besides the basic veneration of Heaven and the natural forces, could not really be seen as based on a coherent theory or structure.

On the whole, the Han government followed a policy that tried to control the myriad cults in the country by several steps. First, beginning from Emperor Gaozu 高祖, various local cults represented by the *wu*-shamans were transported to the capital Changan (*Shiji* 28:1378–1378). Thus the capital became a symbol of the entire state, as the rest of the country was represented, however incompletely, by the local cults (Poo 1998, pp. 117–119). This, of course, should not be seen as the extinction of the local cults. Second, by providing government support to certain cults,

¹⁸ For a discussion of the evolution of the *fengshan* ceremony, see Wechsler (1985, pp. 170–194).

¹⁹ Similar statements, *Shiji* (28: 1357); *Hanshu* (25a: 1193–1194).

²⁰ See further discussion, Poo (1998, chapter 5).

both in the reigns of Gauzu and Wendi 文帝, 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 Wudi 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 value system that was consistent with the official ideology, i.e., Confucianist social ethics in the framework of correlative cosmology.

The imperial order created by all these efforts, to be sure, was only the context in which local variations were taking place and against which they were measured. The belief in and worship of ghosts was one element that could show the interrelationship between order and variation.

4. The 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, which was the help of various ghosts and spirits that were not necessarily incorporated in the official cult. In other words, even at the beginning when imperial cult system was established, there was simultaneous worshipping of ghosts and spirits at the court to serve the emperor. The First Emperor of Qin was known for his intense interest in looking for the elixir of immortality and the islands of the immortals. In order for the immortals to come, according to the Magician Lusheng, one needed to expel the evil ghosts (*Shiji* 6:257; similarly, 12:458). Thus the belief in ghosts was related to the search for immortality. The Han emperor Wendi was, for some time, enchanted by the magician Xin Yuanping 新垣平 who claimed to be able to observe and explain the divine ether. Emperor Wudi was notorious for his indulgence in the magical arts and his belief in the existence of ghosts. When one of Wudi’s favorite concubines Lady Wang died, for example, the emperor asked a magician Shaoweng 少翁 to recall the ghost of Lady Wang, and was convinced that what he saw in the night from a distant tent was indeed her ghost (*Shiji* 28:1387; *Hanshu* 25:1219–1220). After the conquest of the kingdom of Southern Yue, it was reported to Wudi that the Yue people believed in ghosts, and their cult worshipping of ghosts was effective. Thus the former king of Dongou lived to one hundred and sixty years because he worshipped ghosts. Wudi immediately ordered the *wu*-shamans of Yue to setup Yue-style cult in the capital Changan (*Shiji* 28:1399–1400).

Although *guishen* as a term was commonly employed to designate spirits in general, the terms *gui* and *shen* could still be used interchangeably. Thus a woman from Changling was worshiped as “*shenjun* 神君” or “Divine Mistress” by Han Wudi because her ghost appeared to people (*Shiji* 28:1384). There was, however, no specific significance attached to this cult. The ghost of Dubo 杜伯 also received a cult. The *Shiji* describe his cult as “The Lord of Du, who was the Right-General of the former Zhou dynasty, and who was the most junior ghost in Central Qin that showed

efficacy (*shen*).”²¹ Here the word *shen* becomes a term that qualifies the power of the ghost. From the use of the term *guishen* in the Han texts, it is clear that ghost and spirit/god were conceived as belonging to the same category of beings. The difference being that *gui* usually refers to the personal ghost, and *shen* refers to a deity or god of a higher level, such as those of the natural forces or constellations. Ambiguity of course exists when personal ghosts were elevated to a higher status because of special power and efficacy. The “Divine Mistress” of Changling mentioned above is an example. In the later years of Emperor Chengdi’s reign he was said to indulge himself in the worshiping of *guishen*, which should be understood as worshiping all sorts of spiritual beings (*Hanshu* 25b:1260). Wang Mang, the ruler who put an end to the Han dynasty, also feared death and promoted numerous cults dedicated to myriads of ghosts and spirits (*Hanshu* 25b:1270). During the Eastern Han period, an annual ceremony of expelling evil ghosts (Da Nuo 大傩) was performed in the capital at the year’s end, indicating a concern with a general fear of ghosts in people’s lives and environment (Poo 1998, p. 132; Bodde 1975, pp. 165–188).

