

9 Mozi: Defending the Belief in the Existence of Gods and Spirits (ca. 5th Century BCE)

Introduced by Hubert Seiwert

Introduction

In ancient Chinese texts, there is no general term that can be translated as ‘religion,’ and, therefore, no conceptual distinction between the religious and the secular. However, even before the first appearance of Daoist and Buddhist communities during the Later Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), there were discussions regarding the belief in the existence of spirits and gods, and sacrificial rites. In this and the next source (texts no. 9 and 10) we present excerpts from two texts that took opposing positions on this subject without directly referring to each other.

Both texts were written during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), an epoch of profound political, economic, and intellectual transformations, and military conflicts. The end of this era is marked by the military victory of the state of Qin, and the establishment of a unified Chinese empire. The Warring States period is also the classical epoch of Chinese philosophy. Beginning with Confucius (552–471 BCE), numerous teachers emerged seeking ways to secure peace and social order, in the face of the social dislocation caused by war and exploitation of the people.

The book *Mozi* 墨子 (“Master Mo”) was compiled by followers of the teachings of Mo Di 墨翟, who lived in the fifth century BCE. Little is known about Mo Di’s life. A central theme of his teaching was the securing of peace and the prosperity of the people. His moral teaching emphasised the need for impartial, universal love (*jian ai* 兼愛), condemned aggression, and opposed opulence and waste. The school he founded became the most important counterpart to the school of Confucius during the late Zhou dynasty (1050–221 BCE). His teachings were therefore criticised by later Confucians, and were considered heterodox.¹

The book *Mozi* is the only surviving text from antiquity in which morality is justified by reference to gods and spirits. Here, Mozi conceives of Heaven (*tian* 天) as a personal deity that sends good and bad fortune as rewards and punishments, according to people’s moral actions. Mozi thus maintained a belief that was no longer generally accepted in his time. Wars and social ills had raised doubts about the justice of

¹ On Mo Di’s philosophy, see Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction Under the Aspect of the Breakthrough Toward Postconventional Thinking*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 234–43.

Hubert Seiwert, Leipzig University, Research Centre Global Dynamics, KFG 2344 “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”; Leipzig University, Faculty of History, Art and Area Studies, Institute for the Study of Religion

Heaven. The behaviour of the rulers was characterised by violence and greed for power and wealth, and not by justice and concern for the people. Mozi sees this disregard for morality as the cause of the social chaos of his time. In his opinion, the contemporary misfortune was the responsibility of human beings who ignore the fact that misfortune is a punishment for moral transgressions, handed down by gods and spirits. Belief in the existence of supernatural agents is thus considered a prerequisite for securing people's moral conduct.

The chapter, excerpts of John Knoblock and Jeffrey K. Riegel's translation of which are reprinted here, illustrates the diversity of opinions on the existence of supernatural beings at the time. While Mozi's defence of the existence of gods and spirits and the superior authority of Heaven can be interpreted as being a religious argument, he is facing opponents who maintain a secular position that not only denies the existence of supernatural beings, but also opposes religious rituals as a needless waste of resources.

Bibliographical Information

Mozi 墨子. *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 edition. Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua shuju, 1966; 1a–2a, 9a–10a. Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

The translation adopted here can be found in:

John Knoblock and Jeffrey K. Riegel. *Mozi: A Study and Translation of the Ethical and Political Writings*. China Research Monograph 68. Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies University of California, 2013. 254–272; 254–56, 271–72.

The translation also contains the Chinese text.

The translators' philological notes are omitted. Page numbers refer to *juan* 8 of the Chinese edition.

Translation Adopted from John Knoblock and Jeffrey K. Riegel

Explaining Ghosts (*Ming Gui* 明鬼)

The teachings of our Master Mozi say: “Now that the sage-kings of the Three Dynasties of the past are gone and the world has abandoned righteousness, the lords of the various states use force to govern. On account of this, lords and superiors are not gener-

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ous, and their subjects and subordinates are disloyal to them; fathers are not affectionate, sons are not obedient, younger brothers are not deferential, older brothers are not protective, and none of them is virtuous or good. Officials do not devote their energies to their governmental tasks, and menials do not exert themselves in doing their jobs. The people are given to lewdness and violence, banditry and disorder, and thievery and predation, using weapons, poisons, fire, and water to detain innocent travelers on the highways and bypaths and rob them of their carts and horses, coats and furs for their own benefit. All of these, occurring at the same time, originate from the lords of the various states using force to govern. Because of this the world has descended into anarchy.

