

Ghost Literature: Exorcistic Ritual Texts or Daily Entertainment?

Scholars of Chinese popular religious culture have long been aware that, in David Johnson's words, "the distinction between entertainment and religion that comes naturally to us did not seem that obvious to most Chinese," and often their focus has been on the intersection between the performance of ritual and play in the late-imperial and modern periods.¹ Relatively few studies in the religious culture of early and medieval China have been devoted to the relationship between text and ritual, especially in the context of exorcism. By focusing on ghost literature, I hope to reveal the layering of social contexts and show intertwining of text, ritual, and religiosity.

A few words about the relationship between ritual, performance, and entertainment are in order before we proceed. Ritual may be defined as "those conscious and voluntary, repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences," which also include verbal actions such as chants and prayers.² It is often a performance that aims at creating a special, or sacred, situation and realm of existence, such as going back to a primordial time, that enables the performers and participants to gain special powers or revelations.³ Besides serving as a venue of access to the divine world, ritual reinforces prevailing social and cultural values and helps to unite the participants as a socio-

¹ David Johnson, ed., *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies* (Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), p. 91. For a discussion of the interaction between drama and ritual in contemporary Taiwan, see Wang Songshan 王嵩山, *Banxian yu zuoxi: Taiwan minjian xiqu renleixue yanjiu* 扮仙與作戲台灣民間戲曲人類學研究 (Taipei: Daoxiang, 1988), pp. 127–59. For theoretical considerations of the relationship between ritual and play in general, see the recent discussion by Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1997), pp. 72–76; 159–64.

² Evan M. Zuesse, "Ritual," in Mircea Eliade, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 12, p. 405. See also Bell's general introduction in *Ritual*. The present discussion is not specifically concerned with definitions.

³ See Stanley J. Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Ritual," in Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action, An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1985), pp. 123–66.

cultural group. However, if ritual is performed in a “repetitious and stylized” fashion,⁴ it becomes predictable and thus eventually less extraordinary. With every repetition, it becomes more like a dramatic performance, as the onlookers and participants expect more or less the same result: whether it is self-purification, assurance of the benevolence of divine beings, or union with the sacred. Drama and ritual – both being symbolic and metaphorical – are not always exclusive.⁵ Concerning this somewhat ambiguous relationship between ritual and entertainment, one can, following Johnson’s assertion, further suggest that “sacred time” is indeed “festive time,” and that the serious ritual act is in fact a form of entertainment. The Daoist *jiao* 醮, for example, is a series of performances that embodies the tenets of the Daoist religion, through which human beings have access to the divine. For the Daoist priests involved, the ritual acts are serious and rich in meaning, because they bring down the spirits and send up messages to the divine world by following correct procedures. It may, however, also be considered as a form of entertainment for the onlookers, as the rich music and spectacular performances and ritual paraphernalia on display, in addition to invoking a sense of mystery and reverence, also hold the attention of the audience. For the community, then, the performance of the ritual is both an act in which the members collectively gain the blessing of the divine, and a form of entertainment that draws the attention and emotion of the participants together and therefore reinforces the community’s solidarity.⁶

⁴ This, of course, need not mean that every performance of each ritual will be exactly the same; see *ibid.*, pp. 140–41.

⁵ From the perspective of performing art, see, for example, Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania P., 1985), pp. 3–33. From an archaeological point of view, see Colin Renfrew, “The Archaeology of Religion,” in C. Renfrew and Ezra B. W. Zubrow, eds., *The Ancient Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1994), pp. 47–54, esp. 52. In the Chinese context, for example, the origins of certain forms of local drama are closely related to the ritual of Yulanpen. See Piet van der Loon, “Les origines rituelles du théâtre chinois,” *JA* 265.1–2 (1977), pp. 141–68. For *Yulanpen* 于闐盆, see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1988). For the relation between ritual and drama in the late-imperial period, see David Johnson, ed., *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual* (Berkeley: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1989). A form of exorcism, the No 儺 play, has received special attention in the past few decades. See a series of publications in Wang Qiugui 王秋桂, ed., *Minsu quyì congshù* 民俗曲藝叢書.

⁶ In connection with the Taoist ritual and its entertaining aspects, see John Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 52–53. For a recent study on this theme in contemporary Taiwanese religious festivals, see Li Fengmao 李豐楙, “Yansu yu youxi: cong laji dao yingwangji de feichang guanCha” 嚴肅與遊戲從婚祭到迎王祭的「非常」觀察, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan minzuxue yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院民族學研究所集刊 88 (1999), pp. 135–72.

Thus when religious rituals are performed, we should not presume that it is only a belief in the efficacy of the rituals that brings believers together. Intermembral relationships, manifested in the relative position that each member occupies in the ritual act, are often an important objective. When members of a religious community seriously engage in the “playing out” of the ritual, each according to his position, the expression “entertainment” should perhaps be applied to the ritual and understood in a literal sense.

Ghost literature, as I intend to demonstrate, is one kind of evidence that allows us to explore the ramifications of this observation. The whole notion of ghosts is a ubiquitous part of the belief systems of ancient China, as it is in the modern period. Ghosts originated in the prehistoric, and have served throughout history as a focal point to show how a certain religious system, whether Daoism or Buddhism, absorbed or further developed “indigenous” or “primary” religious ideas. The fact that ghosts are often central to rituals and popular stories makes an ideal medium to reflect on the relationship between ritual and entertainment. What follows, needless to say, is only a preliminary attempt to tackle this issue.

GHOST STORIES AND EXORCISTIC RITUAL TEXTS IN THE EARLY PERIOD

Although the idea of ghosts must have originated in preliterate society, and people must have been thinking and talking about ghosts in their daily lives from the earliest times, written records of ghost stories in China appear only as early as the Eastern Zhou period.⁷

The *Commentary of Zuo* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳) recounts the story of the duke of Qi 齊侯, who once unjustly executed a cousin by the name of Peng Sheng 彭生. Peng Sheng’s ghost later came back to haunt the duke and indirectly caused his death.⁸ This episode, while relating an interesting story, also reflects the common idea that the dead could become ghosts to haunt people when they had suffered injustice or other undeserving fate.

⁷ For the concept of ghosts in the Shang and Zhou periods, see Mu-chou Poo, “The Evolving Concept of Ghost in Ancient Chinese Religion,” International Conference on Religion and Chinese Society: The Transformation of a Field and Its Implication for the Study of Chinese Culture, Chinese University of Hong Kong, May 29 to June 2, 2000. For a general treatment of the culture of ghosts in China, see Xu Hualong 徐華龍, *Zhongguo gui wenhua* 中國鬼文化 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1991).

