

Mother Ghost Seeks a Human Son-in-Law

Ghost Shrines in Taiwan

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When I started my fieldwork in Wannian, a village in southwest Taiwan, I heard the following story during an afternoon chat:

Some men are so fond of gambling that they are not afraid to come into contact with ghosts and ask them for lottery number predictions. They often gather at the ghost shrines outside the village to negotiate for numbers. One day, a man named Tianfu decided to take a serious risk: so as to communicate more directly with the ghosts and obtain a winning lottery number, he dared to spend a night in the shrine of the mother-and-daughter ghosts—the fiercest ghosts in the area, but also legendarily the most efficacious. It is said that the next day several people observed him frightened almost into a state of paralysis as he crawled back to the village! When asked what had happened, he trembled and replied: “The mother ghost said that only when I “marry into the family” (*ruzhuì*) with her daughter will she give me the number!”

This story has been deployed by Wannian villagers as a way to tease and warn those who would establish relationships with ghosts in order to obtain benefits. Indeed, the possibilities of human-ghost relationships implied in the story are very rich and intriguing. However, a ghost is a most elusive thing. In contrast to Chinese deities, who have statues for adherents to worship and

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ancestors that attach themselves to ancestral tablets, ghosts do not have obvious material appearances, and their existence remains consistently shadowy and difficult to comprehend.¹

Previous literature gives us some hint as to what ghosts are like. For example, in Arthur Wolf's seminal paper, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," ghosts are portrayed as strangers, beggars, or bandits.² Treating ghosts as a reflection of the human social landscape has been a very influential method in studies of ghosts. The rise of the amoral cult, Eighteen Lords, is similarly analyzed by Robert Weller from the perspectives of the state's incapacity to create a secular value ideology, and the particulars of Taiwan's economic transformation.³

These social analyses provide an important dimension to ghosts and how they have changed over time, but have never fully unraveled what ghosts in fact are. For David Jordan, ghosts are the souls of those who die without descendants.⁴ The studies of Wolf, Stephan Feuchtwang, and Stevan Harrell have further shown that there are two factors which can turn a soul into a ghost. The first is death without descendants. The second is violent death, such as by suicide, murder, or in accidents or disasters.⁵ But how do these two superficially unconnected causes turn a soul into a ghost? Can we discover a more systematic way of understanding the formation of ghosts?

1. Wei-Ping Lin, "Conceptualizing Gods through Statues: A Study of Personification and Localization in Taiwan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 2 (2008): 454–77; "Guimu zhao nüxu: gui, sanpianbi, yu tanlan de yanjiu" *Kaogu renlei xuekan* 75 (2011): 13–36; and *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

2. Arthur P. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors" in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 131–82.

3. See Robert P. Weller, "Bandits, Beggars, and Ghosts: The Failure of State Control over Religious Interpretation in Taiwan," *American Ethnologist* 12, no. 1 (1985): 46–61; "Capitalism, Community, and the Rise of Amoral Cults in Taiwan," in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall, and Helen Hardacre (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 141–64; *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); "Living at the Edge: Religion, Capitalism, and the End of the Nation-State in Taiwan," *Popular Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 477–98.

4. David Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 33.

5. Stephan Feuchtwang, "Domestic and Communal Worship in Taiwan," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 109–11; Stevan Harrell, "When a Ghost Becomes a God," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, 193; Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," 170.

In his research on ghosts in medieval China, Stephen Teiser argues that the ghost festival has to be understood and examined from “widely held values.”⁶ He points out that “the ghost festival was embedded in the familial, political, poetic, and recreational life of medieval China.”⁷ Similarly, P. Steven Sangren analyzes *ling*, the Chinese concept of magical power, in terms of the cosmological ideas of yin and yang.⁸ The efficacy of a ghost comes from its in-between status with respect to the two worlds of yin/yang, and its ability to mediate both.

In this paper, I aim to re-examine the nature of ghosts from the perspective of materialization (an approach I have used before)⁹, and thus as an aspect of material religion in general.¹⁰ Scholars of this trend have argued that religion is inextricable from its material forms and their use in religious practices. Indeed, instead of focusing on religious concepts translated into or signified by objects, one current study has even sought to show that it is the material realm that gives rise to religious ideas and beliefs.¹¹ These new approaches are particularly worth considering when facing the elusive existence of ghosts in Taiwan.

This article starts by tracing the spatial separation between people and ghosts in the village of Wannian. I then go on to discuss in depth how people conceptualize ghosts in terms of the tripartite souls of the deceased. This threefold division of soul helps to elucidate the way in which ghosts are

6. Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), xii.

7. *Ibid.*, 43.

8. P. Steven Sangren, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

9. Lin, *Materializing Magic Power*.

10. Matthew Engelke, “Material Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 209–29; Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman, “Introduction: Material Religion—How Things Matter,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 1–24; Webb Keane, “The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 1 (2008): S110–S127; Birgit Meyer, et al., “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” *Religion* 40, no. 3 (2010): 207–11; Birgit Meyer, et al., “Introduction: Key Words in Material Religion,” *Material Religion* 7, no. 1 (2011): 4–8; David Morgan, “Introduction: The Matter of Belief” in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan (London: Routledge, 2010): 1–17.

