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# What if the Dead Are Never Really Dead?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the value of the 'strange' as a hermeneutical tool to open fresh perspectives on an issue of widespread human concern, specifically how to deal with and relate to the dead. Traditional Chinese folk religion and the animistic ghost culture found within it is introduced and the role of gods, ancestors, and ghosts explained. The view that death is not the end of life but the transition to a new relationship with the living raises questions about our potential obligations to the dead. It also has implications for our thinking about intergenerational justice and the role of our memory of the past in shaping our present and future experience.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Religion is an almost ubiquitous aspect of human culture. The philosophy of religion offers us a conceptual space to examine religions in order to deepen our understanding of them, individually and collectively, and thereby to explore the human condition from a range of perspectives. Until relatively recently, reflective activity has been focused on issues that arise when philosophizing takes place in a Judeo-Christian intellectual context. The questions and issues that have engaged the attention of philosophers of religion have been an extension of the kinds of questions that theologians were asking when European culture was unquestioningly Christian (see Harrison 2011). As secularization has occurred, the questions and issues have remained stable but have taken on a wider scope to include the perspective of nonbelievers (see, for example, Plantinga and Tooley [2008]). However, this widening of scope does not require an exit from the philosophical culture that is rooted in Christianity, since the rejection of faith—and, more specifically, the rejection of belief in the existence of God—is still understood in terms of that faith (see, for example, Smart and Haldane [2003]).

Although faith for many is a kind of trust, like having faith in the goodness of your parents or the soundness of your bank, faith is often taken to mean belief. In the philosophical context that emerged from faith, to have faith was often taken to mean to believe a set of propositions.[1] Such propositions are often taken to constitute the core of any given religion, and as propositions they can be conveniently evaluated as true or false. Scholastic theology, and later the philosophy of religion, came

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to focus on evaluating the truth value of various propositions, such as the proposition 'God exists', by adducing arguments and counterarguments. This style of inquiry requires that there are a number of shared assumptions and definitions that allow the debaters to speak to each other, and to appeal to common principles to adjudicate the various truth claims. The common principles are usually provided by the culture of the disputants and are now widely accepted to be subject to change as the culture changes. The need for a common intellectual context for progress to be made in ongoing philosophical debates was met relatively unproblematically, at least until the success of the natural sciences, especially Darwinian biology, led to a rupture in the Christian West. This was precisely the kind of cultural change that throws common principles into question.

The old strategy of thinking that religions are about propositions and that understanding religions is a question of learning the truth value of propositions has persisted through periods of dramatic cultural change. However, it becomes especially problematic when applied to religions from historically non-Christian cultures. There is still a strong impetus to translate the 'foreign' religions into terms directly compatible with the ongoing concerns, often informed by Judeo-Christianity, of philosophers of religion whose intellectual milieu, to a greater or lesser extent, is theologically informed. Elements of the religion to be studied are selected for attention by virtue of their seeming to fit well with familiar concepts and argumentative interests, as well as being truth evaluable. This phenomenon is known as 'meaning matching', and it is familiar to cultural anthropologists. Its attendant problems are also well known. Aspects of the religion or culture being encountered which do not match the narrative from which meaning is derived tend to be either ignored or distorted in ways that facilitate conceptual assimilation. While it is undeniable that some knowledge can come from such a strategy, it is unlikely to yield deep understanding.

Fortunately, there is at least one other strategy which could be pursued, the strategy of allowing the object of inquiry to remain genuinely strange. This strategy will, of course, make the use of familiar argumentative tactics difficult and will, perhaps, lead the philosopher into a state of confusion. Familiar intellectual landmarks will be missing and practiced conceptual moves will be unlikely to produce the usual effects. The wailing and gnashing of teeth that is produced by the plunge into the unknown is not, at least not necessarily, a sign of some eternal hellscape, but a journey toward understanding a new reality which requires the philosophical skill of curiosity and a sense of wonder to act as our guide. The strange unshackles us from our familiar, and sometime unconsciously held, perspectives and opens the door to new possibilities of meaning and understanding. It does not seem outrageous to assert that those who are never bewildered or confused never learn anything genuinely new. Philosophy can be regarded as the discipline that engages the unfamiliar (although this would obviously be a departure from how it is standardly presented in academia). It is not just about learning how to win the debate or work out the implications of tautologies. Such technical prowess has a more fundamental purpose, to aid the investigation of what it means to be human (see Harrison 2020). Religions provide excellent sites for such exploration, and allowing the religions of unfamiliar cultures to be strange is a very good way to ensure that the exploration will bear new fruit and not be just rehashing

what we already know disguised by foreign clothes. This culturally inflected investigation of what it means to be human can be expected to have significant implications not just for the philosophy of religion but also for ethics and other branches of philosophy.