⁸ *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (SSJZS edn.), j. 8, p. 17. For discussion, see Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 57.

Moreover, it was employed by the author to convey the moral lesson that one should not act unjustly. The story, a relatively minor one, later became one of the most famous ghost stories in the Chinese literary tradition. When Mozi mentioned it,⁹ for example, he used it as evidence for the existence of ghosts, to convince his audience that ghosts did exist, and that people had better behave and not incur their wrath. Both *Shiji* 史記 and *Hanshu* 漢書 carry the story as historical narratives, basically rephrasing that given in *Zuozhuan* and bringing it into the writing of "history."¹⁰ In the Three Kingdoms period the story was recounted as evidence of the transforming characteristics of ghosts and spirits. A famous "man of arts" (or "magician"; *fangshi* 方士) named Guan Lu 管輅 once mentioned that

duke Du 杜伯 released his spirit by riding on the flame; Peng Sheng established his image by means of water transformation. Therefore the living can come in and out of [the world], and the dead can appear or disappear. This is because the spirit of things changes into wandering souls, and human beings and ghosts resonate with each other, according to the rules of destiny 數.¹¹

The story of the ghost of Peng Sheng was mentioned again in the *History of Liang* and the *History of the Northern Dynasties*,¹² and served as a proverbial reference to one who was killed unjustly. On the other hand, in the work of the Eastern Han skeptic Wang Chong 王充, the story of Peng Sheng was cited as evidence that ghosts could not harm people.¹³ For the Daoist Ge Hong 葛洪, again, the story became evidence for the existence of ghosts.¹⁴ Even Buddhist literature and medical texts used the story as evidence for the existence of ghosts.¹⁵

⁹ Sun Yirang 孫貽讓, *Mozi xiangu* 墨子閒詁 (Taipei: Shijie, 1974) 8, pp. 139–40.

¹⁰ *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1971) 32, pp. 1484, 1530; *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1971) 27, p. 1436.

¹¹ *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (*Weishu* 魏書) (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1971) 29, p. 822.

¹² *Liangshu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1971) 5, p. 122; 48, p. 669; *Beishi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1971) 33, p. 1234.

¹³ Huang Hui 黃暉, annot., *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1990) 65, p. 941.

¹⁴ Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian* 抱朴子內篇, *juan* 2, "Lun xian 論仙"; see Wang Ming 王明, annot., *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1985), p. 21.

¹⁵ *Hongmingji* 弘明集 (*T*no. 2102, vol. 52), p. 96A: "The way of the heavenly court reveals and testifies itself, which is shown in the bestowing of honor on Zhaojianzi and duke Mu of Qin. The way of the ghost avenges [injustice], which is seen in the appearances of duke Du and Pengsheng" 天宮顯驗, 趙簡秦穆之錫是也, 鬼道交報, 杜伯彭生之見是也; and *Guang Hongmingji* 廣弘明集 (*T*no. 2103 vol. 52), p. 18B: "The father of king Yu transformed into a yellow bear, the king of Han changed into a black dog, and the incident of Pengsheng ap-

Guan Lu's story about duke Du was another one of the avenging ghost type that was well known to later generations and often mentioned along with Peng Sheng. Supposedly, duke Du was killed unjustly by king Xuan of Zhou. His avenging ghost appeared three years later during a hunting session, dressed in red garments, carrying a red bow and arrows, and shot and killed the king.¹⁶ Another story in *Zuozhuan* describes the duke of Jin's dream of a demon who accused him of unjustly killing the demon's grandson.¹⁷ The story is part of a larger plot in which the fate of the duke of Jin was foretold by two incidents, both of which involved his dreams, which become simply a means for relating the story of the duke's death. Though it might seem that *Zuozhuan* endorsed the validity of the dreams and the existence of ghosts, the stories could at the same time have been deliberately chosen to criticize the duke of Jin's unethical deeds. Whatever the case, the inclusion of the stories underscores the predestined and just aspects of the duke's death. Moreover, the popularity of such ghost stories as those of Peng Sheng and duke Du also indicates that they were an effective literary motif.

Although the entertainment value of these typical ghost stories contributed to their success, they were perhaps not written with only a purpose to entertain. One example of an account closer to pure entertainment is the story of Li Ji 李季 contained in *Hanfeizi* 韓非子. Li Ji was from Yan but traveled frequently. Once, in his absence, his wife had an affair with another man. One day Li Ji came home unexpectedly and caught them together in the inner chamber. His wife was frightened but her servant calmly advised the following:

"Let the young gentleman be naked with disheveled hair and rush straight out through the door. Then we will pretend to have seen nothing." Thereupon the man followed her advice and ran out through the door. Ji said:

appears as a boar was known to the duke of Qi" 禹父既化黃能, 漢王嬖為蒼犬, 彭生豕見事顯齊公。For a medical text, see *Xu Mingyi leian* 續名醫類案 (Yingyin wenyuange SKQS edn.), vol. 784, j. 22, pp. 560–61: "When there are also sicknesses that are caused by offending ghosts and spirits, one should pray and get well. As for the origin of ghosts, there are a number of ways. Some are caused by unsolvable hatred that was one's own wrong doing, some are caused by the ancestors, some are caused by one's harming others by mistake. These are all verifiable facts, although the Confucians will not mention them, they are recorded in the Canons and histories. Stories such as Pengsheng and Boyou are numerous, and many have witnessed them" 更有觸犯鬼神之病, 則祈禱可愈。至於遺之鬼, 則有數端, 有自作之孽深仇不能解者, 有祖宗胎累者, 有過誤害人者, 其事皆鑿鑿可徵, 似儒者所不道, 然見於經史, 如公子彭生伯有之類甚多, 目者亦不少。

¹⁶ See *Guoyu* 國語 (SBBY edn.) 1, p. 11; Sun, *Mozi Xiangu* 8, p. 139.

¹⁷ *Zuozhuan* 26, p. 29.

