

Two Categories of Chinese Ancestors as Determined by Their Malevolence

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Before Emily M. Ahern's *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*¹ appeared in 1973, it had been generally thought that Chinese ancestors were not malevolent at all, but benevolent and protective. Maurice Freedman, for example, had claimed:

while they will certainly punish their descendants if they suffer neglect or are offended by an act or omission which affects them directly (chiefly, the failure to secure for them a firm line of descent), they are essentially benign and considerate of their issue. Before taking action against their descendants they need to be provoked; capricious behavior is certainly alien to their benevolent and protective nature.²

Furthermore, Francis L. K. Hsu, based on his study of West Town in Yunan, had argued:

. . . ancestral spirits, in every part of China, are believed to be only a source of benevolence, never a source of punishment to their descendants. This is shown by the fact that when the Chinese is suffering some misfortune, such as sickness or fire or flood or the lack of male progeny, he will suspect that the fault lies with any of a variety of deities or ghosts,³

1. Emily M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1973).

2. Maurice Freedman, "Ancestor Worship: Two Facets of the Chinese Case," *Social Organization: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth*, ed. M. Freedman (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1967), pp. 92-3.

3. One of the difficulties experienced when the malevolence of the ancestors is examined is how ancestors and ghosts should be distinguished. No clear distinction can be found in the sources mentioned in this paper with the exception of A. P. Wolf; and what is worse, ghosts and ancestors seem to be confused in these sources. Wolf

but never with the spirits of an ancestor.⁴

Ahern's findings, however, derived from her research in Ch'inan, a village in northern Taiwan, stands in contrast to those of Freedman, Hsu and others who have espoused similar views.⁵ Using capriciousness to measure the relative malevolence of ancestors, she found that Ch'inan ancestors were not at all benign. For example, one of her informants said, "You can make lavish offerings on all the proper occasions, but you never know that the ancestors won't come back and make trouble."⁶ This clearly shows that the ancestors in Ch'inan need not be provoked before they cause harm. She also mentioned their severeness. Although it is generally said that Chinese ancestors do little more than make descendants mildly sick,⁷ Ahern gave several examples of Ch'inan ancestors causing serious disability or even death.⁸

Ahern also tried to offer an explanation for the capriciousness and malevolence of ancestors in Ch'inan. Finding punishment for children very stern in that village, she utilized a cross-cultural study which found that "there is a general tendency for less indulgent treatment in infancy to be related to predominantly aggressive deities in the cultural belief system, and for more indulgent treatment to be related to benevolent deities."⁹ Ahern concluded, therefore, that the harsh child-training customs in Ch'inan were responsible for the highly malevolent activities of ancestors there. A painful experience in childhood throws a shadow over the rest of one's life, and the child expects

states that the dead at one end of the continuum are true ancestors," who are taken care of by their descendants, and "the dead at the other end are almost ghosts" (Wolf 1974: 159), who have nobody to worship them, or are neglected. "The category 'ghost' is always a relative one." (173) One of my informants states that any of the ancestors has the potential of becoming a ghost in one situation or another. I will take this standpoint below in my discussion. Thus, strictly speaking, even the ancestors in West Town are not completely benevolent.

4. Francis L. K. Hsu, *Clan, Caste, and Club* (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostland Company, Inc., 1963), p. 45.

5. R. F. Johnston, *Lion and Dragon in Northern China* (New York: E. P. Dutton and company, 1910). pp. 286-87; and J. T. Addison, *Chinese Ancestor Worship: A Study of Its Meaning and Relations with Christianity* (Tokyo: Chung Hua Sehng Kung Hui, 1925).

6. Ahern, p. 200.

7. Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London: Athlone P., 1966), p. 151.

8. Ahern, p. 201.

9. William W. Lambert, Leigh Minturn Triandis, and Margery Wolf, "Some Correlates of Beliefs in the Malevolence and Benevolence of Supernatural Beings: A Cross-Social Study," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58 (1959), p. 164.

that ancestors will behave in the same way as when they were alive. As evidence that malevolent ancestors are the result of the way people remember their parents, Ahern relates this view of ancestors in the underworld: "The dead in the underworld retain the personalities and characters they had while alive, but they are remembered as they were during their middle years, not as helpless old men and women awaiting death."¹⁰

