INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol 15, Issue 3, (2025) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

The Construction and Characteristics of Chinese Beliefs in Ghosts and Deities within the Context of the Integration of the Three Teachings

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To Link this Article: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i3/24778 DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i3/24778

Published Date: 04 March 2025

Abstract

This paper examines the construction and evolution of Chinese beliefs in ghosts and deities within the framework of the integration of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism). By analyzing historical texts, religious doctrines, and literary works such as The Investiture of the Gods, it traces how these beliefs transitioned from early animistic practices to a systematized spiritual framework. The study highlights Confucianism's humanistic reorientation of supernatural veneration, Daoism's philosophical deification of cosmic principles, and Buddhism's structural influence on concepts of hell and karma. It argues that the synthesis of the Three Teachings created a uniquely Chinese belief system characterized by fluid boundaries between humans and deities, where mortals could ascend to divinity through virtue or service. This syncretism not only shaped religious practices but also reinforced cultural identity during periods of social upheaval, as evidenced in Yuan-Ming Zaju dramas and popular literature.

Keywords: Three Teachings Integration, Ghost and Deity Beliefs, Human-Centered Spirituality, Popular literature

Introduction

For a long time, the Chinese belief in ghosts and spirits has been regarded as enigmatic by many. Catherine M. Bell (2002), in her article *The Chinese believe in spirits: belief and believing in the study of religion*, states "There are many Chinese positions on spirits" , where she lists numerous examples of inconsistency in words and actions among both ancient and modern Chinese regarding ghost and spirit beliefs. She explains, "There is little to suggest that a belief in spirits comes with the culture or is any one sort of belief. In other words, there is very little systematic coherence." (Bell, 2002, p. 111) So, How did the chaotic framework of Chinese ghost and spirit beliefs emerge, and does it truly lack internal coherence or philosophical grounding?

In traditional Chinese thought, the 'Three Teachings' (三教 San Jiao) refer to Confucianism (a humanistic philosophy emphasizing social harmony and ethical governance), Buddhism (a spiritual tradition focused on liberation from suffering), and Daoism (a philosophy and religion centered on aligning with the natural Dao). These systems became the ideological pillars of Chinese culture after the Han dynasty, shaping societal norms and spiritual practices. These philosophies became the main pillars of Chinese thought and culture after the Han Dynasty, ultimately forming the spiritual core of Chinese society. While belief in ghosts and spirits has ancient roots, over time, this belief system became increasingly intertwined with the Three Teachings as they flourished. As Chinese thought sought a spiritual foundation, the belief in spirits adapted, shifting towards a reliance on the principles of the Three Teachings.

Since the Tang and Song dynasties, the Three Teachings have continuously borrowed from and influenced each other, converging doctrinally and culturally. Alongside this process, ghost and spirit beliefs also evolved, ultimately creating the eclectic form we see today. This paper will use the trend of integration among the Three Teachings as an intellectual backdrop, examining the historical trajectory of Chinese ghost and spirit beliefs. It will focus on how these beliefs were shaped and restructured under the influence of the Three Teachings, seeking to uncover the underlying logic and distinct characteristics of this belief system.

The study of Chinese beliefs in ghosts and deities within the context of the integration of the Three Teachings is crucial for understanding the unique spiritual and cultural landscape of China. Beliefs in supernatural beings are not merely religious constructs but play a fundamental role in shaping societal values, governance, and individual worldviews. By investigating this subject, we can gain profound insights into the Chinese attitudes toward religion, as well as how religious and philosophical traditions interact in East Asian societies (with China as a representative case) to form a belief system that appears complex yet maintains its own logical coherence. This system profoundly shapes the morphology of societal civilization, social structures, and literary forms.

