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The Evolution of Confucian Belief in Ghosts, Spirits, and Sacrificial Culture: The Pre-Qin and Song–Ming Periods

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Abstract

Belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture is important in the Confucian tradition. Across different periods, Confucian interpretations have changed. Pre-Qin Confucianism distanced itself from earlier *wu-shi* 巫史 (shaman) culture, remaining agnostic about whether ghosts and spirits possess supernatural powers to govern national prosperity or personal fate. In governance and social practice, it prioritized human agency over the authority of ghosts and spirits, marginalizing their influence. While affirming the didactic function of sacrifice, Pre-Qin Confucians venerated ghosts and spirits but insisted on “*ji er bu qi*” (祭而不祈, “sacrificing without supplication”). Song–Ming Confucianism, responding to challenges from Buddhism and Daoism, reinterpreted these concepts and understood ghosts and spirits in terms of *qi* (氣, ether), framing them as the contraction and expansion of “*qi*” (“*qi zhi qu shen*”, 氣之屈伸). They did not recognize the independent existence, sentience, or supernatural powers of ghosts and spirits. Because the *qi* of ancestors and the living are identical, communication with ghosts and spirits could be established during ancestral worship. They favored sacrifice to ghosts and spirits but criticized the Buddhist practice of making images of them. In summary, Pre-Qin and Song–Ming Confucianism offered different explanations for why ghosts and spirits should be venerated and the relationship between sacrifice and blessings. These interpretations, shaped by efforts to distinguish themselves from *wu-shi* traditions and Buddhist–Daoist doctrines, reveal differences and contradictions between the two major phases of Confucian thought. Both, however, shared the aim of negating shamanistic practices and countering heterodoxy.

Keywords: Confucianism; ghosts and spirits; sacrifice; *wu-shi* 巫史 culture; Buddhism and Taoism



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1. Introduction

Belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture is a vital component of Chinese civilization with profound historical depth.¹ Confucianism, which emerged during the Spring and Autumn period, was deeply shaped by this legacy regarding the evolving role of the *ru* 儒 (Confucian literati) and in its doctrinal formation. Consequently, explorations of these beliefs have permeated Confucian intellectual history across all eras.

Within the developmental trajectory of Confucian conceptions of ghosts and spirits, the Pre-Qin and Song–Ming periods are pivotal. During the Pre-Qin era, Confucians generally acknowledged the existence of ghosts and spirits, but Confucians’ inquiries focused on key questions: Can ghosts and spirits interfere in human affairs? Should governance

prioritize human agency or the authority of ghosts and spirits? Why should one sacrifice to ghosts and spirits, and with what attitude? This phase emphasized the practical significance of sacrificial rituals. By reinterpreting belief in ghosts and spirits and shifting from shamanistic mediation to ethical humanism, Pre-Qin Confucians distinguished themselves from *wu-shi* 巫史 (shaman) and ritual specialists, crystallizing their doctrinal distinctiveness.

Under intellectual pressure from Buddhism and Daoism, Song–Ming Confucians redirected their focus to a different set of questions: What are ghosts and spirits? Can they exist independently? How does sacrificial *gantong* (感通, communion) function? Through these debates, they systematically critiqued Buddhist and Daoist conceptions of ghosts and spirits. However, after Buddhism was introduced to China, it absorbed certain ideas about ghosts and spirits from Pre-Qin Confucianism. As a result, Song Confucian critiques of Buddhism, which evolved in response to the demands of the times, were not entirely consistent with the stance of Pre-Qin Confucianism.

A substantial body of research exists on Confucian notions of ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture. Long Jiajie 龍佳解, Wang Jinfeng 王金鳳, W.J. Boot, Zhang Hui 張卉, and Cai Fanglu 蔡方鹿 have examined these concepts within specific historical periods.² Others have considered key Confucian thinkers' interpretations of ghosts and spirits. Li Jian 李建, Zhu Junyi 朱俊藝, and Wang Zhongjiang have offered explanations of Confucius's views.³ Zhang Lihua 張麗華 analyzed Zhang Zai's 張載 (1020–1077) views on ghosts and spirits, while Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990), Joseph Needham (1900–1995), Chen Rongjie 陳榮捷 (1901–1994), Kim Yung Sik, Ching Julia, Daniel K. Gardner, Fang Xudong 方旭東, Wu Zhen 吳震, Yang Yi 楊逸, Fu Xiaofan 傅小凡, Fu Xihong 傅錫洪, Zhao Fasheng 趙法生, and Mao Guomin 毛國民, among others, have studied Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) theories and practices concerning ghosts and spirits.⁴ In addition, scholars such as Chen Yun 陳贇, Thomas Wilson, Xiang Shuchen, Wang Guoyu 王國雨, and Feng Li have explored Confucian belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture either through the classical system of ritual studies or from the perspective of *qing* (情, sentiment).⁵ Poo (2022) traced the origin of early Chinese concepts of ghosts and spirits, the evolution of images of ghosts and spirits in different historical periods, and distinct cultural forms of these beliefs in Daoism and Buddhism. While existing research has extensively explored Confucian conceptions of ghosts and spirits, macro-historical analyses of their evolving manifestations and characteristics and the underlying causes of these changes across different epochs remain underexplored.

This study focuses on the Pre-Qin and Song–Ming periods to elucidate the distinctive features and historical contingencies of Confucian belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture during each phase. It also analyzes the internal logical and inherited relationships between these two major eras.

2. The Emergence of Confucianism: A New Interpretation of the Belief in Ghosts, Spirits, and Sacrificial Culture

Before the emergence of Confucianism, the transmission of belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture was primarily dominated by *wu* (巫, shamans) and *shi* (史, scribes). Therefore, early belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture can also be termed “*Wu-Shi* 巫史 culture”.⁶ As a school of thought, Confucianism's origins are closely linked to this early *wu-shi* culture. The *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字) records: “*Ru* (儒) means soft, the name of a warlock” (儒, 柔也, 術士之稱) (S. Xu 1963, p. 162). Han dynasty scholar Ban Gu (班固, 32–92) suggested that Confucianism originated from the official role of the *Situ* (司徒, Minister of Education), while modern scholars argue that *ru* originally functioned as a profession specializing in ceremonial rites, assisting aristocrats and commoners in conducting weddings, funerals, and ancestral sacrifices. Zhang Taiyan (章

太炎, 1869–1936), in his work *Yuan Ru* (原儒), distinguished between broad and narrow definitions of *ru*, asserting that this profession was closely connected to religious and sacrificial roles, such as shamans. He wrote: “The term ‘*ru*’ likely derives from ‘*xu*’ (需, ritual supplication) ... Those who danced and implored for rain were called *ru*. Thus, Zeng Xi’s (曾皙, 542–475 BCE) eccentric aspiration to dance in the rain ceremony and Yuan Xian’s (原憲, 515–? BCE) austere wearing of ritual headgear both reflect their disillusionment with worldly affairs as *wu*, retreating into the realm of spiritual practices” (儒之名盖出于需。……吁嗟以求雨者謂之儒。故曾皙之狂而志舞雩，原憲之狷而服華冠，皆以忿世为巫，辟易放志于鬼道) (T. Zhang 2008, pp. 383–84).⁷

Like the shaman-scribes, Confucians affirmed the existential value of belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture. The *Liji-Jitong* (禮記·祭統, *Book of Rites: Principles of Sacrifice*) maintains: “Among the ways to govern people, none is more urgent than ritual. Of the Five Classics of Rites, none surpasses sacrifice in importance” (凡治人之道，莫急于禮。禮有五經，莫重于祭) (Zheng 1999, p. 1345). *Wu-shi* affirmed that ghosts and spirits possessed supernatural power to govern world order, national survival, dynastic transitions, and personal fortunes. Humans, being subordinate, were expected to revere ghosts and spirits as sovereigns and devoutly serve them through sacrificial rites to seek *fu lu* (福祿, blessings), *chang shou* (長壽, longevity), and *wu zai* (無災, protection from calamities). Pre-Qin Confucianism, epitomized by Confucius, articulated three distinctive beliefs about ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture. Specifically, Confucianism withholds judgment on whether ghosts and spirits possess supernatural power to influence world order, national prosperity or decline, and personal fortunes. In governance and political practice, it advocates focusing on real, tangible human affairs rather than resorting to ghosts and spirits, seeking to diminish their influence on society.

Beliefs about ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture across the Three Dynasties (Xia 夏, Shang 商, and Zhou 周) differed and influenced state governance and daily life. As recorded in the *Shiji-Xiabenji* (史記·夏本紀, *Records of the Grand Historian: Xia Annals*): “Emperor Kong Jia (孔甲) ascended the throne, favoring occult rituals and indulging in licentiousness. The virtue of the Xia rulers declined, and the feudal lords rebelled against him” (帝孔甲立，好方鬼神，事淫亂。夏后氏德衰，諸侯畔之) (Sima 1982, p. 86). The Shang people revered ghosts and spirits, as Confucius noted in the *Liji-Biaoji* (禮記·表記, *Book of Rites: Biaoji*): “The Yin honored spirits, leading the people to serve spirits, prioritizing ghosts over ritual propriety” (殷人尊神，率民以事神，先鬼而后禮) (Zheng 1999, p. 1485). The Zhou dynasty revered Heaven and the veneration of ancestors, believing ghosts and spirits could protect mortals. The *Shangshu-Jinteng* (尚書·金縢, *Book of Documents: Golden Coffer*) records that when King Wu (武王) fell gravely ill, the Duke of Zhou (周公) offered sacrifices to ancestral ghosts and spirits, even pledging his own life to petition for the king’s recovery.

