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From Cultural Ghosts to Literary Ghosts – Humanisation of Chinese Ghosts in Chinese *Zhiguai*

Abstract: In attempting to explore the role of ghosts, ghost beliefs, and ghost narratives, as an absolute but intimate “other” in mirroring Chinese people and society, this article will examine the process of humanisation of Chinese ghosts in two realms. The first refers to the humanisation of cultural ghosts, i.e. a brief history of Chinese ghost beliefs till roughly around the Six Dynasties. The second realm locates the humanisation of literary ghosts in *zhiguai*, with a specific focus on the literary birth of ghosts and ghost narratives in the Six Dynasties.

Once upon a time there was a traveller drawing for the King of Chi. “What is the hardest thing to draw?” asked the King. “Dogs and horses are the hardest.” “Then what is the easiest?” “Ghosts are the easiest. Indeed, dogs and horses are what people know and see at dawn and dusk in front of them. To draw them no distortion is permissible. Therefore they are the hardest. On the contrary, ghosts have no shapes and are not seen in front of anybody, therefore it is easy to draw them.” – Han Feizi (32.22)

Introduction

This is a story from *Han Feizi* written in the end of the Warring States Period (c. 260–233 BCE), a fable told by Han Fei, a legalist, to illustrate the weight and importance of the reality and to criticise and dispel fantasy, imagination, and superstitions. The lesson is that faithful and realistic imitations and representations are favoured over fictional and imaginary ones, a thought that still exists solidly nowadays in Chinese society.

However, is it genuinely valid to claim that ghosts are the easiest to be drawn, to be talked about and to be represented in Chinese culture, society, and literature? Surely the answer is no, for ghosts belong to the realm of the unspeakable and the unrepresentable. Confucius said in *The Analects* that “Master wouldn’t talk about extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings” (7.21) and that “while respecting ghosts and gods, keep aloof from them” (6.22). The task of this article, thus, is to speak about the unspeakable and to represent the unrepresentable, to see how Chinese ghosts, both cultural and literary ones, have been talked about and represented and have gained their material and linguistic

weight tangibly along the progression of Chinese civilisation, a development that I would like to propose as a process of humanisation of Chinese ghosts.

In attempting to explore the role of ghosts, ghost beliefs, and ghost narratives, as an absolute but intimate “other” in mirroring Chinese people and society, this article will examine the process of humanisation of Chinese ghosts in two realms. The first refers to the humanisation of cultural ghosts, i.e. a brief history of Chinese ghost beliefs till roughly around the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE), to illustrate how an abstract concept of ghosts had been concretised and expanded into some complicated ghost belief systems as a result of an extensive and lively interaction between traditional Chinese religion, Taoism, and Buddhism. Grounded on and nourished by the solid materials of cultural ghosts, the second realm locates the humanisation of literary ghosts in *zhiguai* (“records of the strange”), a literary genre where Chinese ghosts and ghost narratives dwell, with a specific focus on its generic birth in the Six Dynasties to portray how the new-born literary ghosts and ghost narratives came into existence and were endowed with a heavy human form and traits.

Humanisation of Cultural Ghosts: A Brief History of Chinese Ghost Beliefs (Roughly Till the Six Dynasties)

The humanisation of Chinese cultural ghosts from an abstract concept to some complicated belief systems is a process corresponding to the historical progression of Chinese civilisation from a primitive society to a multi-cultural one in terms of the involvement and integration of different philosophical and religious thoughts on the conception of ghosts. In order to grasp a general understanding about cultural ghosts and their meanings in Chinese society, we will examine this historical transformation in the following three stages, including the primal status of ghosts, the etymology of the character 鬼 (*gui*), and the building-up of human-ghost worlds.

Primal Status of Ghosts

In China, the primal status of ghosts was one like creational chaos, in which resided multiple life forces or spirits that couldn't be clearly differentiated from one another. It was a concept whose birth was intimately related to the primitive animistic worldview and to the ancient ancestor worship in order to grasp a faint understanding and to explain the mysteries of the physical world via the invisible. At this primal status, no distinction was drawn yet to set the concept of ghosts apart from that of gods (Zheng 45). Both of them were enclosed and mingled in

this one broad concept of ghosts, as well as other concepts, such as souls, spirits, demons, or monsters.