The Origins of Chinese Ghost and Spirit Beliefs and Their Early Transformations under the Influence of Confucianism

Chinese beliefs in ghosts and spirits originated at an early stage. Archaeological evidence suggests that as far back as the Late Paleolithic period, ancient peoples may have held notions of ghosts and spirits. The extensive oracle bone inscriptions unearthed demonstrate that by Shang Dynasty, a well-developed belief system in ghosts and spirits was already in place, encompassing regular rituals dedicated to natural deities—such as Heaven, Earth, mountains, rivers, the sun, the moon, and atmospheric elements (nature worship)—as well as ancestral figures, including former kings and clan leaders (ancestor worship). Shamans served as intermediaries in these spiritual communications. During the Shang dynasty, supernatural forces were referred to as 'shen' (deities 神)[1], and they began to display attributes of personification. Chang Yuzhi have noted that, according to King Wu Ding's oracle inscriptions, "The Heavenly God Shangdi (上帝) (or simply "Di 帝") held a celestial court much like an earthly ruler, with a formal organization" (Chang, 2010, p. 541). Ancestor worship was also incorporated into the realm of natural deity veneration, with the belief that deceased

[1] In China, Shen (神) refers to deities with yang attributes, while kwei (鬼) represents ghosts associated with yin.

ancestors could ascend to Heaven, thereby gaining the ability, much like Shangdi, to bestow blessings or cast misfortune upon the Shang king (Hu & Hu, 2003, p. 500).

Had this tradition of deifying ancestors and revering spirits continued, it is likely that China would have developed a more formalized belief system centered around ghosts and spirits. However, these customs began to shift and undergo refinement during the Zhou dynasty. As recorded in *The Book of Rites*[2], "The people of Zhou honored rites and prioritized benevolence, showing respect for ghosts and deities while maintaining a respectful distance." (Ruan, 1980, p. 1642) The Zhou introduced ritual and music as cultural foundations, guided by the principles of 'familial affection and respect for honorable,' with a stronger emphasis on ancestor worship, which restrained the prior trend towards a more religious form of ghost and spirit veneration.

By the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, profound social upheavals had fundamentally shaken and weakened the traditional beliefs in Heaven and supernatural spirits. The personified aspects of these beliefs were further stripped away. As a synthesizer of Chinese cultural heritage, Confucius addressed Zai Yu (宰予)'s question about ghosts and spirits in The Book of Rites, clarifying the true significance of ghosts and spirits, the intentions of ancient sages in designating 'ghosts and spirits,' and the enduring importance of ancestor worship.

The (intelligent) spirit is of the shǎn (神) nature, and shows that in fullest measure; the animal soul is of the kwei (鬼) represents ghosts associated with yin) nature, and shows that in fullest measure. It is the union of kwei and shǎn that forms the highest exhibition of doctrine. All the living must die, and dying, return to the ground; this is what is called kwei. The bones and flesh moulder below, and, hidden away, become the earth of the fields. But the spirit issues forth, and is displayed on high in a condition of glorious brightness. The vapours and odours which produce a feeling of sadness, (and arise from the decay of their substance), are the subtle essences of all things, and (also) a manifestation of the shǎn nature. On the ground of these subtle essences of things, with an extreme decision and inventiveness, (the sages) framed distinctly (the names of) kwei and shǎn, to constitute a pattern for the black-haired race; and all the multitudes were filled with awe, and the myriads of the people constrained to submission. The sages did not consider these (names) to be sufficient, and therefore. they built temples with their (different) apartments, and framed their rules for ancestors who were always to be honoured, and those whose tablets should be removed;--thus making a distinction for nearer and more distant kinship, and for ancestors the remote and the recent, and teaching the people to go back to their oldest fathers, and retrace their beginnings, not forgetting those to whom they owed their being. In consequence of this the multitude submitted to their lessons, and listened to them with a quicker readiness. (James, 1885, p. 221)

[2] The *Book of Rites* (礼记 *Liji*), one of the Confucian Five Classics, codifies Zhou-era rituals, social ethics, and governance principles. Compiled during the Han Dynasty, it includes seminal texts like *The Great Learning* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, profoundly shaping East Asian philosophical and cultural traditions. Some translations cited in this text are taken from James Legge. (1885).*The Sacred Books of China, The Texts of Confucianism (part III)* .Clarendon press.