11. S. Brent Plate, “Material Religion: An Introduction” in *Key Terms in Material Religion*, ed. S. Brent Plate (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 4.

considered not only as descendant-less, but also as displaced souls. Personhood and place, as I have argued in my earlier works, continue to form the important bases for understanding how the supernatural world is constituted.¹² My paper then proceeds with a detailed analysis of a type of religious architecture, the ghost shrine. By analyzing its material composition, name, and rites, I show how ghosts are conceptualized as asocial and individual beings, gathering only in single-sex groups. This forms the background from which I explore the incident described above in which “mother ghost seeks a son-in-law.” This story vividly demonstrates that it is not just ghosts who take advantage of humans. Motivated by greed, humans can also cross the spatial boundary to coerce ghosts for selfish reasons. Finally, I compare this particular case with the practice of spirit marriage (*minghun*), which was widespread in Taiwan, and point out that the mother ghost incident is a marriage exchange between a man and a group of ghosts, whereas spirit marriage is performed by families of humans.¹³ I conclude by showing how the gambling stories, by dramatizing the gender contrasts between humans and ghosts, also convey a strong sense of condemnation of greed in human society.

WANNIAN VILLAGE

Wannian is a village located in the north of Tainan county (Figure 1). It has seventy households composed of three main surnames: Gao, Li, and Wang.¹⁴ From its early establishment to the present, farming has been the main economic activity, even as the villagers have also undertaken other kinds of manual labor to increase their income.

Wannian has only one temple with six main deities. How five of the deities arrived there is related to the cultivation history of the village. It is said that the Li family was the first group to come to cultivate land in the area. They brought with them their ancestral image (*zufo*), Laoyegong. Later, two brothers of the Gao family, carrying their ancestral deity, Dadaogong, and traveling up from the south in search of farmland, passed by Wannian. They put the deity statue down to rest there, but when they decided to leave, they discovered that the statue had become too heavy for them to lift. The brothers consequently stayed on and married into the Li family, and after a few generations the Gao became Wannian’s biggest group. Last to arrive were members

12. Lin, “Conceptualizing Gods through Statues”; Lin, *Materializing Magic Power*.

13. See Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors*.

14. The village name and the surnames have been changed to protect their privacy.

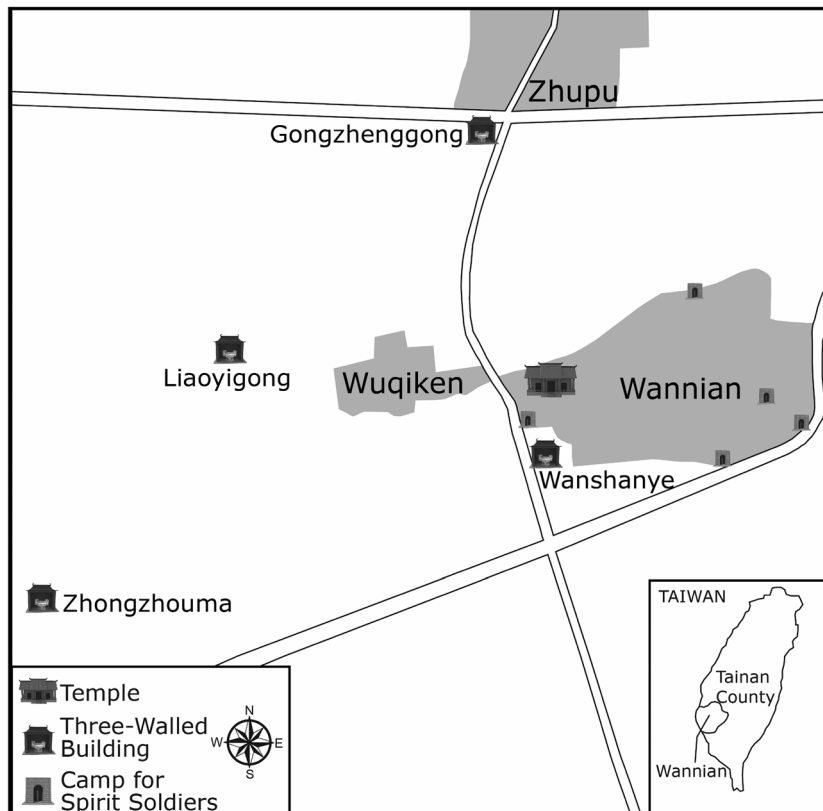


Figure 1. The temple, the five camps of spirit soldiers, and the small shrines around Wannian village. Image drawn by Peng Jiahong.

of the Wang family, who moved in from a neighboring village. Other independent households came later.

As people settled there and the village developed further, the inhabitants decided to make public their respective ancestral images and to worship them as common village deities. The biggest group's deity, Dadaogong, was selected as the main deity. The next in rank was the second Dadaogong, a branch deity of the regional temple in a neighboring town called Xuejia, who according to myth was a sworn brother of the first Dadaogong. The third was the Li family's ancestral deity, Laoyegong, and the fourth was the territorial deity, Jingzhugong. The fifth was a tiger god, Huye, who people say was cured by Dadaogong and afterward followed him as his mount. These have long been Wannian's five major deities. Around thirty years ago, You

Wangye from Liuying conducted an inspection tour (*raojing*) in the proximate area of Wannian. As a result of solicitation by the villagers, a command tablet (*wangling*) of You Wangye was set up in Wannian to protect the village, and he became Wannian's sixth deity.