However, after the fall of the Western Zhou, the Spring and Autumn period saw new reflections on the relationship between humans, ghosts, and spirits, including skepticism toward and outright condemnation of Heaven. In this redefined dynamic, the earlier paradigm of ghosts and spirits dominating human affairs was overturned. Instead, the idea that “the people are the masters of the ghosts and spirits” emerged, with the existence of ghosts and spirits depending on mortal agency. In the *Zuo Zhuan* (左傳, *Zuo Commentary: Sixth Year of Duke Huan* (桓公)), Ji Liang (季梁, ?–?) of Sui (隨) states: “The people are the masters of the ghosts and spirits. Thus, sage kings first secure the people’s welfare before attending to the ghosts and spirits” (夫民，神之主也。是以圣王先成民而后致力于神) (Bojun Yang 1981, p. 111). Similarly, the *Zuo Zhuan: Thirty-Second Year of Duke Zhuang* (莊公) describes the state of Guo (虢), “obeying the ghosts and spirits and tyrannizing (the people)” (虐[民]而听于神), praying for divine land grants to its ruler. The historian Shi Xiao (史釗, ?–?) remarked: “Guo is doomed! I have heard: states thrive by

heeding the people and perish by heeding the spirits. The spirits, though wise and just, act in accordance with human affairs” (號其亡乎！吾聞之：國將興，听于民；將亡，听于神。神，聰明正直而壹者也，依人而行) (Bojun Yang 1981, p. 252). These perspectives reflect the evolving rationalization of the relationship between humans, ghosts, and spirits during this period, a stance inherited and perpetuated by Confucianism. The *Analects* preserves two dialogues where Confucius addresses relationships between humans, ghosts, and spirits:

Fan Chi (樊遲, 515–? BCE) inquired about *zhi* (知, wisdom). Confucius said: “Focus on the people’s ethical obligations, revere the ghosts and spirits yet keep them at a distance—this may be called wisdom.” (樊遲問知。子曰：“務民之義，敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知矣。”) (*Analects*·Yong Ye 論語·雍也). (Bojun Yang 2009, p. 60)

Ji Lu (季路, 542–480 BCE) asked about serving ghosts and spirits. Confucius said: “If one cannot yet serve humans, how can one serve ghosts?” (季路問事鬼神。子曰：“未能事人，焉能事鬼？”) (*Analects*·Xian Jin 論語·先進). (Bojun Yang 2009, p. 112)

From Confucius’s statements — “If one cannot yet serve humans, how can one serve ghosts?” and “revere the ghosts and spirits yet keep them at a distance” — it is evident that in the relationship between humans, ghosts, and spirits, Confucius positioned humans as prior to and superior to ghosts and spirits. Here, the *zhi* (wisdom) Fan Chi inquired about is not ordinary wisdom relevant to individuals. Instead, it addresses how rulers should manage the relationship between the people and ghosts and spirits in “wise” or “prudent” governance. Confucius advocated for governance centered on the people, rejecting ghosts’ and spirits’ interference in political life. Yet he did not frame humans, ghosts, or spirits as oppositional. His statement “If one cannot yet serve humans, how can one serve ghosts?” establishes a sequential, not hierarchical, relationship: “serving humans” pertains to practical governance, while “serving ghosts” refers to ancestral veneration and engagement with the transcendent realm of faith. Under the ancient patrilineal clan system, aristocratic rulers’ political authority and titles were derived from ancestral lineage. Thus, in classical Chinese political theory, rulers took pride in maintaining their inherited positions or surpassing their ancestors’ achievements—a concept termed *guang zong yao zu* (光宗耀祖, bringing honor to ancestors). Such accomplishments, however, had to be grounded in tangible governance and centered on “serving humans”. In Confucian political practice, only by achieving success in “serving humans” and consolidating their rule could rulers properly fulfill filial piety through *shi gui* (事鬼, serving ghosts) during their lives or posthumously. Therefore, within the framework of ancestral rites and sacrificial culture, Confucius emphasized the sequential logic of *shi ren* (事人, serving humans) preceding *shi gui* (事鬼, serving ghosts), rather than a hierarchy of importance.⁸ Nevertheless, Confucius fundamentally opposed allowing spiritual beliefs to influence governance or engaging in speculative debates about the supernatural agency of ghosts and spirits. As recorded in the *Analects*·Shu Er (論語·述而): “Confucius did not speak of anomalies, violence, disorder, or ghosts and spirits” (子不語怪，力，亂，神) (Bojun Yang 2009, p. 71).

Confucianism also affirmed the didactic function of belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture, transforming norms originally applied to ghosts and spirits worship, such as *xiao* (孝, filial piety) and *jing* (敬, reverence), into ethical principles governing human relationships. Prior to the emergence of the Hundred Schools of Thought, Chinese cultural transmission primarily relied on ritual systems. *Yi li wei jiao* (以禮為教, ritual as pedagogy) was the primary method for civilizing the populace, with sacrificial rites to Heaven, Earth, ghosts, and spirits playing the most significant role in instilling filial piety. The *Discourses*

of the States: Zhou III (國語·周語下) states: “To speak of filial piety necessarily involves the ghosts and spirits” (言孝必及神) (Y. Xu 2016, p. 88). The *Discourses of the States: Chu II* (國語·楚語下) adds: “Sacrifices manifest filial piety, pacify the people, stabilize the state, and settle the populace; they must not cease” (祀所以昭孝息民, 撫國家, 定百姓也, 不可以已) (Y. Xu 2016, p. 518). For Confucians, as the most vital of the ancient *wu li* (五禮, five rites), sacrificial rituals also bore the fundamental duty of moral instruction. Confucius declared in the *Liji·Jiyi* (禮記·祭義, *Book of Rites: Meaning of Sacrifices*): “Uniting ghosts and spirits is the pinnacle of education” (合鬼与神, 教之至也) (Zheng 1999, p. 1324). Through sacrificial practices, people were taught proper conduct toward ghosts and spirits and the correct management of relationships between ruler and subject, parent and child, noble and commoner, husband and wife, distant and intimate, and elder and younger. Sacrifices also displayed the honors and titles bestowed upon the ritual officiant by superiors, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions. Confucians systematically expounded the didactic purpose of sacrificial rites inherited from the Three Dynasties:

Sacrifice is the root of education. Sacrifice embodies ten ethical principles: it manifests the way of serving ghosts and spirits, the duty between ruler and subject, the bond between father and son, the distinction between noble and base, the gradation of intimacy and distance, the conferral of ranks and rewards, the separation of husband and wife, the balance of governance, the order of elder and younger, and the boundaries of high and low. These are called the Ten Ethical Principles. (祭者, 教之本也已。夫祭有十倫焉: 見事鬼神之道焉, 見君臣之義焉, 見父子之倫焉, 見貴賤之等焉, 見親疏之殺焉, 見爵賞之施焉, 見夫婦之別焉, 見政事之均焉, 見長幼之序焉, 見上下之際焉, 此之謂十倫。) (*Liji·Jitong* 禮記·祭統). (Zheng 1999, p. 1354)

Because sacrifice intertwined with political governance, familial bonds, and social hierarchies, Confucians persistently emphasized its importance. Confucius asserted: “The rites of the suburban and earth altars serve Heaven and Earth. The rites of ancestral temples honor one’s forebears. To understand these rites and the meaning of seasonal sacrifices is to grasp governance as clearly as viewing one’s palm!” (郊社之禮, 所以事上帝也。宗廟之禮, 所以祀乎其先也。明乎郊社之禮、禘嘗之義, 治國其如示諸掌乎!) (*Zhongyong* 中庸, *Doctrine of the Mean*) (Xi Zhu 1983, p. 27). Pre-Qin Confucians’ acceptance of belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture centered on their pedagogical utility. They called the educative power of sacrifices *shen dao she jiao* (神道設教, divine governance through ritual instruction), as the *Zhouyi* (周易, *Book of Changes*) states: “The sage employs divine principles to instruct, and all under Heaven submit” (圣人以神道設教, 而天下服矣) (S. Zhang and Huang 2007, p. 121). Xunzi (荀子, 313–238 BCE) further analyzed the essence of sacrificial practices: “Sacrifice is the expression of remembrance and longing. It is the ultimate act of loyalty, trust, love, and reverence—the fullest embodiment of ritual propriety. None but sages truly comprehend this. Sages understand it profoundly; scholars and gentlemen practice it steadfastly; officials preserve it as duty; the people follow it as custom. For gentlemen, it is the way of humanity; for the masses, it is the affair of ghosts” (祭者, 志意思慕之情也。忠信愛敬之至矣, 禮節文貌之盛矣, 苟非圣人, 莫之能知也。圣人明知之, 士君子安行之, 官人以為守, 百姓以成俗; 其在君子以為人道也, 其在百姓以為鬼事也) (*Xunzi·Lilun* 荀子·禮論 (*Xunzi: Discourse on Ritual*)) (X. Wang 1988, p. 376). To Xunzi, sacrifice’s essence lay in channeling human reverence into moral cultivation. Its transformative power justified Confucius’s claim that “By solemnly conducting parental funerals and reverently sacrificing to distant ancestors, the virtue of the people will be deepened” (慎終追遠, 民德歸厚矣) (*Analects·Xue Er* 論語·學而) (Bojun Yang 2009, p. 6).