## 2. THE DEAD ARE NEVER REALLY DEAD

One assumption that is culturally shaped and very rarely questioned by analytic philosophers is that the dead are dead and will remain so (although, admittedly, some analytic philosophers of religion hold that at least some of the dead will eventually be resurrected by God). A great many people, especially, but not exclusively, in Africa and Asia, however, hold that the dead remain connected to the world of the living, and in this sense the dead never really die. As the African poet, Birago Diop, puts it,

> Those who are dead have never gone away.
>
> They are in the shadows darkening around,
>
> They are in the shadows fading into day,
>
> The dead are not under the ground.
>
> They are in the trees that quiver,
>
> They are in the woods that weep,
>
> They are in the waters of the rivers,
>
> They are in the waters that sleep.
>
> They are in the crowds, they are in the homestead.
>
> The dead are never dead.[2]

The belief that the dead are still with us is conceptually and historically connected to animism, the stance that an animating spirit connected to the source of life infuses all things belonging to the natural world.[3] Animism is sometimes referred to as 'primal religion', and its serious philosophical investigation is lacking within the philosophy of religion and the analytic philosophical tradition more broadly, the latter having been accused of having little useful to say about either death or the dead (with the exception of analytic bioethics, which is concerned with dying and the definition of death).

The belief that the dead are still with us has been held by a very large swathe of the human population in the past and it is still held by many people alive today.[4] Given the obvious cultural importance and potential implications of this belief, it is surprising that is has attracted so little attention from philosophers. One implication of the belief that the dead are still with us is that we are all permanently entangled with our ancestors, which is a key trope within Chinese culture—ancient and modern. Clearly, in order to engage with China and various forms of animism found there, philosophical reflection will need to take place within an expanded ontological

horizon that includes both the living and the dead.[5] This expanded horizon will surely have conceptual implications for philosophy of religion, ethics, and value theory; as well as a host of practical implications, especially concerning how, as individuals, families, and societies, we deal with the dead and the experience of bereavement (see Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014).[6]

Using current philosophical methods to engage animism also provides an opening to a largely unexplored avenue of research that can broaden our philosophical understanding of religion as a general phenomenon.[7] After all, death and religion are inseparable partners in all cultures, whether ancient or modern. People within every human culture have asked these, or similar questions: What can we do about the dead? How can we keep ghosts at bay? How do we handle the supernatural?[8] Arguably, religions have evolved by elaborating answers to such questions. Questions about the dead are a way into this new philosophical terrain. They are the questions that every religion needs to address; and giving them more prominence than they have hitherto enjoyed in our philosophical reflections will have an impact on what we think philosophy of religion, and analytic philosophy more broadly, might include. We might rejuvenate the discipline of philosophy of religion by introducing new questions. A philosopher of religion, for instance, might ask: How can we adequately conceptualize the relation between the living and the dead while taking into account lived experience framed by animism? Examining questions such as this one will also suggest answers to another set of questions that are currently asked with increasing frequency within the philosophy of religion, namely: What is philosophy of religion when it is decoupled from theology? How can the familiar questions asked by philosophers of religion be changed to make the discipline more globally relevant? What other new questions might there be? (Harrison 2011).

Moreover, philosophical engagement with religion that is channeled through questions about the dead converges with a human experience that is widely shared and commonly reported as occurring most intensely during times of bereavement: The feeling, or sense, that the dead are still with us, that they are not really gone. In traditional Chinese culture, this sense of the dead being present is pervasive and difficult to avoid (see, for example, Mueggler [2001]). The dead are often physically represented in people's homes in the form of ancestor tablets, and ghosts are averted by means of divine stones (*shigandang* 石敢當) which are thought to expel them along with other evil forces. The *shigandang* is usually placed beside the front door to prevent ghosts from entering. They are also placed at street corners, especially intersections, because intersections are regarded as places of yin 陰地, which attracts ghosts.[9] It is apparent, then, for reasons to be explained in the next section, that in traditional Chinese culture the dead are not dealt with once and for all. They remain as objects of concern to the living and maintain a real presence in day-to-day life as ancestors, ghosts, or sometimes even as gods.