Dadaogong, as the head deity, receives much respect from the local inhabitants and holds substantial power. However, all the first five deities have their own spirit mediums and mostly work as a whole.¹⁵ They command five camps of spirit soldiers (*wuying bingjiang*) who protect the territory of the village. The locations of the camps, at the center and four ends of the settlement (see Figure 1), protect the residents from interference by ghosts. In addition, the villagers believe that the spirit soldiers also come to inspect every household. Thus, in front of the main hall of every house, they place grass and water (*macaoshui*) so that the visiting spirit soldiers and horses can rest and refresh themselves. The local people hold a monthly ritual to reward the soldiers (*shangbing*).¹⁶ If there are consecutive misfortunes and deaths happening in the village, these are usually regarded as caused by the boundary having been invaded by ghosts. A house purifying ritual (*zhuyou jingwu*) will be organized to expel the evil power.¹⁷

The explicit boundary between men and ghosts is lifted once a year. The seventh month of the lunar calendar, called the "Ghost Month" (*guiyue*), is when the gate of the underworld opens and all the spirits can enter the world of the living. In the Wannian village, a spirit medium recalls the spirit soldiers (*shoubing*) stationed at the four ends of the village at the end of the sixth month. The door of the temple is closed on the first day of the seventh month to signify that the village deities and their spirit soldiers will stop guarding the village that month. No border separates the worlds of the living and the dead during this time of year. Every household hangs a small lantern from the door of the house, lighting it at dusk to guide the spirits at night. At the end of the Ghost Month, the spirit medium releases the spirit soldiers (*fangbing*) who once again resume their posts. The door of the temple reopens

15. Since the sixth deity, You Wangye, only came to Wannian thirty years ago, he does not have his own spirit medium yet, but uses the territorial deity Jingzhugong's medium to transmit his messages. For further information, see Lin, *Materializing Magic Power*, 47.

16. See also Feuchtwang, "Domestic and Communal Worship in Taiwan," 109; and Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors*, 51.

17. Wei-Ping Lin, "Boiling Oil to Purify Houses: A Dialogue between Religious Studies and Anthropology," in *Exorcism in Daoism: A Berlin Symposium*, vol. 36, *Asien- und Afrika- Studien der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, ed. Florian Reiter (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), 151–70.

on the first day of the eighth month, showing that ghosts and humans are separate again.

GHOSTS: DISPLACED OR DESCENDANT-LESS SOULS¹⁸

When asked who the ghosts are, people in Wannian usually reply:

They are souls that nobody worships.

They are “master-less” (*wuzhu*), owned by no one.

What exactly does “un-worshipped” or “master-less” refer to? Before answering this question, we shall start by discussing where souls go after death.

The idea of the soul in Chinese culture is very complicated. In particular, how many “souls” there are in a given body has been a topic of controversy among scholars of Chinese religion, with different versions holding it to be one, two, three, or twelve.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the tripartite division of souls after death is the one accepted by most scholars.²⁰ For example, Freedman writes,

The conception of the fate of the dead logically required a tripartition of the soul, for there were different places to which an individual proceeded on death, and in each of these three places he received different rites. He went into his grave; he was established in his tablet by the soul-dotting rite; he passed into the underworld to experience judgment, punishment, and usually rebirth.²¹

A similar description appears in Justus Doolittle’s earlier study of Fuzhou;²² Wolf and Sangren also briefly mention the threefold division of souls.²³ The people of Wannian share the same view. In the following I shall explore this tripartite idea in detail to reveal how ghosts are imagined by the ordinary people of Taiwan.

18. The ethnography that follows is based on my paper “Guimu zhao nüxu: gui, sanpianbi, yu tanlan de yanjiu,” *Kaogu renlei xuekan* 75 (2011): 13–36.

19. Stevan Harrell, “The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (1979): 521.

20. *Ibid.*, 523.

21. Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London: The Athlone Press, 1958), 86.

22. Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese: A Daguerrotype of Daily Life in China* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1865), 401–2.

23. Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors,” 175; Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, 144.

The residents of Wannian believe that the souls of a person go to three different places after death. The first is the ancestral tablet. People in Wannian consider the location where one closes one's eyes at the moment of death to be where his or her souls belong. Therefore, family members relocate the dying person to the main hall of the house where the ancestral tablets are placed, in order that he or she can die in the proper place, surrounded by descendants. Funeral specialists, usually Daoist priests, prepare an ancestral tablet for the deceased. The tablet represents the deceased in the rites for the days that follow. On the day of the funeral, the tablet goes with the coffin to the cemetery. On the way, the deceased has to be constantly verbally guided by his or her family members, including instructions to get in or out of the car, cross a bridge, and so forth. Before the coffin is interred, the family members cry, "Rise up! Rise up!" to call the soul of the deceased out of the coffin so that the soul is not buried with the corpse in the tomb. The main Daoist priest then presides over the dotting rite (*dianzhu*), guiding the deceased's soul into the ancestral tablet. After the funeral, the deceased's tablet returns home with his or her family members and lives together with the descendants, who henceforth care for and worship the ancestral tablet.

