

The supernatural in Hong Kong young people's ghost stories¹

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Students at The Chinese University of Hong Kong typically tell ghost stories during orientation camps run in August, before the start of the semester. One night, while students talk in small groups under the stars, older students tell the freshmen ghost stories to scare them. Most students know at least two or three of the more famous stories. Ghosts are commonly said to haunt primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the older the school, the more the ghosts. Female students often fear going to the school toilet alone, and avoid the end stall, for fear of ghosts. Though ghost stories have long been told by adults to children, these stories told among young people—and for young people—are a relatively new phenomenon. They show the emergence of an autonomous youth culture.

Many students believe there is some truth behind the ghost stories (that is, that a person really did die), even if the stories told on campus are just rumours and elaborations. Belief in ghosts is more important in Hong Kong than in the USA in that many people will readily admit they are very much afraid of ghosts. Most students believe that ghosts really do exist. Questionnaires show students believe more strongly in ghosts than in *fengshui* and *qigong*.

Still, the ghost stories are not a frequent topic of conversation, and my focus on them should not exaggerate their importance. Since most students know many of the stories, however, and since the stories are told and passed on and thus relevant to students' lives, they are a good example of modern ghost stories and tales of the supernatural.

An example: Oxtail soup

A male and female student lived in Bethlehem Hall in United College. By coincidence, she lived in the room one floor above the boy's. The girl often cooked soup for the boy. One day they agreed that they would not see each other during the exam period, but the girl continued to cook soup [and lowered it by string outside his window]. Later, the boy found out that the girl had died, but every evening the soup was still lowered to him.

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This story has multiple versions. It is said to have happened in various dorms, and the type of soup varies, some claiming it to be red bean soup. Significantly, all the variations in soup are symbols of love. Red beans (or adzuki beans, *hongdou*) are sometimes called (or confused with) 'love beans' (*xiangsi dou*), and oxtail soup is clearly a phallic symbol. This may seem far-fetched, and students often object to this interpretation, but a printed version in the Business Administration orientation camp booklet for 1992 supports this interpretation. It names the soup as *ngâuh X tòng* ('beef X soup'), meaning bull penis soup, a tonic soup for men. That the girlfriend is cooking such a soup makes the sexual nature of their relationship clear. The fact that the soup, a key symbol in the story, varies around the symbol of love suggests the story is in fact about love.

Soup is an important symbol of domesticity in Hong Kong, and can sometimes have sexual connotations. The expression, to *heui yám tòng* ('to go drink soup') is a euphemism for seeing a mistress. The expression, *yám tàuh daahm tòng* ('to sip the first soup'), is an expression meaning to be the first to have sexual relations with a virgin. Thus, both in the girl's devotion to making soup, and in the fact that it is soup and not dumplings or a sandwich, the story is suggesting that the couple have a sexual relationship. As in most moral tales and ghost stories, naughty people get their comeuppance. The girl dies as a consequence of her breaking the norm against having sex before marriage.

It is important to realise that serial dating is still not very common among Hong Kong students. Most importantly, parents generally are strongly opposed to their children dating while they are students. The student role is incompatible with dating; it is viewed as a dangerous distraction that can derail one's studies and career. These stories thus seem to illustrate the danger of dating; the cases of suicide in some stories come from excessive concern over love.

The stories thus reflect the tension between students' responsibility to study and their interest in sex and dating. All good stories have multiple meanings, but the theme of the conflict between sexual interest and being a good student is at the core of these stories. Understanding this theme helps to explain many of the stories' features that, at first glance, may appear to outsiders difficult to understand.

Some readers may suspect that the ghosts in these stories are not 'true' ghosts but are merely folk tales. This view is strengthened by the social interpretation I have suggested, which makes the category of 'ghost' collapse into social and psychological forces. Others, however, have taken such stories to be 'true' ghost stories, even using the stories to try to discover the underlying true universal (that is, non-cultural) nature of ghosts (see Emmons 1982). A recent series of local books in Chinese also treats the ghosts as 'true', and explains them as due to problems of *fengshui* (Daoyijushi 2001a, b). Furthermore, the ghosts in these stories are very similar to the stories in the famous *Liaozhai zhiyi* originally written in the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911) (see Pu 1997). They are also similar

to the Chinese ghosts described by Steven Harrell (1986:102–103), which he says represent repressed fears. They are useful for our discussion of the nature of the supernatural.

The supernatural

The concept of the supernatural became important during the Enlightenment, when scholars began to emphasise the distinction between the natural world and the realm of spirits. The scope of the natural world expanded as scientists discovered areas, from planetary motion to national economies, in which natural science could be used to explain phenomena that had previously been assumed to be controlled by divine will.