In many places in China, particular in rural areas and in Hong Kong and Macao, we find an ancient but still vibrant religious tradition that displays what can be described as a marked animist orientation (Ingold 2000, 112).[10] That the animist orientation of Chinese religion is, in fact, often overlooked by scholars from within and without China may be because, since the eighteenth century, animism has typically

been associated with the concept of 'primitive' religion. For example, as Mikel Burley notes, for the anthropologist Edward Tylor, animism "represents a 'childish' stage of the human mind's development" (Burley 2020, 167). Yet in China animism has flourished alongside high civilization since before the common era. To make matters more confusing, we shall see that Chinese animism is infused with, what can only be described as, 'ghost culture'.

The next section introduces Chinese religions in general and then Chinese 'folk religion', looking at its ontology of the dead and some of the answers given within traditional Chinese culture to questions about the dead. It also explains the relationship between folk religion and the more well-known, institutionalized traditions of China. One purpose of this focus on China is to bring the strange—in the form of animism in the context of Chinese ghost culture—to our attention, thereby expanding the horizon of our philosophical reflections. Chinese religions are the focus of what follows because, as noted previously, China brings a living tradition of animism into the contemporary world and this tradition has so far been overlooked by philosophers of religion and others within the broadly analytic tradition.[11] One obstacle to philosophical engagement with Chinese traditions, especially folk traditions, is a lack of knowledge about them. This is exacerbated by the difficulty of accessing primary sources, especially for those unable to read ancient or modern Chinese, combined with the difficulty of translating terms into European languages. Thus, the following section briefly provides the contextual historical and conceptual background necessary to begin to think philosophically about these traditions.

## 3. CHINESE RELIGIONS

Chinese religious culture is pluralistic.[12] It centrally includes Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (each of which comes in many different varieties). Judaism, Christianity, and Islam also have deep and long histories within China. Chinese folk religion has coexisted with these well-known traditions since ancient times. The term 'folk religion' is apt to be misleading insofar as it might suggest a tradition at the margins, detached from the institutionalized religions. This is far from the case in China, where folk religion still permeates the lives of many people.[13] Folk religion has subsisted alongside and within Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions, while tending to go unnoticed by scholars, who usually focus their attention on the institutionalized and more clearly defined traditions of China.

The term 'folk religion' captures a religious sensibility that imbues all the other Sinitic religious and philosophical traditions (we can regard Buddhism, in this context, as Sinitic because Chinese Buddhism—as the term suggests—underwent Sinification so long ago, and so thoroughly, that it now unquestionably belongs to the trinity of Chinese religions). Confucian, Daoist, and Chinese Buddhist traditions have evolved together and, despite many philosophical differences, share a core of myths, rituals, and local traditions. It is partly this that allows for practical religious syncretism in China. Even today many ordinary people will visit a Buddhist temple on some occasions and a Daoist temple on others, while perhaps having their day-to-day lives imbued with Confucian learning and values. It has often been observed in political, cultural, and personal contexts that Chinese people dislike choice, especially

decisive choice. To the vexation of diplomats and other negotiators, it seems to be a culturally embedded preference in China to keep options open as long as possible (see Clissold 2014). For most of its history, China has preserved this amicable situation with respect to its religions. Choosing one religion is not a notion that fits well into the Chinese context.

This pervasive religious plurality and syncretism can make the practical side of religion in China appear bewildering to those more familiar with the hard and fast distinctions between traditions that are found elsewhere. This has been an obstacle to scholarly engagement with Chinese religions, even while the philosophical dimensions of Confucian, Daoist, and some forms of Chinese Buddhism are becoming increasingly well known to western scholars. These traditions have such a pronounced philosophical component that the debate is ongoing about whether they are best regarded as philosophies or as religions. Confucianism and Daoism, and, to a lesser extent, Chinese Buddhism are now often studied as philosophies rather than as religions (see, for example, Liu [2006]). By contrast, philosophical work which engages with Chinese folk traditions, especially as these are transmitted in myths and legends and through traditions of ritual practice, is difficult to find. This is unfortunate given the historical and contemporary importance of these traditions. They not only contain a key to understanding China and its history; they also outline an ancient religious and metaphysical system that, despite significant mutations, continues to shape people's lives today. For philosophical purposes, it is especially interesting for the contrast it offers to the ontological perspectives that solidified into cultural assumptions in the traditions which became dominant in India, the Middle East, and in Europe after the decline of paganism.

