MOZI 31: EXPLAINING GHOSTS, AGAIN

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One prominent feature associated with Mozi (Mo Di 墨翟; ca. 479–381 BCE) and Mohism in scholarship of early Chinese thought is his so-called unwavering belief in ghosts and spirits. Mozi is often presented as a Chinese theist who stands out in a landscape otherwise dominated by this-worldly Ru 儒 ("classicists" or "Confucians"). Mohists are said to operate in a world clad in theological simplicity, one that perpetuates folk religious practices that were alive among the lower classes of Warring States society: they believe in a purely utilitarian spirit world, they advocate the use of simple do-ut-des sacrifices, and they condemn the use of excessive funerary rituals and music associated with Ru elites. As a consequence, it is alleged, unlike the Ru, Mohist religion is purely based on the idea that one should seek to appease the spirit world or invoke its blessings, and not on the moral cultivation of individuals or communities. This sentiment is reflected, for instance, in the following statement by David Nivison:

Confucius treasures the rites for their value in cultivating virtue (while virtually ignoring their religious origin). Mozi sees ritual, and the music associated with it, as wasteful, is exasperated with Confucians for valuing them, and seems to have no conception of moral self-cultivation whatever. Further, Mozi's ethics is a "command ethic," and he thinks that religion, in the bald sense of making offerings to spirits and doing the things they want, is of first importance: it is the "will" of Heaven and the spirits that we adopt the system he preaches, and they will reward us if we do adopt it. He takes it for granted that we will not do what we should (in this sense) if we do not believe in spirits or Heaven or if we think that good fortune depends on

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1 See, e.g., Ching, Chinese Religions, 70. JeeLoo Liu speaks of Mozi as the "only ancient philosopher who dealt with philosophy of religion" and "the most religious among ancient philosophers." See Liu, An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy, 110, 124. Angus Graham characterizes the Mohists as being "at once the most religious and the most logical of the ancient thinkers." See Graham, Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science, 4.
“fate” rather than being a reward for good deeds. So people must believe in spirits and must not believe in fate. In his view of religion there is (as in his ethics) no inner feeling or awe.²

Sophisticated Ru are juxtaposed here to simple-minded Mo and the implication is that both are rival camps. Michael Puett emphasizes that the Mohists were not bent on sacrificing to transform Heaven. Sacrifices for the Mohists, he argues, “are simply a case of humans giving the spirits what the spirits need, just as the spirits give humans what humans need.”³ In Puett’s reading, neither Heaven nor the spirits can be capricious to the Mohist since they act according to a clear moral calculus. Mohist interaction with the spirit world therefore is highly perfunctory and efficient since the spirits act in an entirely predictable way: you get out of the spirits what you put into them.

Another simplification of Mohist religiosity is the idea that their views on spirits are a remnant of an archaic religious world that became gradually superseded by a tide of conceptually more sophisticated philosophies. In this linear view of the history of Chinese thought, Warring States ghosts and spirits make way for rationality and ritual as we move toward the Han. For instance, Burton Watson speaks of “a growing atmosphere of sophistication and rationalism [that] led men to reject or radically reinterpret the ancient legends and religious beliefs that Mozi had so fervently affirmed.”⁴ Mozi’s “inability to prove that Heaven or the spirits deliver immediate rewards and punishments,” Benjamin Schwartz writes, “probably left his upper-class hearers indifferent to his particular religious message.”⁵ And, according to Lester Bilsky, the Mohist view that spirits give blessings in proportion to the number of offerings they receive had little impact on the overall practice of religion and government.⁶

Sometimes, the plebeian nature of Mozi’s take on the spirit world is grafted on to a sociology of the Mohist community, a subject for which very little concrete evidence survives in our sources. Angus Graham

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² Loewe and Shaughnessy, *Cambridge History of Ancient China*, 761. Chris Fraser writes in a similar vein but qualifies his statement: “The mundane tone of their religious thought is perhaps partly due to the Mohists’ general disregard of aesthetic and cultural value. Yet it would be indefensibly parochial to expect them to conform to a modern Westerner’s conception of religiosity, since the comparatively mundane character of Mohist religion is typical of much traditional Chinese folk religion.” See Fraser, “Mohism.”


