

# Ghost Stories of Ancient China: Beware of Po, Hun

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River lanterns are put in a river by people to pray for favorable weather and peace and prosperity on the night before the Ghost Festival on August 16, 2016, in Guilin, China. Photo by: VCG/VCG via Getty Images

Ghost stories were the earliest form of literature in ancient China. They were almost certainly part of a very old oral tradition before writing developed during the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.) and they continue to be popular in China today. Ghosts were taken very seriously by the ancient Chinese. In modern-day China ghosts only have the power to harm if one believes in them, but in ancient China, they were a reality whether one believed in them or laughed them off.

When a person died their soul journeyed across a bridge to the afterlife. They were judged as worthy or unworthy on this crossing. If they had lived a good life, they continued on, but if they had done evil they fell from the bridge into hell. If they reached the other side, they were either reincarnated or went on to live with the gods, depending on one's beliefs. Buddhists, for example, believed that people were more often reincarnated, or born again on Earth. Confucians believed that the dead lived with the gods and could be prayed to for assistance or protection. The first step in this journey after death was one's burial and funeral service, and if this was not done right the soul of the dead would return to Earth to haunt the living.

## **The importance of proper burial**

In China, the ground under the earth was considered the property of the gods. Cemeteries were located outside of towns and cities in rural areas, and there were earth spirits there known as Tudi Gong, as there were anywhere else. One could not dig a grave without first honoring the gods and local spirits who owned the land.

Since it was hoped the dead person's soul would pass over the bridge to the land of the gods, grave goods were included in the burial, which consisted of favorite objects and food. The dead then had to be mourned for an appropriate amount of time. For parents and grandparents, the minimum was three years, during which one had to wear special mourning clothing and could not attend parties or listen to music. If any of these rules were broken, the soul of the dead would return to Earth.

## **The parts of the soul**

There were two parts to the soul: the po and the hun. The po was the yin aspect of the soul, associated with darkness, water and Earth, and represented the animal nature of man, including instincts and urges. The hun was the yang aspect of the soul, associated with light, fire and the heavens, and represented reason and intelligence.

These two parts of the soul worked together to make life possible for a person. The hun (reason) governed the po (instinct), but the hun needed the po in order to survive. After death, these two aspects could return to cause problems for the living if proper burial rites had not been observed or for other reasons such as unfinished business.

## **Po and hun hauntings**

Stories of ghosts haunting a house where they once lived, haunting relatives or appearing to strangers for help are all examples of po hauntings. The yin spirit is still attached to the earth because proper rituals were not observed to release it.

Hun hauntings are different because the hun is not as attached to the body. Stories about spiritual possession, ghosts appearing as though they were still living or ghosts taking revenge on the living are examples of hun hauntings.

## **Types of ghosts**

The po and the hun, when they returned to haunt the living, were generally known as guei. Improper burial was the chief reason for their return, but they could also seek revenge or ask for help in righting a wrong.

A particularly dangerous ghost was the shui gui (water ghost), which was the spirit of someone who had drowned and whose body was never recovered or honored with a proper burial. The shui gui haunted the waters where they died and lured people in to drown them.

After their victim was dead, the shui gui could move on. The victim's spirit took its place and waited for the next person who could be caught off-guard. Talismans and amulets were worn to protect one from a shui gui when going near water or swimming.

The jiangshi was a kind of zombie ghost (the name means "stiff body") that would steal the breath from a person. The Chinese believed that breath, or qi, was the vital energy on which life depended, and these spirits sought to steal it away for themselves. Jiangshi are also known as "hopping ghosts" because their spirit bodies are so stiff they seem to hop instead of walk.

The most famous type of ghost in China is the hungry ghost. This type emerged sometime after the first century when Buddhism came to China. Hungry ghosts are the spirits of people who always wanted more than they had, were never grateful for what they were given and cannot find peace in the afterlife any more than they could when they lived. They are often shown as people with enormous stomachs but tiny mouths and necks which no amount of food could ever fill. Hungry ghosts can appear as living people to ask for food. If one does not give them any, they can curse the person and bring disaster on their home and loved ones.

## **Views of ghosts and practices**

The reality of ghosts like these gave rise to practices and rituals to protect people from them. The best defense against such ghosts was to live a good life, and this was why ghost stories were (and are) so often told to children. The stories express cultural values and encourage people to be kind and courteous to each other.

A ritual still observed in China today is Tomb Sweeping Day, which usually falls around April 4th. Even if one has neglected the graves of one's parents, relatives or friends all year, one will go tend those graves on Tomb Sweeping Day and pay respects. The Ghost Festival is also still observed. This celebration appeases the souls of the dead so they will not bother the living. It takes place during Ghost Month in China on the 15th day of the seventh month, when it is thought that the curtain between the land of the dead and the land of the living is drawn aside and the dead can cross back over.

## **Celebrations and rituals of Ghost Month**

There are a great many rules one must keep in mind during Ghost Month. One should not sit in the front rows at the theater because those are the seats the ghosts want and they will be offended. One should not place one's shoes facing the bed because ghosts will take it as an invitation to sleep with the person. One should not stay out too late or a ghost may follow one home (this is most often said by parents to their teenage children). Freshly-washed clothes should not be hung up toward evening because ghosts will try them on, and this brings bad luck to whoever wears them next.

Many shops in towns, and even cities, close during the festival so that the ghosts will not be disturbed by living shoppers. As the festival ends, people light small lanterns, which they place on paper boats and send off on the water of streams, lakes or rivers. The lanterns let the ghosts know that their time of visiting with the living is over and they have to return to the underworld. The ghosts are thought to be attracted by the lanterns and will follow them back home to the afterlife. When a lantern goes out, it is a sign that the ghost following it has reached the other side and is at peace.

## Quiz

- 1 Which of these statements would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) Most Buddhists believed that if a person had lived a good life, they'd be reincarnated after crossing the bridge into the afterlife.
  - (B) The Ghost Festival is a yearly occasion, still celebrated in China, in which ghosts can cross back into the world of the living.
  - (C) The Chinese considered breath to be an essential energy of life; jiangshi ghosts sought to steal it from the living for themselves.
  - (D) The Chinese believed the soul had two distinct parts that could come back after death to haunt the living in different ways.

- 2 The central idea of the article is developed by:
- (A) describing examples of various Chinese ghosts and the ways they haunt their victims
  - (B) explaining the influence an ancient belief in ghosts continues to have on Chinese culture
  - (C) showing the methods employed by both ancient and modern Chinese people to avoid hauntings
  - (D) illustrating how ghost stories are an effective way for Chinese children to learn valuable lessons

- 3 Read the sentence from the section "Views of ghosts and practices."

*It takes place during Ghost Month in China on the 15th day of the seventh month, when it is thought that the curtain between the land of the dead and the land of the living is drawn aside and the dead can cross back over.*

How does using the image of a curtain to represent the dividing line between the lands of the living and the dead help the reader better understand the relationship between the two worlds in Chinese culture?

- (A) It shows they believe the worlds are similar to each other.
- (B) It shows they believe the worlds are far from each other.
- (C) It shows they believe the worlds are stacked on each other.
- (D) It shows they believe the worlds are connected to each other.

- 4 Read the sentence from the section "Views of ghosts and practices."

*The reality of ghosts like these gave rise to practices and rituals to protect people from them.*

What paragraph in the section "Types of ghosts" helps the reader understand what "practices and rituals" are referring to?