The understanding and attitude of later Confucians(c. 551–479 BCE) toward ghosts and spirits are closely tied to this passage from Confucius. First, it acknowledges that " kwei (ghosts) and shăn" indeed exist, but they do not have physical forms; rather, they are accumulations of "essence" and "spirit (qi 气) ," perceptible through manifestations like "brightness" and "vapour" Terming those formless yet perceptible entities with yang attributes "spirit" and "essence", and those with yin attributes "ghost" "animal soul" (po 魄), are intended to evoke fear and respect among populace. However, Confucians felt this was insufficient, as invoking fear of these entities could cultivate reverence without fostering a sense of intimacy, potentially leading to superstitious and exploitative attitudes (akin to adoring power). Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–104 BCE) states in *Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall (Baihutongyi)*:"The Shang kings instructed through reverence, yet erred by over-relying on kwei (ghosts)." (Chen, 1994, p. 369) Therefore, they developed ancestor worship grounded in familial bonds. By leveraging inherent hierarchies and bonds of closeness within human relationships, Confucianism sought to inspire natural interpersonal affection and respect, as Mencius (c. 372–289 BCE) expressed "That he is affectionate toward his family is what allows him to be humane toward the people and loving toward creatures" (Mencius, 2011, p. 155). In addition to maintaining respect, humility, and sincerity, one should also cultivate a compassionate and benevolent heart toward the people, as stated in the *Book of Rites*

The laying the foundation of (all) love in the love of parents teaches people concord. The laying the foundation of (all) reverence in the reverence of elders teaches the people obedience. When taught loving harmony, the people set the (proper) value on their parents; when taught to reverence their superiors, the people set the (Proper) value in obeying the orders given to them. Filial piety in the service of parents, and obedience in the discharge of orders can be displayed throughout the kingdom, and they will everywhere take effect. (James, 1885, p. 217).

Thus, under Confucian influence, Chinese society consistently upheld humanism, prioritizing human relationships and emphasizing subjective agency, diminishing the earlier religious tendencies of supernatural dominion. Confucians acknowledge ghosts and spirits as natural entities, allowing for their development in later thought; yet, as Confucius said, 'Respect ghosts and spirits but keep them at a distance' (敬鬼神而远之) (Yang, 2015, p. 71), redirected focus from supernatural authority to human agency. By prioritizing ancestral rites grounded in familial bonds over direct worship of deities, Confucianism fostered a human-centered worldview. This shift diminished the role of divine intervention in governance, instead emphasizing moral cultivation (ren 仁, benevolence) and social responsibility, which establishes a non-religious human-centered view of ghosts and spirits in China.

Transformation of Ghost and Spirit Beliefs after the Establishment of Daoism in the Late Han Dynasty

After the Zhou dynasty redirected the focus of Chinese culture from the Shang dynasty's theocratic orientation to a human-centered ethos of rites and music, beliefs in ghosts and spirits remained in a relatively unsystematic and primitive state for a long time. However, ghosts and spirits were not merely products of imagination or deception (at least in the view of the ancients. Confucianism also acknowledged their existence). For rulers, the sacred authority of kingship often relied on ghosts and spirits to reinforce absolute power, while common people looked to them for comfort in explaining the incomprehensible. Despite

Confucian teachings advocating a respectful distance from ghosts and spirits, these beliefs persisted throughout history. Indeed, educating the populace through the fear of ghosts and spirits may have been far simpler and more effective than Confucian teachings of kinship and benevolence. During the social unrest of the late Eastern Han dynasty, Zhang Daoling's (34–156 CE) founding of the Zhengyi Dao provided a channel through which fragmented ghost and spirit beliefs, marginalized by mainstream Confucian thought, found cohesion and expression. Many of these beliefs found coherence and flourished within Daoism, which became a primary conduit for their development.

Ancient China already had mythologies like *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and *Tale of King Mu, Son of Heaven*, comprising deities rooted in oral tradition with minimal interconnections and lacking theoretical foundations. While the Zhengyi Dao sect, which formed the basis of Daoism, is a polytheistic religion with a central deity. The *Zhengyi Fawenjing chang guanpin* mentions an extensive pantheon of 120 celestial officialsn (Qing,1996, p. 173), whose origins can be traced in the Dunhuang manuscript *Xiang'er Commentary to the Laozi*. Attributed to Zhang Daoling, Zhang Xiu (Zhang Daoling's son), and Zhang Lu (Zhang Daoling's grandson), the *Xiang'er Commentary* states, "Rulers honor the Dao, and officials and commoners emulate it. While they may not fear the law, they fear celestial deities." (Rao, 1991, p. 41) This statement highlights the necessity of deities as instruments of governance, filling a role that human laws alone could not achieve. The primary purpose of the Zhang family's establishment of ghost and spirit beliefs was to regulate the populace and achieve the ideal of social harmony.