Along with the progression of human civilisation, this broad concept of ghosts had undergone a process of division and categorisation. It was until much later, i.e. roughly around the Shang dynasty (c. 1600 – c. 1046 BCE), that a more precise and definite concept of ghosts directly referring to the death of humans started to gain its firm shape in the development of Chinese ghost beliefs. As this was also the very period of time when the ancient Chinese character of ghost, 鬼 (*gui*), was first found on oracle bones used in divination in the late Shang dynasty (c. 1200–1050 BCE), the examination of its etymology based on its graphic formation in different script styles will help to reveal the materialisation of this abstract broad concept of ghosts into one concrete single character 鬼 (*gui*).

Etymology of the Character 鬼 (*gui*)

Chinese characters are logograms whose word-formation graphically embodies and preserves the archaic thoughts and meanings that they were endowed with at the time of their birth, including the way of thinking, cultural and social reality, and have in reverse exerted effects on shaping the Chinese mind and culture (Jia and Jia 151). Through tracing the etymology of 鬼 (*gui*), two main meanings can be read and deduced from its graphic variants of this ancient character found in oracle bone script and in seal script. One refers to living, human-like creatures as material others and the other to human ghosts as immaterial others.

Table 1: Variants of the character 鬼 in Chinese script styles

Oracle bone scripts		Small seal script	Standard script
甲	𠩺	鬼	鬼

(1) 鬼 as Living Human-Like Creatures or Material Others

The Chinese character 鬼 was written variably in oracle bone inscriptions, the earliest body of Chinese writing, as illustrated in Table 1. The first meaning as living, human-like creatures can be seen visually when the variants are read as pictograms, i.e. characters whose graphic forms are realistic imitation of physical objects. According to *Jiaguwen Zidian (Dictionary of Oracle Bone Script)*, 鬼 is defined based on its graphic form as “human-like creatures with giant heads [...]

to represent something radically different from living human beings” (1021). As a result of modern etymological researches, Shen argued that the primitive meaning of 鬼 was very probably a name given to some simian or anthropoid animal living in ancient China (1–2). Besides, G. Wang explicated that *guifang* 鬼方 was a name given to a foreign tribe located in the northwest of ancient China that was at war with the kingdom of Shang in the 13th century BCE (586).

Either read as some anthropoid animal or barbarian, the first meaning of the character 鬼 as living, human-like creatures or material others is attached with a solid physical existence and a strong sense of otherness in contrast to (Chinese) humans, as its graphic form visually pronounces. Developed from the primal status of ghosts as creational chaos in lack of any distinctiveness, the physical properties conveyed in the graphic form of 鬼, including human shape, materiality, and otherness, have been maintained and carried into the further conception of ghosts, i.e. the integration and development between the abstract concept of ghosts and the concrete pictographic character 鬼, into human ghosts or immaterial others.

(2) 鬼 as Human Ghosts or Immaterial Others

The second meaning of 鬼 as human ghosts, or immaterial others, can be seen and deduced from reading the word either as a pictogram or a compound ideograph in terms of word-formation. When it is read as a pictogram to mean immaterial human ghosts in oracle bone script, its graphic form does not represent some anthropoid animal literally but a man wearing a horrible, giant, symbolical mask, i.e. a shaman or *wu* 巫, impersonating a *gui* to carry out a rite of exorcism in traditional Chinese religion. In doing so, some physical properties are attributed to the abstract concept of ghosts and render the invisible ghosts visible both in the traditional folk rite and in the graphic form of 鬼. Moreover, it is due to the inclusion of further philosophical and religious thoughts concerning the abstract concept of ghosts into the graphic form of 鬼 that the character in small seal script is read as a compound ideograph to represent specifically human ghosts as immaterial others in the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) and mostly so ever since.

In Xu Shen’s (c. 58 – c. 147 CE) *Shuowen Jiezi* Dictionary (100 CE), 鬼 in small seal script, i.e. the national script standardised under the reign of the first Chinese emperor, Qin Shi Hungdi (221–210 BCE), is read as a compound ideograph and defined as “what humans return to (after death);” that is, human ghosts (5789). It is a word composed of *ren* 人 (human), *guitou* 田 (head of ghost), and *si* 厶 (private, evil). The first two components harken back to the reading of 鬼 as a pictogram to mean either material or immaterial others with human shape, and the third is used to indicate that ghosts as manifestation of the Yin energy are capable

of hurting people. While 𤑔 is a new note added to the graphic meaning of 鬼, it tells about how 鬼, i.e. human ghosts specifically here, were generally perceived with a touch of malice and, thus, with a heavy accent on a proper return of humans after death in the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). This is a result following all sorts of philosophical and religious thoughts on human ghosts that had been discussed and accumulated since the Shang dynasty to explicate this post-human or post-living condition, which further shaped the building-up of human-ghost worlds that were launched from the late Han and Six Dynasties onwards and still have their effect on our perception of ghosts today.