"Who is that?" "Nobody," replied everyone in the house. Li Ji asked, "Have I seen a ghost?" His wife replied: "Certainly!" "What shall I do then?" "Take the excrement of five kinds of animal and bathe in it." Ji said: "All right!" So he bathed in the excrement. Another version says the man bathed in orchid soup.¹⁸

A passage in *Xunzi* 荀子 further illustrates how afraid a credulous person could become when confronting the notion of ghosts:

There was a man named Juan Shuliang 涓蜀梁 who lived south of Xia-shou 夏首. He was stupid and easily frightened. One night he was walking in the moonlight when, glancing down and seeing his shadow, he took it for a crouching ghost. Looking up, he caught sight of his own hair and took it for a devil standing over him. He whirled around and started running, and when he reached his home he fell unconscious and died.¹⁹

The main thrust of the stories could be seen as having two functions: on the one hand they are warnings not to be credulous and stupid; on the other hand the stories themselves could be quite entertaining. We are meant to laugh at the foolish cuckold bathing in excrement and the terrified dolt scared to death by his own imagination. Another story with a similar effect is found in *Lüshi chungiu* 呂氏春秋 and involves a "strange ghost" who liked to appear in disguise in the form of people's sons and nephews:

North of Liang there is a place called Liqiu bu 黎丘部, where there was a strange ghost who liked to imitate the likeness of people's sons, nephews and younger brothers. In the town there was an old man. Once, when he went to the market and came back drunk, and the ghost of Liqiu turned into the form of his son and held him and tortured him on the way home. When the old man returned home and sobered up, he scolded his son and said: "I am your father, didn't I care for you? I was drunk, and you tortured me on the way, why?" His son cried, bowed to the ground and said: "This is wicked! There is no such thing. You can ask the people east of the town tomorrow." His father believed him and said: "Yes! This must have been the strange ghost. I have heard about this." The next day, he again went to the market and drank, thinking that he might meet the ghost and kill it. Thus he went to the market and got drunk. His real son

¹⁸ Wang Xianshen 王先慎, *Hanfeizi jijie* 韓非子集解 (Taipei: Shijie, 1962), pp. 182-83; W. K. Liao, trans., *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu* (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1959) 2, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Taipei: Shijie, 1967), p. 270; Burton Watson, trans., *Hsün Tzu*. (New York: Columbia U. Press, 1963), pp. 134-35.

feared that his father could not return safely, so he went to meet his father. The old man saw his real son, drew the sword and stabbed him. The old man's wit was confused by that which resembled his son and so killed his real son. In the same way, if one is confused by the false gentleman and misses the true gentleman, this is like having the wit of the old man of Liqiu.²⁰

Although this seems like a burlesque without much serious intention, *Lüshi chungiu* takes the opportunity to make it into an example of the importance of discretion in one's observation of people and things.

From the above we can see that one and the same story could be read differently in different contexts, and that the stories of ghosts could carry complex cultural, literary, and symbolic meanings.

References to ghosts necessarily constituted part of exorcistic rituals. The "Demonography" chapter of the Qin-era bamboo-slip *Daybook* (*Rishu* 日書) from Shuihudi 睡虎地 provides us with a large number of short instructions for exorcisms of ghosts of various kinds.²¹ Although the texts themselves are not "ritual texts" in a formal sense, they provide instructions to various ritual acts, some including incantations. For example:

Whenever people in a house are having nightmares and cannot rest, this is because a ghost lives there. Take a club made of peach wood and thrust it at the four corners and the center of the house. Then hang a knife made of thorn on the wall, and pronounce: "Ho! Get out quickly! If you do not get out today, I shall use the thorn-knife to strip your garment." Then there should be no more trouble.²²

Here the text contains the instructions for the ritual performance and the incantation. Notably, the performance of exorcist rituals was not necessarily controlled by a "ritual specialist." Anyone could perform the appropriate rituals to drive away ghosts or ward off evil spirits so long as one followed the prescribed ritual acts and incantations given in the texts.

Although such references to ghosts are not stories per se, the different

²⁰ *Lüshi chungiu* 呂氏春秋 (Taipei: Chunhua, 1972) 22, p. 5b. A similar story is found in Gan Bao 干寶, *Soushenji* 搜神記 18. See Wang Shaoying 汪紹楹, annot., *Soushenji* (Taipei: Liren Book Co., 1982), p. 198.

²¹ Yunmeng Shuihudi Qinmu bianxiezu 雲夢睡虎地秦墓編寫組, *Yunmeng Shuihudi Qinmu* 雲夢睡虎地秦墓 (Beijing: Wenwu 1981), slip 872 r. to 828 r. For a short commentary and discussion, see Liu Lexian 劉樂賢, *Shuihudi Qinjian rishu yanjiu* 睡虎地秦簡日書研究 (Taipei: Wenjin, 1994); Donald Harper, "A Chinese Demonography of the Third Century B.C.," *HJAS* 45.2 (1985), pp. 459-98.

²² *Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin mu*, slip 872 r. to 870 r.; Liu, *Shuihudi Qinjian rishu yanjiu*, p. 230.

situations in which ghosts might appear contain certain basic elements of ghost stories that one finds in other writings. For example, the *rishu* texts in a particular passage mention that one way to drive away a demon who haunts a woman is for her to bathe with dog excrement,²³ a method exactly the same as that mentioned in the story of Li Ji and his adulterous wife, quoted above. Moreover, the essential characteristics of various accounts of ghosts and exorcistic methods in the *rishu* also appear in later literary works, especially the Six Dynasties *zhiguai* 志怪 literature, or anomaly accounts, to which we return below.

HAN-ERA GHOST STORIES AND EXORCISTIC RITUALS

Although lacking elaborate and memorable ghost stories, Western Han documents nonetheless provide us with the impression that the ghosts of the dead continued to exert a strong influence on people's thinking. When emperor Wu's 武帝 favorite concubine lady Wang 王夫人 died, the despondent emperor wanted to see her ghost. A magician by the name of Shao Weng 少翁 therefore contrived to recall her ghost at night, and the emperor was said to have seen her from a distant tent.²⁴ Another story has it that when the emperor's uncle Tian Fen 田蚡 was ill, he pleaded for mercy in unconscious mutterings. A shaman was sent to look into his illness and discovered that the ghosts of two persons who were formerly executed because of a feud with Tian Fen were about to kill him, and, sure enough, he died not long afterwards.²⁵ While Sima Qian 司馬遷 had specific reasons to include these stories in his work (perhaps to portray the superstitious mind of emperor Wu or to imply that Tian deserved to die), he nonetheless used them also because ghosts resonated with people's daily lives.

There is no need to list all the references to ghosts in Han-era writings.²⁶ The existence of ghosts in people's lives, however, called for exorcistic rituals. For this, no evidence better illustrates the extent of such activities and the related genre of literature than the ritual texts recorded in the "Bibliographic Treatise" ("Yiwenzhi 藝文志") contained in *Hanshu*. Among the texts listed under the category of *shushu* 數術, the art of divination, there are twenty-one on "Portents and Strange Transformations 禎祥變怪" and another twenty-one on "Human Ghosts and Spiritual Beings

and the Strange Transformation of the Six Beasts 人鬼精物六畜變怪," which probably contained accounts of various ghosts and spirits. Although these texts are not preserved, it is likely that they had some similarity to items collected in Ying Shao's 應劭 *A Penetrating Account of Manners and Customs* (*Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義),²⁷ or to those in the "Treatise on the Five Phases 五行志" in *Hanshu*.