How were these deities established? The *Xiang'er Commentary* explains Laozi's phrase "When the intelligent and animal souls are held together in one embrace," stating: "The One is Dao(道)… The One transcends heaven and earth, yet permeates all things and travels within the human body, encompassing every part and not confined to a single location. When dispersed, it is 'qi(气)'; when concentrated, it becomes the Taishang Laojun(太上老君)." (Rao, 1991, p.12) In other words, the Taishang Laojun is the 'conceptual deification' of the One. Following this line of thought, the *Laozi* (老子)declares, "The Dao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things." (Lou, 2011, p. 120) This cosmology allowed Daoism to establish an extensive pantheon, rooted in Daoist cosmogony rather than mere animism. With theoretical support, the names of Daoist deities proliferated in later generations. Since the Dao encompasses all things, as many functional deity names could be created as were needed by the people. These titles were not chosen arbitrarily.

According to the *Scripture of the Inner Explanations of the Three Heavens* [*Santian neijie jingjuan*(三天内解经卷)*]* Dao originated from nothingness, embodying pure spontaneity, and eventually forming the Daode Zhangren(道德丈人). Born before primordial qi, it is the supreme honor within the Dao, thus called the 'Venerable Lord of Dao and Virtue' (Daode Zhangren). Consequently, there are titles such as the Taiqing Xuanyuan Wushang Santian Wuji Dadao Taishang Laojun (Supreme Purity and Profound Origin, Supreme Three Heavens, Limitless Great Dao, Lord Lao the Most High 太清玄元无上三天无极大道太上老君), Taishang Zhangren (Venerable Lord of the Grand Purity 太上丈人), Tiandi Jun (the Celestial Emperor Lord 天帝君), Jiulao Xiandu Jun (the Nine Elder Immortal Lords 九老仙都君), Jiuqi Zhangren (the Nine Vitality Lords 九气丈人), and others. These represent countless layers of Daoist qi which form thousands of celestial officials within the universe (Anonymous, 1988,

p. 413) and the Supreme Lord of Highest Clarity. Titles like “Lord,” “Elder Lord,” and “Venerable” reflect the personification of abstract philosophical principles and practical roles. Names of Daoist officials, such as “Supreme Heavenly Lord,” “Five Elements Lord,” and “Lord of Grains,” symbolize both abstract philosophy and functional deity roles, serving as a major source of structure for China’s spirit world and providing a philosophical foundation for further evolution of the pantheon. Daode Zhangren" refers to "the Venerable Lord of Dao and Virtue," symbolizing supreme Daode (Virtue). Terms like "Taiqing Xuanyuan（Supreme Purity and Profound Origin 太清玄元）", "Wushang Santian (Supreme Three Heavens 无上三天)", and "Wuji Dadao(Limitless Great Dao 无极大道)” indicate notions of origin, supremacy, and primordial essence. Titles such as "Jun (Lord 君)", "Laojun (Venerable Lord 老君)", and "Zhangren (Venerable Master 丈人)" are honorifics for deified beings. Names of Daoist celestial officials like "Wushang Tianjun" (Supreme Lord of Heaven 无上天君) and "Wugu Jun" (Lord of Five Grains 天官五行君) embody the deifications of abstract concepts or practical functions. This establishes a philosophical basis for the structure of China’s spiritual world and allows endless derivations of deity names.

The Refinement of the Ghost and Spirit Belief System Following the Introduction of Buddhism

The ghost and spirit concepts derived from Daoist thought, much like its characteristic philosophical framework, are all-encompassing yet inevitably fragmented and unwieldy. There was no conscious top-down design for either the celestial or ghostly realms, making it difficult to present a coherent and tangible cosmology to ordinary people. Around the Wei and Jin periods, the introduction of Buddhism, deeply marked by Indian religious influences, objectively facilitated the construction of China's ghost and spirit system, ushering in an era characterized by greater concretization of the ghostly world.