Despite their close relationship to folk religion, it is currently fashionable in China and elsewhere to portray the three institutionalized Chinese traditions, especially Confucianism, as early forms of naturalistic philosophy. This accords with the reading of Confucian and Daoist traditions that has become dominant in western scholarship over the last two decades, and which tends to regard them primarily as political or ethical philosophies. It also accords with the currently dominant ideology in China, which favors secularist naturalism colored by a Chinese-Marxist version of historical materialism. Both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars, then, have an interest in portraying traditional Chinese philosophical-religious systems as naturalistic in the sense that these systems are concerned with ethical, social, and political realities rather than with supernatural ones. From this perspective, institutionalized early Chinese traditions can come to seem 'just like' culturally inflected forms of, for instance, virtue ethics, anarchism, communitarianism, or utilitarianism. We shall see, however, that Chinese folk religion resists this sort of reduction to western conceptual normality. It shows a different side of China; one that is as salient to people's lives today as it was in the past, and which persists both in China's countryside and in its ultramodern urban environments as well as in the global Chinese diaspora. Below I sketch the metaphysical architecture of Chinese folk religion, putting it into a broad historical context and highlighting some of the key points which make it seem so strange to those unaccustomed to thinking within the horizon it presents.

As Arthur Wolf demonstrated in his studies of religion in Taiwanese villages in the 1970s, Chinese folk religion has three structural elements: Gods, ancestors, and ghosts (Wolf 1974). Other research has shown that this tripartite structure has been firmly in place since the 5th to 3rd centuries B.C., and that it has roots even further down in the cultural history of China. Already during the Shang dynasty (c.1500–c.1050 B.C.), gods and ancestors played prominent roles within religious understanding. For the Shang, the ancestors who mattered most were those of the King, for they were thought to be able to help the King mediate with the spirit world through divination (Keightley 1999). In Shang culture during this period, gods were typically associated with natural phenomena such as wind, rain, or clouds. They do not seem to have been associated with specific functions in the human social world. However, as Hu Qiong (2020) has demonstrated, the Chu people of Southern China (who flourished during the 5th to 3rd centuries B.C.), in contrast to the Shang, understood gods to have specific functions in the human social world, such as 'controller of fortune'. Despite this important difference in their understanding of gods, the Chu people, like the Shang, held that ancestors continued to interact with the living. To the Shang duality of ancestors and gods, however, the Chu people added a third element by giving central importance to human and nonhuman ghosts (Lai 2015, 32–36). Nature spirits were regarded as nonhuman ghosts by the Chu, while human ghosts were thought to be unsuccessful ancestors. The merging of the Shang and the Chu religious worldviews that began during the Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.) generated the tripartite structure of Chinese folk religion that still exists today. Within this structure, the Chu understanding of gods having specific functions quickly became dominant over the more naturalistic Shang view of deities (although the latter view was not entirely eclipsed by the former). It was by virtue of the Chu's influence on the Qin and their successor dynasty, the Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), that a very ancient animistic tradition, expressed through ghost culture, was carried over into the Chinese religious worldview that further evolved during the common era and has persisted into the twenty-first century.

The animist strain within Chu thought is revealed in their understanding of ghosts. The Chinese character being translated as ghost is 鬼 *gui*, and in ancient Chinese texts it is used to refer to a variety of spiritual beings (Poo 2004, 176). Human ghosts and nature ghosts form the two main categories of ghost.[14] In brief, human ghosts are formed when a human being dies and its spirit fails to become an ancestor, this might happen for a number of reasons: violent death or death away from home being two of them. Nature ghosts were similarly unsuccessful in failing to become nature gods. This way of thinking reveals a key feature of Chinese folk religious ontology, namely that it is possible for a spirit to transition between categories. For example, a nature ghost that is sufficiently troublesome or sufficiently helpful to warrant human attention may transition into a nature God. Likewise, upon death a human spirit was thought to be capable of becoming either an ancestor or a ghost; which of these he or she became was thought to depend on the manner of his or her death and the attitude and behavior of the living relatives. In this view, a spirit that becomes a ghost and either causes enough trouble or proves himself or herself capable of benefiting the living, may transition into a deity (神). Whether or not this

transition occurs will depend in large part on how the living choose to treat the ghost. In sum, whether or not the spirit of a dead human becomes a malicious ghost, an ancestor, or a god depends largely on how it is treated by the living. Likewise, whether a nature spirit becomes a ghost or a deity depends on how it is treated by the living. These transitions also operate in reverse. If ancestors or gods are neglected, they may become malicious ghosts, and if nature gods cease to be treated as gods they will revert to being merely nature spirits. Whether they are ghosts, ancestors, or gods, spirits are thought to be capable of impacting the world of the living. Chinese folk religion can be understood as an extended exercise in controlling this impact.[15] It is not an exaggeration to say that Chinese folk religion is primarily concerned with the dead and with protecting the living against them.