Also in the "Bibliographic Treatise" are ritual texts for exorcising ghosts and spirits, such as *Capture the Inauspicious and Subdue Ghosts and Spirits* 執不祥劾鬼物 in eight *juan* and *Inviting the [Heavenly] Officials to Expel the Demonic Portents* 請官除詆祥 in nineteen *juan*.²⁸ Neither of these is preserved. One can, however, gain some idea of their contents by examining tomb-quelling texts 鎮墓文. One of the most explicit examples, in the form of an exorcistic spell against ghosts, is found in an Eastern Han tomb:

He who died on the *yisi* day has the ghost-name "heavenly light" 天光. The Heavenly Emperor and Sacred Teacher already knows your name. Quickly go 3,000 miles away. If you do not go immediately, the ... [monster ?] of the South Mountain is ordered to eat you. Hurry, as prescribed by the law and ordinance.²⁹

Another spell threatens to "kill" the evil ghost: "The torch-holding official will burn your bones, and the master of wind and rain will scatter your ashes."³⁰ These texts were most likely pronounced first in an exorcistic ritual before they were written down and put into the tomb as a protection for the dead and the living.

Wang Chong mentioned that during his time people would try to appease the earth gods in order to redeem their offensive acts, such as activities involving building houses or digging tombs. Or they would try to expel evil ghosts and demons that would harm people.³¹ The tomb-quelling texts just quoted seem to belong to the second category.

The most prominent ghost-expelling ritual during the Han, as Wang Chong also mentioned, was the "*dano* 大儺" or "Great Exorcism," which was performed at the end of each year to drive away the evil spirits that

²⁷ See Wang Liqi 王利器, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 風俗通義校注 (rpt. Taipei: Mingwen, 1988), pp. 386-444; for discussion, Mu-chou Poo, "The Completion of an Ideal World: The Human Ghost in Early Medieval China," *AM* 3d ser. 10.1-2 (1997), pp. 69-94.

²⁸ *Hanshu* 30, p. 1772.

²⁹ *KG* 1960.10, p. 18.

³⁰ Cai Yunzhang 蔡運章, "Dong Han yongshou ernian zhenmu ping taowen kaolue" 東漢永壽二年鎮墓瓶陶文考略, *KG* 1989.7, pp. 649-61.

³¹ Liu Pansui 劉盼遂, *Lunheng jijie* 論衡集解 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1957), pp. 504-7.

²³ *Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin mu*, 859 r.

²⁴ *Shiji* 12, p. 458; 28, p. 1378.

²⁵ *Shiji* 107, p. 2854.

²⁶ For a general account, see Poo, *Personal Welfare*, chapter 7.

accumulated during the entire year.³² The ritual was described in the "Treatise on Ritual" in the *History of Later Han*, in which the exorcistic text was quoted:

Jiazuo 甲作 eats the vicious, *Fowei* 肺胃 eats the tiger, *Xiongbo* 雄伯 eats the ghost, *Tengjian* 騰簡 eats the inauspicious, *Lanzhu* 攬諸 eats the guilty, *Boqi* 伯奇 eats the dream, *Qiangliang* 強梁 and *Zuming* 祖明 eat those who were beheaded and temporarily impersonated the living. ... Altogether twelve gods are sent to chase the evil spirits, to intimidate your (the evil spirit's) body, to tear your limbs, to dismember your flesh, to disembowel your intestines. If you do not get away quickly, you who lag behind will become food [for the gods].³³

The basic thrust of this spell is the same as those recorded in the tomb-quelling texts, that is, the evil ghosts are threatened to be killed or even "eaten" by other "carnivorous gods" sent by higher beings. This pattern, as mentioned below, is later followed in Daoist texts where the evil ghosts were killed by heavenly soldiers and marshals sent down by the Lord on High. Serious as it may sound, the threatening language in the exorcistic spells was ostentatious and dramatic, and the people disguised as the twelve plague-spirits and the onlooking officials and civilians were all engaged in the rite in a celebrative mood, as the Eastern Han writer Zhang Heng 張衡 so vividly described in his "Rhapsody of the Eastern Capital" ("Dongjing fu" 東京賦).³⁴

GHOSTS IN ZHIGUAI STORIES:

PURE ENTERTAINMENT OR OTHERWISE?

One of the characteristics of literary activities of the era after the fall of the Han was the appearance of the *zhiguai* genre.³⁵ The earliest example, or a precursor, however, is the late-Eastern Han work *Fengsu tongyi* by Ying Shao, whose ghost stories fit into the general scheme of describing and criticizing the manners and customs of the world he saw.³⁶ The entire book,

as Ying himself stated, had a serious purpose: to benefit those who are in the government; for "the most important business in governance is to criticize manners and correct customs."³⁷ Thus the ghost stories were not meant to be entertaining, but had a practical and political purpose. On the other hand, of course, readers could easily indulge themselves only at the story level and enjoy the thrill of the ghost story. This inherent problem of the rationale of ghost literature also characterizes the other *zhiguai* that flourished in Six Dynasties China.

In a previous study I discussed the purpose of the authors of these accounts of ghost stories.³⁸ I agree with a number of scholars that the authors can be roughly divided into three categories: literati with no particular religious inclinations; Buddhist literati and monks; and Daoist advocates.³⁹ It is clear that Buddhist and Daoist authors utilized the stories to propagate or defend their respective tenets and to try to persuade readers to convert. For those without a particular religious inclination, the stories were told with various kinds of moral lessons. The Jin-era scholar-historian Gan Bao 干寶 stated explicitly in the preface to his *Soushenji* 搜神記 that he composed the work because he felt that records about history, whether ancient or contemporary, often only reflected part of what happened in the past. Thus it was difficult for one to be certain about the true story of an event when different accounts appeared. His idea of collecting all the strange stories was therefore to preserve various records that might be useful, so as to "prove that the way of spirits was not false."⁴⁰

Indeed, in *zhiguai* generally one can find stories that carry moral messages, such as promoting the virtue of righteousness, filial piety, or loyalty. Occasionally, of course, there are also stories that seem to be purely for entertainment; that is, no obvious "moral lesson" was to be learned from them. The only purpose for the latter seems to be to preserve anecdotes for the readers. In any case, the fact that the *zhiguai* stories are recorded at all

Dynasty Political, Philosophical and Social Unity" (Ph.D., Princeton University, 1982); Campany, *Strange Writing*, pp. 46, 139-42.