Although one soul of the deceased returns home, there is also a soul that remains in the tomb with the deceased. The descendants clean, worship, and maintain their ancestors' tombs annually during the tomb-cleaning festival (*qingming jie*). Finally, there is a third soul that goes to the underworld. While the coffin reposes, Daoist priests perform rites to guide the soul to the underworld. Meanwhile, the family members prepare a paper house (*zhicuo*) and spirit money (*zhiqian*) for the deceased to use in the underworld. All these items are burned to send them to the deceased. With the care of descendants, the soul can have a new and unworried life in the underworld.

The tripartition of souls illustrates the patrilineal ideology in Chinese society and the importance of guiding the soul of the deceased to its appropriate places by means of rituals. This idea, furthermore, provides us a more complete perspective for understanding how a ghost is formed. First of all, a ghost is a descendant-less soul. Having descendants ensures that the soul of a person will be well tended after death. A soul without descendants becomes "master-less," owned by no one, and thus a ghost. In the past, if a person died young, he or she was always buried in haste, with no rites and no ancestral tablet. Although people who die young nowadays are no longer treated in this manner, they still run the risk of becoming master-less if they expire without a descendant.

Second, a ghost is a displaced soul as a result of a bad death. Earlier I mentioned that people in Wannian consider the location where one closes

one's eyes at the moment of death to be the place where one part of the soul belongs, and the other parts need to be guided to their proper places through funeral rites. Therefore, when a bad death happens, such as by an accident, suicide, or homicide, the soul of the deceased will linger at the site of death.²⁴ This is why a person on the verge of death will be sent home in an ambulance, wearing an oxygen mask and creating a pretense that the body is still alive, even if the person is no longer breathing before leaving the hospital. Not until the main hall of the house is properly set up will the deceased's family members remove the oxygen mask. All this shows the importance placed on a person's passing away at home surrounded by his/her descendants. Only this can be considered a proper death. For those who have died in accidents, family members go to the place where the accident happened to call back the soul (*zhaohun*) by crying "Come back! Come back!" The soul of the deceased is guided back home through the cries of the relatives. On the other hand, those who are not guided home by their family members, such as persons whose "bones are left exposed in the wilderness" (*huangye kugu*), become displaced souls, suffering enforced restlessness. Unable to return home, and finding no way to the underworld, these lost souls wander between the two worlds and become ghosts.

Many studies of Chinese religion have discussed ghost shrines, which are referred to as *youyinggong miao* (temple of deities who respond to every request) in Mandarin, or *bio-a* (small temple) in Hokkien.²⁵ Research focusing on the shrines' architectural forms and their imbued significances, however, is still limited. An in-depth analysis of ghost shrines will therefore allow a more nuanced understanding of what ghosts are.

GHOST SHRINES (*SANPIANBI*)

There are four ghost shrines in the vicinity of Wannian. All of them are located outside the five camps of spirit soldiers (see Figure 1). Of the four, Wanshanye is under the guardianship of Wannian. Liaoyigong in the west is mainly cared for by Wuqiken. Gongzhengong in the north belongs to Zhupu, while Zhongzhouma in the southwest is named after the local place called Zhongzhou and refers collectively to the female ghosts in that area. These small shrines provide us with a concrete way to explore how people in Wannian think of ghosts.

24. Feuchtwang, "Domestic and Communal Worship in Taiwan," 123; Harrell, "When a Ghost Becomes a God," 193.

25. See Weller, "Capitalism, Community, and the Rise of Amoral Cults in Taiwan"; Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China*; and Weller, "Living at the Edge." Hokkien is a dialect of Mandarin spoken in Taiwan.



Figure 2. A type of ghost shrine known as a “three-walled building” (*sanpianbi*).

In the past, these small shrines were built of thatch. Villagers say that they looked rather gloomy and eerie. Unless strictly necessary, no one wanted to pass by these shrines. Even though they have now been rebuilt into more formal concrete structures with improved decorations, most people would still rather take a detour than pass by one of them. This type of small shrine has a unique name, “three-walled building” (*sanpianbi*) (Figure 2). Villagers say that they are not really houses, but merely temporary shelters for ghosts to keep out of storms and the rain. How a ghost shrine differs from people’s houses or a deity’s temple can be further seen in the style of construction of the three-walled buildings. First, as mentioned above, this kind of structure has only three walls and no doors, so it is not considered to be a proper house. Second, it is a standalone building, unlike a house or temple, which has extensions on both sides. In addition, the completion ceremony for a three-walled building is different from that for ordinary temples or houses. To celebrate the completion of a house or a temple, one has to prepare two brooms that are used to sweep from the outside of the building to the inside. While sweeping, one has to speak auspicious words: “Sweeping from the

outside inwards with brooms, bringing in sons and wealth.” However, since ghosts are by definition those who do not have children, how can they be blessed with sons? So the villagers do not chant these words and prepare only one broom.

There are usually no deity statues set up in ghost shrines.²⁶ Instead, the villagers simply write the names of the ghosts on the walls (Figure 3). Sometimes we see wooden tablets in small shrines for ghosts to attach themselves to. However, since ghosts have no descendants, no “dotting rite” is performed to connect them to the person doing the ritual. People build a statue for a spirit because they want to establish a permanent and mutually obliging relationship with that spirit.²⁷ That villagers do not want to set up statues for ghosts or dot their tablets illustrates that people merely want to pacify ghosts, and desire no further involvement with them.