The above examples show that the belief in ghosts was very much an integrated part of the life of the ruling court. This cannot be viewed as only reflecting the culture of the ruling members, since evidence shows that often the ideas of specific cults were transmitted from the lower echelons of society. The “Divine Mistress” of Changling is one such example. The *wu*-shaman from the kingdom of Southern Yue was another example. This culture of ghost recognised that the power of certain ghosts could influence the fate of a person by inflicting pain or sickness, or providing secrets of longevity. The workings of the ghosts were basically on the personal level, since for the larger concern of the welfare of the state there were the responsible deities. The famous event of the case of witchcraft in Han Wudi’s reign (*Hanshu* 27a:1334; 45:2178–2179; 63:2742–2747; 66:2879–2882), and the death of Tian Fen (*Hanshu* 52:2393), Han Wudi’s uncle, all involved belief in the malicious attacks of ghosts.

When one looks at the evidence that reveals the belief in ghosts in society, one realises that a large portion of the daily life of the ordinary people was intimately related to the idea of the ghost. 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” (Wang Liqi 王利器 1992, p. 352). The activities of the shamans and spell-chanters no doubt were related the daily dealings with ghosts and spirits in the areas of sickness, death, marriage, childbirth, and various daily activities.²² 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 (see Lin Fu-shih 林富士 1999, chapter 7), though this need not to be a hindrance for us to gain a general understanding regarding the state of religious life during the Han period. The Eastern Han scholar Wang Chong was a fervent critic of popular beliefs and

²¹ *Shiji* (28:1375), 杜主, 故周之右將軍, 其在秦中, 最小鬼之神者。

²² For discussion of daily religious activities, see Poo (1998, chapter 6).

cults, and the essays contained in his *Lun Heng* only confirm our impression that the belief in ghosts was a common phenomenon. From his description of the idea of ghosts current in his time, it seems that ghosts were basically conceived as evil beings that caused pain and fear and produced negative results in their relationship with humans.²³ Stories contained in the biographies of the *fangshi*-magicians and others in the *Houhanshu* often mention exorcism against evil ghosts.²⁴

Funerary custom revealed the belief in ghosts from another angle. We mentioned *rishu* or Daybook as testimony of popular belief in ghosts and spirits. So far at least seven different finds have been excavated from Qin-Han tombs, the geographical distribution ranges from present-day Gansu in the west, to Hebei in the Central Plain, to Hubei and Anhui in the south.²⁵ This custom suggests that what people found useful against ghosts in life was considered beneficial to the dead even in the netherworld. The existence and wide distribution of *rishu* can be corroborated by the *Treaties of Bibliography* (*yiwenzhi* 藝文志) in *Hanshu*, wherein a number of exorcistic texts were mentioned as belonging to the royal library (*Hanshu* 30:1772). 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 *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Yili zhushu* 37:8; *Zuozhuan zhushu* 39:3), but also confirmed by archaeological finds. In an Eastern Han tomb was found a funerary ritual text, which was a spell against an evil ghost:

He who died on the *yisi* day has the ghost-name “heavenly light” (*tien-guang* 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 (Jiangsusheng wenwu guanli weiyuanhui 江蘇文物管理委員會 1960, p. 18).

The paintings and reliefs often found in the Han tombs are potentially very important sources for our understanding of the supernatural world. Yet if we look at those “supernatural beings”, such as winged immortals and half human beasts, we can hardly identify any of them as threatening ghost. Instead, the large number of seemingly ferocious “monsters” are in fact playing the role of protectors and auspicious omens.²⁶ This is perhaps because of the fact that the paintings and reliefs basically served the function of funerary objects that either should aid the deceased to have a better next life, or to ward off all sorts of malicious ghosts and demons. In other words, there is hardly any chance for an image of unwelcome ghost to be depicted in the tomb setting.