Building-up of Human-Ghost Worlds

As “what humans return to” is the core of Chinese thoughts on the confinement and development of the concept of human ghosts, we will examine the philosophical and religious discourses on “what humans return to” from classical texts to delineate the intimate relation between humans and ghosts first, and then on the building-up of human-ghost worlds or that of the afterlife manifest in the integration of diverse ghost belief systems in Chinese cultures, i.e. “where ghosts return to”.

(1) Human Ghosts, “What Humans Return to”

The Chinese character of “ghost” (*gui* 鬼) partakes of the connotation of “return” (*gui* 歸) based on their being near-homophones, and is interpreted in the *Erya*, the earliest Chinese glossary compiled c. in the 3rd century BCE, hence: “the meaning of ghost is ‘that which returns’” (3.123) and then in *Suowen* as “what humans return to” (5789). This definition illustrates an intimate relation between humans and ghosts: a transformation and continuation of living existence from humans to ghosts or that from material selves to immaterial others without shaking off the strong physicality that was once endowed both on the character formation of 鬼 and in the bodily vitality of humans.¹ Chinese ghosts, transformed from humans after death, as the ancients called the dead the returned, live on in another form in another realm, which is where ghosts return to.

1 This strong physicality plays an essential and decisive role in the conception of Chinese ghosts, which renders Chinese ghosts different from other ghosts based on their strong physical and material needs that pronounce their intimate relation to this worldliness, a key concept that will be discussed further in this article. Other reference to this topic could be found in Yunheng Gong’s *Liang Han ling ming shi jie guan tan jiu* (*Investigation on the other/underworld worldview in Han dynasty*; Taipei: Wenjin, 2006).

The relations between “ghost” and “return” in terms of “what humans return to” and that of “where ghosts return to” are illustrated in classical texts from different schools. *Liji* (the *Book of Rites*), one of the five classics of Confucianism, dictates that “all living creatures must die, and all the dead must return to earth. This is what is called ‘kuei.’” (qtd. in Yu 403). In *Liezi*, a Taoist book, we read: “When spirit and body separate [in death], each returns to its true [place or nature]. This is therefore what is referred to as a ghost. A ghost means to return, that is, to return to its true home” (qtd. in Zeitlin 4). *Zuozhuan*, one of the earliest Chinese narrative histories, states that “if ghosts have an abode to return to, they won’t cause terror” (qtd. in D. Wang 267). Either to earth or to a true home, “return” in this context indicates a “return home,” an essential anthropological need that cannot be easily suppressed or pacified and can be further referred to as the restoration of order and balance or of humanity. In other words, this returning home is what determines ghosts as what they are in terms of their relation to humans and further leads us to the building up of their cultural whereabouts, i.e. “where ghosts return to,” in Chinese ghost belief systems.

(2) Human-Ghost Worlds, “Where Ghosts Return to”

As the concept of “returning home” is essential to define and confine Chinese ghosts, what kind of home or abodes do they return to in Chinese culture? Being a manifestation of the humanisation of cultural ghosts, the building-up of human-ghost worlds, attributed with strong physical and human features, has involved and therefore shaped many philosophical and religious reflections upon the historical development of Chinese society. It is a process that has progressed along with the building-up of some complicated ghost belief systems through time, a result of extensive and lively interaction and integration between traditional Chinese religion, Taoism, and Buddhism.

Echoing the primal status of ghosts, multiple life forces and spirits co-existed spatially on the same level, i.e. on earth, though the life-death separation started to be manifested in the physical separation between human habitations and cemeteries nearby almost as early as ancestor worship appeared in Chinese culture (Liu 5).² It is roughly until the Qin and Han dynasties that a more definite demarcation between the human world and the human-ghost world was drawn with the appearance of *Tai-shan* and *Song-li* as the actual geographical

2 The spatial separation of living residence and cemetery could be found as early as in Neolithic cultures of China, such as in the Yanshao culture, which is dated from around 5000 to 3000 BCE.

