



# Exploring Confucian Concepts of Ghosts and Gods

Longxi Hu

Bates College, Lewiston, 04240, US

hulongxi0123@163.com

**Abstract.** Confucianism, as one of the most influential thoughts on traditional Chinese culture, has also had a profound influence on the formation of the concept of ghosts and gods in traditional Chinese culture. This article discusses the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods based on the remarks and thoughts of Confucius. Besides, it also explores the formation and development of the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods in the context of the time. According to the analysis, conclusions can be drawn that the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods was formed with great consistency of the social purpose of Confucianism and the thought of Confucius. It emphasized the relationship between humans and real life, pursuing the practical and realistic significance of behavior while retaining a strong yearning for the culture of the previous dynasties. Research on this topic is meaningful to the understanding of Confucianism as well as traditional Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Confucius, Concepts of ghosts and gods, Philosophy.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of ghosts and gods has been an important part of human civilization in different historical periods, ethnic groups, regions, and cultures. It represents people's imagination and interpretation of abstract concepts and the unknown <sup>[1]</sup>. The construction of such imaginations and explanations is based on the social system and culture of the time, and it can also reflect the thinking pattern and behavioral habits of the people.

The main object of this article is the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods, which is approached from the following perspectives: first of all, based on the remarks of Confucius, this article explains the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods in general; secondly, the pragmatism and practicality of Confucius' thought are combined to analyze the concept; last but not least, by taking into account the background of the time and the concept of the "Way of Heaven" (Tiandao) which is closely related to the concept of ghosts and gods, the basis of the formation of Confucian concepts of ghosts and gods and the reasons for it are explored.

As one of the most important schools of thought in traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism's attitude toward ghosts and gods has largely influenced the traditional Chinese culture's understanding of ghosts and gods. Knowing Confucianism's culture

of ghosts and gods can help people understand Chinese culture's conceptual system of ghosts and gods in a more systematic way, which is also very helpful in explaining some cultural behaviors of Chinese people. Meanwhile, the concept of ghosts and gods mirrors a school of thought's realization and explanation of the abstract ultimate power, so learning about the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods is also greatly helpful and meaningful to the overall understanding of the philosophical spirit of Confucianism.

## **2. The Concept of Ghosts and Gods Embodied in Confucian Works**

First of all, based on the starting point of Confucius' remarks, Confucianism's attitude towards ghosts and gods is ambiguous. Throughout the records of Confucius' discourses, he always avoided answering questions related to ghosts and gods positively. When Confucius talked about ghosts and gods, he did not deny the existence of ghosts and gods, but he also never defined their existence. "Respect the ghosts and gods but not get close to them <sup>[2]</sup>" summarizes the basic tendency of Confucianism in dealing with the issue of ghosts and gods. The reasons for the ambiguity of Confucianism's attitude toward ghosts and gods are also revealed in many of Confucius' recorded statements. Confucians do not emphasize being close to ghosts and gods because they do not want the affairs of ghosts and gods to occupy too much of people's time so people neglect or ignore their actual and real lives. That is why Confucius replied to Zi Lu, "If you can't serve humans, how can you serve ghosts?" "Without knowing life, how can one know death? <sup>[2]</sup>". If people are not even aware of the real world of the living and do not even care about the people around them, how can they possibly know the world after death, and how can they possibly know how to deal with ghosts and gods? The contrasts between death and life, between ghosts, gods, and people, and between the unknown world and the real world all reinforce the fact that the focus of Confucianism is on people's connection to the real world. As such a "worldly" school of thought, the exploration and regulation of human behavior have always been the purpose of Confucianism, and based on this, practicality and realism have also become important features of Confucianism.

## **3. Reasons for the Formation of the Confucian Concept of Ghosts and Gods**

### **3.1. The Consistency of the Concept of Ghosts and Gods with the Social Purpose of Confucianism**

Combining such characteristics and then analyzing the reasons why Confucius did not totally deny ghosts and gods though did not promote them, the following viewpoints can be drawn. The existence of ghosts and gods to a certain extent fits in with the ideological direction of Confucianism in regulating social customs. In the *Book of Rites*, Confucius once said, "Combining ghosts and gods is the best way to teach <sup>[3]</sup>." The