While Confucianism affirmed the significance of sacrificing to ghosts and spirits, it also advocates for *ji er bu qi* (祭而不祈, “sacrificing without supplication”). Confucian sac-

rifices were not intended to seek ghosts' and spirits' protection or blessings but to demonstrate filial piety and repay ancestral grace. Because rulers of the Three Dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou believed that celestial and ancestral ghosts and spirits governed national survival, dynastic transitions, and personal fate, the Zhou established a strict sacrificial hierarchy, as recorded in the *Liji·Qulixia* (禮記·曲禮下, *Book of Rites: Quli II*): "The Son of Heaven sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, the four directions, mountains and rivers, and the Five Deities annually. Feudal lords sacrifice to their regional territories, mountains and rivers, and the Five Deities annually. Ministers sacrifice to the Five Deities annually. Scholars sacrifice to their ancestors" (天子祭天地、祭四方、祭山川、祭五祀，歲遍。諸侯方祀，祭山川、祭五祀，歲遍。大夫祭五祀，歲遍。士祭其先) (Zheng 1999, p. 153). Historical texts and inscriptions on Pre-Qin bronze vessels preserve numerous records of supplicants seeking blessings, longevity, and health through sacrifices.

While Confucians acknowledged the potential of sacrifices to invoke blessings, they insisted that such acts must conform to *li zhi* (禮制, ritual propriety) rather than degenerate into indiscriminate pleading. Confucian sacrificial norms demanded that sacrifices be made "in accordance with ritual" (祭之以禮) (*Analects·Wei Zheng* 論語·為政) (Bojun Yang 2009, p. 13). Confucius condemned improper sacrifices: "To sacrifice to ghosts and spirits not one's own is flattery" (非其鬼而祭之，諂也) (*Analects·Wei Zheng* 論語·為政) (Bojun Yang 2009, p. 21). Such *yin ji* (淫祀, immoral sacrifices) directed at unauthorized ghosts and spirits were deemed fruitless. The *Liji·Qulixia* clarifies: "In all sacrifices: what should be abolished, none dare revive; what should be observed, none dare discard. Sacrificing to improper recipients is called 'immoral sacrifice'—such sacrifices yield no blessings" (凡祭，有其廢之，莫敢舉也；有其舉之，莫敢廢也；非其所祭而祭之，名曰淫祀：淫祀無福) (Zheng 1999, p. 154). Confucians maintained that communion with ghosts and spirits through rites should never prioritize material gain. Confucius criticized seeking blessings through sacrifice, admonishing Zigong (子貢, 520–456 BCE): "Those who lack virtue chase after ghosts and spirits; those devoid of wisdom drown in divination" (德行亡者，神靈之趨；智謀遠者，卜筮之繁) (*Boshu Zhouyi·Yao* 帛書周易·要) (Yu 2013, p. 185). During the Pre-Qin period, the attitudes of *wu-shi*, who engaged in ghost and spirit sacrifice and divination to seek auspicious outcomes and avert misfortune, reflected prevailing views of the era. Confucius, by articulating his divergence from *wu-shi* in interpreting the *Zhouyi* (*Book of Changes*), expressed his rejection of transactional sacrifice for blessings. He stated the following:

Later scholars who doubt me may do so because of the *Yi* (易, *Book of Changes*)! I seek only virtue; though my path aligns with *shi-wu* (史巫), our ends diverge. Noble individuals pursue blessings through ethical conduct, thus they seldom sacrifice; they seek auspiciousness through benevolence and righteousness, thus they rarely divine. Shamanistic practices are not the paramount method! (后世之士疑丘者，或以《易》乎！吾求其德而已，吾与史巫同途而殊歸者也。君子德行焉求福，故祭祀而寡也；仁義焉求吉，故卜筮而希也。祝巫卜筮其后乎！) (*Boshu Zhouyi·Yao* 帛書周易·要). (Yu 2013, p. 186)

For Confucius, seeking blessings through sacrifice marked moral deficiency. *Junzi* (君子, noble individuals) should cultivate virtue to attain "*fu*" (福, blessings) and realize auspiciousness by practicing *ren* (仁, humaneness) and *yi* (義, righteousness) in daily life, rather than resorting to divination. Furthermore, Confucians argued that the "*fu*" obtained by the virtuous through sacrifices differed from worldly notions of "fortune" as material prosperity. Instead, they defined it as *bei* (備, completeness). The *Liji·Jitong* explains: "When the virtuous sacrifice, they inevitably receive 'blessings'—not what the world calls 'blessings.' 'Blessings' means 'completeness'; 'completeness' signifies the name for universal harmony. When nothing is discordant, it is called 'completeness'" (賢者之祭也，必受其福，非世所

謂福也。福者，備也；備者，百順之名也。無所不順者，謂之備) (Zheng 1999, p. 1345). Zheng Xuan (鄭玄, 127–200) clarified that worldly “blessings” referred to “receiving aid from ghosts and spirits” (受鬼神之佑助) (Zheng 1999, p. 1345), while the virtuous attained *bei*, a state of “all affairs proceeding smoothly”.

In summary, Confucianism’s stance toward ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture diverged significantly from that of *wu-shi*, consciously demarcating its boundaries from their practices. Within the relationship between humans, ghosts, and spirits, Confucians prioritized human agency, opposing the interference of ghosts and spirits in secular governance or personal fate. While valuing sacrificial rites, they emphasized their didactic function over any notion of transactional blessings. Confucian sacrifices aimed not to secure divine favor but to *bao ben huan shi* (報本還始, repay origins and return to beginnings), manifesting *xiao dao* (孝道, filial piety).⁹ By reinterpreting belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture, Confucians not only redefined the essence of ghost and spirit worship, but also overturned the *wu-shi* tradition, rooted in the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou), that subordinated humans to ghosts and spirits and advocated serving ghosts and spirits through human submission. They transformed the earlier path of seeking *de* (德, virtue), *wei* (位, status), and *fu* (福, blessings) via ghosts’ and spirits’ appeasement into a human-centered path individuals could follow through self-cultivation, moral refinement, and personal effort.

By reinterpreting belief in ghosts and spirits and sacrificial culture, Pre-Qin Confucians abandoned the notion of ghosts and spirits wielding supernatural power to reward virtue, punish vice, or bestow blessings. They liberated themselves from the shackles of *wu-shi* culture, which elevated ghosts and spirits above humans and demanded human submission, and reinterpreted the value of these beliefs through a humanistic lens. This provided classical legitimacy for later generations to understand such beliefs and culture.

3. Explaining Ghosts and Spirits Through Qi 氣: New Song–Ming Interpretations of Belief and Sacrificial Culture

During the Han and Tang periods, Confucian conceptions of ghosts and spirits underwent little change. By the Song dynasty, however, Confucianism faced challenges from Buddhist and Taoist thought following the chaos of the Five Dynasties and the Ten Kingdoms, leading to its decline. As noted, “The Confucian gate grew desolate, unable to retain its followers” (儒門淡泊，收拾不住) (C. Liu 2018, p. 150). Buddhist teachings on reincarnation and posthumous rebirth in heavenly or hellish realms were deeply influential. Many abandoned traditional Confucian earth burials in favor of cremation, commissioning sutras, statues, and pagodas for the deceased. Some officials even urged emperors to “adopt Buddhist funeral rites entirely” (喪禮盡用釋氏) (Lü 1992, p. 1421). This shift burdened society and destabilized the Confucian conception of ghosts and spirits. As Zhu Xi’s (朱熹, 1130–1200) disciple observed: “In Han times, Zheng Xuan (鄭玄, 127–200) annotated the Two Rites, simply defining ghosts and spirits as *qi* (氣, ether). With Buddhism’s arrival, the realms of humans and ghosts and spirits became disordered” (漢時如鄭康成注二禮，但云鬼神是氣。至佛入中國，人鬼始亂) (Jingde Li 1986, p. 3034). The scholar Luo Qinchun (羅欽順, 1465–1547) offered the following criticism: “Heterodox teachings have existed since antiquity, yet none rival Buddhism’s harm. When first entering China, Buddhism seduced people solely with its theories of rebirth” (異端之說，自古有之。考其為害，莫有過于佛氏者矣。佛法初入中國，惟以生死輪回之說動人) (Q. Luo 2013, p. 59). To counter Buddhist cosmology and reincarnation doctrines, Song–Ming Confucians such as Zhang Zai (張載, 1020–1077), Cheng Yi (程頤, 1033–1107), and Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) redefined ghosts and spirits through classical texts, addressing their nature, existence, and ritual engagement while critiquing Buddhist practices.