In *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwanese Village*, David K. Jordan does not pay much attention to the malevolence of ancestors in Bao-an, the village which he studied; but he does illustrate "spirit marriage," a practice which provides further evidence of ancestral hostility.¹¹ In Bao-an, as elsewhere in China, a daughter is considered by her natal family to be an outsider from birth, for she is destined to marry into another family and contribute to its welfare. Therefore, when a girl dies unmarried, she is not worshiped by her natal family. A posthumous marriage is arranged for such a girl when misfortune (usually sickness) in her own family or that of her sister is interpreted as her demand for a husband. In other words, she must have a person who can take charge of worshiping and caring for her. Jordan's thoughts about this kind of spirit, which he calls a familial ghost, are summarized in the following statement:

Unlike Western ghosts, the familial ghosts of Bao-an do not attack man out of pure devilishness and malice, but out of necessity. Morally they are neutral beings. The operation that stops the disaster in the case of familial ghost is the correction of the unsatisfactory and anomalous position of the ghost.¹²

Since Ahern and Jordan published their findings, the malevolence of Chinese ancestors has attracted increasing attention.¹³ Arthur P. Wolf, for example, says that Chinese ancestors seem to be much more punitive than he had thought after his first field trip, when he com-

10. Ahern, p. 218.

11. David K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 138-71.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

13. G. Seaman, "Ancestors, Geomancy, and Mediums in Taiwan"; Douglas Miles, "Prophylactic Medicine and Kin Units Among Yao Ancestor Worshipers"; Yih-yuan Li, "Chinese Geomancy and Ancestor Worship: A Further Discussion"; Arthur P. Wolf, "Aspects of Ancestor Worship in Northern Taiwan"; Sung-hsing Wang, "Ancestors Proper and Peripheral"; and C. Stevan Harrell, "The Ancestors at Home: Domestic Worship in a Land-Poor Taiwanese Village," *Ancestors*, ed. William H. Newell (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1976), pp. 307-85.

prehended them in much the same way as had Freedman.¹⁴ Wolf lists fifteen excerpts from his field notes which led him to change his mind. He explains why Chinese ancestors are sometimes said to be malevolent and at the other times, on the contrary, to be benevolent:

This seems to me only one manifestation of a conflict between an ideal that says the ancestors are always benevolent and a fear that they are in fact punitive. Asked if they believe that their ancestors would punish them for neglect, people usually insist that they would not. But when they suffer a series of misfortunes, most people give serious consideration to the possibility that the ancestors are responsible.¹⁵

Though Ahern concludes that the ancestors are thought to be malevolent because in Ch'inan "the dead in the underworld retain the personalities and characters they had while alive,"¹⁶ she also cites several cases in which the collectivity of ancestors, and not individual deceased persons, are thought to cause trouble. Thus, when ancestors are mentioned, they seem to be thought of in one of two different ways: as a "collectivity," in which all of the ancestors are generalized and conceived of as one body, and as "individuals," or dead persons who are remembered vividly with their own personalities and characteristics.

Let us examine some examples of malevolence in order to see the differences between the collectivity of ancestors and ancestors as individuals. I gathered about fifty examples, both actual cases and general comments, from Ahern's *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*, Wolf's "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors" and "Aspects of Ancestor Worship in Northern Taiwan," Jordan's *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors*, Wang's "Ancestors Proper and Peripheral," and Harrell's "The Ancestors at Home: Domestic Worship in a Land-Poor Taiwanese Village." From these examples, typical cases of misfortune caused by the ancestral collectivity and the individual deceased are listed below.

I. INDIVIDUAL

1. Asking to be worshiped

"A woman in Lun-ya, Hua-tan, . . . told me that her son went mad. They asked the deities why. The deities told them that a spirit haunted him. The spirit is her husband's father's wife's brother, who has no

14. Arthur P. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. A. P. Wolf (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

16. Ahern, p. 218.

descent. She promised to offer him some food and paper money on the first and fifteenth of each lunar month. She worshiped him outside the courtyard of the dwelling. Her son did not recover because the spirit insisted that he should have his own tablet, which should be placed inside the door. She promised she would do this only if her son had really recovered."¹⁷

A spirit marriage is included here, too.