concept of ghosts and gods could help them to indoctrinate people so that people would have something to revere, and thus achieve the harmonious and beautiful social environment that Confucianism was committed to constructing. Because Confucianism focuses on actual people and things, they explore more about the purpose of behavior and the way of thinking associated with it. Confucius never directly condemns the weaknesses of human nature, but it is clear from his attitude toward ghosts and gods that, regardless of whether or not he recognized the existence of ghosts and gods, or what he really thought about them, at least he understood that the existence of "ghosts and gods" was closely related to people's fear or reverence. In the *Zhi Si* chapter of the *Analecets*, Zigong and Confucius have this conversation: Zigong asked Confucius, "Do the dead have consciousness? Do the dead have no consciousness?" Confucius said, "If I say that people have consciousness after death, I am afraid that people do not serve the living well during their lives, but put their faith in the dead with grand ceremonies after death. If I say that people have no consciousness after death, I am also afraid that unfilial children and grandchildren will abandon their deceased elders without burying them." [2] Confucius once again evaded a direct answer to the question of ghosts and gods, but he was well aware that the fact that people were so eager to know the answer to the question of whether or not ghosts and gods existed was largely rooted in their inner restlessness and fear of the unknown. With insight into this psychology, Confucius' ambiguous attitude toward ghosts and gods can be explained. By utilizing such an evasive attitude, Confucius neither totally denied the existence of ghosts and gods, nor allowed people's beliefs and offerings to reach the level of superstition. He preserved the possibility of the existence of ghosts and gods in a moderate manner, left room for people's imagination and reverence, and limited the development of the concept of ghosts and gods to a reasonable extent, which neither affected real life nor challenged the emotional value that people derived from their beliefs [4,5].

### **3.2. The Consistency of the Concept of Ghosts and Gods with the Thought of Confucius**

In addition to this, Confucius' acquiescence to the existence of ghosts and gods also stems from the grounded thinking style of Confucius' thought. The focus of Confucius' philosophical thought is not on exploring some ultimate questions or pursuing purely theoretical breakthroughs, so he would not overly discuss or define things that are outside of his ability. Confucianism encourages people to focus more on the present and the people around them since these are the behaviors that actually help in personal cultivation and social development. There is a saying in the chapter *Wei Zheng* of the *Analecets*, "To know is to know, and not to know is not to know, and this is true wisdom [2]." This saying can be universally applied to any attitude toward knowledge, and Confucius was cautious about talking about ghosts and gods, something he was not sure about because he held the same idea.

#### 4. Exploring the Confucian Concept of Ghosts and Gods in the Context of the Times

Lastly, exploring the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods in the context of the times will reveal that although Confucius' thought was born out of his yearning for the Zhou Dynasty system, its basic logic developed in such a chaotic era as the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Periods, and the context of the times had a profound impact on the eventual formation of Confucian thought. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, the order of the previous dynasty was on the verge of collapse, but the rules of the new era had not yet been determined, so people were in pursuit of new, better, and more perfect social systems and institutions. Confucianism's ambiguous attitude toward ghosts and gods was also derived from such an era. One of the goals of Confucianism for the cultivation of the individual revolves around "benevolence" (ren). How to reach this goal is stated in the *Analecets* in the chapter of *Yan Yuan*, which states: "克己复礼为仁"<sup>[2]</sup>. There are a few different interpretations of this phrase in its nuances, but later opinion generally agrees with Zhu Xi's interpretation in his *Collected Notes on the Four Books (Sishu Zhangjv Jizhu)*<sup>[1]</sup>: It means to restrain and overcome one's own selfish desires and to restore and observe etiquette, which is benevolence<sup>[6]</sup>. The "etiquette" here refers to the etiquette of the Zhou Dynasty. Confucius wanted to revitalize the etiquette of the Zhou Dynasty, and this was his clearly expressed viewpoint in the *Analecets*: "The Zhou rites borrowed from the rites of the Xia and Shang dynasties, and they are really colorful and rich! I agree with and follow the Zhou Rites." "Elaborate without creating, believe in and love ancient culture."<sup>[2]</sup> All these views express his longing and love for the Zhou Dynasty system and rituals. Considering Confucius' concept of ghosts and gods from this perspective can prove that the social culture and system of the Zhou Dynasty did have influences on Confucius' thoughts.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the concept of ghosts and gods is actually a reflection of people's imaginations and interpretations of the unknown world, so conversely, people can also extract the reasons for the formation of the concept of ghosts and gods from society's interpretations of a wider range of abstract concepts. The concept of the "Way of Heaven" in the Zhou Dynasty is an explanation for the vast unknown power. The rulers of the Zhou Dynasty personified "Heaven" to consolidate the authority of the king, but during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, the rule of the Zhou Dynasty was no longer as effective as it had been before, and so people began to re-discuss the definition of the "Way of Heaven" and the origin of authority<sup>[7]</sup>. However, it has to be mentioned that the religious thinking of the Zhou Dynasty had already adopted a relatively secularized stance compared to its predecessor, the Shang Dynasty. According to contemporary archaeological evidence, extreme religious practices such as human sacrifices were prevalent in the Shang Dynasty, but the rulers of the Zhou Dynasty completely abolished and obliterated such primitive and brutal traditions, and chose a path of humanism. Although the Zhou Dynasty did not create a new religious system, it distanced itself from extreme religious practices, which laid the foundation for the cultural development of later generations and the ideological theories of Confucius<sup>[8]</sup>.