Webster's ninth new collegiate dictionary (1990) gives the concept of the supernatural two related but separate meanings. In one sense, 'supernatural' refers to 'an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe', especially relating to spirit(s). A second meaning is 'departing from what is usual or normal esp. so as to appear to transcend the laws of nature'. The first meaning focuses on a spirit world. The second meaning, though it can include the first meaning (because spirits transcend the laws of nature), focuses instead on any phenomenon that cannot be explained by science. This is sometimes called the paranormal.

In what follows, I use the term 'supernatural' in the dictionary sense of beyond the observable universe and transcending the laws of nature, recognising that the concepts of nature vary from culture to culture, and over time. Thus, practices that are regarded as natural by informants may be regarded as supernatural by us. Alternatively, phenomena that informants may view as supernatural may be viewed as natural by us (*e.g.*, see Hyman 1981 for an example of a social and psychological explanation of fortune-telling). I use the term 'natural' for phenomena understandable through ordinary science, as opposed to parapsychology or religion. Some such phenomena—fortune-telling, for example—may be unusual, may require special talents, or may even be viewed as strange, but they are natural if they are explicable by the natural and social sciences. Informants may or may not have a category of the supernatural, but I will argue that it is useful for us to have one.

Morton Klass has argued that the concept of supernatural should be abandoned because it is ethnocentric to impose it on cultures where the distinction between natural and supernatural is not made. He rejects basing the natural on 'what the *ethnographer* considers to be part of reality' (Klass 1995:30, emphasis in original). His argument is flawed, however.²

To claim that anthropologists should only use concepts as used by informants is a mistake in epistemology. It is impossible to write anthropology with only the concepts used by informants. We must translate native concepts into other languages, such as English, and from concepts developed within anthropology,

for example, *mana*. Thus, the term 'supernatural' can be used to describe beliefs relating to spirits.

Furthermore, it is impossible to 'discover' the correct definition of any concept; we label things, and give a definition to our concepts, indicating how we intend to use them. Chinese people often claim to have no religion, but anthropologists have not hesitated in defining the complex of activities including ancestor worship, worship of deities in the home, and visits to temples as popular religion. Contemporary Chinese usage defines religion as institutionalised religions such as Buddhism or Christianity. The term 'religion', *zongjiao*, is, in fact, a modern term combining two characters, *zong* ('ancestors' and 'to venerate') and *jiao* ('teachings'). Most students in Hong Kong claim they have no religion, though they and their families participate, in varying degrees, in popular religion. In Taiwan, informants, especially college-educated ones, claimed that ancestor worship and lunar new-year rituals were not religious, but just 'customs'. We need not use their definition of religion, however. There have been debates in the anthropology of China about whether to view popular religion as a single religion or many (e.g., see Bell 1989; Freedman 1974; Wolf 1974), but I know of no anthropologist who accepts the popular notion that 'customs' are not part of religion. It is not ethnocentric to use our anthropological concept of religion rather than my informants' concept, since it allows us to compare aspects of Chinese popular religion with other religions. We may also jettison the concept of religion and use 'cosmologies' instead. In any case, just as we can use our anthropological definition of religion or cosmology, we can use an anthropological definition of supernatural.

Klass (1995:28–30) illustrates his argument that it is ethnocentric for the anthropologist to impose his or her view of reality by citing the case of Trinidadian farmers for whom rent to an absentee landlord and offerings to the *di*, a spirit of the field, are equally real. Klass overstates his case when he claims that, were a young leftist to believe that landlords had no right to the crops, the landlords would not exist. This is an error of logic; even if for the young leftist landlords *should* not exist, he would do well to realise that they do exist. Presumably, they or their agents would come to claim the rent if it were not paid.

Chinese traditionally also have had earth gods and deities comparable to the *di*. Because these spirits do not actually consume the food left for them (in contrast to landlords who actually did take their rent, which was once about half the crop), Chinese informants recognise the spirit world as different from the human world. Chinese people see the heavenly, human, and underworld (*tian, ren, di*) domains as linked, but they recognise them as different. Indeed, it is precisely because they are different that rituals and offerings are necessary to link humans and spirits. Thus, though Klass argues that paying rent to the landlord and making offerings to deities of the field *could be* viewed as the same by the farmer, I wonder if they are not actually viewed differently.