Before the emergence of Buddhism, India was already a region fervently devoted to the worship of deities, possessing a vast and intricate system of mythology. Its pantheon of gods and spirits, as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, formed a relatively sophisticated and comprehensive belief system. Consequently, as Buddhism spread in India, it was compelled to adopt and incorporate the language of mythology to articulate its doctrines, thereby catering to the cultural preferences of the Indian populace. Many deities, such as Shiva (known in Buddhism as Maheshvara), Indra (Shakra), and Krishna (Mahakala), became Buddhist guardian deities. Concepts such as Mount Sumeru, the Great Thousand Worlds, and the Six Paths of Rebirth were extended into Buddhist theological frameworks. As these concepts were transmitted to China, they underwent processes of integration and adaptation. For example, the belief in the Jade Emperor in China evolved from the Indian deity Shakra (Indra), who was adopted by Buddhism as Shakra Devanam Indra. When this belief spread to China, it merged with indigenous Daoist and folk beliefs in the Jade Emperor. The Buddhist image of Shakra gradually aligned with that of the Jade Emperor, whose narrative and divine functions borrowed from Shakra's attributes. As a result, these figures "ultimately became representations of similar divine characteristics, manifesting differently across religious sects and folk beliefs" (Zhang, 2014, p. 193).

The Chinese concepts of heaven and hell also bear significant Buddhist influence. While Daoism developed its celestial cosmology, Buddhism introduced a structured underworld system, which Daoism later integrated into its own framework. During the early Liu Song period, the Daoist classic *Tai Zhen Ke*(太真科), with reference from the Buddhist

Maharatnakuta Sutra, Volume Four, which describes the six heavens of the Desire Realm, the eighteen heavens of the Form Realm, and the four heavens of the Formless Realm, inspired a new conception of four civil heavens, three heavens, and the supreme Great Luo Heaven, thereby forming the foundational framework for the thirty-six heavens in Daoist cosmology (Wang, 2017, p. 89). These thirty-six heavens became the basis of Daoist celestial cosmology[3], with the thirty-sixth heaven, also known as the Great Luo Heaven, as the highest realm.

The influence on hell-related concepts is even more evident. The Buddhist notions of the eighteen hells, the Ten Kings of the Underworld, and the worship of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva transformed Confucius's vague depiction of ghosts as ethereal presences perceptible through vital energy into vivid and tangible forms. Daoism, building upon traditional Chinese beliefs in celestial deities, terrestrial spirits, and human ghosts, actively absorbed Buddhist conceptions of hell, forming a system centered on the Northern Feng Emperor —-the Savior Celestial Honored One, as rulers of the underworld, supported by Perfected Lord of Primordial Mystery and Vast Subtlety (Taisu Miaoguang Zhenjun 太素广妙真君), Perfected Lord of Supreme Rectitude and Righteous Path (Wushang Zhengdu Zhenjun 无上正度真君), and the Five Transformed Majestic Spirits as the Ten Kings, along with underworld officials for the nine, twenty-four, and thirty-six prisons, as well as various officials presiding over the great Iron Enclosure Hell and the minor Iron Enclosure Hell (Pu, 2021, p. 15). Under the influence of Buddhist religious thought, the Chinese world of ghosts and spirits gradually developed into a structured and systematic system, becoming richer and more comprehensive. This evolution provided a robust cultural foundation for the creation of later supernatural literature, including novels and operas.

The "Human-Centered" Principle of Chinese Ghost and Spirit Beliefs

What distinguishes Chinese ghost and spirit beliefs from those of most other cultures and religions is the persistent influence of Confucian "human-centered" thought. Unlike figures such as Mary in Catholicism, Jesus in Christianity, Muhammad in Islam, or Rama and Krishna in Hinduism, who are either prophets, messengers, or earthly incarnations of the supreme deity, these figures may be revered as saints or holy beings but cannot themselves be equated with gods[4]. They lack subjective agency; their divine status is inherent or a result of divine selection or favor, rather than something achieved through personal effort.

