Tales of the anomalous (zhiguai 志怪) contain valuable clues to the conceptions of death and the afterlife in the Six Dynasties (c. 220–589 C.E.). These tales synthesized traditional viewpoints, integrated and echoed the advent of Buddhist and Daoist teachings, and addressed issues prominent in contemporary philosophical debates, such as discourses about the existence (or non-existence) of ghosts and the relationship between a person’s body and spirit. Of the over one hundred extant tales, many they drew from a variety of non-official traditions (zazhuan 雜傳 and zaji 雜記). Within narrative literature, this constitutes an aesthetic of the strange that serves as a model for subsequent ghost stories. Encompassing a broad range of motifs, tales of the anomalous are similar to the tales of transformed spiritual beings (jingguai 精怪) and gods, all of which are based on a narrative model which I call “guiding the deviant towards the norm (chang 常).” These narratives unfold by attempting to resolve problems presented by the anomaly. Not only did sophisticated readers, narrators, and compilers of the anomaly tales such as Gan Bao 干寶 (276?–336) use this narrative model with great skill, ordinary readers also read with the expectation

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that the anomalous would in the end be guided back to the norm. The anomaly tales, however, are not merely conventions inherited from the past. They are in a sense creative works that reinvent the categories by which the world is ordered and evaluated.\(^4\) Using as evidence three sets of Six Dynasties narratives representing traditional, Daoist, and Buddhist tales of the strange, I shall demonstrate how this narrative mode attempts to solve the troubled relationship between the human and the spirit worlds through rituals informed by shamanistic, Daoist and Buddhist practices, and how it symbolically expresses a dialectic between “normative” and “anomalous” in an age of upheavals.

Even if this narrative mode is traditionally regarded as a kind of “minor way” (\textit{xiaodao} 小道), i.e., a trivial literary pastime, it is nevertheless able to reflect serious worldviews. The more outlandish the narratives seem, the more keenly they reveal attitudes and beliefs regarding the ultimate questions about the afterlife. Issues such as the separation of the living and the dead and the continuity of life and death ultimately aim at “guiding the deviant back to the norm” and thus embody the collective psychological demands of normality and order.

\textit{Basic Concepts of Ghost Narrative}

\textit{The Realms of Life and Death}

Differentiating the spaces of the living and the dead in terms of “the norm,” coordinated with burial practices, created a “representational space”\(^5\) for the realm of the dead. For example, the hundreds of large tombs of the Yangshao (仰韶) culture, dating from the Neolithic period, are public graves for one clan. As the space of the dead, these graves, while usually located in the vicinities of the villages, are clearly

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\(^4\) For the narrative model of “guiding the deviant towards cosmic constants (\textit{chang} 常)” see Liu Yuan-ju, \textit{Shenti, xingbie, jieji—Liuchao zhiguai de changyi lunshu yu xiaoshuo meixue} 身體·性別·階級—六朝志怪的常異論述與小說美學 (Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, 2002), pp. 18–19, 195.

\(^5\) According to Lefebvre, representational space is the combination of both spatial practice and represented space. For a discussion of how this concept can be applied to a spatial analysis of cityscapes, see Edward Soja, \textit{Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places} (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997).