

**Confucius, Mencius, and Mo Tzu:**

**Ghosts, Sprits, and Rituals**

**Philosophy Term Paper**

Victoria Mills

CHIN-3120 Philosophy in Ancient China – 001

Yanming An

December 6, 2022

In this paper, we will discuss all of the different views on spirits and ghosts amongst all of the ancient Chinese philosophers that discussed them throughout the course reading material this semester and compare and contrast them and their viewpoints based on those texts and research. To broadly introduce this paper we will be looking at the works The Confucius' Analects, the edition that has been translated by Arthur Waley, Mencius, the edition that has been translated by D.C. Lau, The Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, the edition that has been translated by Burton Watson. Within each of these works we will be addressing each of these ancient philosophers' ultimate viewpoints on how they feel about ghost and spirits at the time that they formulated their philosophies. We will also be looking at each of these ancient philosophers' lives which is important because they may have impacted their ultimate viewpoint on how they felt about ghosts and spirits at the time that they formulated their philosophies. We will also be taking a section to assess how each of these ancient philosophers viewed topics related to ghost and spirits such as respect for the dead in the form of funerals and the rituals that are practiced in these funerals such as the treatment of an overall nature of these ceremonies in ancient China from the standpoint of how each of these ancient philosophers follows that these rituals and ceremonies should be carried out according to all of their philosophies. We will be comparing and contrasting all of the ancient philosophers' lives and for each of them that says anything about ghosts, spirits, or rituals to tie it all together and come to a conclusion about each of their viewpoints.

To look at each of these ancient Chinese philosophers' lives to get a better idea of where they came from and how that may affect their philosophies we are going to start with Confucius. Confucius, according to Britannica probably had ancestors that were members of the aristocracy

that had become impoverished commoners by the time he was born. It also says that his father passed away when he was at the age of three years old and was taught by his mother and became a tireless learner in his teens. [i] Based on this information it is safe to assume that he was an intellectual which is understood, and he possibly had a mixture of a higher class and lower class point of view on the world and the way things should be derived from his preliminary stages of life.

Moving on to Mencius, also according to Britannica, mentions came from a noble origin and also lost his father at the age of three years old. His mother gave him special attention throughout his upbringing even moving several times in his youth to settle next to a school so he could “have the right kind of environmental influence.” From acknowledging these points about his early life, it can be assumed that he was also, like Confucius, intellectual but may have had viewpoints from a higher class level than Confucius did since Mencius was born into a noble family instead of only his ancestors coming from the aristocracy but being born poorer himself. [ii]

Next, to analyze Mo Tzu (Mozi), continuing to use Britannica as a source, Mo Tzu was originally a follower of Confucius’ teachings, but then he became convinced that “Confucianism laid too much emphasis on a burdensome code of rituals and too little on religious teaching, at which time Mozi decided to go his way” and Mo Tzu was more drawn to the commoner of China and looked to the “life of primitive simplicity and straightforwardness in human relations.”[iii] Considering this it can be said that Mo Tzu had a more of a lower class view of society since he was more accustomed to the common people as opposed to the viewpoints that someone like

Mencius, who grew up in a noble family and treated specially by his mother to cater to his education since they had the financial ability to do so.

Now to get into each of their views on ghosts and spirits. Starting again with Confucius, beginning in book six of the analytics section 19 is where we will first talk about his view on spirits. In this section of this book it says, “the master said, two men who have risen at all above the middling sort, one may talk of things higher yet. But two men who are at all below the middling sort it is useless to talk of things that are above them.”[iv] In an attempt to explain what this quote means let us first look at the footnote provided at the end of this section that says “that belonging to a higher stage of learning”[v] given this upon further analyzation of this section it could be said that Confucius is expressing that he believes that people who have not reached almost in an enlightened state of education which could be unattainable merely at the human level have no place or any business to be talking of “things”. This section leads into section 20 of book six in the Confucius analects that discusses wisdom or “to what the title wise could be according”[vi] considering this section concerning the previous section it says, “The master said, he who devotes himself to securing for his subjects what it is right they should have, home by respect for the spirits keep them at a distance, maybe termed wise,”[vii] this is the first section where we truly discuss Confucius’s opinion on how people should interact with spirits which is by what we see here treating them with respect. Also annotated in a footnote in this section it says, “when the spirit of hills and streams do not receive their proper share of ritual and sacrifice, they do not ‘keep their distance,’ but ‘possess’ human beings, causing madness, sickness, pestilence, et cetera.” There is a lot to unpack here with this explanation of this quote. Firstly it mentions ritual and sacrifice which we will get more into later when we get to the section on