names for the earliest human-ghost worlds developed in Chinese folk religion, in which the setting up of a household registration system for ghosts was included (Liu 6). However, the systematic building-up of distinct (imaginary) human-ghost worlds underground, i.e. *Diyu* from Buddhism and *Difu* from Taoism, was launched only after the introduction of Buddhism to China and the popularity of Taoism as the major religious rival against Buddhism in the late Han and Six Dynasties, a period severely troubled by long-term social and political disturbances. Built upon and along with the two main ghost belief systems in Chinese culture, both *Diyu* and *Difu*, usually translated into “hell” in English, can be seen as expanded and transformed imitations and copies of the human world, whose formation consist of many bureaucratic and legal systems originating in Chinese society and were more or less completed only in the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE).³

After acquiring a brief history of Chinese ghost beliefs illustrated in the humanisation of cultural ghosts from an abstract concept into some complicated belief systems in three stages, we will examine the humanisation of literary ghosts in *zhiguai* with a specific focus on its generic birth in the Six Dynasties, as it is the particular time when the two main ghost belief systems in Chinese culture launched their epic construction and competition, which, along with the difficult political and social upheavals at that time, brought about the literary birth of ghosts and ghost narratives.⁴

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- 3 The building-up of a human-ghost world, evolving along with the building-up of a belief system, is a long-term work. It involves complicated and constant repetitions and revisions of concepts and images which are adjusted to the historical and social progression of the human world. The construction of *Diyu*, the Chinese Buddhist hell, is a result of the integration of the concept of the otherworld in traditional Chinese folk religion and that in Indian Buddhism. The construction of *Difu*, the Taoist hell, is an imitation and transformation of the Buddhist *Diyu* and a result of religious competition starting in the late Han dynasty. Thus, the (rough) completion of the building-up of *Diyu* and *Difu*, along with the two ghost belief systems, only occurred almost one century later in the Song dynasty.
- 4 There were basically no literary ghost narratives but cultural, religious, or philosophical “ghost discourses” existent until the late Han dynasty, which is to say that the birth of literary ghosts and ghost narratives is a cultural and historical production that happened in the Six Dynasties, though surely it was impossible without the previous long term formation of Chinese cultural ghosts and ghost beliefs. Reference can be found in Changyu Shi’s “Lu weijin ziguai de guimei yixiang” (On the imagination of ghosts and goblins in the fantasies of the Wei and Jin Periods), *Wenxue Yichan (Literary Heritage)* 2 (2003): 15–24.

Humanisation of Literary Ghosts in *zhiguai*: Literary Birth of Ghosts and Ghost Narratives in the Six Dynasties

Literary ghosts and ghost narratives in Chinese literature first came into existence in the Six Dynasties and were bestowed with very physical and human forms and traits according to the cultural ghosts and ghost beliefs at that time and have remained so till now. Nourished by this strong physicality intimately entwined with human bodiliness and worldliness, literary ghosts started to appear in ghost narratives and to take up time and space in history, narrative, and life. The humanisation of literary ghosts in *zhiguai*, which centres on the literary birth of ghosts and ghost narratives in the Six Dynasties, will be examined concerning three aspects: historicising ghosts, poeticising ghosts, and humanising ghosts.

Historicising ghosts: literary birth of *zhiguai*

Historicising ghosts is the birthmark of literary ghosts that indicates the first step of their humanisation at the generic birth of *zhiguai* in the Six Dynasties. *Zhiguai*, which literally means “records of the strange” or “records of the supernatural”, is an original Chinese literary genre defined as “short fiction written in classical Chinese (*guwen*), which depicts all events about supernatural, strange, improbable, or abnormal phenomena” (Chen 239). As its name relates, *zhiguai* was both read and written as authentic historical and factual recordings of the strange and supernatural, which reveals and proclaims a method of historiography that Gan Bao (286–336 CE), a historian and a great *zhiguai* writer at all times, took in compiling *Soushenji* (*In Search of the Supernatural*, c. 350 CE), a seminal work in the *zhiguai* genre.

In this way, ghosts and ghost narratives were historicised and testified with physical material properties in time and space, as historicity and accounts of the strange and supernatural were attributed to *zhiguai* at its generic birth. After all, the Six Dynasties, due to the incessant social and political disturbances and discontinuities in reality⁵, was a time when the strange and supernatural were perceived as real and factual, when the existence of ghosts was not questioned at all, and when *zhiguai* was categorised into the section of “biographies” instead

5 As its name suggests, the Six Dynasties is a collective noun for the many Chinese dynasties during the periods of the Three Kingdoms (220–280 AD), the Jin Dynasty (265–420 AD), and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589), a period of disunity, instability and warfare.

of “fiction” in books of history.⁶ Immersed in this strong historicity, the narrative form of *zhiguai* is structured and composed accordingly in the form of historical writing and that of biography, which leads us to the next illustration of the humanisation of literary ghosts: poeticising ghosts.