Song Confucians regarded ghosts and spirits as transformations of *qi* (ether), rather than independent entities endowed with supernatural powers. In determining what, exactly, are *guishen* (鬼神, ghosts and spirits), traditional Chinese culture defined *gui* (鬼, ghosts) as humans' posthumous state. The *Liji·Jifa* (禮記·祭法, *Book of Rites: Sacrificial Norms*) states: "The dead are called *gui*" (人死曰鬼) (Zheng 1999, pp. 1298–99). *Shen* (神, spirits) broadly denoted ancestral spirits, often conflated with *gui* as representations of the departed.¹⁰ Confucius clarified this distinction in the *Liji·Jiyi* (禮記·祭義, *Book of Rites: Meaning of Sacrifices*):

Zai Wo (宰我, 522–458 BCE) asked: "I have heard the names *guishen* (ghosts and spirits) but do not understand their meaning." Confucius replied: "*Qi* (ether) constitutes the flourishing of *shen* (spirits); the *po* (魄, corporeal soul) constitutes the flourishing of *gui* (ghosts). Uniting *gui* and *shen* achieves the height of education. All living beings will die; death means returning to earth—this is called *gui*. Flesh decays below, becoming wild soil in the shadows; their ether ascends, manifesting as radiance, fragrant vapors, and poignant awe—this is the essence of all things, the vivid presence of *shen*." (宰我曰: "吾聞鬼神之名, 而不知其所謂。"子曰: "氣也者, 神之盛也; 魄也者, 鬼之盛也; 合鬼與神, 教之至也。眾生必死, 死必歸土: 此之謂鬼。骨肉斃于下, 陰為野土; 其氣發揚于上, 為昭明, 焄蒿, 淒愴, 此百物之精也, 神之著也。") (Zheng 1999, pp. 1324–25)

For Confucius, *gui* and *shen* were distinct posthumous states: *gui* was formed through earthly decomposition, while *shen* emerged from ascending ether—luminous, ethereal, and immanent in all things' essence. *Guishen* thus represented the ultimate transformations of human death through two discrete existential modes.

Confucius's view represented the prevailing Pre-Song Confucian understanding of *guishen*. However, Song Confucians such as Zhang Zai and Zhu Xi redefined ghosts and spirits not as independent entities, but as the contractive and expansive functions of *qi* (ether), the ontological substance that generates and transforms all things. Zhang Zai grounded his theory in two passages from the *Zhouyi* (周易, *Book of Changes*): "Essence-ether constitutes things; wandering souls effect transformations. Thus, we comprehend the nature of *guishen*" (精氣為物, 游魂為變, 是故知鬼神之情狀) (*Zhouyi·Xici Shang* 周易·系辭上) (S. Zhang and Huang 2007, p. 378). "Cold departs, heat arrives; heat departs, cold arrives. Cold and heat alternate to form the year. Departing is *qu* (屈, contraction); arriving is *shen* (伸, expansion). Contraction and expansion interact to generate benefit" (寒往則暑來, 暑往則寒來, 寒暑相推而歲成焉。往者屈也, 來者信也, 屈信相感而利生焉) (*Zhouyi·Xici Xia* 周易·系辭下) (S. Zhang and Huang 2007, p. 408). From these, Zhang Zai argued: "*Gui* signifies *gui* (歸, return) or *qu* (屈, contraction); *shen* signifies *shen* (伸, expansion). Together, *guishen* describes *qi*'s cyclical states of contraction and expansion that produce heaven, earth, and all beings". He elaborated as follows:

Animals, rooted in heaven, gradually coalesce and disperse through breath; plants, rooted in earth, do so through the ascent and descent of *yin* and *yang*. When things first form, *qi* accumulates daily to nourish growth; when fully matured, *qi* reverses course and disperses. This arrival is called *shen* (expansion); this reversal is called *gui* (return). (動物本諸天, 以呼吸為聚散之漸; 植物本諸地, 以陰陽升降為聚散之漸。物之初生, 氣日至而滋息; 物生既盈, 氣日反而游散。至之謂神, 以其伸也; 反之謂鬼, 以其歸也。). (Z. Zhang 1978, p. 19)

For Zhang Zai, *guishen* merely denotes the natural operations of *yin qi* and *yang qi*: *shen*, as *qi*'s expansion governs life's flourishing; *gui*, as *qi*'s contraction, governs death's return. He asserted that even ancient categories such as *tianshen* (天神, heavenly deities), *dishi* (地示, earthly deities), and *rengui* (人鬼, ancestral ghosts) can be reduced to *qi*'s cyclical

motions. He said: “*Guishen* signifies *qi*’s alternation between contraction and expansion. Thus, heaven is called *shen*, earth is called *shi*, and humans are called *gui*. *Shen* and *shi* mark the inception of return; return and arrival mark the completion of cycles” (鬼神，往來，屈伸之義，故天曰神，地曰示，人曰鬼。神示者歸之始，歸往者來之終) (Z. Zhang 1978, p. 16). By redefining all heavenly deities, earthly deities, and ancestral ghosts as etheric dynamics, Zhang Zai denied the independent existence of *guishen* with extraordinary abilities that could interfere with and influence daily life.

Cheng Yi (程頤, 1033–1107) of the Northern Song also interpreted *guishen* through the dynamics of *yin* and *yang*, asserting: “*Guishen* is the trace of cosmic transformation” (鬼神者，造化之跡也) (Cheng 2011, p. 12). Zhu Xi similarly argued that “*Guishen* is nothing but *qi*. Contraction, expansion, coming, and going—all are movements of *qi*. Between heaven and earth, there is only *qi*” (鬼神只是氣。屈伸往來者，氣也。天地間無非氣) (Jingde Li 1986, p. 34). He regarded Zhang Zai’s theory as superior to Cheng Yi’s, remarking: “Cheng Yi’s claim that ‘*guishen* is the trace of transformation’ falls short of Zhang Zai’s formulation, ‘the latent capacity of the two ethers’ (二氣之良能). While Cheng’s view is sound, it remains vague. Zhang’s theory clarifies the presence of *yin* and *yang* as distinct forces” (伊川所謂“鬼神者，造化之跡”，卻不如橫渠所謂“二氣之良能。”程子之說固好，但卻渾淪在这里。張子之說分明，便見有個陰陽在) (Jingde Li 1986, p. 1548). Zhu Xi further expanded Zhang Zai’s framework: “In terms of dual ethers: *gui* is the numinous aspect of *yin*; *shen* is the numinous aspect of *yang*. In terms of unitary ether: *shen* denotes its arrival; *gui* denotes its return. The unitary ether refers to the cyclical motion of *yin* and *yang*—when it arrives, all arrives; when it departs, all departs. Dual ethers signify the oppositional pairing of *yin* and *yang*, each governing distinct domains” (以二氣言，則鬼者，陰之靈也；神者，陽之靈也。以一氣言，則至而伸者為神，反而歸者為鬼。一氣即陰陽運行之氣，至則皆至，去則皆去之謂也。二氣謂陰陽對峙，各有所屬) (Jingde Li 1986, p. 1548).

Building on this theory of *qi*, Song scholars argued that sacrificial rituals enabled communion with ancestral ghosts and spirits, as living descendants shared the same *qi* as their departed ancestors. Pre-Song Confucians had debated whether sacrifices should seek blessings and how to define “blessings”, but they left unresolved whether sacrificial communion with ghosts and spirits was genuinely achievable. This uncertainty bred skepticism about the necessity of sacrifices. Song Confucians, however, by using *qi* to explain *guishen*, provided a novel rationale for the efficacy of sacrificial practices.

For Zhu Xi, like all beings between Heaven and Earth, human life and death hinge on the coalescence and dispersal of *qi*. Death disperses *qi* but does not annihilate it. Because descendants share the same *qi* as ancestors, sacrificial practices can summon this shared *qi*: “For distant ancestors, the presence of *qi* may be uncertain. Yet because descendants and ancestors are of one *qi*, communion remains possible through sincerity and reverence” (然人死雖終歸于散，然亦未便散盡，故祭祀有感格之理。先祖世次遠者，氣之有無不可知。然奉祭祀者既是他子孫，畢竟只是一氣，所以有感通之理) (Jingde Li 1986, p. 37). “Though ancestral *jingshen hunpo* (精神魂魄, spirit and soul) scatter after death, descendants retain subtle connections to them. By performing rituals with utmost sincerity, one can gather these scattered *hunpo*. This is elusive to articulate—once dispersed, they seem gone. Yet through devotion, communion occurs because the *li* (理, principle) persists eternally” (Jingde Li 1986, p. 46).

Zhu Xi believed that after a person’s death, although their *qi* dissipates, because descendants share the same *qi*, they can communicate with their ancestors’ *qi* when conducting sacrifices with sincere reverence. Likewise, they can regather the *qi* that dissipated from their ancestors and communicate with their ancestors’ souls, thus realizing the connection between humans and *guishen*. “Descendants are the rooted *qi* of ancestors. Though ancestral *qi* scatters, its foundation remains. Through sincere worship, their *qi* coalesces anew

here” (畢竟子孫是祖先之氣。他氣虽散，他根卻在這裡；盡其誠敬，則亦能呼召得他氣聚在此) (Jingde Li 1986, p. 47). By framing sacrificial communion as an etheric resonance, Zhu Xi rationalized ritual necessity within Confucian cosmology.