rituals and then it mentions the second portion about the spirit not keeping their distance and possessing human beings which is a very interesting interpretation when you take into account the section we are about to get into on Confucius' thoughts and ideas when it comes to ghosts more specifically.

Resuming our discussion on Confucius' philosophy about ghosts and spirits we are now going to get into the ghost side of it. Utilizing book 11 section 11 of the Confucius analects to dive into this, we see here that it says, "The master said, till you have learned to serve men, how could you serve ghost?" then goes on to say, "the master said until you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead?"[viii] a footnote here questioning the consciousness of ghost in calling it a much-debated problem redirects us, readers, back to the introduction on page 32. In this introduction it point out that Confucius does not commit to any statement about anything like the conscious or unconscious state of the dead and that they are of secondary importance compared to the handling of living people[ix] it may also be useful to point out that and just in the paragraph before this in the same introduction it discusses a little more about his attitude towards the supernatural in terms of spirits. Referring back to our previous paragraph in this essay, we briefly analyze Confucius in his point of view on spirits, but this may be immensely helpful and useful to add to that discussion. In this section of this introduction, it acknowledges again that he is more attuned to human relations and not so much to human-spirit relations. This portion also brings up in early Chinese literature it has been frequently debated whether the claims to people or the spirit world should come first and comes to the conclusion that the security of the whole state should come first and that depends on the goodwill of the green soil river and hill spirits, gained by lavish offerings and sacrifices, regardless if it is

difficult on the common people, to prevent any manifesting of “ill-will” and “attack” on humans. This interpretation speaks a lot of volumes about how Confucius’ aristocratic background has had an impact on his philosophies. Since he has come from that kind of ancestry where that type of thinking to achieve what is needed, meaning his opinion that taxing the common people to satisfy the spirit world with lavish offerings and sacrifices to maintain the security of the state as a good ruler, is a reasonable idea is very evident proof of this correlation between an ancient Chinese philosophers’ background and their ultimate philosophy which comes not only from their environment and education but also their family lines or the lineages that they come from and childhood upbringings.

Moving on to Mencius for a brief moment to provide some of his input on the topic as one of Confucius’ most revered students. He seems to speak specifically on the ill-will portion of the same point in a more niched manner. In Mencius' book seven part A section 13, He says, “They bear no ill will when put to death, neither do they feel any gratitude when profited. They move daily towards goodness without realizing who it is that brings this about. A gentleman transforms where he is passing through, and works wonders where he abides. He is in the same stream as heaven above and earth below. Can he be said to bring but small benefit?”[x] In slight opposition to Confucius’ idea about providing spirits with lavish offerings and sacrifices to prevent them from bearing any ill will towards the common people, Mencius expresses that he believes that, in one understanding, spirits will not show any hatred the people that killed them or any favor when bestowed with any of those lavish offerings and sacrifices. It could be said that Mencius believes that it makes no difference how you interact with spirits and there is no reason to at all. Since Mencius believes that human nature is inherently good, it seems that he also believes that after

death people continue to move towards continuing to be good without any knowledge of what gifts are being given to them from the earth so again it may not make any difference one way or another. When he continues about the gentleman working wonders where he abides, it appears that he believes that spirits reside somewhere in between heaven and earth or in both as derived from the following sentence. Mencius places a large significance on the idea of benefit and with the last question that he asked in this passage it may seem that he believes that you mean spirits can produce some kind of benefit towards the common people even after they have passed.