Poeticising Ghosts: The Narrative Form of *zhiguai*

As a literary manifestation of historicising ghosts, poeticising ghosts locates literary ghosts in the narrative formation of *zhiguai*, or that of ghost narratives, namely to record fragments of the life of ghosts and their daily unlikely encounters with humans in the written form of historiography and biography. Biography, a written account or history of a person’s life, and historiography, defined as the writing of history or of past events, are both narratives used to represent the significant past, either of a person or of a nation, from a historical point of view. Deeply affected by this historiographical style, *zhiguai*, though whose subject (ghosts) and content (the strange and supernatural) are utterly distinct from both of them (humans, the real and factual), adopts and adapts these narrative forms to a large extent as history is considered a noble genre which gains high literary recognition in Chinese narrative writing.

In imitation of historical writing, *zhiguai* substantialises and preserves the living traces of ghosts through its narrative formation. Firstly, *zhiguai* is always narrated in the past tense by a heterodiegetic narrator, who concentrates more on showing instead of telling and refrains from commenting most of the time. Due to these many layers of distance constructed by time, space, and narrative voice, *zhiguai* setting, characters and plots, no matter how strange or supernatural, are securely framed in the distanced historical narrative and arouse no ambiguity or hesitation in the Chinese reader’s or the character’s mind in recognising ghosts and their daily unlikely encounters with humans as purely common facts.⁷

6 The reorganization of *zhiguai* into the section of “*xiaoshuo*” as literary fictional writings in books of history was done by Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072 CE) when he compiled *Xing Tang Shu* (*New History of the Tang*, 1060) in the Song dynasty. While the content of *zhiguai* has been officially recognised as fictional and imaginary since then, its literary form of historiography has remained intact till Pu Songling’s time, i.e. till the Qing dynasty.

7 This Chinese way of reading and writing the strange or the supernatural, i.e. *zhiguai*, is in direct contradiction to the strict definition of fantastic literature offered by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, as he claims that the fantastic resides in the hesitation or ambiguity between the marvelous and the uncanny (33). While ghosts were recognised as real and factual and *zhiguai* was/had been read and written as history in Chinese culture, there exists no hesitation or ambiguity about the solid existence of the strange and supernatural in Chinese *zhiguai*.

Secondly, the language used in *zhiguai*, especially the one at its generic birth in the Six Dynasties, is mostly plain, factual, and brief, approximately some tens up to 350 words in length. They are quick sketches and snapshots of the life of ghosts, collecting both written and oral information about them, such as the insertion of speech and dialogues. As the life of ghosts is relatively insignificant and rather trivial in comparison with those of emperors and nobles, *zhiguai* narrative, though adopting a historiographical style, often fails to trace the whole life of a ghost in chronological order and is shown fragmented in its narrative form. However, it is via accumulating fragments of the life of many ghosts from here and there that the life of ghosts on the whole, along with pieces of the trivial everyday life reality around them, has been somehow threaded together and sustained in *zhiguai* narrative or in so-called *zhiguai* historiography.⁸ The life of literary ghosts, especially those new-born ones sketched in the *zhiguai* of the Six Dynasties, is what will be examined next in humanising ghosts.

Humanising Ghosts: The Literary Birth of Ghosts in *zhiguai*

Chinese ghosts, both cultural and literary ones, are humanised in a very corporeal sense that (or, as if) they are strongly affected and conditioned by their experiences and memories of being human and of having physical bodies before death, despite the very fact of their being immaterial. Shaped profoundly by this strong physicality that expresses their intimate relation both to their human selves and their worldliness, literary ghosts were brought to life in human form and endowed with vivid human qualities in *zhiguai*.

Like humans, literary ghosts are driven by both physical and emotional needs/desires. They possess not only a human-body form, which makes them hard to be differentiated from humans by sight, weigh basically nothing and stir no noise when crossing a river as narrated in “Song Dingbo” (Cao 321.4), but also have humanlike physical needs and desires for food, drink, shelter, sex, etc. Yet, they are unable to disturb the physical world in a profound, material way. For example, a large amount of food and drink that a ghost just consumed “would re-appear in the status as if they hadn’t been touched at all” shortly after the ghost left the scene, as recorded in Dai Zuo’s *zhiguai* story (2.267).