The names written on these three-walled buildings reveal the characteristics of the ghosts. Their surnames are randomly chosen, such as “Liao” or “Gong.” Thus, the name is really a collective term and does not refer to any particular ghost. Sometimes the local place name is applied to ghosts, such as “Zhongzhouma” denoting female ghosts who wander within the Zhongzhou area southwest of Wuqiken (see Figure 1). After the surname or place name, the given names are usually terms with positive meanings, such as justice (*zheng*), righteousness (*yi*), or kindness (*shan*). Villagers explain that this is because ghosts often live by begging or robbing, and by giving them the positive names and constructing three-walled buildings for them, the villagers hope that the ghosts may be encouraged to refrain from disturbing people. Finally, the suffix to their names is usually “gong” (grandfather) or “ma” (grandmother), which indicates that the ghosts in a particular shrine are either female or male. There has never been a three-walled building with a mixture of “gong” and “ma,” or both male and female. In other words, a three-walled building is unlike a temple where both male and female deities are worshipped together, or a house altar where male and female ancestors are juxtaposed. Ghosts gather in single-sex shrines. This is in obvious contrast to the deities of a temple who apply the terms “sister” and “brother” to address one another, or the family members in a private house who are reproduced by the union of the two sexes.²⁸

26. See also Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China*, 130–31; Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* (Richmond UK: Curzon, 2001), 47.

27. Lin, “Conceptualizing Gods through Statues,” 462.

28. *Ibid.*, 459.



Figure 3. The names of ghosts worshipped in a three-walled building.

Since most people do not want to interact with ghosts, it is the people who encounter them most often—such as those who work near the three-walled buildings or who pass by the shrines regularly—who worship them during the three major festivals of the year and during the Ghost Month, in order to safeguard themselves from being attacked by the ghosts. It is said

that if somebody who works in a place frequented by ghosts forgets to worship them, the ghosts will remind this person of the omission in various ways. I have heard of ghosts haunting people physically or haunting the oxen or agricultural machinery used for cultivation. For example, a villager recounted: "My ox was always obedient to me, but each time we passed by a small shrine in the adjacent village, he would become very ill-tempered and out of control. I knew that the good brothers were asking for food." Another villager gave a similar story:

A few days ago my cultivator shut down all of a sudden while I was working in the field and would not start again no matter how hard I tried. I knew then that it must be Zhongzhouma who was giving me trouble to ask for something to eat.

The food that villagers prepare for the ghosts is usually very simple. The rice or meat is usually uncooked. Compared to the rich feast prepared for deities or ancestors, the food given to ghosts is more like an act of charity from the villagers.²⁹

We can refine our understanding of the villagers' ideas about ghosts by considering the offerings to the good brothers during the Ghost Month. The villagers of Wannian, like other Taiwanese, worship ghosts on the fifteenth day of the Ghost Month. Offerings are placed in the courtyard of the house in the afternoon. Since it is an annual rite, these offerings are various and abundant. After the worship, it is not taboo for the villagers to eat the offerings. They are unwilling, however, to eat the water spinach soup, which is usually prepared when worshipping ghosts. It is made by simply boiling the vegetable in plain water without adding any salt, resulting in quite a bland dish. Why is it necessary to prepare the soup? Villagers explain that the offerings are usually consumed very quickly by the large number of eager ghosts. When some ghosts arrive late to find the food is already gone, they complain that the villagers have not prepared enough, and commit random acts of malice. To prevent this from happening, every household prepares a bowl of water spinach soup. Water spinach is an inexpensive vegetable that almost every household grows in its garden. Women will deliberately cook it in a way that makes it unpalatable, so it will be left behind by the ghosts who prefer to take other offerings. Those who arrive late can at least have this

29. See also Bernard Formoso, "Hsiu-kou-ku: The Ritual Refining of Restless Ghosts Among the Chinese of Thailand," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2, no. 2 (1996): 220; Robert Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Houndmills and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 66.

soup, and therefore have no excuse for mischief. “A ghost who doesn’t even have water spinach soup to eat” is a common idiom to describe a person in the most miserable situation imaginable. In the past, this water spinach soup was fed to the pigs, but now it is generally thrown away. From this, we know that the worship of ghosts is completely distinct from ancestor worship: villagers do not treat ghosts as their family and are not entirely willing to share food with them.

The hierarchically lower and marginalized ghosts, however, are sometimes considered to possess unique powers, and people sometimes make requests of them.³⁰ Communication between humans and ghosts is quite different from that between humans and deities. For example, when a person makes a request of a deity, he or she must give a name and address. This is not the case when someone submits a request to the ghosts. An article on ghosts reports a woman saying:

How can we tell ghosts [our names and addresses]? Once they finish all [the offerings], they may come to us for more if they know where we live. [We] certainly cannot [get entangled] with them . . .³¹

In addition, when villagers make a request to ghosts, they must make very clear how they will return the favor if their wish is granted. Wannian villagers reiterate that the promise has to be kept and the favor returned precisely and quickly. In other words, people are willing only to build a relationship of balanced reciprocity with ghosts.³² In contrast to the long-term reciprocal relationships that people wish to establish with deities or ancestors, they hope their transaction with ghosts is kept temporary and conducted at arm’s length.³³

As for the ghosts themselves, there are no interactions between them. Ghost shrines, in contrast to temples which usually form wide-ranging alliances, have no connections to each another. Each is an independent entity. In short, ghosts exist asocially.