Most Song Confucians affirmed the necessity of sacrificing to Heaven, Earth, ghosts, and spirits while condemning Buddhism’s practice of crafting spirit idols. Pre-Qin Confucianism inherited and refined China’s early sacrificial culture, establishing a rigorous ritual system. Sacrifices to cosmic and ancestral ghosts and spirits remained integral to this tradition. After Buddhism was introduced into China, while adopting Confucian sacrificial norms, it expanded them by creating statues of ghosts and spirits and worshiping these icons. In contrast, for Confucianism, as the purpose of offering sacrifices to Heaven, Earth, ghosts, and spirits is only to express gratitude, there is no need to fashion images of them. Zhang Zai argued the following:

When sacrificing to mountains and rivers, we honor their towering heights and abyssal depths—their capacity to generate clouds and rain. We repay them with rites befitting dukes and lords. Why would we fashion human-like images? A sage ruler must abolish this. (山川之祀，止是其如此巍然而高，淵然而深，蒸潤而足以興云致雨，必報之，故祀之視三公諸侯，何曾有此人像！圣人為政必去之。). (Z. Zhang 1978, p. 295)

For Confucians, mountain and river sacrifices acknowledged their life-nurturing role, requiring no anthropomorphic icons. Zhang Zai argued that ancient rituals prescribed the use of wooden *shenzhu* (神主, spirit tablets)—not painted portraits—to represent ancestors during sacrifices. He condemned the later practice of creating and venerating human-like images, asserting: “The ancients did not make effigies. Portraiture fails to capture authenticity; over generations, such images would inevitably be discarded, leading to irreverence and neglect. Thus, employing a *zhu* (spirit tablet) is superior” (古人亦不為影像，繪畫不真，世遠則棄，不免于褻慢也。故不如用主) (Z. Zhang 1978, p. 298). Zhu Xi echoed this critique:

Ancient sacrifices were upright, free from superstition. They erected temporary altars—sincere intent summoned etheric resonance, which dissipated post-ritual. Today’s idols sit lifelessly, breeding delusion. (古人祭祀都是正，无許多邪誕。古人只臨時為壇以為祭，此心發處，則彼以氣感，才了便散。今人不合做許多神像，只兀兀在這裏坐。). (Jingde Li 1986, p. 2261)

Ancient purity of intent evoked pure ghosts and spirits; modern corruption begets chaos. Formerly, mountain rites used transient altars—present during reverent, gone afterward, avoiding desecration. Now temples enshrine permanent idols, deluding minds and breeding false hopes. (古人之意正，故其神亦正；后世人心先不正了，故所感無由得正。因言：古人祭山川，只是設壇位以祭之，祭時便有，祭了便無，故不褻瀆。后世卻先立个廟貌如此。所以反致惑亂人心，僥幸非望，無所不至。). (Jingde Li 1986, p. 2261)

In summary, Song Confucians reinterpreted the essence of *guishen* through *qi* metaphysics, offering novel explanations for how sacrificial practices enable communion with them. Their critiques of Buddhist beliefs about ghosts and spirits, reincarnation doctrines, and sacrificial practices were grounded in this new theoretical framework. As Zhang Zai argued: “Buddhists claim that sentient beings cycle through rebirths to escape suffering—do they truly understand *gui*? Deluded minds equate the change of wandering souls with reincarnation, lacking reflection. True learning begins with comprehending celestial virtue; through this, one understands sages and ghosts and spirits. Yet Buddhists fixate on cycles of life and death, insisting liberation requires enlightenment—can this be called true awakening?” (浮屠明鬼，謂有識之死受生循環，遂厭苦求免，可謂知鬼乎？……惑者

指游魂為變為輪回，未之思也。大學當先知天德，知天德則知圣人，知鬼神。今浮屠極論要歸，必謂死生輪流，非得道不免，謂之悟道可乎？) (Z. Zhang 1978, p. 64). Buddhism reified ghosts and spirits as discrete entities, positing that posthumous souls enter reincarnation unless liberated through Buddhist practice. Zhang Zai dismissed this as absurd, asserting: “*Gui* is merely *qi* returning to the *taixu* (太虛, Great Void)”. Those who grasp life’s nature see birth and death as natural transformations, free from attachment. Zhu Xi endorsed this view: “The principles of ghosts and spirits, life, and death fundamentally differ from Buddhist claims and vulgar superstitions” (鬼神死生之理，定不如釋家所云，世俗所見) (Jingde Li 1986, p. 35).

4. Pre-Qin Versus Song–Ming Confucianism: Conflicts and Contradictions in the Belief in Ghosts, Spirits, and Sacrificial Culture

While Pre-Qin and Song Confucianism share doctrinal continuity, their interpretations of belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture diverge significantly due to distinct historical exigencies, with the latter advancing nuanced developments over the former.

Pre-Qin Confucianism grounded its reverence for ancestral *guishen* (ghosts and spirits) in dual socio-ethical imperatives. On the one hand, it emphasized filial *xiao* (孝, piety), framing posthumous veneration as gratitude for the ancestors’ bestowal of life and material prosperity. On the other hand, it tacitly acknowledged the prevailing belief that ancestral ghosts and spirits could actively protect and bless the living, legitimizing ritual practices as tools for moral edification. In contrast, Song–Ming Confucians interpreted *guishen* from the functional perspective of *qi* (ether). They posited that *guishen* merely represented alternative expressions of *qi*’s *qu* (屈, contraction) and *shen* (伸, expansion). *Qi*, as the *benyuan* (本源, primordial source) that generates and transforms all things between Heaven and Earth, necessitates reverence for *guishen* as an acknowledgment of awe toward *qi*’s functional capacity to actualize cosmic creation.

Confucius stated: “The virtues of *guishen* are supremely profound! They cannot be seen with the eyes or heard with the ears, yet they protect all things without omission” (鬼神之為德，其盛矣乎，視之而弗見，聽之而弗聞，體物而不可遺). Zhu Xi explicated *guishen*’s “protect all things without omission” as follows: “*Guishen* lacks form and sound, yet the beginnings and endings of all things are invariably governed by the harmonization and dispersal of *yin* and *yang*. Thus, *guishen* constitutes the ontological substance of things, which no entity can exist independently of” (鬼神無形與聲，然物之終始，莫非陰陽和散之所為，是其為物之體，而物所不能遺也) (Xi Zhu 1983, p. 25). He further elaborated: “All things under heaven are necessarily the work of *guishen*. Hence, *guishen* serves as the ontological substance of things, and nothing exists without depending upon them” (天下之物，莫非鬼神之所為也，故鬼神為物之體，而物無不待是而有者) (Xi Zhu 2002a, p. 74). Scholars such as Zhang Zai and Zhu Xi asserted that *guishen* accomplished the formation of all things. By hermeneutically correlating *guishen* with *qi*, they reinstated the decisive status of *guishen* in the existence of all things between Heaven and Earth.

Song scholars also critically redefined the relationship between *jisi* (祭祀, sacrifices) and *fu* (福, blessings), challenging earlier assumptions. Pre-Song Confucianism either emphasized the relationship between sacrificing and blessings, advocating for *ji er bu qi* (祭而不祈, “sacrificing without supplication”), or believed that the blessings sought through sacrifice were not the “blessings” that common people thought of as the collection of all beautiful things and that the so-called “blessings” were simply *bei* (備, completeness). However, these viewpoints, regardless of whether one sought blessings or not, tacitly assumed that blessings are the result of sacrifices. During the Song–Ming period, Confucian scholars proposed novel interpretations of the relationship between sacrificial practices and blessings. While they asserted that sincere devotion in performing sacrificial practices for *guishen*

would inevitably result in blessings, these blessings were not equivalent to the worldly conception of a blessing as a blanket term for all auspicious outcomes. Fu Guang (輔廣, 1145–1220), a disciple of Zhu Xi, stated: “The inevitability of receiving blessings is grounded in principle. What the world calls blessings cannot be guaranteed by such inevitability” (必受其福，以理必之，世所謂福，則不可必也) (Wei 1986, vol. 119, p. 465).

They further argued that while blessings arise from sacrifices, blessings are not the consequence of sacrificial practices but rather their precondition, permeating the entire sacrificial process. Fu Guang further elaborated: “The blessings mentioned in the classics reside in the pre-sacrifice state, whereas the blessings understood by the world manifest post-sacrifice. The earlier passage speaks of ‘trembling reverence and ritual offerings’, wherein ritual is embedded in material objects. Here, ‘the act of presenting objects guided by ritual means that objects must be consecrated through ritual’. Only by not seeking specific outcomes can the full righteousness of sacrifice be realized; any deliberate pursuit corrupts this righteousness” (經之所謂福具于未祭之前，世之所謂福應于已祭之后，前言心怵而奉之以禮者，禮寓于物也。此云奉之以物，道之以禮者，物必將之以禮也，不求其如此，然后能盡祭之義，一有所求，義不盡矣) (Wei 1986, vol. 119, p. 465). To emphasize the doctrine of *jisi bu qi* (sacrificing without supplication), Song Confucians reinterpreted the blessings sought through rituals as a pre-existing state of blessings, positioning Confucian sacrificial aims in direct opposition to popular notions of sacrificing for blessings. They insisted that the “blessings” in *jisi qiu fu* (祭祀求福, seeking blessings through sacrifice) refer to the sacrificer ritually presenting blessings to ancestral ghosts and spirits, rather than petitioning ancestors or *guishen* to bestow blessings upon the living.