2. Provoked by unintentional misbehavior

"The Li *tang-ki* told me that a family once inadvertently knocked off part of the roof of a house [a small-scale replica made for a dead person] before burning it. Immediately afterward, people fell sick and things went wrong in the household. The accepted explanation was that the ancestor was unhappy because his house had arrived with a hole in the roof, allowing rain to come in. After the family burned a paper replica of the roof that was damaged, their problems ended."¹⁸

3. Because of capriciousness

An elderly man in the Ong settlement had a bad back for many years. "Most Ongs who would talk about it agreed that the man's trouble was caused by a malicious ancestor in his grandfather's generation. All attempts at propitiation had failed. 'That ancestor just had a bad heart. That's why the man has that trouble with his back. The ancestor is causing it out of meanness.'"¹⁹

4. Seeking revenge

"The wife of a farmer for whom Tan So-lan picked tea mistreated her *sim-pua* [little daughter-in-law] so badly that the girl committed suicide. To get revenge the girl's parents pulled an edge of her clothing out of the coffin before it was buried. 'That girl came back all the time to scare her [foster] mother. When the mother's son married, the daughter-in-law was very aggressive and fought with her mother-in-law. Their quarrels made the son feel so bad that he ran away to the mainland and became a bandit. All this was because that woman treated her *sim-pua* so badly."²⁰

5. Letting the living know of an uncomfortable situation

"The disabilities of three members of the *be* [one division of the Ong

17. Wang, p. 369.

18. Ahern, p. 228.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

20. A. P. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," p. 165.

settlement]—a child who is unable to walk, another who is unable to talk, and a middle-aged woman who occasionally becomes violent—are laid to the discomfort of the ancestor in the titled grave.”²¹

6. In an unhappy situation

There are four brothers in the Lou lineage, two of whom do not live in the village. “The pair in Ch’inan planned to build a joint grave for their parents without consulting their brothers, but the other two heard about it and arranged to steal their mother’s bone pot. The Ch’inan brothers went ahead anyway, building the grave with only the bones of their father. Then, in a year or so, things began to go wrong for them. The wife of one brother fell sick and did not improve, and all the chickens in the other’s poultry farm became diseased and died. The Lous’ interpretation of this ill-fortune was that the deceased couple were unhappy at not having been buried together and so were punishing those responsible.”²²

II. COLLECTIVITY

7. Asking to be worshiped

The Huang was La Yang’s mother’s natal family. Its tablet was brought into the Lo family by her, accompanied by her foster grandmother and a piece of land, because the Huang family had no descendants. “Huang’s ancestors had been haunting this family [Lo] until they decided to let Lo Yan’s two sons succeed two family lines and adopt double family names (Lo Huang).”²³

8. Provoked by unintentional misbehavior

“ ‘Several years ago a Ui man accidentally bumped and moved the incense pot for the ancestors in the hall. As a result, another man in the lineage died shortly afterward. When they opened the tablet box to insert that man’s tablet, two more people died.’ ”²⁴

9. Because of capriciousness

“One old Peq lady told me several times, ‘The ancestors are always coming back to make trouble. If your eight characters are low [vulnerable to supernatural attack], they will always be coming around to

21. Ahern, p. 184.

22. Ibid., p. 187.

23. Wang, p. 369.

24. Ahern, p. 201.

mess with you.' ”²⁵

10. Punishing people's misbehavior

“ I asked Li Chieng-cua if a man's sons have to have their father's permission to divide the family. He insists that they do, and that the ancestors would punish anyone who talked about dividing the family when their father was unwilling.”²⁶

11. Being invoked

“ When, after her husband died, she [the wife of a man in the Li lineage] began to sleep with his elder brother, the rest of the family became very upset by her unseemly behavior. Shortly thereafter, she lost her senses and tried to commit suicide by jumping into the river. . . . He [a *tang-ki*] discovered that some member of the family had burned a charm in the Li ancestral incense pot, asking the ancestors to punish the woman.”²⁷

12. Provoked by breaking an oath

“A former head of the Lou lineage in Chi-nan told me that Lous never marry their neighbors the Uis. ‘The Uis tried to steal our land and we told our ancestors we would never marry anyone named Ui.’ He also told me that when a Lou family broke this pledge and gave a daughter to a Ui family as a *sim-pua* [a little daughter-in-law], the girl died before she was old enough to marry her foster brother. He attributes the girl's death to the anger of his lineage ancestors.”²⁸

TABLE 1 Perceptions of Ancestors and Causes of Ancestral Malevolence

Causes of Malevolence	Individual	Collective
Asking to be worshiped	×	×
Provoked by unintentional misbehavior	×	×
Because of capriciousness	×	×
Seeking revenge	×	
Letting the living know of an uncomfortable situation	×	
In an unhappy situation	×	
Punishing people's misbehavior		×
Being invoked		×
Provoked by breaking an oath		×

25. Ibid., p. 200.

26. A. P. Wolf, “ Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors,” p. 165.

27. Ahern, pp. 201-2.

28. A. P. Wolf, “ Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors,” p. 167.

Table 1 summarizes the cases of malevolence mentioned in these examples.