³⁷ Wang, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu*, p. 8; Campany, *Strange Writing*, p. 140.

³⁸ Some of the discussion about *zhiguai* in the following paragraphs stems from my earlier article; see Poo, "Completion of an Ideal World."

³⁹ For detailed discussion, see Wang Guoliang 王國良, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao zhiguai xiaoshuo yanjiu* 魏晉南北朝志怪小說研究 (Taipei: Wenshizhe, 1984), pp. 37-52; Kominami Ichirō 小南一郎, "Rikuchō Zui Tō shōsetsushi no tenkai to Bukkyō shinkō" 六朝隋唐小説史の展開と佛教信仰, Fukunaga Mitsuji 福永光司, ed., *Chūgoku chūsei no shūkyō to bunka* 中國中世の宗教と文化 (Kyoto: Jimbun kagaku kenkyūsho), pp. 415-500; and Campany, *Strange Writing*, pp. 168-79.

⁴⁰ Wang, *Soushenji*, p. 2.

³² Poo, *Personal Welfare*, pp. 132-33; Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1975), pp. 117-27.

³³ *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1971), pp. 3127-28.

³⁴ Xiao Tong 蕭統, *Wen xuan* 文選 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1977) 3, pp. 25-26; see Poo, *Personal Welfare*, pp. 132-33.

³⁵ See Robert Campany, *Strange Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

³⁶ Michael Nylan, "Ying Shao's *Feng Su Tung Yi*: An Exploration of Problems in Han

implies a position, either to entertain, or, as Gan Bao puts it, to prove that the way of spirits was not false.

The *zhiguai* texts reflect only part of the world of the Six Dynasties in that they were mostly the product of the literati class. Yet this world of ghosts was not the creation of the literati, since they lived in a world where belief in the existence of ghosts and spirits was prevalent. As I have suggested elsewhere, there was a reciprocal relationship between these texts and the readers and audience. The way that the authors selected and organized their texts must have been influenced by feedback from readers. It is possible that many were interested in these stories mainly for the fun of reading or hearing fantastic plots. A number of stories were repeatedly incorporated into various collections, not to mention those with similar plots, which indicates their popularity.⁴¹

The ghost stories in the *zhiguai* texts of the Six Dynasties period, therefore, could have begun as texts with serious purposes, although when they were presented to the readers, there is no way that they could be restrained from becoming entertaining literature. It is true that these texts were not ritually employed, yet we can speculate that they actually served some exorcistic functions. By talking about ghosts, and learning that there were ways to expel the ghosts, and that even ghosts could often uphold justice, people could perhaps somehow be released of their fear of the unknown and malicious world of the spirits.

GHOSTS IN SIX DYNASTIES DAOIST TEXTS

While the literati were collecting ghost stories in the *zhiguai* format, either as moral lessons or for entertainment, Daoists of the Six Dynasties were confronting ghosts in ordinary people's daily lives and trying to exorcise them and establish the authority of the Daoist teachings. Ge Hong's *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, for example, mentions ways to exorcise ghosts for people who intended to go into the mountains.⁴² Quite a number of the exorcistic methods resemble what one finds in *rishu* texts. For example,

If you encounter an official, but only hear his voice without seeing any shape as it keeps shouting to you, throw a white stone at it, and it will stop. Another way is to make a reed spear and prick the creature with it, then everything will be all right. If you meet a ghost coming and shouting

continuously to you for food, throw a white reed at it and it will die instantly.⁴³

In the *rishu*, similarly, white sand, white reeds and other materials were used to exorcise the ghosts and spirits. This very fact indicates that there was a long tradition of exorcism that was inherited by the Daoists. During the early years of the development of the religion, practitioners often had to confront so-called "lascivious cults" and forbid their followers to worship local ghosts and spirits with blood sacrifices. Putting aside the arguments concerning whether the Daoists' religion was different from "popular cults" only in the degree in which they worshiped ghosts or different in a more fundamental way,⁴⁴ early Daoist texts did include a large proportion of exorcistic texts for use by adepts. This suggests that people were living in a world often haunted by various kinds of ghosts and spirits, and it was necessary that the Daoist masters should provide exorcistic methods to help them.

The ghosts in Daoist exorcistic texts were believed to be able to harm people in all sorts of places and situations, yet there were no stories about individual ghosts and their interactions with living people, as is often found in *zhiguai* texts. In other words, the ghosts in the exorcistic texts usually did not have individual characters; they existed only as a category. The texts were often recited in rituals and were believed to be able to subdue the ghosts. For example, one of the most important exorcist texts, *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 太上洞淵神咒經, dated to the early-fifth century, is a collection of various texts or spells that were supposed to be able to expel or exterminate evil ghosts. The work is cast in a story-like plot, in which the "Dao" (the personification of the supreme Way) gives a sermon to the people and predicts that in the coming "*kalpa* 劫," a great disaster will destroy mankind. The spiritual beings that will bring about the disaster are ghosts and the demon-king Mara 魔王. Thus begins a series of prophecies concerning how the ghosts would come down and kill off the people, and how those who accept the text of *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* would be protected and saved.

⁴³ Wang, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, p. 304; trans. James R. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine, Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung (Pao-p'u tzu)* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), p. 288.

⁴⁴ For arguments in both directions, see Rolf A. Stein, "Religious Daoism and Popular Religion from the Second to Seventh Centuries," Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel, eds., *Facts of Taoism* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1979), pp. 53-81; Lai Chi-tim, "The Opposition of Celestial-Master Taoism to Popular Cults during the Six Dynasties," *AM* 3d ser. 11.1 (1998), pp. 1-20.

⁴¹ Campany, *Strange Writing*, pp. 21 ff.

⁴² *Baopuzi neipian* 17 ("Dengshe 登涉"); see Wang Ming 王明, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), pp. 299-314.

