THE CULTURE OF GHOSTS IN THE SIX DYNASTIES PERIOD  
(c. 220–589 C.E.)

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The Development of the Concept of the Ghost in Early China

In early China the term gui 鬼 can roughly be equated with the term “ghost” in modern English, although other terms such hun 魂, po 魄, ling 靈, mei 魅, wu 物 and guai 怪, can all have the connotation of ghost in certain contexts.¹ The most common conception regarding the origin of gui-ghosts is that they are the spirits of deceased humans. Oftentimes, however, people in ancient China believed in the existence of ghosts or spirits of animals and even inanimate objects such as trees and rocks, just as E. B. Taylor pointed out long ago in Primitive Culture. It is noteworthy that although non-human spirits constitute a special category of beings in the Chinese belief system and folklore, and can rightly be treated separately,² in this article I prefer to include them in the category of gui-ghost, since during the Six Dynasties period, which is the period discussed here, it is often difficult to treat them differently from human ghosts, given their images, their behavior, their interaction with human beings, and their anthropomorphic nature in general.

Our understanding of gui-ghosts in early China is naturally limited and shaped by the available evidence. For the Shang (c. 17–11 century B.C.E.) period, the oracle bone inscriptions provide the main source of evidence. The gui-ghosts mentioned there are usually those deceased ancestors who caused certain diseases, especially to the kings

and nobles. The information provided by these texts basically relates to what the ghosts did, but not the reasons why they did it, or where they came from. Nor is there any information on the appearance of the ghosts. For the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–256 B.C.E.), the persona of gui-ghosts gradually takes shape, as more textual evidence related to ghosts gradually appears. In general two views of gui-ghosts can be deduced from the textual and iconographical evidence of this period. The view represented by certain elite-intellectuals, later known for convenience sake as the Confucians, regards ghosts as formless and invisible beings. As such, they could not have possessed any concrete image. Yet it is perhaps against human cognitive instinct to imagine a “being” that could exert power and influence on people’s lives yet without having a form. Thus this view belonged to the minority even amongst the elites. Instead, most people in our sources tend to take the position that ghosts, despite their illusive nature, are a kind of tangible existence perceptible by human senses.

In fact, most religious sacrifices of this and the previous period imply a belief in the concrete nature of ghosts and spirits. One passage in the Zuozhuan, the major source for the history of the Eastern Zhou (c. 770–256 B.C.E.) period, mentions that even ghosts needed to be fed, which is a clear indication of the anthropomorphic imagination of the nature of the ghost. It is unlikely that the author of the Zuozhuan would have fabricated an idea that was not already accepted in the common mentality, since presumably he is striving to convince his audience. Thus the passage could serve as an indication of the general religious mentality of the time. In the book of Mozi, written during the early fourth century B.C.E., the author uses a common-sense approach to prove the existence of ghosts by quoting incidences where people claimed to have seen ghosts. Regardless of the logical problem inherent in Mozi’s argument, it is undeniable that the author’s words are representative of the common conception of ghost in his time.

Since they are regarded as concrete beings, it follows that gui-ghosts must have possessed certain physical attributes. Of course, exactly how a ghost should look can vary greatly from one instance to another. The general impression is that ghosts could possess certain strange

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