²³ Liu Pansui 劉盼遂 (1990 rpt.), “Dinggui 訂鬼” (pp. 448–456); “Sihui 四諱” (pp. 465–472); Forke (1962, pp. 239–249).

²⁴ *Houhanshu* 82b:2744, 2746,2749. See DeWoskin (1983). For other stories involved in the exorcism of ghosts, *Houhanshu* (41:1441; 50:1676; 57:1841).

²⁵ For detail, see Li Ling 李零 (2000, chapter 3).

²⁶ For a convenient reference to the themes in Han tomb paintings and reliefs, see Finsterbusch (1966, 1972).

So far the culture of the ghost as we observe at the court level was basically of the same type as that in society at large. The nature of the ghost in this culture was basically hostile towards humans, and the human attitudes toward the ghosts were either conciliatory or antagonistic. For people who aspired to a prosperous life and longevity, the idea of a ghost was actually the other side of the coin: whatever hope there was for an ideal life or life hereafter cannot be achieved without first settling the account with ghosts and spirits. It is only after ghosts were appeased that people's hope could be realised. Thus, in the Han dynasty, the ability to exorcise ghosts was to become one of the outstanding characteristics of a number of people with magical power, including the *wu*-shamans and *fangshi*-magicians. Whatever reverence there was toward the great cosmic forces was relegated to the background in people's daily lives when they had to solve certain immediate problems. The imperial order of official cults, the ones that were mentioned in the *fengshan shu* 封禪書 of *Shiji* or *jiaosi zhi* 郊祀志 of *Hanshu*, 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 of society.

5. The rise of the literary ghost

The idea of a ghost is in a sense 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 image of a ghost could reveal the social ethics of a given age, or at least hint at certain characteristics that are otherwise less easy to recognise. The majority of the examples from the pre-Qin to the Han dynasty that have to do with ghosts reveal a noticeable fact; most of the ghosts were described as independent agents who had little or no individuality. They could interact with humans, yet there was little exchange of ideas in a "person to person" way between them and humans. In other words, people imagined that the ghosts could exert certain power over humans, and that there were ways humans could deal with ghosts and their power, but they did not seem to be able to imagine the ghosts to have a more personal relationship or interaction with the humans. This impersonal imagination of ghosts, wherein ghosts are either to be expelled or appeased, remains a predominating view and understanding in the popular mentality. 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 more "personable" fashion. Whereas before when a ghost was mentioned in a narrative, he was usually treated as "it", as a "thing", that no communication between the ghosts and human beings was possible or necessary – as if they were not also once humans. It seems that, as an element in the narrative, the image of a ghost had not yet become something into which writers could inject their own thoughts. In other words, the concept of ghost had not yet been utilised as a vehicle to express particular ideas or emotions. Gradually we see more and more "human" aspects are injected or infused into the description of ghosts, and the ghosts

began to be endowed with “human” nature. The ghosts were given individualities approximating that of the humans. The process of this re-cognition of the human nature of ghosts, to be sure, cannot be established with any precision. We can only rely on what we can find, and place the Eastern Han as a possible starting point. The more plausible evidence we have 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*).

Elsewhere I have discussed *Fengsu tongyi* as precursor to Six Dynasty ghost stories (Poo 1997, pp. 69–94). The most extraordinary feature of the ghost stories in *Fengsu tongyi* is that the ghosts were conceived and described by the author with a human character, the action, concern, emotion, intention, love and hate of the ghosts were woven into the narratives. In other words, these are stories about the individual ghost that one does not find in the earlier material. This humanising tendency in the ghost stories received further development in the Six Dynasties anomaly tales or *zhi-guai* novels. A number of factors might account for this tendency; the rise of the genre of short stories that demanded a more vivid literary portrait 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 proselytising (Poo 2000, pp. 43–64).²⁷ On the whole, the humanising tendency could be seen as part of the collective effort to create an ideal world, since, as I argued elsewhere, the world of the ghosts was, in a sense, more ideal than the human world, for no human intrigues could have worked in the world of the dead (Poo 1997).