We also read numerous assertions that the world is coming to an end because people had committed various crimes, such as not following the Dao, acting in evil ways, and coveting wealth and pleasure. Thus, although it is obvious that *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* helped in the exorcism of ghosts, it also served to transmit various moral and ethical values. One passage reads:

The Dao says: The name of the ghost of mountains and forests is Xuanzidu 玄子都. He leads 20,900,000 ghosts who often suddenly kill people, young and old. They enter into people's houses and scare people and chickens and dogs. Then again there are 39,000 ghosts with red turbans who enter into people's houses and take away their animals. Then again there are 800,000 green worm ghosts that are three and a half feet long. With heavenly fire they burn people's houses and cause people to get involved in litigation. Then again there are 490,000 great-fortune green ghosts, thirty feet high, who beat people with red clubs. If a good person believes in the [Daoist] teaching, they would not dare to get close to him. As for the evil person who upholds no justice and kills people and defiles the Dao, and who does not care for his parents, who cheats the Daoist adepts, and who insults teachers and students, he shall be executed without pardon.⁴⁵

Elsewhere, the Dao explains how to use the text:

There are many evil people in the world; therefore there exist such evil ghosts who kill people. From now on, when encountering anyone, male or female, who would accept the Three Caverns (that is, the text), the ghost king would be reverent and dare not to offend him.⁴⁶

There are various ways to expel unwelcome ghosts, but reciting spells was the most common method. A writing titled "The Northern Emperor's Method of Killing Ghosts" 北帝殺鬼法, as recorded in Tao Hongjing's 陶弘景 *Dengzhen yinjue* 登真隱訣, reads as follows:

One should first grind one's teeth thirty six times and chant: "Heavenly tent, heavenly tent, nine elements that kill the child, the commander of five soldiers, the high knife and the northern elder, seven righteous [ones]

and eight spirits, the supreme and great villain, long headed monster, holding the cup of the emperor, the three gods of the white owl(?) 素臯三神, whose spirits ride on the dragon, who bravely kill the divine king, with purple *qi* rise up to heaven as red clouds gush forth, swallow Mara and consume the ghosts. The Red Emperor will drain the blood and the Big Dipper will burn the bone. The Four Luminaries will break the skeleton, and the Heavenly General 天猶⁴⁷ will extinguish their ilk. As the divine knife strikes, myriads of ghosts will desist."⁴⁸

One way to put the exorcistic text into effect and be saved by the ghost kings was, for example, to recite it in a fasting ritual for one day and one night, and to practice the Dao at all times, giving alms to the poor and practicing meditation.⁴⁹ On the other hand, however, since the text was read to people during ritual gatherings, it is not surprising that included in it were so many stories, poems and lyrics that could attract people's attention. A typical passage describing the carnage carried out by the evil ghosts reads as follows:

The Dao says: The great disaster is coming, the government is not in order, people are in distress, the wind and rain do not come in time, and the five grains do not mature. People have hatched evil intentions and become rebellious. Fathers and sons and brothers try to take advantage of each other and cause their death. Angry bandits will roam about and kill innocent people. During this time, plagues permeate the world and there are ninety kinds of illnesses that kill evil people. There is also the red-headed "ghost-killing Ghost King," 100,000 feet tall, who leads 3,600,000,000 "ghost-killing ghosts," each carrying a red club and traveling around in the world, with the special intention of taking the life of people.⁵⁰

On another occasion, the text reads:

The Dao says: In the *wuyin* year there is a giant ghost with a red nose whose name is Fuzi. His height is nine feet, and he has three faces and one eye. There is another ghost who has two heads and one body, three

⁴⁵ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 太上洞淵神咒經 ([Zhengtong 正統] *DZ* edn. [1445; rpt. Shanghai, 1923–1926]), no. 335, following numbering in Weng Dujian 翁獨健, comp., *Combined Indices to the Authors and Titles of Books in Two Collections of Taoist Literature*, Harvard-Yenching Inst., Sinol. Index Ser. 25, (Beijing: 1925; hereafter cited as *HY*), *juan* 8, pp. 5b–6a.

⁴⁶ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 6, p. 7a.

⁴⁷ Tianyou zhenjun 天猶真君 is one of the four heavenly generals 四聖真君 in the Taoist pantheon; see Hu Fushen 胡孚琛, ed., *Zhonghua Daojiao dacidian* 中華道教大辭典 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1995), p. 1466.

⁴⁸ Tao Hongjing 陶弘景, *Dengzhen yinjue* 登真隱訣 (*DZ* edn.; *HY* no. 421), *juan* B, pp. 11a–12b.

⁴⁹ *Taishang dongyuan shenzhoujing* 7, p. 12b.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 1, pp. 4a–b.

feet tall. They all have red eyes. There is again another ghost whose name is Daye, with three heads and one body, seven feet tall. They go together carrying white knives, roaming the world to take the lives of small children. They fly about in the clouds and produce red *qi* and cause people to suffer cold and heat and vomit blood, with swelling heart and discomfort in the chest. At this time, if one could have the master of the Three Caverns come and recite the scripture, then the sick will be healed and trouble with the government will be resolved. If the sickness is not healed, the ghost-king shall be held responsible.⁵¹

The descriptions of the various ghosts do not really provide any story, yet they resemble the descriptions found in the "Great Exorcism," and those are basically entertaining, going beyond merely the bare fact that ghosts existed. There are of course "real" stories to be found in the exorcistic ritual texts. In *Yaoxiu keyi jielüchao* 要修科儀戒律鈔, for example, the author included an elaborate fox story in order to expound the difference between the orthodox and the evil.⁵² Presumably the story could serve as a much needed distraction from more serious rituals and regulations.

In the process of reciting texts, moreover, the audience was given fantastic descriptions about all sorts of ghosts and spirits. The *Taishang zhengyi zhonguijing* 太上正一咒鬼經, for example, provided several extravagant lists of ghosts. One of them reads as follows:

Ghosts and Spirits: There are ghosts of thinking, ghosts of disabilities, ghosts of Wang-liang, the ghost of the constellation Ying-huo 熒惑, ghosts of roaming and exorcism, ghosts of dead bodies, ghosts of those who died of sickness, ghosts of those who died of sexual excess, ghosts of those who died of old age, ghosts of the official residence, ghosts of the traveler, ghosts of the army camp, ghosts of the prisoner, ghosts of the publicly executed, ghosts of those who frightened people, ghosts of those who died by wood, ghosts of those who died by fire, ghosts of those who died by water, ghosts of those who died when traveling, ghosts of the unburied, ghosts of the road, ghosts of those killed by weapons, ghosts of those who died because of their constellation, ghosts who died because of blood, ghosts of those who died of hasty prayers, ghosts of the beheaded, ghosts of the hanged, ghosts of the offended, ghosts of those who killed themselves, ghosts of those who are afraid of people, ghosts of those who died

unnaturally, two-headed ghosts, horse-riding ghosts, chariot-driving ghosts, mountain ghosts, godly ghosts, earth ghosts, mountain peak ghosts, water ghosts, ceiling-beam ghosts, road ghosts, ghosts of the Qiang and Hu barbarians, ghosts of the Manyi barbarians, ghosts of taboos, ghosts of animals, ghosts of spirits, ghosts of various insects, ghosts of wells, stoves, ponds, and marshes, ghosts of ten thousand roads, hidden ghosts, the inefficacious ghosts, false ghosts, and all the hundreds of great and small spirits and ghosts.⁵³

