Introduction

The religious terrain that we see from the pre-Qin era to the Eastern Han period is that people in general accepted and participated in various forms of religious activities. There are the official cults, which are managed and maintained by the government; there are also those local religious activities that constituted part of people’s daily life. These daily religious activities, as they originate from the primary religious beliefs in society that go back to the remote past, are part of the cultural milieu that people grew up with. The daily religious activities mainly deal with various problems and issues in life, be they major ones such as birth, illness, and death, or minor ones such as headache or digging a well. When dealing with these daily activities, it is often the case that people believe they have come into contact with certain powers—extra-human powers as I would like to phrase it—that could influence their life. Some of these powers are benevolent, others may be malevolent. The benevolent are usually perceived as gods, while the malevolent are seen as evil ghosts and spirits, although we should be quite clear that the term *shen* (god or divine spirit) does not necessarily carry a benevolent connotation. For the common people, therefore, the issue with ghosts and deities is not whether they exist or not, but how to deal with them. There are of course a number of intellectuals who have always doubted the existence of ghosts and spirits, yet their voice is a telling sign that indicates the general mentality of the society in which they live. Few in a traditional society can avoid facing the problem of dealing with ghosts and spirits in various forms and capacities.

From the Eastern Han period onward, new elements were added to the Chinese religious horizon: the rise of religious Daoism and Buddhism. Daoism originates from the soil of traditional Chinese belief systems, thus has an intimate relationship with the beliefs and cults that have a long history in the land. Buddhism came to China via Central Asia, and borrowed many traditional Chinese concepts in the initial
phase of its propagation in Chinese society. It of course also brought quite a number of new concepts and related terminologies into the Chinese language and intellectual reservoir. Daoism and Buddhism are not only competing with each other, they also need to compete with the Chinese tradition. Between Daoism and Buddhism, this competition consists in part of philosophical arguments, as each wished to dismantle the other’s theoretical basis of existence. Sometimes they also rely on the support of one secular government or another to suppress their opponent. Yet between them and the common people, both needed to demonstrate that they could effectively solve any problem people encountered in their daily lives and therefore could legitimately replace the traditional belief system. In order to demonstrate that they had such ability, they had to show they could perform certain important functions that the traditional belief systems used to perform, such as the ability to communicate with ghosts and spirits, or to exorcise evil spirits. This, in other words, is to say that they did not oppose the traditional concept of ghosts and spirits in a fundamental way but rather tended to accept what people were used to believing in. Any transformation of these traditional concepts would have to come later, after each of these new religions had established its foothold in society.

The goal of this chapter is to explore the extent to which dangerous spirits, ghosts, and demons influenced the life and thought of the people of late Han to the end of the Six Dynasties period. I shall examine the similarities and differences among the Daoist, Buddhist, Confucian, and commoner views and treatment of these malicious spirits. As the fear of evil spirits rarely departed from people’s daily life, we need to ask what is more important for a commoner: the distinction between one religious persuasion and another, or the distinction between effective and ineffective ways of warding off evil ghosts? By clarifying this issue, it might be possible to have a more subtle view of the interrelationship between these different persuasions and their practical effect at the level of people’s daily existence and to arrive at an understanding of the religious experience of the people in which doctrines are but the outer garments of the inner being. It is also possible that, by examining the idea of ghosts and evil spirits, we can analyze how people with different religious backgrounds utilized the fear of dangerous spirits to propagate their own teaching, their moral, philosophical, or political ideas. The end result of such discussions, hopefully, is to sketch a common religious mentality against which the major religious traditions of this period played out their acts.