Once, when Duke Huan went hunting in the marshes with Guan Zhong as the driver of his chariot, he saw a ghost. The Duke grabbed Guan Zhong’s hand and said: “Did you see that?” Guan Zhong answered, “Your servant didn’t see anything.” When the duke returned, he became gloomy and withdrawn and fell ill, to the point of not going out for several days. A gentleman from Qi named Huangzi Gao’ao said: “The duke has harmed himself. How could it have been a ghost who harmed the duke! When pent-up qi dissipates without returning, it causes insufficiency. When it ascends without descending, it causes irascibility in the person. When it descends without ascending, it causes forgetfulness in the person. When it neither ascends nor descends, but remains in the center of the body by the heart, then it will cause disease.

Zhuangzi, “Mastering life”¹

Introduction: demons as disease-causing agents

The deepest source of disease is fear; unknown things are the breeding ground of fear. Even though Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公 and Guan Zhong 管仲 went hunting together, it was only Duke Huan who encountered the ghost. Duke Huan was greatly frightened and fell ill to the point of not leaving his home. Being haunted by demons served as the dominant etiological notion during the pre-Qin period.² Nevertheless, Huangzi Gao’ao 皇子告敖 in the story above rejected the possibility of Duke Huan seeing a ghost and instead suggested that the direct cause of his disease

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was excessive worrying, a type of emotion also referred to as “pent-up qi” 忿滀之氣. Stagnation of congested qi caused pathological changes in the person on both the physical and emotional level, such as irascibility or mental confusion. The ghost that Duke Huan saw with his own eyes was a delusion produced by the action of qi. Furthermore, people believed that the disquietude caused by being haunted by demons was the result of “loss of virtue” 失德. The Han Feizi 韓非子- states: “What everybody refers to as ‘being haunted’ (sui 崇) is in fact a condition wherein the hun and po souls have departed and the spirit is in disarray. When the spirit is in disarray, virtue is absent. When demons do not haunt a person, the hun and po souls do not depart, and when the hun and po souls have not departed, the spirit is not in disarray. The state of the spirit not being in disarray is called ‘having virtue.’” The cycles of qi were found everywhere in early China. The hun and po souls inside the human body, the spirit and “virtue” all are a type of the subtlest qi. At the same time, the notion of “qi” also carries the implication of moral principles 道德倫理.

The time around the 4th century BC was a key period in the transformation of etiological notions in the early medical classics. Before this time, the main causes of disease had been factors that invaded the human body from the outside, such as climatic changes or calamities caused by demons. According to the chapter on “Medical offices” 醫官 in the Zhouli 周禮( Rites of Zhou), “the four seasons each have their pestilential diseases.” The “Discussion on wind” 風論 in the Suwen 素問 (Plain questions) also explains that “wind is the leader among the hundred diseases.” Nevertheless, exterior causes like climatic change gradually began to be calculated and subjected to laws, becoming closely linked to hemerology. At the same time, we must pay special attention to the rise of theories on internal causation and psychologi-

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3 For a discussion of qi in the early classics, see Du Zhengsheng, Cong meishou dao changsheng: yiliao wenhua yu Zhongguo gudai shengming guan (Taipei, 2005), pp. 122–54.