Finally, to discuss Mo Tzu's view on ghosts and spirits. Mo Tzu is known for being one of the first major intellectual rivals of Confucius so therefore it is expected rightly so for him to have a different point of view on ghosts and spirits than Confucius did. Confucius almost completely directly refuses to discuss ghosts or acknowledge whether or not ghosts are real, but Mo Tzu on the other hand intends to prove that ghosts exist by stating that, "if from antiquity to today, from the beginning of mankind to the present, there have been people who have seen ghosts like in spirit like beings and heard their voices, then how can we say they don't exist?" [xi] Mo Tzu is saying here that since people say they exist, they do. Looking at this at the surface level sounds very naive at first but if you take it a little deeper than face value it starts to make a little more sense. Thinking that little deeper about other things that we believe just because other people have told us that they exist is actually kind of numerous. For example, places we have never been to or people we have never met. We have not seen or heard them ourselves, but we have been told that they exist so therefore we believe that they do so which makes Mo Tzu's outlook seem a little less crazy. It is easy to dismiss Mo Tzu's philosophy in favor of Confucius's philosophy, especially since he is attempting to go against a very major player when

it comes to ancient Chinese philosophy, and say he is just believing anything anyone tells him, but that would be wrong, because that after serious consideration of the bigger idea that Mo Tzu is getting at is pretty insightful if you see it in this light and agree with this interpretation of his philosophy.

Now when it comes to Mo Tzu's opinion in a little narrower sense, it becomes a little different. When asked, "this not only fails to benefit parents until he does harm to filial sons, but also does it not?" Mo Tzu said that "the ghost and spirits of past and present are of three kinds only: the spirits of heaven, the spirits of the mountains and rivers, and the ghost of men who have died." [xii] And then goes on about how it is important to please them similar to Confucius's philosophy about spirits. It can be slightly hard to understand at first where Mo Tzu's ideas stand, whether that be completely alone or a lot closer to Confucius's than it may seem. Based on this information it is probably safe to say that he falls somewhere in between since there are many major differences but also some striking similarities between the two ancient Chinese philosophers.

Returning to Confucius to talk about rituals, since this is an important ritual that ties into the treatment and honoring of the dead. Confucius particularly puts a lot of emphasis on the rituals concerning the deceased. To present a few passages that represent this let us start with an excerpt from book one section 9 that states, "when proper respect towards the dead is shown at the end and continued after they are far away the moral force of people has reached its highest point." [xiii] The proper respect that Confucius is talking about here must be an adequate funeral for the person that is following his philosophy and continuous lavish offerings and sacrifices. Confucius emphasizes this point in book 2 Section 5 in the passage where he says, "while they



are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, buried them according to ritual and sacrifice them according to ritual.” [xiv] This again shows the major weight that rituals hold to Confucius. Rituals and sacrifices, to him, are something that you live and die by. Another significant passage comes from book 3 section 11 which talks about when someone asks Confucius for an explanation of the ancestral sacrifice he said, “I do not know. Anyone who knew the explanation could deal with all things under heaven as easily as I lay this here; and he laid his finger upon the palm of his hand.” [xv] This passage calls back to the fact that Confucius avoids making any concrete statements about the supernatural such as the reason anyone should even respect them or give them offerings and sacrifices. The last point on Confucius and rituals that we will bring up here is from book 20 Section 2 where it says, “What he cared for most was that people should have food, and that the rights of morning and sacrifice should be fulfilled,”[xvi] this quotation could use a little bit of an explanation of the culture behind it to make sure its prominence is fully understood. The Chinese concept of filial piety is basically at its core an intense respect that children have for their parents which includes a period of mourning after their deaths which some say should last at least three years nothing but grieving not even working.