A reader unfamiliar with this way of thinking might wonder why the threat posed by ghosts has been felt so persistently in the face of people's experience, which, one might suppose, lacks direct encounters with ghosts. One might also wonder how ghosts could harm people. In premodernity it is likely that ghosts were blamed for calamities that could not be otherwise explained, such as sickness or death that lacked other obvious causes. The persistence of this understanding of ghosts may have resulted from an effort to make certain aspects of experience explainable. In a world where many things within one's experience are not well understood, the scope for the action of ghosts could be extensive. Identifying a particular ghost or particular type of ghost as the source of one's trouble could also be empowering insofar as it suggested a way to handle the trouble. Consequently, Chinese literature contains, as well as detailed taxonomies of ghosts, a wide range of exorcism rituals.[16]

To understand this way of thinking about the dead, and ghosts in particular, requires familiarity with traditional Chinese folk religious ontology. The ancient Chinese (prior to the arrival of Buddhism in China) regarded the world as one system with no 'outside'. The celestial and terrestrial realms were not strictly separated, as they are in western religious thought (at least, in those parts of western religious thought with which people today are more likely to be familiar). When a human died, it was believed that his or her spirit had to go somewhere, in other words, it had to inhabit either the celestial or the terrestrial realm. In traditional Chinese thinking, heaven and earth were part of a continuum and it was possible for deities and shamans to travel between them using one of eight sky poles (sacred mountains) or one of the many available sky ladders.[17] This view entailed that there was no definitive and final crossing of the spirits of the dead into another realm from which they could not potentially return to engage with the living, hence the urgency of finding mechanisms to mitigate against the dangers caused by malicious spirits interfering with the living. Under these conditions of ready transit between heaven and earth, gods also had to be placated by reverence and offerings. If they received appropriate offerings, they should be obliged to help the supplicant.

The spirits of dead humans occupy a special place within the tripartite system of Chinese folk religion for, as we have seen, they can transition into ancestors, ghosts, or gods. If they are neglected by their descendants, they will become ghosts; however, if they prove themselves particularly beneficial to the living, they may become gods. In modern Chinese folk religion, most gods were formerly human (Maspero

1981). Many of these gods are also recognized in Buddhism and Taoism, as well as in Confucianism.[18] In this conceptual scheme, it makes sense to think of a human spirit 'living' well or badly in the afterlife. The idea of living well in the afterlife may strike the reader as strange. Nonetheless, it should be understood very concretely. It is the descendant's responsibility to make sure that their ancestors live well in the afterlife by providing the things they need to flourish. This includes not only remembrance but also spiritual food and sometimes other spirit goods, such as money (Jordan 1985, 32–33). Spirits that do not receive such offerings are deprived and hungry, hence they are likely to become malicious ghosts who cause trouble for the living. This is why, although they are both spirits, ghosts tend to be malicious and ancestors tend to be benign. Offerings to ancestors are still common within the more traditional parts of China and they are renewed frequently. The sites for such offerings are usually within the home.

Homes provide further evidence of the presence of folk religion in modern Chinese culture. Many buildings, even recent ones, have small altars on the outside near the entrance which hold frequently renewed offerings of incense and fruit for the local Earth God 土地神 (*Tudi shen*). The offerings are made in the hope that the god will secure prosperity for the inhabitants.[19] If a house is derelict, the altar is neglected. Within the perspective of Chinese folk religion, it makes sense to speculate as to cause and effect. Is the house derelict because the altar was neglected, or is the altar neglected because the house is derelict?

The daily practices associated with ancestors, gods, and ghosts in China demonstrate that, within a traditional Chinese worldview, the world is not only populated by those currently living but is also imbued with the spirits of those formerly alive. Ancestors remain present in their descendant's lives, just as ghosts (and gods) occupy a shared world with those who have not yet died. This gives us a sharp contrast with a typical view of these matters held in the religions of the west, in which the dead are thought to have gone to another realm (heaven, hell, or purgatory). In the Catholic Christian tradition, for example, All Saints and All Souls days mark the time when the souls of the dead are thought to cease engaging with the living. This disengagement simply never occurs in the traditional Chinese worldview. As we have seen, the spirits of the dead can never go away because there is nowhere for them to go. Lacking a heaven or hell with a no return policy, another means of dealing with ghosts is necessary.