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, the theoretical connotation of the concept of the "Way of Heaven" became complex, because it had both the historical deposits of the previous dynasties and the conceptual breakthroughs that integrated the new social environment. Chen Lai, a modern Chinese scholar, points out three types of understandings of the concept of the "Way of Heaven": a religious understanding of destiny, the use of moral concepts inherited from the Zhou Dynasty, and a naturalistic interpretation of the "Way of Heaven" [9]. The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were times when theological thought faltered and declined, while naturalism and humanism were gradually proposed and accepted. Therefore, naturalism and humanism gradually became the dominant voice in the interpretation of abstract ideas. Confucianism's attitude toward the concepts of the "Way of Heaven" and ghosts and gods similarly contained these multiple connotations in the context of such an era. Its explanations retained the almost religious beliefs of the previous dynasty and also included the meaning and power of the existence of nature itself in the new era; the explanations were more based on humanistic thinking, focusing on the real society and emphasizing the real connection between human beings and reality, between human beings and society, and between human beings themselves. The ultimate explanations of morality and benevolence were also included [10,11].

After the depersonalization of the personified abstract concept, "heaven" becomes an abstract image that has neither distinctive appearance nor specific character traits, and it is difficult to express. Because of the incomplete and abstract image of personality, "heaven" cannot regulate things on earth through concrete guidance, and it is this blurred personality of the supreme power and the incomplete and unsystematic interpretation of abstract concepts that lays the foundation for the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods, which is dominated by realism and has a weak theological consciousness. In this context, both the "Way of Heaven" and the ghosts and gods lacked concrete image representations. This provided space for the development of Confucianism's human-centered philosophical concepts. Therefore, Confucius' attitude toward ghosts and gods began to move away from the concern for unexplainable nature and forces, and was not limited to the intense questioning and thinking about ultimate issues, but rather shifted to serve a more realistic social order. However, it is undeniable that Confucius, whose thought was born out of the rituals of the Zhou Dynasty, did not give up his obedience to and reverence for unknown forces, as can be seen in the sacrificial rituals of the Confucian tradition. What the thought of Confucius gave up, or changed, was only the abstract concept of being personified. Although the concept of ghosts and gods has lost its personification, Confucian thought still retains the authority of the concept of ghosts and gods.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, Confucianism's ambivalent attitude towards ghosts and gods shows very rich layers, exposing the complexity of the social and human nature represented by the concept of ghosts and gods. Confucianism's great concern for real life is one of the important factors in the formation of its conception of ghosts and gods, but at the same

time, it also has its own reflections on history and culture based on the social environment. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, a time when breakthroughs and changes were sought, Confucius' concept of ghosts and gods had its own unique foothold. He emphasized the relationship between human beings and real society and pursued the practical and realistic significance of behavior, but meanwhile, he retained a strong yearning for the ritual and culture of the previous dynasties, which made the realism of Confucianism equally rich in humanistic concern.

The Confucian notion of ghosts and gods represents the continuing search for ways to live with abstract concepts in those turbulent times. When the ideas of the previous dynasty were no longer persuasive, people began to reconsider their place in the world. Exploration and philosophical reflection on this path continues to the present day. The Confucian concept of ghosts and gods is a very broad topic, and this paper still leaves much to be accounted for. For example, it is possible to think about whether there is an interactive relationship between the Confucian concept of ghosts and gods and the attitude of faith in Chinese culture in the context of broader abstract concepts. A review of Confucianism in history will offer great help in an overall understanding of the perception of abstract concepts in Chinese culture, and it will also have a cross-generational significance for the continued exploration of human philosophy in this area.

## Reference

1. Dai, C. (2011). Qianlun Rujia de Guishen Sixiang (A Brief Discussion on the Confucian Thought of "Ghosts and Gods"). *Huaxia Culture*, (01), 6-8.
2. Chen, X. F. (2016). Translation Commentary, *Analects*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
3. Hu, P. S. and Zhang, M. (2017). Translation Commentary, *The Book of Rites*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
4. Tang, D. Z. (1986). Rujia de Tiandao Guishen Guan (Confucian View of Heaven). *Confucius Studies*, (02), 102-108.
5. Thomas A. W. (2022). The Ritual Construction of Confucian Gods in Imperial China: The Case of Vast Heaven High God. *History of Religions*, 62. The University of Chicago.
6. Zhu, X. (1983). *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu (Collected Notes on the Four Books)*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
7. Goldin, P. R. (2020). *The Art of Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
8. Li, S. (2022). *Jian Shang: The Changes of Yin and Zhou and the New Life of Huaxia*. Guangxi Normal University Press, 15.
9. Chen, L. (2009). *The World of Ancient Thought and Culture: Religion, Ethics and Social Thought in the Spring and Autumn Period*. SDX Joint Publishing Company.
10. McConochie, T. and Fang, Z. H. (2020). Exploring the term "harmony" and its practical significance in Confucian classics with examples drawn from the Liji. *Philosophy Compass*, 15(9), 1-12.
11. Peng, G. X. (1969). *The Confucian tradition: between religion and humanism*. Alhambra, CA: Bridge 21 Publications.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