From the above discussion of three-walled buildings, we can see that ghosts are in obvious contrast to the Chinese concept of personhood: they

30. Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, 144–56.

31. Weixin Chen, “Qiushen wengui zhi weicai: Dajiale suo xianxian de minjian Xinyang,” *Si yu yan* 25 (1988): 578.

32. Marshall Sahlins, “On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange,” in *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972), 199.

33. Chen, “Qiushen wengui zhi weicai,” 579.

are connected to nobody, as no statue or dotted ancestral tablet is made for them. The structure of these buildings shows that they are not “houses” with kinship implications. The names reveal that these structures are simply a gathering place for a single gender. There is no systemic organization or connection amongst the ghosts themselves. They are individual, asocial, and fall outside of the norms of kinship.

BEGGING FOR LOTTERY NUMBERS

As discussed above, the marginality of ghosts can be interpreted as lending them certain specific powers unconstrained by social and moral norms; thus, gamblers often try to enlist their help. Literature in the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945) already documented stories of gamblers begging ghosts for lottery numbers.³⁴ It was not until the 1980s, however, when an illegal lottery called Dajiale (literally, “everybody’s happiness”) swept Taiwan, that this phenomenon became rampant and was extensively reported in newspapers.³⁵

The winning numbers of Dajiale came from those of the national lottery (*aiguo jiangjuan*, literally, “patriotic lottery”) which have been issued by the government since 1950, and became rather popular in Taiwan from 1950 to 1980. After 1980, the economy of Taiwan started to flourish, but official investment channels such as stocks, bonds, and futures were limited. It is said that people invented Dajiale out of their dissatisfaction with the national lottery, which offered only a very low probability of winning. In Dajiale, people bet on the last two digits of the seventh-place prizes of the national lottery, and so the odds of winning were much higher. A 1987 police report recorded that around three million people took part in this lottery.³⁶ The government finally canceled the national lottery in 1987, in order to stop the illegal gambling. However, Dajiale survived, as it was later combined with Hong Kong lotteries such as Mark Six, and continues to be popular in Taiwan to this day.

Some villagers in Wannian take part in this type of gambling. They often discuss the numbers together, consult leaflets in the newspapers, or beg the ghosts for winning lottery numbers. I had several opportunities during my fieldwork to witness how villagers consulted ghosts for lottery numbers in

34. Jinglai Zeng, *Taiwan de mixin yu louxi* (Taipei: Wuling, 1994 [1938]), 100.

35. Tai-Li Hu, “Sen, gui yu dutu: Dajiale dutu fanying zhi minsu Xinyang,” in *Di er jie guoji hanxue huiyi lunwen ji (minsu wenhua zu)*, ed. The Editorial Board for the Collection of Papers, The Second International Conference of Sinology, Academia Sinica (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1989), 401–24.

36. Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China*, 140.

the small shrines. The process usually starts around eight or nine o'clock at night, because nighttime belongs to yin and is when the ghosts are active. Number begging in small shrines takes place in private gatherings. Unlike temple activities, which are public affairs in the village and are broadcast through village speakers, ghost consultation can be initiated by just two or three people, and others may choose to join when they hear about it. Initiators prepare a divination chair (a small wooden chair) and a tray of sand and place them in front of the altar in the small shrine. After more people gather, they pick an interpreter from the crowd, and also two people who can be most easily possessed by spirits to hold the divination chair by its legs. When a ghost comes and sits on the chair, the two chair holders fall into a trance (Figure 4) and start to write characters in the sand with the left armrest of the chair to communicate the ghost's message.

While waiting for the ghost to arrive, villagers chat with each other and otherwise amuse themselves, as if out on an adventure. As public affairs related to religion in Wannian are mostly managed by men, most of the number-begging activities in ghost shrines are also initiated by men. The usually desolate ghost shrine will suddenly come to life as men gather in the courtyard, drinking rice wine or other intoxicating beverages, and chewing betel nuts. Sometimes the spirit mediums of the village deities will also come to the shrine out of curiosity. However, they will stay at a distance, away from the happenings in the shrine. As the deities' mediums, they must not allow ghosts to come close to their bodies or to possess them.

After an interval, chair holders start to show signs such as spasms or violent shaking that indicate that the ghost is about to arrive. The villagers told me that when a ghost approaches, people feel a chill descend upon them, and sometimes a fishy odor (in contrast to the warm and pleasant fragrance when deities come). Ghosts can be quite unpredictable during a possession. For instance, it is said that once a ghost refused to leave the bodies of the chair holders after the consultation. Therefore, this kind of event always involves some risk, showing the extraordinary courage of the chair holders in allowing ghosts to possess their bodies. In other words, holding the chair is also a way for men to show their daring and masculinity.

