

Ghosts in classical Chinese philosophy

IAN JAMES KIDD examines the differing ways in which Chinese philosophers approached the subject of ghosts and spirits

An ancient China recognised various kinds of spirits or ghosts (*gui*). An early philosopher, Mozi, grouped them into “the ghosts of Heaven, the ghosts of the mountains and rivers, and the ghosts of men who have died”. Some were friendly to humans, others hostile. Some took the form of humans or animals. Others were formless. Such beliefs run through Chinese history, religion, and literature. Think of such classic collections of stories of the supernatural as *Soushen Ji* (*Anecdotes about Spirits and Immortals*, c. 350) and Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (*Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*) of 1740. These stories of spirits and immortals are didactic, used to condemn feudalism, corruption, and the exploitation of the poor – a strategy of concealing critique in the fantastical used, centuries later, by Rod Serling in *The Twilight Zone*.

The moral significance of spirits and ghosts ensured that they were discussed by philosophers. The main schools of classical Chinese philosophy all emerged during the violence and instability of the Period of the Warring States, 430-221 BC. Common to all the schools was an effort to diagnose and respond to that unfolding moral chaos, even if the specifics varied enormously. We find most of the interest coming from Confucius and his followers and the shorter-lived, lesser-known school of Mozi. They differ about all sorts of issues, including ghosts and spirits. The big questions are whether Confucius and Mozi believed in ghosts, and, if they did, what they



LEFT: An illustration for *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*. FACING PAGE: The philosopher Confucius.

sign of Confucian ‘humanism’, the moral injunction to focus on the everyday world of human life, not distract oneself by speculating about the supernatural and the afterlife. Other readings, though, suggest that care of spirits and ghosts is more difficult, thus reserved for only the most able. Confucius elsewhere advises “respecting the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance,” and not entangling their affairs with our own. A minister, for instance, is criticised for trying to curry favour with spirits with acts of extravagance.³

It’s tough to work out Confucius’s own views on spirits and ghosts. A snag is that we’re told he did not discuss, among other things, ‘prodigies’ and the supernatural. This principled silence is explained in terms of their being irrelevant to the fundamental task of human life – ethical self-cultivation.⁴ But that’s clearly wrong. Our attitudes to spirits and ghosts can be assessed as respectful or presumptuous, appropriate or extravagant. Moreover, Confucius did discuss ghosts and spirits! A blunt solution was offered by a later Confucian thinker, Xunzi. It is to embrace a form of naturalism – roughly, denial of the supernatural and seeking only natural explanations of the world. Divination, for instance, does not provide knowledge of future events, but serves certain social and emotional functions, even though “the common people look upon it as connecting with spirits”.⁵

No such ambivalence and reductive naturalism is visible in the philosophy of Mozi, an intriguing figure – a warrior, engineer, philosopher, and the author of an essay entitled “On Ghosts”. This contains the famous story of King Xuan, who killed his minister, Du Bo, who swore revenge before expiring. A few years

thought our attitudes to them ought to be.

Confucius famously declared that his goal was to preserve the traditions of the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC). This included belief in Shàngdì, ‘the Lord of Heaven’, most powerful of all the ancestor spirits, elevated during the Zhou into a supreme moral force, source of the Mandate of Heaven (*Tiānmìng*) which conferred authority on the ruler. Zhou practices included offering sacrifices to ancestor spirits who might, at times, intercede on behalf of their descendants. It was vital to maintain good relations with those spirits, mainly through offering sacrifices that were conducted in the correct ways. Confucius inherited all of this – his ethics focuses on an ideal of ‘ritual correctness’ and

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his disciples are warned not to make sacrifices without the right attitudes of reverence, awe, and respectfulness.¹

Similar warnings were offered to disciples who asked about serving ghosts and spirits. Asked by one disciple how best to serve ghosts and spirits, Confucius bluntly replied that, unable to serve people, how could he ever hope to serve ghosts and spirits and understand death?² Western commentators interpret this as a



later, the king was hunting with several thousand soldiers when, at high noon, Du Bo appeared in a chariot. The ghost pursued the king and “shot him as he rode in his chariot; the arrow pierced the king’s heart and splintered his spine. King Xuan collapsed in his chariot and, draped over his own bow case, he died.”⁶

Interestingly, Mozi proceeds to offer a philosophical analysis of this episode using his so-called ‘three gauges’ (*sān biāo*).⁷ These are systematic tests to help us determine whether one should accept or reject a claim. First, is there *precedent* for the belief in ghosts and spirits, to which the clear answer was, overwhelmingly, yes. Second, is there *evidence*, specifically as gained through the senses. “If there really are people who have heard and seen something, then you must accept that such things exist. If no one has heard or seen anything, then you must accept that such things do not exist.” Clearly, many people had seen and interacted with ghosts and spirits. In the case of Du Bo, thousands of people witnessed him, at high noon with the physical evidence of the pierced heart and shattered spine of King Xuan.