The criticism that the anthropologist defines what is part of reality takes relativism to an extreme. Klass (1995:31–32) minimises the importance of the fact that we know the rainmaker is only symbolically effective, while the agricultural expert is instrumentally effective. I would argue, instead, that there can be little doubt about the relative instrumental effectiveness of the two (though the agronomist is also unlikely to bring rain), but that often the point of traditional rainmakers and curers is not instrumental effectiveness, so that it is incorrect to compare the two. At a natural level, it is possible to test the material impact and effectiveness of a rainmaker and an agricultural expert. Of course, the agricultural expert may be wrong. Furthermore, it is also true that, for most people, belief in science is like belief in magic or religion; as Arthur C. Clarke's (1973:21) third law states, 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'. Most people use computers with only a vague knowledge of how they work (as is frustratingly obvious when they do *not* work). Yet instrumental effectiveness and the degree of control (that is, reproducible results) offered by natural science are what has led to the expansion of the domain of natural science and to the use of the natural/supernatural distinction.

If we recognise that the rainmaker is operating at a social or cultural level and not instrumentally (bringing rain in the natural sense), then the comparison is false. This is precisely why the concept of the supernatural is important. It tells us that the phenomenon needs to be analysed at a different level from the instrumental level; it is socially, symbolically or experientially special, and may or may not be instrumentally valid or significant. In the case of the university ghost stories, the stories are true at a cultural level. They have a real effect—producing fear, changing people's routes and behaviour after dark, passing on moral lessons—even if the ghosts themselves do not attack anyone. They deserve to be taken seriously at the level I have analysed them above, but not at the natural or literal level that many students tell the stories. In one sense, I have treated the ghosts, or, more accurately, the ghost stories, as natural phenomena, and put aside their supernatural aspects. Calling the ghosts supernatural makes it possible for me to avoid the mistake of trying to capture the ghost, as one 1970s graduate of The Chinese University has told me he and his friends spoke of doing. If the ghost were entirely a natural phenomenon or, better, if I were not to make a distinction between natural and supernatural, interviewing the ghost would be a logical research strategy. Defining it as supernatural, however, I can justify a strategy of interpreting the stories and not investigating the ghost as a natural phenomenon.

In Chinese, the term for supernatural, *chaoziran* (literally 'super-nature'), is a neologism only about a century old. The terms 'supernatural' and 'superstition' came into the Chinese language as part of the concept of modernity from the West. The Western categories were translated into Chinese as part of the importation of science. The term *mixin* ('superstition') came to replace previous

terms *xie* ('incorrect') and *mi* ('confused') (Feuchtwang 2001:35). Confucius had urged scholars to leave the spirit world alone; Confucianists held a sceptical but respectful stance. Modernist intellectuals came to see tradition and 'superstition' as the roots of China's weakness, and advocated 'science and democracy' as the main solutions to China's problems in the May 4th Movement of 1919.³ The term 'superstition' has become the core concept around which a critique of religion was developed by modernist Chinese intellectuals—and not just the Chinese Communist Party; the Nationalist KMT was just as active in fighting 'superstition' until the 1980s, when democratisation of Taiwan led the party to change its stance. With *mixin* taking on the derogatory modernist meaning, the term *chaoziran*, or 'supernatural', has retained a more neutral, even positive, meaning, in that the use of the term allows the supposition that such a supernatural realm exists and is not mere fantasy.

Are ghosts supernatural? Students themselves have different views, and often are not sure. In a survey of 45 students, 56 per cent said yes, 31 per cent said no, and 13 per cent were not sure. Some students who believe in ghosts view them as real and natural phenomena, while others have adopted the Western categorisation of spirits as supernatural. Christian students also are divided, some insisting that as Christians they believe the soul exists, so ghosts are not supernatural, while others assert that, since science cannot study the soul, it must be supernatural. Thus, as a contemporary concept in Hong Kong, the supernatural has a confused meaning. If we use it, it must be for its analytical value, not because it is a native concept.

We have, then, a paradox. We need, on the one hand, to preserve a concept of the supernatural, so that we know we have to investigate certain claims like these ghost stories at a cultural and not natural level. We do not need to try to interview ghosts. On the other hand, however, we also need to treat supposedly supernatural phenomena as natural in order to analyse them. This is true as much for ghost stories and phenomena like fire walking as for claims of extraordinary powers such as those of spoon bender Uri Geller, all of which have natural explanations.⁴

Many anthropologists argue that the truth of stories is not important; what matters is that they are believed. Klass (1995:6), for example, argues about beliefs and practices that: 'We must never ask whether they are "true", whether they really "work".' As a research strategy, this is fine advice. As theory, however, Glücklich (1997:7) points out that 'this may be a cozy relativism, a scholar's hideout and a way to avoid the question that interests everyone else: Is there such a thing as real magic?' In addition, this agnostic attitude risks being dishonest: the scholar is giving a nod and a wink, admitting that he or she does *not* believe, and would never visit the shaman for a serious malady, but might for something minor, for the experience, or if failed by biomedicine. Despite saying we should never ask, in fact we are left to assume that beliefs and

practices do not work. We will never understand the possible interrelations between belief, practice, and efficacy if we do not ask. A stance of rigid rejection of the natural sciences will fail to discover the fascinating possible links between culture and biology that medical scientists are beginning to explore.