Pre-Qin and Song-Ming Confucians differed fundamentally in their perspectives on whether *guishen* possess sentience or cognitive agency. Pre-Qin Confucianism adopted a stance of deliberate agnosticism, arguing that the question of *guishen*’s perceptual capacities transcends human empirical knowledge. They neither affirmed nor denied such attributes, maintaining strategic silence. Confucius, for instance, metaphorically associated *guishen* with posthumous transformations of the deceased but deliberately avoided ontological judgments about their independent existence or sentience.

Zigong (子貢, 520–456 BCE) asked: “Do the dead possess consciousness or not?” Confucius replied: “If I were to claim the dead are conscious, I fear filial descendants might neglect the living to extravagantly serve the deceased. If I were to deny it, I fear unfilial descendants might abandon proper burials. Zigong! If you wish to know whether the dead are conscious—you will find out soon enough after your own death! There’s no urgency now!” (子貢問孔子：“死人有知無知也？”孔子曰：“吾欲言死者有知也，恐孝子順孫妨生以送死也；欲言無知，恐不孝子孫棄不葬也。賜欲知死人有知將無知也？死徐自知之，猶未晚也！”). (X. Liu 1985, p. 558)

Confucius did not give a clear response as to whether the deceased have consciousness as *gui* (ghosts), fearing that either answer would have negative effects. Instead, he vaguely replied that Zigong would know the answer after his death. Confucius viewed the existence of *guishen* with caution. He believed that what happens after death is beyond human comprehension. Thus, when Zi Lu (子路) asked him about death-related topics, he said: “If one does not know life, how can one know death?” (未知生，焉知死?) (*Analects*·Xianjin 論語·先進) (Bojun Yang 2009, p. 112).

Zhang Zai categorically denied that *guishen* possess perceptual or cognitive capacities or supernatural agency. He argued: “Contemporary discussions of *guishen* describe their formlessness as akin to Heaven and Earth, yet attribute to them human-like actions. How could the ghosts of the dead paradoxically embody both celestial and human capacities?” (今之言鬼神，以其無形則如天地，言其動作則不異于人，豈謂人死之鬼反能兼

天人之能乎?) (Z. Zhang 1978, p. 373). “If the dead retained consciousness, then loving mothers—who deeply cherish their children—would surely manifest daily through speech or dreams to comfort their living kin after death. Yet such phenomena are never observed. Similarly, claims that *guishen* reward the virtuous and punish the wicked collapse under scrutiny: why do minor transgressions sometimes incur severe penalties, while grave crimes go unpunished? Such contradictions are innumerable” (如人死皆有知，則慈母有深愛其子者，一旦化去，獨不日日馮人言語，入夢寐存恤之耶？言能福善禍淫，則或小惡反遭重罰而大愆反享厚福，不可勝數) (Z. Zhang 1978, p. 373).

Zhang Zai made three criticisms of secular concepts of *guishen*. First, after death, the dissolution of the physical form negates the physiological basis for perceptual or motor functions. Without a body, *guishen* cannot replicate human cognition or movement. Second, if the dead retained sentience, deceased relatives—motivated by affection—would routinely interact with the living. The lack of such observable phenomena disproves posthumous consciousness. Third, believing that *guishen* can reward the good and punish the evil is falsified by empirical reality: virtue often goes unrewarded, while vice escapes retribution. This disproves their alleged supernatural oversight. Zhang Zai concluded that *guishen* lack independent cognitive or supernatural powers. He dismissed tales of malicious hauntings by the dead as absurd and unfounded.

Although the concept of *guishen* held by Song Confucians was inherited from Pre-Qin Confucianism, their explanation of *guishen* in terms of *li* (理, principle) and *qi* differed markedly from earlier accounts. Therefore, the concept of *guishen* held by Song Confucians had theoretical problems and was criticized by later Confucian scholars.

Song Confucians, asserting that *guishen* was merely “the excellent capacities of the two *qi*” (二氣之良能) and that “Heaven is principle” (天即理), struggled with reconciling the ethical and ritual functions of *guishen* and Heaven within sacrificial practices. Although Zhu Xi acknowledged the existence of ghosts in a limited sense, his Neo-Confucian framework reduced *guishen* to the *qu* (contraction) and *shen* (expansion) of *qi*, effectively denying their independent existence. This interpretation inevitably raised questions: If *guishen* lack autonomy, how can they possess the numinous power to bless or punish humans? It was precisely this theoretical impasse that provoked Ming scholar Li Zhi (李贄, 1527–1602) to critique Zhang Zai’s and Zhu Xi’s rationalization of *guishen* and Heaven based on *qi* from the standpoint of sacrificial practices. Li Zhi argued the following:

Zhu Xi states, “Heaven is principle” and “*Guishen* is the excellent capacities of the two *qi*.” To equate Heaven with principle is acceptable, but does this mean sacrificing to Heaven is equivalent to sacrificing to principle? To define *guishen* as “excellent capacities” is permissible, but does this reduce sacrificial practices to worshiping mere capacities? (朱子曰：“天即理也。”又曰：“鬼神者，二氣之良能。”夫以天為理可也，而謂祭天所以祭理，可欤？以鬼神為良能可也，而謂祭鬼神是祭良能，可欤？) (Zhi Li 2009, p. 92).

Li Zhi further invoked the *Classic of Poetry*’s mystical account of Hou Ji (后稷, ?–?), the progenitor of the Zhou dynasty: “Hou Ji is the son of a ghost; from the Duke of Zhou upward, all were descendants of ghosts. The Duke of Zhou not only refrained from concealing this but celebrated it as supremely auspicious, composing hymns for suburban sacrifices to honor them, calling himself a descendant of King Wen” (后稷，鬼子也；周公而上，鬼孫也。周公非但不諱，且以為至祥極端，歌詠于郊禘以享祀之，而自謂文子文孫也) (Zhi Li 2009, p. 92). Later Confucians, especially those of the Song–Ming eras, tabooed discussions of *guishen* because they “never penetrated the mysteries of the unseen realm or understood the true nature of *guishen*” (未嘗通于幽明之故而知鬼神之情狀) (Zhi Li 2009, p. 92). While they loudly condemned “Buddhism and Taoism as heterodoxies and dismissed *guishen* as *yinsi* (淫祀, immoral sacrifices)”, when faced with urgent matters, they were often confused. “They hypocritically resorted to frantic prayers and exorcisms, rush-

ing to these practices more eagerly than commoners who revere ghosts!" (禱祀祈禳，則此等實先奔走，反甚于細民之敬鬼者) (Zhi Li 2009, p. 92).

When Confucian scholars served as local officials during the Song dynasty, they were mainly engaged in religious rituals to worship ghosts and spirits and to seek their blessing. Take Zhu Xi's tenure as an official in Nankang (南康) as an example. He criticized local officials for being deeply influenced by Buddhism and Taoism when holding sacrificial activities, saying: "The spirits' matters they hold in awe, revere, and enshrine are limited to either the temples of Taoism and Buddhism or the ghosts of unauthorized cults. The institutions of the ancient sage-kings and our dynasty's ritual codes, by which the spirits govern human affairs, have never made an impression on their hearts and minds!" (其所敬畏崇飾而神事之者，非老子釋氏之祠，則妖妄淫昏之鬼而已。其于先王之制，國家之典，所以治人事神者，曷嘗有概于其心哉！) (Xi Zhu 2002b, p. 3771).

However, when there were natural disasters in the region, he also "visited all the sacred sites, monasteries, Daoist temples, shrines, and deep pools within the jurisdiction to fetch water; established an altar precinct; offered sacrifices to the dragon in accordance with the ritual statutes and conducted Daoist sacrificial ceremonies; prohibited slaughtering; and offered prayers with the utmost diligence and sincerity" (遍詣管屬靈跡，寺觀，神祠，諸處淵潭取水，建置壇場，依法册祭龍及修設醮筵，禁止屠宰，精加祈禱) (Xi Zhu 2002b, p. 739). Zhu Xi himself said, "I prayed everywhere and to all deities, including those to whom I had never prayed" (祈禱萬方，平生所不欲為者皆為之) (Xi Zhu 2002b, pp. 2019–20). Although these sacrifices were ultimately ineffective, the ghosts and spirits Zhu Xi worshipped included Buddhist and Taoist ones, which he criticized as heterodox. Zhu Xi's practice of breaking religious boundaries to worship ghosts and spirits for the welfare of the local area was quite representative among Confucian officials in the Song dynasty.¹¹

The Song Confucians interpreted *guishen* through *qi*, asserting that such *guishen* lacked independent ontological existence and were merely functional manifestations of *qi* in its role of generating Heaven, Earth, and all things. Sacrifices directed toward *guishen* in this conceptual framework effectively entailed sacrificing *qi* itself. This reductionist approach stripped ancestral veneration, a practice inherently imbued with *xiao* (filial piety), of its affective and emotional resonance. It was precisely this philosophical stance that drew criticism. As Qian Daxin (錢大昕, 1728–1804) polemicized: "Zhang Zai claims *guishen* is the 'excellent capacities of the two *qi*'—a notion absent in ancient teachings. The two *qi* refer to *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* naturally wax and wane—how could *guishen* govern such processes? It is akin to human respiration: people breathe autonomously—must there be *guishen* controlling our inhalations and exhalations?" (橫渠張氏以鬼神為二氣之良能，古人無此義。二氣者，陰陽也。陰陽自能消長，豈假鬼神司之？如人一呼一吸，人自為之，豈轉有鬼神為我呼吸乎！) (Gu 1994, p. 232).