What is the cause of this state of affairs? Everyone is uncertain about whether ghosts and spirits [p. 1a/1b] exist or not, and they do not understand that ghosts and spirits have the ability to reward the worthy and punish the violent. Now if everyone were to believe in the ability of ghosts and spirits to reward the worthy and punish the violent, would there be any anarchy in the world?"

Now those who advocate that ghosts do not exist say: "Ghosts and spirits most certainly do not exist." Morning and evening they preach this doctrine to the world, sowing doubts among the masses and causing everyone to be uncertain about whether ghosts and spirits exist or not. The result has been to throw the world into disorder. This is why our Master Mozi said: "Now if the kings, dukes, great men, and the ruling elite of the world in fact desire to promote what benefits the world and to eliminate what is harmful to it, then I think that they must clearly investigate the question of whether ghosts and spirits exist or not."

If it is given that the question of whether ghosts and spirits exist or not is one that must be investigated, then when I want to investigate this matter clearly, what kind of argument is admissible? Our Master Mozi said: "The method used by the whole world to determine whether something exists or not is to rely upon what the great mass of people knows from the evidence of their own ears and eyes and to use this as a standard for determining whether something exists or not. If someone has genuinely heard something with his own ears and seen something with his own eyes, then it must exist. [p. 1b/2a] But if no one has either heard or seen it, then it must not exist. If this is the case, why not try going into villages and districts and asking? If from antiquity to the present, from the birth of humankind to the present day, people have seen evidence of ghosts and spirits and heard their voices, how could we say that ghosts and spirits do not exist? But if no one has ever seen or heard them, how could we say that ghosts and spirits exist?" [. . . p. 2a–9a . . .]

[The text continues by citing numerous historical accounts that prove the working of ghosts and spirits and show that the sage-kings of antiquity believed in them and offered sacrifices.]

Now those who maintain that ghosts do not exist say: “Belief in the existence of ghosts not only fails to benefit parents, it actually does harm to their obedient children, does it not?”¹ Our Master Mozi said: “Ghosts of antiquity or the present are none other than the spirits of Heaven, the ghosts and spirits of the mountains and rivers, and the ghosts of people who have died.” Now there are instances of sons predeceasing their parents and of younger brothers, [p. 9a/9b] their elder brothers. Despite the fact that this sometimes happens, the natural order of things in the world is: the first to be born are the first to die. This being the case, if the first to die is not your father, it will be your mother; if not your elder brother, it will be your elder sister. Now when we prepare purified wine and rice and millet cakes and offer them in sacrifices with reverence and care, if ghosts and spirits really exist, this is the same as giving food and drink to our fathers, mothers, elder brothers, and elder sisters. Is this not a rich benefit? But if ghosts and spirits do not in fact exist, then would we have wasted materials making purified wine and rice and millet cakes? Though we do use up resources making them, it is not as though we had just poured the wine down the drain or thrown away the rice and millet cakes. Within the family, descendants of the common ancestors, and from outside the family, members of the village and district, can all gather to eat and drink them. So even if ghosts and spirits do not in fact exist, people would still be able to enjoy being with the assembled family and develop closer ties with the people of the village and district.

Now those who advocate that ghost do not exist say: “It is patently obvious that ghosts and spirits do not exist. This is why we do not contribute goods like purified wine, rice and millet cakes, or animals for sacrifice. It is not a matter of our begrudging the expense of such things, but that we do not see what is accomplished by using them.” This contradicts the records of the sage-kings and violates the actions proper to the people and to obedient sons. Though such people desire to be eminent gentlemen in the world, [p. 9b/10a] this is not the way to become one.

This is why our Master Mozi said: “Now when I perform sacrifices and make offerings, it is not as though I merely pour out the wine and throw away the millet. Above I secure the blessings of the ghosts and below assemble the whole family on an enjoyable occasion and cultivate closer relations with people of the village and district. If spirits exist, then I am able to provide food to my parents and brothers. How could these not be things that benefit the whole world?”

This is the reason our Master Mozi said: “Now if the kings, dukes, great men, and the noble elite of the world in fact seek to promote what benefits the whole world and eliminate what harms it, they cannot but honor and explain to others the fact that ghosts and spirits exist, for this is the Way of the sage-kings.”

1 [editorial note 29 in the original] Based on Mozi's response, it would appear that what is being objected to is the wastefulness of offerings that not only fail to benefit the deceased, but are expensive for their descendants to prepare.