We can speculate that bureaucracy emerged in China as a strategy to keep the spirits of the dead—especially, potentially malicious ghosts—under control. According to traditional belief, if spirits are adequately attended to, they do not become malicious ghosts. It is only if spirits are neglected that they are likely to cause potentially serious problems for the living. Early Chinese bureaucratic institutions can be seen as part of the effort to establish an ordered world out of an animated chaos peopled by a wide variety of spirits. Given that the spirits of the dead were thought to be active within the same realm as the currently living, some control mechanism was essential. This explains why the main role for gods in the traditional Chinese worldview is as civil servants within the celestial bureaucracy; as celestial civil servants, gods were thought to be as amenable to negotiation as were their terrestrial

counterparts. From the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–906) onwards, both celestial and terrestrial civil servants were held to be under the direct supervision of the Son of Heaven, the Emperor of China. In this scheme, many gods had very specific roles concerned with the ordering of ghosts. The City God 城隍神 (*Chengchuang shen*, literally, the God of Wall and Moat), for example, had the job of calling all the local ghosts to order to distribute to them gifts from the residents. This mechanism was designed to ensure that no ghost went hungry and so became troublesome. For obvious reasons, the centrally organized method of taking care of ghosts was thought to be more reliable than leaving it to individual families, who might only take care of their own dead. Thus, the importance of the celestial bureaucracy.

The obvious analogy between gods and civil servants in Chinese folk religion was brought to the attention of scholars by Arthur Wolf (1974). As Wolf explained, just as a civil servant has very specific responsibilities within a locality or administration, so a god has very specific responsibilities in the spiritual domain. In imperial times the Emperor would assign the duties of both senior bureaucrats and significant gods, with some bureaucrats being awarded divine status after death in recognition of their service in the terrestrial realm and so that they could continue their good work in their new state. This bureaucratic role underlines one of the key features distinguishing the traditional Chinese conception of gods from the conception of God that became dominant outside Asia.

Another similarity between the terrestrial civil service and the celestial bureaucracy is that both have a well-delineated chain of command. For example, each traditional local community would have an Earth God, this would be the deity in charge of agriculture with a responsibility for the community's welfare. The administrative district in which the community was located would also have a City God. The City God was the superior of the Earth Gods of all the local communities under the administrative jurisdiction of the city, and so had a much wider range of responsibilities. As mentioned previously, these gods were understood to be open to negotiation in the same way that terrestrial bureaucrats might be open to negotiation. As Wolf explains, "when a man . . . appeals to a God he negotiates for his good will just as he would in attempting to secure a favor from a magistrate or a policeman" (Wolf 1974, 162). To make sense of this it helps to think of the role of the god as well defined and the occupant of the role as subject to approval. As Henri Maspero remarks, in China, "divinity is a responsibility like a public function: the title endures not those who hold it" (Maspero 1981, 87). He adds that those holding the title "are functionary gods who receive a position, who lose it, who are promoted or demoted" (ibid.). This again indicates the transitory nature of the spiritual system, where one might be fired from a divine position by failing to fulfill one's responsibilities, just as in the terrestrial bureaucracy.

Perhaps the most prominent example of a human who was accorded divine status is Confucius. During the rule of the Tang dynasty the trend was established of deifying deceased humans who had exemplified the Confucian virtues of loyalty, righteousness, and integrity. This was a way of integrating official, state-sponsored religion and the much older folk traditions.[20] As part of this initiative, temples to the new gods were erected by both the state and local communities. Most gods recognized in the

Confucian tradition of this period and later were former humans. As Valerie Hansen (1990) has shown, while these gods began their divine life within specific localities, some of them were adopted in other regions and were eventually promoted throughout China (for instance, Zi Tong 梓童 and Zhang Wang 張王, whose local cult status became national under the Song [see Hu Qiong 2020, 145]). Given their former experience as exemplary civil servants, such gods were expected to be able to cooperate efficiently with officials in the nonspiritual realm, and ritual was regarded as the principal channel of communication between them. The trend of deifying deceased civil servants and casting them as celestial officials persisted into modern China, and it accounts for much of the perceived strangeness of traditional Chinese culture and religion from the perspective of those who encounter it for the first time.