The *qi* theory also failed to explain how dispersed ancestral *qi* could reunite to perceive and interact with living descendants during sacrifices. Once an ancestor passed away, their *qi* dissipated and turned into *guishen*; what remained after the *qi* dissipated was still just *qi*. If it was *qi*, why could it be perceived and transmitted to the descendants to worship them, thus reuniting from its scattered state? That is, when the dispersed *qi* reunites, it must be assumed that *qi* has the ability to perceive or receive perception. Only in this way can sacrificial activities realize the possibility of communication between ancestors' *guishen* and real human beings. Otherwise, if one does not recognize that *qi* itself has the ability to communicate, Zhu Xi's explanation of how *qi* can gather after scattering would have theoretical loopholes. If one uses *qi* to explain *guishen*, then sacrificial activities are a purely symbolic activity and cannot truly communicate with *guishen*. Zhu Xi's disciples acknowledged the existence of three kinds of *guishen* precisely because explaining *guishen* with *qi* cannot solve the problem of how sacrifices can communicate with *guishen*.

and due to the conflict between Zhu Xi's theory of *guishen* and the theory of *guishen* in the Pre-Qin period.

Huang Shiyi (黃士毅, fl. 1195–1200) said: “The *guishen* in heaven are the result of the creation of *yin* and *yang*. Among the *guishen* of human beings, when a person dies, he becomes *gui* (ghost); the *guishen* in worship are the ones that represent ancestors. Although the three are different, the reason why they are regarded as *guishen* is the same. Only by discerning both their distinctions and unity can one discourse on the Dao of *guishen*” (在天之鬼神，陰陽造化是也；在人之鬼神，人死為鬼是也；祭祀之鬼神，神示祖考是也。三者雖異，其所以為鬼神者則同，知其異又知其同，斯可以語鬼神之道矣) (Jingde Li 1986, p. 28). Chen Chun (陳淳, 1159–1223), another disciple of Zhu Xi, believed that *guishen* have four meanings: “One is the original meaning in the Classics, another on ancient sacrifices, another on later *yinsi* (immoral sacrifices), and yet another on later monsters” (當以聖經說鬼神本意作一項論，又以古人祭祀做一項論，又以后世淫祀作一項論，又以后世妖怪作一項論) (C. Chen 1983, p. 56). In Chen Chun's view, the term *qi* used to explain *guishen* cannot be mixed with those used in sacrifices. It is necessary to maintain the *guishen* used in sacrifices as an independent existence.

The evolution of the Song Confucian perspective on *guishen* from the pre-Qin Confucian outlook can be accounted for as follows. Although pre-Qin Confucian beliefs in *guishen* and sacrificial culture were rooted in the wu-shi culture, pre-Qin Confucians tacitly affirmed the independent existence and transcendent powers of such beings. Their characteristic stance, however, was one of *cun er bu lun* (存而不論, preserve without discussing). As Buddhism spread in China, it absorbed and drew upon these early Confucian conceptions. Consequently, when Song Confucians mounted their critique of the Buddhist view on *guishen*, their own position underwent a necessary transformation—a development that while deeply rooted in Pre-Qin heritage, gave rise to formulations that were not in every respect identical to those of the early Confucians, reflecting the ongoing evolution of the tradition.

5. Conclusions

Pre-Qin Confucianism and Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism diverge fundamentally in their belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture. Their respective historical contexts were also very different. Pre-Qin Confucian discourse on ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture emerged during the foundational period of Confucian doctrine. Its main purpose was to distinguish Confucianism from *wu-shi* (shaman-scribe) culture and to establish its own intellectual character. In contrast, Song Dynasty Confucian engagement with these concepts arose from an entirely different historical imperative. During the early Song period, Confucianism occupied a disadvantaged position in the tripartite competition with Buddhism and Taoism. Its discussions of belief in ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture were mainly stimulated by Buddhism and Taoism, taking Buddhism as the object of criticism. It attempted to expose the absurdity of the Buddhist view of ghosts and spirits at a theoretical level. In doing so, Confucianism hoped to gain an advantage in the competition between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

While discourse on ghosts and spirits among Song–Ming Confucians differs from that of Pre-Qin Confucianism, new articulations were fundamentally grounded in Pre-Qin Confucian classics. In essence, by reinterpreting these classical texts and formulating new doctrines, Song–Ming Confucians sought to respond to the intellectual challenges posed by Buddhism and Daoism. The spirit that animated this endeavor, however, remained continuous with that of Pre-Qin Confucianism, carried forward as part of the same living tradition.

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Notes

- ¹ There are differing understandings in the Confucian tradition of the meaning of ghosts and spirits from the Pre-Qin era to the Northern Song dynasty and from the Northern Song onward. Therefore, to highlight the distinctions between Confucian interpretations of ghosts and spirits across these two periods, this paper employs different translations for the term. For the period from the Pre-Qin era to the Northern Song dynasty, ghosts and spirits were characterized by supernatural powers, and the term is thus translated as “ghosts and spirits”. From the Song dynasty onward, Confucianism oriented to ghosts and spirits as the activity of *qi* (ether) and stressed that *guishen* (鬼神) is precisely the “*gui-shen* (歸伸, return and expansion)/*qu-shen* (屈伸, contraction and expansion)” of *qi*. To reflect this, the term used in the post-Song period is translated as “*guishen* (鬼神, ghosts and spirits)”. However, it should be noted that even after the Song dynasty, *guishen* were still associated with supernatural powers; as such, translating *guishen* as “ghosts and spirits” is also valid. Ritual culture is only that part of sacrificial culture that is officially endorsed, promoted, and standardized. Sacrificial culture has a longer history and a broader scope; it also includes spontaneous and informal practices and the beliefs of individuals or non-official organizations offering sacrifices to ghosts and spirits.
- ² Long Jiajie (龍佳解) believes that Pre-Qin Confucianism emerged in the context of ancient sacrificial culture, emphasizing the social role of sacrificial ceremonies in governing human affairs. In particular, sacrificial practices integrated culture and politics and supported moral education, leading to a traditional sacrificial culture with Chinese characteristics (Long 2008). Wang Jinfeng (王金鳳) believes that “respecting ghosts and spirits while keeping away from them” represents the basic tendency of traditional Confucianism. Based on the meanings of ghosts and spirits presented in the *Analects*, she discusses how to respect and keep away from them and how the relationship between ghosts and spirits is respectful and distant. She believes that Confucius’s handling of the tension between “reverence” and “distance” toward ghosts and spirits constitutes a good solution to the issue (J. Wang 2011). W.J. Boot discusses the core categories of the Confucian theory of ghosts and spirits and its influence in Japan and introduces research on the Confucian theory of ghosts and spirits by Japanese scholars (Boot 2014). Zhang Hui (張卉) and Cai Fanglu (蔡方鹿) hold that politics offers an important perspective on “ghosts and spirits” in Pre-Qin Confucianism. Pre-Qin Confucianism, through a human-centered lens, demonstrated the rationality of combining “ghosts and spirits” and politics. The view of “ghosts and spirits” in Pre-Qin Confucianism not only emphasized human emotions and ethical norms, but also expressed political intentions through a series of complex but definite sacrificial rituals (H. Zhang and Cai 2021).
- ³ Li Jian (李建) believes that Confucius did not explicitly deny the existence of ghosts and spirits to practice “*shen dao she jiao*” (神道設教). Confucius’ “*shen dao she jiao*” is not intended as a way to promote education under the domination of destiny and ghosts and spirits but a realistic, rational, and wise strategy to guide people’s belief in ghosts and spirits. It is also a unique form of humanistic education (Jian Li 2009). Zhu Junyi (朱俊藝) suggests that the saying “If one cannot serve people, how can one serve ghosts?” in the *Analects* cannot be regarded as evidence that Confucius did believe in ghosts and spirits. Instead, Confucius was concerned with how to properly serve ghosts and spirits rather than denying them (J. Zhu 2012). Wang Zhongjiang (王中江) argues that Confucius’s teachings possess a distinct religious consciousness, which is manifested not only in his belief in Heaven and the Mandate of Heaven and his reverence for ancestral spirits, but also in his belief in natural deities. Moreover, Wang places particular emphasis on studying Confucius’s beliefs concerning natural deities (Zhongjiang Wang 2026).
- ⁴ In the context of the Confucian concept of ghosts and spirits between the Song and Ming dynasties, Zhang Lihua (張麗華) researched Zhang Zai’s view of ghosts and spirits (L. Zhang 2006). The academic community has primarily focused on the