Unlike the Abrahamic religions where humans cannot become divine, Chinese theology allows mortals to ascend to godhood through virtue or service. Chinese ghost and spirit beliefs are fundamentally different: there is no insurmountable boundary between "humans" and "deities." Li Yuanguo, in *The Historical Genealogy of Daoist Immortals in China*, categorizes Daoist immortal genealogies into three types: "deities, perfected beings (immortals), and ghost officials" (Li, 2022, p. 99). He explains:

[3] Daoism also holds concepts of the Three Heavens, the Thirty-Two Heavens, and the Thirty-Three Heavens. The concept of the Three Heavens stems from a theoretical transformation into symbolic imagery (based on *Laozi*: 'The One gives birth to Two, the Two give birth to Three, and the Three give birth to all things'), hence the Daoist saying 'One Qi transforms into the Three Pure Ones.' The 'Three Pure Ones' refer to the Three Pure Realms, which are further conceptualized as the Three Pure Heavens. The Thirty-Two, Thirty-Three, and Thirty-Six Heavens all originate from Buddhist teachings, with the Thirty-Six Heavens having the greatest influence.

[4] Many regions and ethnic groups have had legends of mortals becoming gods, but due to the passage of time and the focus on individual heroic figures, these stories did not evolve into traditions and lacked systematic methods or continuity. Especially after the emergence of religions, the descendants of these regions and ethnic groups severed any possibility of becoming "gods," essentially marking the end of the original civilization.

Deities are various supernatural figures worshipped and believed in within Daoism, such as Tianzun (Celestial Lords 天尊), Daojun (Daoist Sovereigns 道君), Laojun (the Venerable Lord Lao 老君), and Leizu (the Thunder Ancestor 雷祖)...; perfected beings are mostly immortals who have attained sainthood through accumulated virtue and Daoist practice. Their original forms were living, ordinary humans, such as Guang Chengzi(广成子), Ning Fengzi(宁封子), and Chisongzi(赤松子) from ancient times, as well as the Eight Immortals of the Tang and Song dynasties(Li, 2003, p. 136).

Ghost officials "originated from ancient religious worship of human ghosts. They are historical emperors, officials, and virtuous individuals—essentially the revered sages and ancestors of the Chinese people," such as "King Wen and King Wu of Zhou, Duke Huan of Qi, and Duke Wen of Jin" (Li, 2022, p. 104).

Due to the assimilation and preservation of most Chinese deities and spirits within Daoist culture, the Daoist pantheon can be broadly regarded as the Chinese pantheon, encompassing figures from Confucianism and Buddhism[5]. Accordingly, the Chinese system of deities and spirits adheres to this classification, which can be divided into three major categories: "deities," "perfected beings (immortals)," and "ghost officials". The concepts of "Perfected Beings (Xianzhen 仙真)" and "Ghost Officials" are significant human-centered innovations in Chinese theological thought. "Perfected Beings" signify that ordinary mortals, through extraordinary perseverance and the accumulation of great virtue, can attain immortality and become equal to celestial gods and Buddhas[6]. "Ghost Officials" represent the idea that even if one does not practice the path of immortality in life, those with intelligence, integrity, or significant achievements that benefit the people can become deities after death and receive sacrificial offerings and veneration.

The notion that humans can become deities can be traced back at least to the Western Zhou period. In *Discourses of the States — Discourses of Lu*, Zhan Qin elucidated the principles of the state sacrificial system since the Western Zhou:

The sacred kings determined sacrificial rites as follows: those who set an example for the people were honored with sacrifices; those who died performing their duties diligently were honored with sacrifices; those who labored to secure the state were honored with sacrifices; those who averted great disasters were honored with sacrifices; and those who protected the people from severe harm were honored with sacrifices... Along with the spirits of the land and rivers, all were those who made significant contributions to the people. Sacrificial rites also honored virtuous and wise figures of the past, who served as moral exemplars; the three

[5] The situation with Buddhism is more complex and has dual aspects. According to orthodox Buddhist doctrine, the Buddha is an enlightened being, not a supernatural deity or idol. Siddhartha Gautama was a historical figure who attained a state of holiness through spiritual practice; under the Chinese classification of deities, he would be categorized as an "immortal." However, due to the strong religious atmosphere in India and the Western Regions, the way certain Buddhist scriptures are taught, and the Buddha's foreign identity (which creates a sense of distance and lacks historical documentation), upon its transmission to China, for the average believer, the "Buddha" became an idol with a divine status, revered as the supreme deity. The aspect of Buddhism without a deity is key to its integration with Chinese Confucian and Daoist cultures; conversely, its aspect of possessing a supreme divine status has aided Daoism in perfecting its system of ghosts and deities.