Practices and beliefs concerning gods, ancestors, and ghosts have persisted into modern times. This is surely because they are intricately interwoven into so many aspects of Chinese culture and philosophy.[21] We can speculate that the persistence of these practices and beliefs is also a response to the common human experience of the death of loved ones, especially family members. Chinese ghost culture raises questions about possible ways to deal with the dead, something that must be done in every culture and by almost every one of us at some time in our lives. This perspective can challenge philosophy of religion, and analytic philosophy more broadly, to address death and the afterlife as meaningful parts of life and might contribute to our understanding of what it means to be human.

## 4. PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

This culturally inflected investigation of what it means to be human has focused on Chinese folk religion as an access point to a way of conceptualizing the world that is rarely considered within academic philosophy, and which falls beyond the radar of many modern educated people wherever they are. It is a world in which the dead are never really dead. As Lai Guolong eloquently puts it, in Chinese religion "death is not the end of one's life but entering a new relationship with both the dead and the living" (Lai 2015, 1). Given this conception, it makes sense for there to be ongoing communication between the living, ancestors, gods, and ghosts. The unfamiliarity of this world to many today makes it all the more worthwhile to investigate it philosophically. Arguably, traditional Chinese folk religion offers a more humane way of conceiving the world and our place within it than the brute materialistic one, held by many today, in which death marks the point at which an individual simply ceases to exist and only the living are thought to matter. One does not have to adopt the traditional Chinese folk perspective outlined in this paper to register its interest and potential value, even if one ultimately judges its chief value to lie in the contrast it offers to conceptualizations more familiar to many today.

What does Chinese folk religion show us, as philosophers and as human beings, about possible ways of relating the living and the dead? This question takes us far beyond the assessment of the truth value of propositions or questions about whether language about gods, ancestors, and ghosts should be regarded as literal, metaphorical, or something else. And, arguably, this question gets us closer to what matters to

us as human beings, who, the older we become, are increasingly likely to be dealing with the dead and their ongoing imprint on our lives.

Earlier I explained that a key feature of Chinese folk religious ontology is that it presents us with a world in which it is possible for a human spirit after death to transition between the categories of ancestor, god, and ghost. Taking this perspective on board requires reflection on the notion of living a good life after death, of living well in the afterlife. It also invites questions about what sort of afterlife it would be valuable to pursue and how best to prepare ourselves for our own death. Pondering such questions in the light of Chinese folk religious ontology and the religious practices concerning the dead that are still prevalent in modern China and the Chinese diaspora might provide a useful framework for thinking about our actions and goals in the current life. It is important to note that thinking about these questions and issues within this ontological framework does not require us to evaluate propositions about gods, ancestors, or ghosts, and their relations to the living as true or false. Even if conceived of as a thought experiment, or within the hermeneutical framework of philosophical fictionalism, this would surely be an interesting line of inquiry that is likely to have ethical as well as spiritual implications.[22]

In addition, Chinese folk religion invites us to take a more expansive perspective about issues of intergenerational justice than is usually considered. Our possible obligations to future generations have been a staple topic of analytic ethics for some years now, and this could be complemented by an investigation into our possible obligations to the dead who are still with us. If the mode in which the dead remain with us is largely decided by how the living relate to them, the ethical implications are profound and far-reaching. Should we at least consider setting up a Lewisian church or foundation in which the names of our dead are repeated daily in the sentence 'X exists', where 'X' stands for each of our dead? This might provide a minimalist way to discharge an obligation to remember the dead so that they might remain with us.

More seriously, Chinese folk religion provides a new perspective from which to consider the active role of memory in transforming the past in ways that might impact the present and future. The way we handle our memory of the dead, as individuals, families, and societies, can have real consequences for those still living insofar as the lineage kept alive through memory gives shape to present experience. To some extent, we can already see this dynamic at work in the common practice of only saying good things about people in obituaries and at their funerals. By following this practice, we are inviting our memory of the dead to be more selective, thus subtly shaping the role they might play in our future lives. Chinese folk religion brings this largely unconscious practice to attention and recommends that we use it wisely.