This long list shows clearly the extent of people's obsession with the malevolent world of ghosts. As one looks at other early Daoist texts, this proves to be a common phenomenon. That titled *Nüqing guilü* 女青鬼律 also lists a long string of names of ghosts, and provides various methods to exorcise them: pronouncing the names of the ghosts, carrying talismans written with the names of the ghosts, or hanging talismans over the doorway.⁵⁴

It is conceivable that the authors of such texts exaggerated the grotesque and ferocious features of the ghosts, and increased their numbers, only to show what great power the Daoist priests had possessed and what they could do to help. One should, however, perhaps not assume that the Daoist priests or authors invented all the specifically described ghosts, since in order to be credible they would have had to utilize, even if partially, the sorts of ghosts currently talked about in society.

The expected result achieved by the exorcistic spells, according to *Taishang zhengyi zhonguijing*, was to fulfill people's wishes "to practice the Dao, to cultivate one's self, to cure illness, to prolong life, to deliver one from disasters, to ascend to heaven in daylight, to ask for peace in the household, to ask for successful harvest, to gain profit in business, to have many slaves and servants, to be promoted to high office, to win litigation, to have longevity for men and women, to protect offspring, and to have safe pregnancy for women."⁵⁵

As I indicated at the beginning, when rituals were performed by the Daoist priests, what drew people together was not simply a wish to have a blessed life, but also the attraction of the complicated and mysterious language of the spells, the enchanting music, the splendid costumes, and the physical actions such as the "Pace of Yü" that the priests acted out. Separately, the spells are serious exorcistic texts, yet when they appear in ritual

⁵¹ Ibid. 8, p. 2b.

⁵² *Yaoxiu keyi jielücao* 要修科儀戒律鈔 (DZ edn., HY no. 463), juan 2, pp. 11b-13a.

⁵³ *Taishang zhengyi zhonguijing* 太上正一咒鬼經 (DZ edn., HY no. 875), pp. 9a-10b.

⁵⁴ *Nüqing guilü* 女青鬼律 (DZ edn., HY no. 789).

⁵⁵ *Taishang zhengyi zhonguijing*, pp. 5-6.

context, they assume a more entertaining role to the participating audience.

GHOSTS IN SIX DYNASTIES BUDDHIST TEXTS

When Buddhism came to China, it did not enter a religious vacuum. Besides trying to win over the attention of the literati class, Buddhists also needed to confront whatever popular beliefs they encountered. Early Buddhist texts, therefore, also abound with references to popular religious activities, including the worship of ghosts and spirits. This is best illustrated in *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, or *Biographies of Eminent Monks*. Many stories recorded in the *Biographies* presented monks as capable of exorcizing ghosts.⁵⁶ Moreover, *zhiguai* stories of this period utilized ghost stories in order to show the magic powers practiced by Buddhist monks.⁵⁷ The Tang-era encyclopedic text *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 also contains a large number of ghost stories aimed at propagating Buddhist teachings, many of which are excerpts from Six Dynasties *zhiguai*.⁵⁸ Unlike the *zhiguai*, in the Buddhist texts ghosts and spirits were regarded as evil in character, as illustrated in a text found in Dunhuang:

Many people will be ill, with their stomachs and intestines upset. Various bodily evil demons will then make them weak and sick. The sick will perform divination and pray to the gods, [offering] oxen, sheep, chickens, pigs, wine, and dried meat in sacrifice to the gods. Liang-wang (sic) demons and gods will thus obtain food and travel in and out [of the body of the affected]. They will change their forms to look like dead persons, whose names they will falsely assume. Weak and wasting away, the sick appear shriveled. Some [of the demons] at times kill people. They make it impossible for people to dwell in tranquility...⁵⁹

The purpose of the references, of course, was to dismiss these beliefs. As one text indicates: "Those who customarily practice a depraved way 邪道, serve demons, and sacrifice to the gods to seek blessings are deceiving

⁵⁶ See Mu-chou Poo, "The Images of Immortals and Eminent Monks: Religious Mentality in Early Medieval China," *Numen* 42 (1995), pp. 172-96; John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 1997), pp. 107-9.

⁵⁷ E.g., "Zaguishen zhiguai" 雜鬼神志怪; "Xuanyanji" 宣驗記; "Mingxiangji" 冥祥記; "Jingyiji" 勝異記; for which see Lu Xun, *Guxiaoshuo gouchen* 古小說鈞沉 (in *Lu Xun Quanji* 魯迅全集 [Taipei: Tangshan, 1989], vol. 2).

⁵⁸ See particularly *juan* 31 and 32.

⁵⁹ *Foshuo juezi fujing* 佛說決罪福經, quoted in Daniel Overmyer "Buddhism in the Trenches: Attitudes toward Popular Religion in Chinese Scriptures Found at Tun-Huang," *HJAS* 50.1 (1990), pp. 197-222; quotation at p. 210.

themselves and opening for themselves the three paths to evil rebirth."⁶⁰ However, in some of the Buddhist sutras ghost stories were not only read for their possible proselytic value, but because to do so was intrinsically interesting. One story in the *Biographies* mentions that ghost stories in *Fajujiing* 法句經 and *Xianyujing* 賢愚經 were read to the emperor Ming of Song to amuse him and alleviate his sickness.⁶¹ Although, to be sure, the final result of the reading of the sutras was that the emperor was moved by the stories and repented for his harsh treatment of the people, thus demonstrating a successful proselytization.⁶²

As for exorcist acts mentioned in early Buddhist texts, spell-casting appears to be the most common method. The catalog of early Buddhist texts compiled in the early-sixth century, *Chu sanzang jiji* 出三藏集記, just like the Bibliographic Treatise in *Hanshu*, listed a number of spell books, demonstrating to us that spell-casting was a well-established practice in early Buddhism.⁶³ Moreover, a passage in the biography of Dharmaraksa (Tanwuchan 曇無讖) reads:

Tanwuchan once told Mengxun 蒙遜: "There are ghosts coming into the settlement, and disasters and plagues are due to occur. ... It is better that we should purify ourselves and fast and use divine spells 神咒 to expel them." Then he recited the spells for three days and told Mengxun: "The ghosts are gone." At the time, people at the border saw ghosts and reported that a few hundred plague ghosts scurried away from the district.⁶⁴

Otherwise, Buddhist scriptures were often regarded as having magical power, and could be used as a tool to exorcise ghosts and spirits.⁶⁵ The ubiquitous rhymed chants called "jie 偈" (Sk.: *gāthā*) in Buddhist texts, though a vehicle to convey Buddhist teachings, were often employed as exorcistic spells. Moreover, a ghost might fear a monk because he was highly learned, without his even casting a spell:

Lady Liu 劉氏, the wife of Xiao Sihua 蕭思話, was sick and often saw ghosts coming to haunt her. At the time, they happened to invite Zhiyan 智嚴 to give a lecture on the Dharma. As soon as Zhiyan arrived at the outer hall, Lady Liu saw a flock of ghosts scurry away.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁶¹ Kieschnick, *Eminent Monk*, p. 69.

⁶² *Gaosengzhuan* 高僧傳, T no. 2059, vol. 50, pp. 373C-374A.

⁶³ Kieschnick, *Eminent Monk*, 84-87.

⁶⁴ *Gaosengzhuan*, p. 336B.

⁶⁵ Kieschnick, *Eminent Monk*, 90-92.

⁶⁶ *Gaosengzhuan*, p. 339b.

The monks themselves, moreover, were thought to have possessed exorcistic power, as the ability to recite sutras and to cast spells was internalized and became part of the essence of a monk.

The most famous ghost story, to the Buddhist audience at least, was the story of Mulian. A very complex religious and cultural phenomenon, the story of Mulian absorbed the original Indian story and added Chinese characteristics as it evolved into a cross-religious, cross-cultural phenomenon – the Ghost Festival, which involved age-old ancestor worship. Daoists also celebrated the Ghost Festival since the Tang dynasty.⁶⁷ Since Mulian texts developed into a dramatic play and became a classic example of the relationship between religious ritual and early drama, a separate treatment is needed that I shall not pretend to be able to deal with in the present context.⁶⁸ Suffice it to say that the Mulian phenomenon is fertile ground to test our argument that exorcistic ritual texts and entertainment literature could at times be one and same.

CONCLUSION

Ghosts might simply be products of the imagination, yet the imagination itself is a historical subject that needs attention. Stories about ghosts in ancient China served different functions, whether from the viewpoint of the originator, the propagator, or the audience, because ghosts were an integrated element in people's daily lives, in their most common mentality and religious sentiments. Each "genre" of texts that we discussed above has its particular rationale for including ghost stories, since the meaning or function of a text was decided not only by the composer or originator, but also by people who disseminated, received and interpreted it.

Historical and philosophical texts employed ghost stories as anecdotes that facilitated an intended moral or political argument, because it was believed that ghosts had the ability to avenge wrong doings. Ghost stories, therefore, were evidence of a divine justice that supported a moral system. This is also true for the Daoist and Buddhist texts when ghost stories were recorded to prove the validity of their teaching.

The exorcistic ritual texts, such as those listed in *Hanshu* and mentioned in other texts of the Han period, or in Daoist and Buddhist ritual

compilations, though less story-like contain information about various kinds of ghosts and were built on the belief in the existence of ghosts. Yet here the important difference is that the ghosts to be exorcised were evil ghosts. They did not serve the function of avenging injustice, and they were to be expelled for their evil deeds against human beings. Thus people's attitudes toward ghosts were essentially ambivalent. Avenging and just ghosts were accepted or even approved, while evil ghosts were exorcised, that is, if one could tell the one from the other.

The *zhiguai* literature might claim to have a serious purpose, either for moral teaching or for defending a particular belief system. Yet it was also a literary genre that people were interested in exploring. The telling of ghost stories can be seen as a form of catharsis that released the fear of ghosts. It was therefore a way to address anxiety over the unknown world of the dead. On the other hand, to read or to listen to ghost stories was psychologically stimulating and emotionally satisfying, and thus a form of entertainment.

The audience or readers of all these types of texts, in any event, could have appreciated the ghost stories from various perspectives, as there was no guarantee that they would necessarily have understood or cared about the authors' original intention. The fantastic descriptions of all sorts of ghosts and demons in the exorcistic ritual texts, perhaps originally intended to emphasize the perils of the world; and the power of the true Dao, for example, could actually have served as interesting anecdotes and exotic knowledge of the spiritual world for the readers or participants of the ritual. The performance of the ritual, besides being a pious act that confirmed certain basic religious beliefs could, on the other hand, become a form of entertainment in a society where things extraordinary could become the center of attention.

Ghosts always appear in a certain socio-cultural-religious context and serve a concrete function. As we have explored in this paper, this function changes when ghost stories appear in different genres of texts, and it changes when the texts are understood from different angles. As part of exorcist ritual texts or as part of entertainment literature, ghost stories demonstrated that the idea of ghosts was a multifaceted cultural phenomenon. It was more than a single element of religious belief, and it was closely integrated into the life and thought of the people.

Thus, as long as one admits that the ritual and textual elaboration and the meticulous observation of the exorcistic acts resemble a game played according to set rules, one could turn around and say that the serious exor-

⁶⁷ See Teiser, *Ghost Festival*, pp. 35 ff.

⁶⁸ For a recent study, see Ling Yiyun 凌翼雲, *Mulienxi yu Fojiao* 目連戲與佛教 (Guangzhou: Guangdong gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998).

cistic ritual texts are no less a kind of entertainment literature. This touches upon a more fundamental conceptual problem. If we pose the two terms – religious piety and entertainment – against each other, the assumption must be that these are two different categories of acts, and that religious activities, though containing some entertaining elements, are essentially solemn, and piety itself could not have been entertaining. Ghost stories challenge this assumption. As our discussion shows, they could appear in contexts that serve both as part of exorcistic ritual acts and yet at the same time retain certain entertaining effects. In other words, the demarcation between pious act and entertainment becomes blurred when ghost stories enter the picture. This, of course, is not to say that this observation could only be articulated by ghost stories. A further ramification could be posed as a question: if we assume that religious piety itself is but a form of entertainment (although not vice versa, and that this is not the same as to say that religious activities “contain entertaining elements”), would our understanding of the nature of religion and our approach to the study of religion be changed?

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HY Weng Dujian 翁獨健, comp., *Combined Indices to the Authors and Titles of Books in Two Collections of Taoist Literature*