After the chair holders have fallen into a trance, the people in the courtyard gradually approach the altar. The spirit medium interpreter starts to have a conversation with the ghost. The conversation concerns only the winning lottery numbers and negotiations about how many offerings are required if the numbers turn out to be correct. The ghost communicates with the people through the chair holders who write in the sand with the left armrest of the chair. Finally, the moment that everyone has been breathlessly waiting for



Figure 4. Divination chair and chair holders in a trance. Note that the setting in this picture is not a ghost shrine.

arrives: the armrest of the divination chair moves back and forth in the sand and lottery numbers slowly materialize. At this moment, people become frantic with excitement, their eyes closely following the smallest movement of the armrest as they shout out the numbers. The numbers written in the sand, however, are often ambiguous, as the ghost may write in Chinese characters, Arabic numbers, or even ideograms. It is not easy to decipher the right numbers. If the winning lottery numbers are very close to those given by the ghost, more similar gatherings are likely to happen. If the results are very

different, the disappointed gamblers turn away and the ghost shrine returns to its original state of bleak silence.

As I conducted my research, some villagers who did not attend the gathering would ask me the following day about how it went and what numbers were given. They would sometimes ask me whether I would place a bet myself. Then they would frequently comment by telling me the story related in the introduction of this article, “Mother ghost seeks a human son-in-law.”

GREED AND BREAKING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN HUMANS AND GHOSTS

The ghost shrine of Zhongzhouma is located in the far southwest corner of Wannian village, in a rather remote place (see Figure 1). It is said that once a mother and her daughter lived and worked near Zhongzhou. They both died when their thatched hut caught fire, and have haunted the Zhongzhou area ever since. People working in the area said that they sometimes heard the footsteps of the mother and daughter walking back and forth through the fields. Some said that they heard screaming. To address this, the people who worked nearby raised money to build a three-walled building for them. It was hoped that if the ghosts were given a place to rest and food to eat, they would cease spreading terror among local inhabitants.

Despite this, Zhongzhouma did not stop causing trouble. As the most ferocious ghosts of all, they still frequently haunt people who work in the area. Stories of their acts abound, such as the sudden breakdown of plows, or the unexpected illness of someone immediately after working in the fields there. Villagers say that dreadful cold winds sometime suddenly descend upon them and petrify them. This is why Tianfu—the lead character in the mother ghost story who dared to visit this most terrifying of ghost shrines in the middle of the night, sleep there, and demand that Zhongzhouma give him winning lottery numbers—was considered to be completely insane, caring about money at the expense of his own life.

This kind of behavior, though abnormal in Wannian, was also seen in other places in Taiwan when Dajiale took the nation by storm several years ago. For example, Weller notes:

Small or large shrines were even more involved in this, and there were close ties with ghostly death. People would spend the night in graveyards hoping to be inspired with dreams.³⁷

37. Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China*, 141.

Compared with this short description, the mother ghost story obviously gives a more vivid picture of the separation of time and space between humans and ghosts, as well as the dynamic border-crossing between their separate realms. In the mother ghost story, Tianfu was blinded by greed and ceased to care about his life; he crossed the border between humans and ghosts, and went into the wilderness at night (when ghosts are the most active) to meet the mother ghost. He even slept in the shrine to force her to give him lottery numbers. Compelled to obey him, the mother ghost demanded in turn that Tianfu promise to marry into her family uxorilocally (*ruzhuì*) and produce descendants for them before she would give him the lottery numbers. This story shows how humans, driven by greed, cross the border separating humans from ghosts to attempt to manipulate ghosts. Similarly, female ghosts also desire to cross the border to obtain marriages, families, and descendants in the human world, and thereby mitigate their lonely and displaced lives. The difference is that the greedy Tianfu could lose everything he owns in one transaction with ghosts who, by contrast, obtain a line of descendants and achieve eternal existence. “It’s lucky for Tianfu that he could still crawl back from Zhongzhouma,” said the villagers.

Does this story of the mother ghost and her daughter (resembling Wolf’s “uterine family”³⁸ in their strong devitalizing power) exemplify the threatening role of women in Chinese patrilineal society?³⁹ Addressing this question, it is important to note that similar incidents can occur with the genders reversed. For example, I found the following story in a popular magazine:

Miss Wu, who lived in Taichung, was 17 years old. When the rumor about the “ghost-given lottery numbers” hotline was popular in Central Taiwan, Miss Wu [. . .] dialed the number without thinking of the consequences. A man answering the phone gave her five numbers and asked her how she would return the favor. Miss Wu did not reply. The man said, “After you win the lottery, you must marry me.” Miss Wu did not think it was a big deal [. . .] she wrote down the numbers. [Later]

38. Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors.”

39. Emily M. Ahern, “The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women,” in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 193–214; Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*; Stevan Harrell, “Men, Women, and Ghosts in Taiwanese Folk Religion,” in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Rickman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 97–116; Margery Wolf, “The Woman Who Didn’t Become a Shaman,” *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 3 (1990): 419–30.

Miss Wu won the lottery, which was worth more than five million dollars. To everyone's surprise, [one month later] she died suddenly.⁴⁰

This report reveals that female ghosts hold no monopoly in pursuing marriage with human beings. In fact, in Chinese society there is a formalized type of marriage between humans and ghosts called spirit marriage (*minghun*). Below I shall briefly discuss this phenomenon to help us understand the deep significance entailed in the gambling stories.