It could also be argued that an awareness of 'our' dead and of 'the' dead is a metaphor for an awareness of history. As such it might help us to guard against the danger of forgetting the past. Regarding the dead as in an ongoing relationship with the living can strengthen the bonds between the past, the present, and the future, which surely has value given that, in both the East and the West, we seem to be in a crisis of historical amnesia.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thinking philosophically about Chinese folk religion allows us to expand our conceptual horizons by considering an unfamiliar (or less familiar) tradition that is nonetheless built around concerns that are universally relevant to us as human beings—specifically, concerns about how to deal with and relate to the dead. As Mikel Burley observes, this kind of exercise can be liberating, not because it puts before us other options we might be tempted to adopt, but because it shows us that our "own preconceptions of what human life, and what human *religious* life in particular, 'must' be like are amenable to be loosened and destabilized. The result can be simultaneously unsettling and edifying" (Burley 2020, 192–93). With this remark, Burley nicely captures the virtue of the 'strange' as a pointer towards unexplored, or underexplored, pathways for future philosophical research.[23]

The focus here has been on traditional Chinese folk religion, and specifically on the animist tendency found within that in the context of ancient and modern Chinese ghost culture. The goal was to display an ontological perspective that grounds unfamiliar conceptualizations of the relations between the living and the dead and to suggest ways in which further philosophical engagement with this perspective might yield fruit within many areas of philosophy, especially philosophy of religion and ethics, in addition to having practical consequences.

## NOTES

1. Moses Maimonides's 12th-century Commentary to the Mishnah (2004), in which he states thirteen beliefs at the core of Judaism, is an early example of this emergence.
2. Birago Diop, "The Dead are Never Dead."
3. I set aside the question of what the phrase 'the natural world' means more precisely in this context, although it certainly would stand in need of clarification in a longer work.
4. Of course, it is difficult to know what people really believe. Some people in Africa and Asia, especially those from the younger generation, may continue to perform traditional practices associated with the dead from habit or from a sense of their cultural importance, rather than from belief.
5. I here use the term 'China' casually, to refer to the geographical region that is now referred to as China.
6. While there has been some investigation of these implications within African philosophy, where one finds a specific concern with how the connection to ancestors impacts one's ethical orientation, they have not begun to be explored in relation to Chinese thought.
7. See Sharma (2006) for a beginning in this direction.
8. The popularity of contemporary ghost stories in literature and film, especially in Asia, confirms the ongoing relevance of these questions. I am grateful to Damian Shaw for this observation.
9. As further protection against ghosts, in Chinese folk culture 'door gods' are used to keep ghosts out of temples and houses. The most well-known door gods are Qin Qiong 秦瓊 and Yuchi Gong 尉遲恭, who were Tang generals in their lifetime. Another frequently used door god is Zhong Kui 鐘馗, a Daoist deity. I am grateful to Li Teng for this information.
10. See the discussion of animism in Burley (2020, ch. 7).
11. Burley (2020) contains a discussion of animism. However, Burley's discussion does not cover Chinese folk religion.
12. For an introduction to the religions of China, see Jochim (1986).
13. The religious scene in China is especially complex in the post-Mao era. See Johnson (2017).
14. The Chu recognized a large variety of ghosts. For an analysis of the different types of ghost acknowledged by the Chu, see Hu Qiong (2020).
15. Daoism and Buddhism also took over this concern; each developed elaborate rituals to help with the taming of ghosts. Such rituals are still carried out today.
16. See Poo 2009, 287–88.

17. An early tradition holds that some evil gods took advantage of the passageways between heaven and earth to make trouble in both the celestial and terrestrial realms. Emperor Zhuanxu (the grandson or great grandson of Emperor Huangdi) decided to break all the links between heaven and earth, thus creating two separate worlds. See Chen Lianshan (2011, 78).

18. From the Song dynasty (A.D. 960–1279), the trend was to deify humans who exemplified Confucian virtues. Thus, deceased civil servants or military officers were good material for the pantheon (Shryock 1931, 45).

19. The Earth God is sometimes known as the God of the Locality. The latter name makes it clear that many gods are at stake, as each locality has its own.

20. I am grateful to Li Teng for this insight.

21. The same could be said of modern Taiwanese, Korean, and Japanese culture.

22. Some practical implications of the spiritual ontology of death as these concern death, dying, and bereavement in an African context, are discussed in Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014).

23. I am indebted to Hu Qiong and Li Teng for many discussions about this material, and to Rhett Gayle and Damian Shaw for insightful suggestions and pointers away from error. The paper is dedicated to my beloved friend, Jackson, who died in Macao, China, on 31st August 2020.

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