Thus the rise of literary ghost since the late Han contributed to the growth of the culture of ghost in Chinese society. This literary ghost did not replace the previous idea of ghosts, since it is only an elaboration on the character of the ghosts. The literary ghosts, however, after they were ingrained in the popular mentality, became part of society’s collective imagination. We could therefore observe two ways to portray ghosts in Chinese society; those concerning people’s daily activities, the ancient concept of malicious ghosts that need to be dealt with effectively persisted throughout the centuries; and, when people are in a more relaxed or speculative mood, literary ghosts, the ones with all sorts of exotic power and fabulous stories, were likely to occupy people’s attention.

6. Conclusion

The culture of ghost can only be grasped by looking at how people imagined what the ghost looked like, what they could or would do to people, how could they be controlled by people, and why all these happened the way they did. This paper starts with the intention of investigating the culture of the ghost in early imperial China, especially with regard to the possible dichotomy between official and private religious activities. I try to point 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

²⁷ For the anomaly tales in general, see Company (1996).

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 the private sphere from the emperor in the court to the ordinary people in their household. In a sense, the belief in ghosts was always a local phenomenon, for the interaction of ghosts with humans was always on a personal, therefore local, level. The religious milieu of early imperial China, therefore, was one that was framed by the official cults, but stuffed with private worship of ghosts and spirits.

Contrary to the common idea that ghosts cause fear and create terrifying experiences, 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. The textual evidence no doubt gives us some information concerning how the ancient Chinese talked about ghost. The question is, did people actually “believe” in the stories? An uncertainty was perhaps always part of the picture, as one passage in *Zhuangzi* puts it: “When one has contact with the spirit, how can one say that there is no ghost? Yet when one has no contact with the spirit, how could one claim that there is a ghost?” (Guo Qingfan 1975, p. 958). In the elite texts, ghost was mostly mentioned in the context of some didactic purpose, the concept of ghost was appropriated to serve as a means to construct a world view or philosophical system, whether Confucianism, Taoism, 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 (Guo Qingfan 1975, pp. 617–619). Although there is no doubt that the concept of the ghost reflected a prevailing “belief” in the existence of ghost, the author of *Zhuangzi* was obviously using the concept as a convenient literary device to propagate his idea that what was important in life was freedom from the constraint of worldly affairs, which only a ghost could possess.

As Jean-Claude Schmitt puts it when he discusses the concept of ghost in Medieval Europe: “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” (Schmitt 1998, p. 8). In the process of talking and writing about the ghosts, to elaborate on Schmitt’s observation, people thus created a mental world that served some practical functions. These include moral teaching, as for example in such famous Confucian mottos: “To make sacrifice to a ghost that is not one’s own ancestor is an act of sycophancy” (*Lunyu zhushu* 2:10), 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 wisdom” (*Lunyu zhushu* 6:8). The telling of ghost stories, moreover, could also enhance the authority or prestige of certain classes of people in the belief system. These include the major players of the ghost story: the ancestors, the exorcists or *wu*-shamans, and those who have the power to communicate with ghosts. *Mozi* has obviously realised this possibility and puts it bluntly in his chapter on “Explaining Ghosts (Ming gui 明鬼)”, that a good political ruler should utilise people’s belief in and fear of ghosts, induce them to moral rectitude, and achieve a better society: “Now all the kings and nobles and gentlemen of the world who wish to seek to increase the benefit and eliminate the misery of the world, they should admit that

ghosts and spirits do exist and they should do nought but revere and propagate their existence. This is the way of the sage-kings” (Sun Yirang 1972, p. 154).

The belief in ghosts offers some psychological benefits too; it satisfies curiosity, it intensifies and releases the nervous system, and it could even be entertaining, as many of the ghost stories show. The talk about ghosts, in fact, is a perfect gray area for people to negotiate with faith: one could never be completely certain if ghosts really exist or not, thus there is always the room for religious piety to take root.

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