This brief survey of interpretations of misfortunes, attributed either to a collectivity of ancestors or to individual ancestors, brings to light a number of points. To some degree, the collectivity of the ancestors is an extension of the individual ancestors. Both of them bring about trouble when they are not worshiped and well cared for. They also get angry at unwitting faults and are somewhat capricious. However, a major difference between the two concepts is that the collectivity of ancestors act as a moral agent, but individual ancestors do not. Only as a group do ancestors punish their descendants when they misbehave or break an oath; and only as a group are they invoked to stop an immoral deed within a lineage. Individual ancestors, on the other hand, are more human-like. They are thought to bring about misfortunes out of a desire to live as comfortably as living people do. Thus, the evidence shows that when ancestors are generalized into one body, they are conceived of as being more jural-authoritative, while as individuals they seem to be supported more by the sentiment of those who remember them.

I have tried in the above to demonstrate that there are different concepts of ancestors—namely, a collectivity of ancestors and individual ancestors—evidenced in the interpretations of misfortunes given by Chinese informants. Though the malevolence of ancestors has been increasingly studied in recent years, this distinction has not been noted. Furthermore, the distinction of ancestors as a collectivity from ancestors as individuals furthers our understanding of the reasons why they are comprehended as malevolent.

APPENDIX

In the following, about fifty actual examples or general comments are classified according to the interpretations of the living. They are excerpted from Ahern's *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*, Wolf's "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors" and "Aspects of Ancestor Worship in Northern Taiwan," Jordan's *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors*, Wang's "Ancestors Proper and Peripheral," and Harrell's "The Ancestors at Home: Domestic Worship in a Land-Poor Taiwanese Village." An example with an asterisk is mentioned in the text.

I. INDIVIDUAL

Asking to be worshiped

1. Ahern, p. 125.
 2. Ibid., p. 129.
 3. Ibid., p. 152.
 4. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," p. 152.
 5. Ibid., p. 160.
 6. Ibid., p. 161.
 7. Ibid., p. 165, #2.
 8. Ibid., #4.
 9. Ibid., #9.
 10. Ibid., #10.
 11. Jordan, p. 141.
 12. Ibid., pp. 143-44.
 13. Ibid., pp. 144-46.
 14. Ibid., pp. 165-66.
 - *15. Wang, p. 369.
 16. Harrell, p. 384.
- Provoked by unintentional misbehavior
- *17. Ahern, p. 228.
 18. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," p. 166, #7.
- Because of capriciousness
- *19. Ahern, p. 200.
- Seeking revenge
- *20. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," p. 165, #5.
 21. Ibid., p. 165, #13.
 22. Ibid., p. 173.
- Letting the living know of an uncomfortable situation
23. Ahern, p. 181.
 - *24. Ibid., p. 184.
 25. Ibid., pp. 184-85.
 26. Ibid., p. 247.
- In an unhappy situation
- *27. Ahern, p. 187.
 28. Jordan, pp. 155-56.
- Unclassified
29. Ahern, p. 119.
 30. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," p. 153.
 31. Ibid., pp. 165-66, #6.
 32. Ibid., p. 167, #15.
 33. Wolf, "Aspect of Ancestor Worship in Northern Taiwan," pp. 359-60.
 34. Jordan, pp. 166-67.

II. COLLECTIVITY

Asking to be worshiped

35. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," p. 165.

36. Ibid., p. 167.

37. Wang, p. 368.

*38. Ibid., p. 369.

Provoked by unintentional misbehavior

*39. Ahern, p. 201.

Because of capriciousness

40. Ahern, p. 200.

*41. Ibid.

Punishing people's misbehavior

42. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," p. 148.

*43. Ibid., p. 165, #3.

44. Ibid., p. 166, #8.

45. Ibid., p. 167, #12.

Being invoked

*46. Ahern, pp. 201-2.

47. Ibid., p. 202.

Provoked by breaking an oath

48. Ahern, p. 201.

49. Ibid.

*50. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," p. 167, #14.

Unclassified

51. Harrell, p. 384.

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