[6] In Buddhism, specifically in Mahayana (Northern Transmission), it is taught that everyone has the potential to become a Buddha. In contrast, in Theravada (Southern Transmission) Buddhism, the Buddha is seen as unique, and ordinary practitioners can only attain the state of an Arahant.

celestial bodies, which the people revere; the five terrestrial elements, which nurture life; and the famed mountains, rivers, and lakes across the nine regions, which provide resources. Anything outside these criteria did not belong in the sacrificial canon. (Zuo, 2015, p. 107)

Ordinary individuals who have made contributions and rendered meritorious service to the state and its people are treated on par with natural deities such as the spirits of the land and rivers or the sun, moon, and stars, and are honored with state sacrificial ceremonies. There is no insurmountable divide between "humanhood" and "divinity"—it can be said that due to their "extraordinary" deeds, their "humanhood" ascends into "divinity," earning them treatment equivalent to that of deities.

When ghost and spirit beliefs were incorporated into the religious framework of Daoism, "establishing teachings through ghosts and spirits" required these entities to possess abilities that surpass those of ordinary people; otherwise, they would lack the authority and influence necessary to lead or command reverence. However, under the influence of Confucian thought, humanist values remained dominant in traditional Chinese civilization. As Mencius proclaimed, "Everyone can become a Yao or Shun" (Ruan, 1980, p. 2755). The *Classic of Filial Piety* states, "The nature of Heaven and Earth holds humanity as most precious" (Ruan, 1980, p. 2553). Xunzi （c. 313–238 BCE） further asserted, "Humans possess vitality, life, and consciousness, as well as a sense of righteousness, and therefore are esteemed above all under Heaven." (Xun et al., 2005, p. 380).

On this cultural foundation, religions centered on ghosts and spirits could no longer ignore the power of humans. Since Confucianism advocated that everyone could become a Yao or Shun (figures who, according to the sacrificial system of the Western Zhou, were deified and worshipped), Buddhism and Daoism naturally followed suit, proclaiming the motto that "immortals were originally ordinary people." Many sect founders, Perfected Beings, and historically remarkable kings and generals were equated with natural deities after their deaths, becoming revered divine figures. Due to their former mortal identities, these figures were seen as more relatable by the general populace. The stories surrounding them often carried a vivid, down-to-earth quality. As a result, the influence of "Perfected Beings" and "Ghost Officials" sometimes surpassed that of natural deities. For instance, in Chinese communities, the familiarity and fondness for figures such as the Eight Immortals and Guan Gong far exceed that for celestial beings like the Tian Zun (Celestial Lords)and Laojun (the Venerable Lord Lao).

The Integration of the Three Teachings in Chinese Ghost and Spirit Beliefs

Since the introduction of Buddhism to China during the Eastern Han dynasty, the stage was set for the contention between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. After nearly four centuries of debates, adaptations, and reconciliations through the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, the three teachings had established a tripartite balance by the Sui and Tang dynasties, gradually moving toward integration. Following the Song and Yuan dynasties, the foundation for the convergence of the three teachings became increasingly solid, and the notion of their equality and shared origins became a widely accepted ideological framework across all social strata.

Chinese ghost and spirit beliefs were never exclusively associated with any one of the three teachings but rather inherited the cognitive framework of early ancestors. Over time, these beliefs absorbed elements from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, resulting in spiritual figures that spanned all three traditions. Popular works during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, such as *Extensive Records of the Search for Spirits (Shoushenguangji* 搜神广记*)* and *Illustrated Comprehensive Origins of the Three Teachings and Search for Spirits (Huitu sanjiaoyuanliu soushen daquan* 绘图三教源流搜神大全*)*, explicitly listed "Confucian Origins," "Buddhist Origins," and "Daoist Origins." These texts integrated the divine genealogies of the three teachings, profoundly influencing later generations and demonstrating the flourishing of a syncretic ghost and spirit belief system among the populace.

The concept of the integration of the Three Teachings in Chinese ghost and spirit beliefs is not only reflected in the inclusion of deities from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism within a unified divine genealogy but, more importantly, in the fluidity of the identities of these figures (ghosts and spirits). Deities originally belonging to Buddhism were often adopted by Daoism, and Daoist figures frequently appeared in Buddhist stories, breaking down sectarian boundaries.