study of Zhu Xi's theories of ghosts and spirits and related sacrificial practices. Scholars such as Qian (1971, pp. 297–344), Needham (1956, pp. 490–91), Kim (1985), Gardner (1995), Fang (2006), Z. Wu (2012), Xihong Fu (2018), Zhao (2022), and Mao (2024) have focused on interpretations of Zhu Xi's concept of ghosts and spirits; Ching Julia systematically examines Zhu Xi's theory of ghosts and spirits by addressing topics such as "Ghosts and Spirits", "Do Ghosts and Spirits Exist? The Upper and Lower Souls (Hun-p'o)", "A Philosophical Rationalization", "On Communing with the Spirits", "On Ancestral Spirits", and "On Spirit Possession and Other Phenomena" (Ching 2000, pp. 60–71). Others, such as R. Chen (1982, pp. 181–204), X. Chen and Tillman (2014), Y. Yang (2016), and Xiaofan Fu (2016), have focused on the practical aspects of Zhu Xi's theories of ghosts and spirits.

- 5 Chen Yun (陳贇) believes that ghosts and spirits in Confucianism are a self-conscious type of existence and that communication with ghosts and spirits is the process of returning to the essence of self-life. Confucian sacrificial behavior is not a religious ritual but a series of ontological actions and an inherent part of becoming an adult (Y. Chen 1998). Thomas Wilson notes that since the Tang dynasty, Confucianism has emphasized the concepts of the spirit and the soul in interpretations of the classical system, and on this basis, formulated rituals for ghost and spirit worship (Wilson 2014). Xiang Shuchen examines the topic of "Confucian Attitudes toward Ghosts", arguing that Confucianism possesses a distinctive interpretive and cognitive framework for understanding ghosts and spirits and that Confucian discourse on such beings ultimately returns to the concerns of self-cultivation and ritual (Xiang 2015). Wang Guoyu (王國雨) believes that the early Confucian emphasis on the moral and social functions of sacrifice based on a functional perspective answers the question "why is sacrifice necessary", while the understanding of ghosts and spirits through the concept of the soul and the theory of spirit and soul answers the question "why is sacrifice possible". In the world of early Confucianism, although "serving humans" was prioritized over "serving ghosts and spirits", Confucianism pursued a balance between "respecting ghosts and spirits" and "keeping away from ghosts and spirits" (G. Wang 2020). Feng Li (馮立) argues that early Confucianism reinterpreted sacrificial rites through the lens of "qing" (情, sentiment). The Confucian sacrificial sentiment has three core dimensions: remembrance, gratitude, and reverence and awe. These three sentiments constitute a relational structure between humans and *guishen* (ghosts and spirits). Thus, Confucian sacrificial thought affirms human dignity and moral agency while preserving the transcendence of the sacred (Feng 2025).
- 6 Many scholars have pointed out that in the pre-Philosophers period of China, *wu-shi* culture was dominant. Li Zehou (李澤厚) said: "Before Confucius, there was a long tradition of shamanism being rationalized" (Zehou Li 2012, p. 5). Chen Lai (陳來) believes that the thoughts of Confucius and early Confucianism originated from the ancient *wu-shi* culture and sacrificial culture (L. Chen 2019). In early Chinese culture, *wu* and *shi* had the same functions. The *Liji-Liyun* (禮記·禮運) records: "The *wu* stood in front of the king, and the *shi* stood behind him" (王前巫而後史). Chen Mengjia (陳夢家), based on the statement in the *Discourses of the States: Chu II* that "every household can become *wu* and *shi*" (家為巫史), noted that "both 'zhu shi' (祝史) and 'wu shi' (巫史) are *wu*, and *shi* is also *wu*" (M. Chen 1936). However, there is considerable scholarly disagreement regarding the English translation of *wu* (巫) and whether it can be rendered as "shaman". Hopkins (1945), Schafer (1951), and Eliade (1964) all translated *wu* as "shaman", yet Eliade explicitly noted that *wu* is not equivalent to shaman (Eliade 1964, pp. 450–54). Many scholars, such as Waley (1956) and Chang (1983), have likewise adopted this translation. In contrast, scholars represented by Keightley (1998), Boileau (2002), and Puett (2002) reject the equation of *wu* with "shaman". Mair (1990) proposed "magician" as a more appropriate translation, while Lothar rendered it as spirit medium (von Falkenhausen 1995, pp. 279–80), and Boileau argued that *wu* should be understood as a "diviner". Michael (2015) contended that *wu* is not synonymous with "shamans" and offered a systematic examination of the translation issues surrounding *wu* and shamanism in Chinese and Western scholarship. Drawing on ethnographic research, Winkel (2023) argued that *wu* should be translated as "ritualist". Liu Yuedi (劉悅笛) believes that it is inaccurate to translate the *wu-shi* tradition as "shamanist-historical tradition" and that it is more appropriate to translate it as "*wu*-historical tradition" (Y. Liu 2019). Because of these differences in translation, to avoid disputes, this article directly translates it as *wu-shi* culture.
- 7 Scholars such as Xu Zhongshu (徐中舒) and Li Zehou (李澤厚) concur that early *ru* (儒), akin to shamans and historians, engaged in sacrificial rituals. Xu Zhongshu noted: "Ancient *ru* served as ritual masters, overseeing ancestor worship and funerals, necessitating frequent ritual purification" (Z. Xu 1975). Li Zehou observed: "The Confucian school represented by Confucius evolved from the organizers and leaders of primal ritual-shamanic practices (the so-called shamans, invocators, and historians) into specialized conservators of ritual propriety" (Zehou Li 1980). Wu Shuchen (武樹臣) comprehensively summarized historical perspectives on *ru* (S. Wu 2025).
- 8 Some scholars, based on the argument that "If one cannot serve people, how can one serve ghosts?", believe that Confucius did not believe in the existence of ghosts and spirits. Wang Zhixin (王治心) said: "Confucius did not believe in ghosts and spirits" (Zhixin Wang 1988, p. 53). Yang Bojun (楊伯峻) believes that "Confucius doubted the existence of ghosts and spirits" (Bojun Yang 2009, p. 12). However, some scholars believe that Confucius did not deny the existence of ghosts and spirits but simply did not talk about them directly (J. Zhu 2012).
- 9 Han Xing (韓星) believes that the rites of offering sacrifices to Heaven, Earth, ancestors, sages, and worthies in Confucianism have a dual aspect of religiosity and humanistic rationality and embody a unique humanistic spirit (Han 2015). Wang Guoyu

(王國雨) believes that the early Confucians rationalized, humanized, de-substantialized, and de-divinized the concepts of ghosts and spirits from the Yin and Zhou dynasties, answering the questions of why to worship and how worship was possible. The purpose and attitude of sacrifice shifted from emphasizing blessing to emphasizing gratitude, and from focusing on the object of belief to focusing on the believer himself (G. Wang 2020). Some scholars have also studied the rationalism of Confucianism from the perspective of ghosts, spirits, and sacrificial culture, believing that Confucianism's understanding of ghosts and spirits is based on the "xing-qi lun" (形氣論, theory of form and ether) as the basis of knowledge, that humans and ghosts and spirits can achieve communication, and that the most important thing when communicating with ghosts and spirits is that the person performing the sacrifice should have "a sincere heart" (Qin 2020).

- 10 However, Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn texts also used *shen* (神) for deceased ancestors. Bronze inscriptions and transmitted texts frequently mention "bai shen" (百神, hundred spirits) or "duo shen" (多神, many spirits). Scholarly interpretations vary. Zhu Fenghuang (朱鳳瀚) argues that the Hu Zhong bell (𠩺鐘) inscription's "bai shen" includes natural and ancestral spirits beyond the heavenly deities (F. Zhu 1993). Qiu Xigui (裘錫圭) contends that Western Zhou bronze references to "bai shen" specifically denote the vessel owners' ancestors, citing terms such as "wen shen" (文神, cultured spirits) and "huang shen" (皇神, August spirits) (Qiu 2008). Luo Xinhui (羅新慧) asserts: "Examining Western Zhou inscriptions, 'bai shen' (hundred spirits), 'duo shen' (many spirits), and 'da shen' (great spirits) are parallel to terms like 'qian wen ren' (前文人, former cultured men), all referencing ancestors" (X. Luo 2023, p. 173).
- 11 Many scholars have researched the sacrificial activities carried out by Confucian officials in the Song dynasty. When local disasters occurred, Song Confucian officials would not only make efforts to address them from a human perspective, but also hold sacrifices to pray for the protection of various ghosts and spirits. Chen Xi (陳曦) and Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, using Zhu Xi as an example, point out that Zhu Xi's concept of ghosts and spirits, which combines "divine affairs" and "human affairs", is representative among local officials of the Southern Song dynasty (X. Chen and Tillman 2014).

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