A COMPARISON WITH SPIRIT MARRIAGE (*MINGHUN*)

David Jordan, in his book *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwanese Village* gives a very detailed description of spirit marriage:

Spirit marriage occurs when a girl who has died in childhood appears to her family in a dream some years later and asks to be married. A groom is found by the family by laying "bait" in the middle of a road. This usually takes the form of a red envelope (used in China for gifts of money). A passer-by sooner or later picks up the envelope, and immediately the family of the spirit come out of hiding beside the road and announce to the young man that he is the chosen bridegroom. If he refuses, he is of course in danger of vengeance by the ghost [. . .] The ghost is married to him in a rite designed to resemble an ordinary wedding as closely as possible, although the bride is represented only by an ancestral tablet [. . .] the only obligation he and his family have is to accommodate the ancestral tablet of the bride on their family altar and to provide it with sacrifices as though the spirit bride had married in life.⁴¹

A spirit marriage does not affect the real marriage of a man. Its purpose is to find a husband for a girl who died at a young age, thus giving her a chance to become an ancestor of someone's family, receive worship, and bring an end to her miserable fate of being a wandering ghost forever. Jordan explained later that a majority of spirit marriages he had studied involved the husband of a girl whose sister had died young.⁴² Similar cases are also found in Wannian and spirit marriages are practiced there, too.

At first glance, the story of the mother ghost seems similar to a "spirit marriage," which is more familiar in Chinese religious studies. Nevertheless, spirit marriages are different from the story of "mother ghost seeks a human

40. Zhonghe Yang et al., "Qingshen rongyi songshen nan," *Meihua baodao* 104 (1987): 22.

41. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors*, 140–41.

42. *Ibid.*

son-in-law” in important ways. Although the wedding is extremely simple in a spirit marriage, it still maintains the fundamental elements, including a ceremony and reception. Most importantly, the wedding is performed by two families. It is a marriage exchange between *families of humans*, whereas in the case of the mother ghost, the marriage exchange is between *a man and a group of ghosts*. This kind of exchange not only destroys the boundary separating humans from ghosts, but also brings chaos to the cosmological order. This is why stories reported in popular magazines in which humans make deals with ghosts in exchange for winning lottery numbers always end in illness or death.⁴³ We can say that the gambling stories, by deploying and dramatizing the gender contrasts between humans and ghosts, convey a strong sense of condemnation of human greed.

CONCLUSION

I started the research for this paper with the question of why the ghost in Chinese religion had always remained a very elusive concept. In contrast to deities who have statues for adherents to worship, and ancestors who attach themselves to ancestral tablets, ghosts have no obvious material appearances or attachments, and their existence remains shadowy and indeterminate. After my research had taken its course, I realized that that was exactly the point: the formlessness of ghosts results from the fact that they are connected to no particular people and are attached to no place, but forever remain wandering beings.

By incorporating the recently developed approaches of materialization and material religion, this article has explored the nature of ghosts through a careful examination of a particular religious architecture, the ghost shrine. From an analysis of its materiality, a far clearer image of ghosts as asocial and individual beings gathering in single-sex groups has emerged.

Although a rural tale, the story of mother ghost vividly portrays the separation in time and space between humans and ghosts, and shows how the boundary is not rigidly fixed or impenetrable, but rather is frequently crossed by humans because of greed or other immoral and self-serving motivations. Ghosts in these stories are deployed and dramatized to facilitate the imagining of immoral exchanges in contemporary gambling. It is not far-fetched to think that the vitality of ghosts will continue to play a role in condemning other “immoral” politico-economic forces intervening locally in society.

43. Chen, “Qiushen wengui zhi weicai,” 579.

GLOSSARY

<i>aiguo jiangjuan</i> 愛國獎卷	<i>shangbing</i> 賞兵
<i>Dadaogong</i> 大道公	<i>shoubing</i> 收兵
<i>dianzhu</i> 點主	<i>wangling</i> 王令
<i>fangbing</i> 放兵	<i>Wuqiken</i> 蜈蚣坑
<i>gong</i> 公	<i>wuying bingjiang</i> 五營兵將
<i>guiyue</i> 鬼月	<i>wuzhu</i> 無主
<i>huangye kugu</i> 荒野枯骨	<i>Xuejia</i> 學甲
<i>Huye</i> 虎爺	<i>yi</i> 義
<i>Jingzhugong</i> 境主公	<i>You Wangye</i> 遊王爺
<i>Laoyegong</i> 老爺公	<i>youyinggong miao</i> 有應公廟
<i>ma</i> 媽	<i>zhaohun</i> 招魂
<i>macaoshui</i> 馬草水	<i>zheng</i> 正
<i>minghun</i> 冥婚	<i>zhicuo</i> 紙厝
<i>qingming jie</i> 清明節	<i>zhiqian</i> 紙錢
<i>raojing</i>	<i>Zhongzhou</i> 中洲
<i>ruzhui</i> 入贅	<i>Zhongzhouma</i> 中洲媽
<i>sanpianbi</i> 三片壁	<i>zhuyou jingwu</i> 煮油淨屋
<i>shan</i> 善	

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