In literary works, particularly the dramas and novels produced during the Ming and Qing dynasties, characters often embodied the syncretic features of the Three Teachings. For example, the famous Ming dynasty mythological novel *The Investiture of the Gods* [7]presents a complex religious system and an enchanting world of immortals and Buddhas, which is described as both perplexing and immensely captivating and influential (Xie, 2014).

In *The Investiture of the Gods*, the immortals are not limited to a specific sect, but rather include figures from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. For instance, the *List of Invested Gods* features 371 divine positions. In line with Confucian values, individuals who sacrificed their lives for the country, fulfilled their duties as loyal subjects or filial children, or were closely associated with such people, are granted divine status. There are 135 such "human gods" in total. Buddhist figures are also frequently depicted, are even reimagined as characters in the Chanjiao [8]. For example, the three great Bodhisattvas—Manjushri, Samantabhadra, and Avalokiteshvara—are portrayed in the novel as Manjushri Guangfa Tianzun (Manjushri, Celestial Lord of Expansive Dharma), Samantabhadra Zhenren (Samantabhadra, Perfected Being of Universal Virtue), and Cihang Daoren (Compassionate Ferry Taoist), disciples of the Yuan Shi Tianzun and part of the Twelve Golden Immortals, later joining the Western Sect (a metaphor for Buddhism). In this Western Sect, the two main leaders, Jieyin Daoren (Guiding Daoist 接引道人) and Zhunti Daoren (Cundi Daoist 准提道人), are representations of Amitabha Buddha from the Pure Land school and Zhunti Bodhisattva

[7] The Ming-dynasty novel The Investiture of the Gods (Fengshen Yanyi 封神演义), written circa the 16th century, is a seminal mythological text that fictionalizes the Zhou dynasty's overthrow of the Shang. It amalgamates deities from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism into a unified pantheon, epitomizing the syncretic nature of Chinese spirituality.

[8] "Chanjiao" is a religion created by the author of *The Investiture of the Gods*, also known as the "Kunlun Sect," with its leader being "Yuan Shi Tian Zun" (The Primordial Supreme Being). The term "chan" means to "elucidate, expound, or open up," indicating that this religion is primordial and original, even preceding the three teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism). As such, its religious figures encompass deities from the later three teachings.

from the Esoteric school. The term "Jieyin" refers to Amitabha Buddha's role in receiving souls, as described in the *Amitabha Sutra*, with Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta as his two great attendants in the Western Pure Land, guiding beings to the paradise. Zhunti Bodhisattva, in some Buddhist texts, is referred to as the "Buddha Mother." The Buddha of the Lamp is reimagined as the Lamp-bearing Daoist under the Jade Void, demonstrating the gradual Sinicization of these Buddhist deities, to the point where their names and forms became increasingly Daoist in nature. This reflects the dissolution and fusion of religious boundaries (Liu, 2011), authentically illustrating the social trends of religious syncretism at the time. At the same time, the practice of mixing figures without distinction, using them interchangeably, is a major reason why the general public tends to view Chinese ghost and spirit beliefs as "disorderly" or "chaotic."

Conclusion

China's belief in ghosts and deities has been often attributed to Taoism, and is viewed as a product of Taoist thought. In reality, the origins of these concepts predate both Confucianism and Taoism. Initially, the concept of ghosts and deities was not influenced by religious theology but was purely an objective description of the experiences of the ancient people. During the Shang dynasty, ghosts and deities began to be idolized and deified, and were subsequently influenced by Zhou dynasty culture and later Confucianism, which emphasized human-centered governance. This led to a reduction in the emphasis on the divine nature of these beings. Supernatural beliefs about ghosts and deities began to merge with Taoism by the end of the Han dynasty, incorporating Huang-Lao thought at its core, with the forms of ghosts and deities as their outward manifestation. This gave birth to Taoism as a religious tradition. Under Taoism's influence, the concept of ghosts and deities not only evolved alongside Taoism's growth but also absorbed Confucian human-centered ideas and Buddhist religious culture. Eventually, just as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism interacted and influenced one another, this belief system expanded beyond a single religious tradition, forming a unique and distinctly Chinese system of belief in ghosts and deities. The syncretism of the Three Teachings not only shaped Chinese spiritual practices but also reinforced a collective cultural identity that transcends sectarian boundaries.

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