Switching back to Mencius on rituals, he is again expectedly remarkably similar to Confucius in his philosophy on this topic as well. Similarly, to Confucius, Mencius also agrees with him on the idea that children should take care of their parents throughout their lives, especially in their old age, and that they should be given elaborate funerals and given lavish offerings and sacrifices to show them respect after they pass. Going back to the idea of their backgrounds, Confucius, and Mencius both come from people who lived relatively wealthy

lifestyles, people who would have the means to be able to afford these things. Realistically most common people could not do these things and that leads us to our final philosopher's outlook on the topic of rituals and funerals.

Mo Tzu may have been alike to Confucius and Mencius in some aspects of their philosophies but when it comes to rituals precisely funerals these ancient Chinese philosophers could not be more different. Their philosophies are opposites of each other when it comes to how funeral rituals should be. As stated in the beginning when we went over each of the philosophers we were going to discuss here backgrounds, we mentioned that Mo Tzu was different from Confucius and Mencius in the sense that the family is in ancestries in which they came from were different since Confucius and Mencius came from either an aristocratic ancestry or a noble family and Mo Tzu, on the other hand, was part of the common people of China and did not live an extravagant lifestyle in the slightest. The major debate between these philosophers when it comes to funerals is just this, how should they be. All of the philosophers seem to agree that there is reason to show respect for the deceased but the way that each of them concluded the best way to do this where completely the opposite from one another. Confucius and in turn Mencius, each believed that the best way to show respect for the deceased is to have elaborate expensive funerals for them with food and music and the whole nine yards if done correctly, but Mo Tzu felt that this was not the right thing to do at all. Mo Tzu believes that choosing to show respect for the deceased in this way was completely and utterly useless. Mo Tzu saw this as nothing more than a total waste and not only of money. Mo Tzu deemed them over the top funeral rituals a waste of time money and energy since yes, he believed that there was a reason to show respect for the deceased but that display of respect should benefit, not be inefficient.

In conclusion, each of the ancient Chinese philosophers that we discussed here come from vastly divergent backgrounds which significantly impacted their ultimate philosophies. Confucius and Mencius coming from the higher class resulted in them having a more unattainable philosophy in terms of achievability by the common people due to the wells they were born into or the educations that they received. Mo Tzu was one with the common people in the lower class and had more of a realistic philosophy, but it was probably not held to the same standard as the other two for that same reason at least internationally. We discussed all of the different views on spirits and ghosts amongst each of these ancient Chinese philosophers that discussed them throughout the course reading material this semester and compared and contrasted them and their viewpoints based on those texts and research. We can say that we concluded that Confucius took a strong stance on respect and skepticism when it came to the treatment of ghosts and spirits. We could also say that we came to the same conclusion for his student Mencius whose philosophies very evidently took a lot after his knowledgeable teacher. Mo Tzu took his side and concluded that if there have been people who have seen ghosts and spirit-like beings and heard their voices, then they do exist. For the conclusion on funeral rituals and acts to show respect for the dead, we concluded that they all find this especially important but go about doing so in all quite separate ways. Confucius's and Mencius's ideas and philosophies tend to commonly line up with one another and Mo Tzu being one of Confucius's first major intellectual opposers expectedly had a quite different view than the other two most of the time even though they did line up sometimes and this could be chalked up to Mo Tzu originally being a follower of Confucius before he started to go down his path. In the end, each of their ancient Chinese philosophers was extremely insightful and is to be respected by not only

the people who exclusively study ancient Chinese philosophy but all people who come across their works.

[i] <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Confucius>

[ii] <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mencius-Chinese-philosopher>

[iii] <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mozi-Chinese-philosopher>

[iv] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book 6 Section 19

[v] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book 6 Section 19

[vi] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book 6 Section 20

[vii] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book 6 Section 19

[viii] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book 11 Section 11

[ix] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley p.32

[x] Mencius book 7 part A section 13

[xi] Mo Tzu basic writings translated by Burton Watson part III section 31 p. 95

[xii] Mo Tzu basic writings translated by Burton Watson part III section 31 p. 107

[xiii] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book I Section 9

[xiv] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book II Section 5

[xv] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book III Section 11

[xvi] The Analects of Confucius translated and annotated by Arthur Waley book XX Section 2