8 *Zhiguai* historiography is a field that has been worked on a lot in the last decades, to reconsider the relation between history and literature. References can be found in Rober Campany’s *Strange Writings: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), or Judith Zeitlin’s *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

While this material-world non-disturbance rule seems to work strictly and perfectly in most cases, strong emotional bonds between humans and ghosts, such as love and affection, can surely do some tricks. They are illustrated most abundantly in three literary motifs in *zhiguai* to depict the emotional needs and desires of ghosts: to establish, maintain, or restore their relationships with humans in terms of love, resurrection, or revenge/favour.

One of the earliest *zhiguai* stories that covers more or less all three literary motifs and manifests evident material changes in the physical world of the text world is “Tan Sheng” (Cao 316.5). Tan, a scholar of 40, marries a young, beautiful, female ghost of 15 from a rich family, who comes to him one night, gives birth to a son after their marriage, and gradually regains half of her human flesh back within two years. It is when Tan breaks his promise not to look at her in firelight for three years that they are finally separated, but Tan is left with their son and rewarded and given office with the help of the family of the female ghost. As her emotional bond with her husband and son, or her self-awareness of being a wife and a mother, has been strengthened over time, she also gains more access to the physical world in terms of corporality. She is able to give birth to a human son like a human woman does and her gaining half of her human flesh back indicates her regaining her human identity and life, a process of humanisation of literary ghosts in its fullest literal sense, which, however, ends sadly in failure.

Being an early example of *zhiguai*, “Tan Sheng” relates a strong, plain yearning of the new-born literary ghosts for exerting actual effects on the material world and for retaining bits of their ghostly existence in the human world – a daring yearning manifested vividly in the humanisation of literary ghosts in *zhiguai* in the Six Dynasties; namely, historicising ghosts, poeticising ghosts and humanising ghosts. This desire of literary ghosts to become human, however, has not been eliminated or weakened much in later periods, especially in those of troubled times. *Zhiguai*, after all, is a literary genre that claims to be faithful recordings of the strange and supernatural in the form of historical writing, and it has persisted so till the time of Pu Songling.⁹

Conclusion

From the humanisation of cultural ghosts in Chinese society to that of literary ghosts in *zhiguai*, Chinese ghosts have developed from an abstract broad concept, to one concrete Chinese character in which many philosophical and religious

9 Pu Songling (1640–1715) was a Qing dynasty (the last Chinese dynasty) writer, best known as the author of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, 1740), i.e. the best known Chinese *zhiguai* collection in the world.

thoughts had been gathered. From there the concept developed into complicated cultural belief systems in its early structural formation, and further to a myriad literary ghosts, which were brought into life in human form and depicted vividly with distinct human traits in the considerable corpus of the *zhiguai* ghost narratives in the Six Dynasties.¹⁰ As literary ghosts are fulfilling this irrepressible tendency of humanisation in order to become more human or gain more human features, they, along with ghost narratives, serve the role of valuable foils to humans and history – they are the absolute but intimate “other” in mirroring Chinese people and society, even more so when their strange and supernatural existence stirs no hesitation. It is when literary ghosts are narrated to appear more human than humans are, either in ghost narratives or in reality, that we as readers might start to reflect upon who or what a human being is, or how to be a human. The formerly taken for granted borderline between humans and ghosts is somehow dramatically twisted or even reversed. Literary ghosts in ghost narratives in the Six Dynasties and in general can thus be read as some restored images of the living yet alienated humans in Chinese society, whose ghostly presence reminds us of an essential anthropological need of returning home as explicated in the etymological reading of 鬼 (*gui*) – they, as well as we humans, need to return home in the sense that order and humanity shall be restored.

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10 Though the production of *zhiguai* narrative was at its peak in the Six Dynasties, we shall keep in mind as well that *zhiguai* was considered as a genre much inferior to history and poetry in Chinese narrative tradition, adding that many of them are lost or survived only as fragments today; thus, “the considerable corpus of *zhiguai* ghost narratives,” which refers to maybe up to one third of the 55 extant but incomplete books of *zhiguai* collections circulating in the Six Dynasties, shall neither be exaggerated nor underestimated.

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