The third ‘gauge’ is rather different. Mozi urges us to ask if belief in ghosts and spirits has *application*, in the sense of advancing the security and stability of the state. Interestingly, the answer is, again, yes. “If the ability of ghosts and spirits to reward the worthy and punish the wicked could be firmly established as fact throughout the empire and among the common people, it would surely bring order to the state and great benefit to the people.” A skilled thief or murderer might evade detection and punishment by humans, but not by ghosts and spirits. No matter how far you flee, no matter how carefully you conceal your crimes, “the ghosts and spirits will see what you do!”⁸

Obviously, the third gauge assesses the *utility* of beliefs, not their *truth*. Plenty of false beliefs are useful and true beliefs don’t necessarily bring “great benefit to the people”. Some commentators thus suggest Mozi didn’t *really* believe in ghosts



and spirits. It’s just prudent, sometimes, to encourage belief in avenging spirits for reasons of crime-reduction. Such sceptics point to Mozi’s remark that, even if ghosts and spirits don’t exist, they’re useful in “gathering people and increasing fellowship among people.”⁹ Sceptics also challenge the three gauges – why uncritically defer to prior experiences, which might be explained away as superstitions, exaggerations, or appeals to authority?¹⁰

Many modern readers seem to think that Mozi clearly couldn’t have actually *believed* in ghosts and spirits. He was philosophically astute and practically-minded – his ‘day job’ was as the leader of a paramilitary army. More generally, Mohists made important advances in mechanics, optics, and logic.¹¹ It’s also pointed out that Mozi unlike effete Confucians, came from a humbler social background. This might explain his sympathy for folk religious beliefs.¹² He was too intelligent to believe in ghosts

and spirits, but still sympathetic to those who did.

Still, things are more complex. Mozi repeatedly affirms that ghosts and spirits do exist and asks how anyone can doubt it. Indeed, he warns of the risks of their abandoning us if we become too insouciant.¹³ Moreover, the confident claim that an intelligent person can’t believe in ghosts is narrowminded. Plenty of intelligent people did, and still do, believe in ghosts and spirits.¹⁴ After all, Mozi *argues* his way into a belief in ghosts and spirits rather than just relying on flat assertion. Moreover, the three gauges are intellectual standards we ourselves employ – established precedent and empirical evidence are common to the practice of law, medicine, and science.¹⁵

I’m unsure what to make of , Mozi’s remarks. A recent scholar brackets the question of their reality, suggesting that his guiding concern was with establishing “the proper *dao* [way] by which to guide social and personal life”.¹⁶ This fits Confucius’s remarks, too:

understanding the living is more important than understanding the dead. It also fits the morally instructive aims of the *Soushen Ji* and *Liaozhai Zhiyi* – to call out corruption and celebrate acts of kindness and love. Taking this ‘humanist’ line also helps make Confucius and Mozi acceptable relative to the scientific convictions of modernity. Unfortunately, such explanations take for granted that ghosts and spirits don’t exist – a claim that turns on complex metaphysical questions about the nature of reality. Exploring such issues would take us into deep waters. But that might be acceptable to Confucius and Mozi.

NOTES

References to Confucius are to *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis, Hackett, 2003). References to Xúnzǐ and Mòzǐ are to Philip J Ivanhoe and Bryan van Norden (eds.) *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis, Hackett, 2005).

- 1 *Lúnyǔ* 2.24 and 3.12.
- 2 *Lúnyǔ* 11.12.
- 3 *Lúnyǔ* 6.22 and 5.18.
- 4 *Lúnyǔ* 7.21.
- 5 Xúnzǐ ch. 17.
- 6 Mòzǐ ch.31.
- 7 Mòzǐ ch.35.
- 8 Mòzǐ ch.31.
- 9 Mòzǐ ch.31.
- 10 Piotr Gibas, “Mozi and the Ghosts: The Concept of *Ming* in Mozi’s ‘*Ming Gui*’”, *Early China* 40 (2017), pp89-123.
- 11 Robin DS Yates, “The Mohists on Warfare: Technology, Technique, and Justification”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 47(3) (1980), pp549–603.
- 12 AC Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Illinois, Open Court, 1989), p47.
- 13 Mòzǐ ch. 25 and 31.
- 14 Bryan van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis, Hackett, 2011), pp66-67.
- 15 AC Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* (Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 1978).
- 16 Chris Fraser, *The Philosophy of the Mòzǐ: The First Consequentialists* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2016), p69.

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