In the case of The Chinese University ghosts, even though students disagree as to whether the ghosts are supernatural, I can analytically say they are supernatural because they involve spirits, 'an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe', and appear to transcend the laws of nature. Using the concept of supernatural in cases of spiritual agency allows a cultural analysis to become the primary, not secondary, issue. It is precisely because the ghost stories analysed above are 'supernatural' (by my definition, and regardless of how they are defined by students who tell them) that it is appropriate to study them as cultural products and to interpret them, rather than to study them as actual physical manifestations (see, on the other hand, Emmons 1982, who uses Hong Kong ghost stories to identify real aspects of their manifestations aside from their cultural differences). I do not accept the occultist view that the stories are literally true (see Daoyijushi 2001a, b), but one cannot prove ghosts do not exist. In a sense, because they are believed, they are true and become real, but in a different sense from that imagined by the believers. As Lohmann (this issue) puts it, they are empirical but imaginary. Not everything people believe is true is physically true; in some cases, by 'true', people do not necessarily mean physically true. I have analysed the stories as natural phenomena, the natural product of social and psychological tensions. If I believed there were anything natural to the ghosts themselves, I would be obliged to go beyond just a symbolic interpretation. Ghosts may be physically real or natural; I cannot prove they are not. In saying they are supernatural, however, I am taking a stand of scepticism and saying I will only investigate the social and cultural levels.

The concept of supernatural is, as Klass notes, a boundary that has been drawn in the West. It is not arbitrary, however; it is based on current scientific understandings. The boundary between natural and supernatural may shift, but it is still an important and useful boundary.

Conclusion

All concepts are culturally defined. Though the category of supernatural is not always a native concept, and though the boundary between what we understand as natural and supernatural has shifted, and is still shifting with research on the placebo effect and on traditional healing practices, the concept is a useful research tool for certain questions. It marks a type of phenomenon that involves spirit or magical agency. Without such a concept, we are forced to accept the existence of spirits and phenomena transcending the laws of nature. Yet, we must not make the boundary too sharp, as many supernatural phenomena have

natural explanations. 'Supernatural' can thus be justifiably and effectively used even though it is not a native category.

I have offered a symbolic and psychoanalytic explanation of Chinese University students' ghost stories that I believe is an attractive explanation. This does not prove there are no supernatural forces or spirits. Indeed, one cannot prove there are no supernatural forces or spirits. My hypothesis 'does not entitle us to affirm categorically that there are *no* spiritual forces save those that well up from man's subconscious' (Lewis 1997:22). This is why we need to listen to tales of supernatural phenomena with open minds and a respectful stance, even if we are sceptical. We cannot prove the supernatural is not so, even though we may prefer an alternative, natural hypothesis.

At the beginning of *Ordered universes*, Morton Klass stated that a goal for the book was to make us all more uncertain of our beliefs, and therefore more tolerant of other cultures. The argument that we should abandon 'supernatural' because it is a Western concept contradicts this goal, because it traps us in the single cultural view of our informants. To say, therefore, that the things informants 'do and believe in are fully—fully—as "true" and as "verifiable" as are *all* the things *we* do and believe in' (Klass 1995:6, emphasis in original) falls into the trap of extreme relativism. Though it is an essential research stance to achieve ethnographic understanding, it risks preventing cultural analysis. By over-valuing informants' views, it denies any advantage or benefit to anthropological theories and perspective. Yet most anthropologists do believe the anthropological perspective is better than a single culture-bound perspective for understanding culture; we must have the courage to say so.

NOTES

1. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Morton Klass, teacher and stimulator of discussion and ideas. I wish also to thank Wong Ngai Lui, Tse Yee Wan, So Wan Suen, Viki Li, and Rebecca Ma for research assistance.

2. It is important to note that Klass is rejecting the concept of the supernatural not just on its own terms (though he devotes all of Chapter 4 to the task), but also because he wishes to avoid using the concept as the centrepiece of a definition of religion. I shall not seek to address the problem of the definition of religion, but wish simply to show why it is useful to retain the concept of the supernatural.

3. The May 4th Movement was sparked by outrage that German territories (known as concessions) in China were not returned to China but turned over to Japan, but it also became a movement for promoting science and cultural reform, including the use of the vernacular in writing.

4. The explanation for fire walking is that coal, even when hot, is a low conductor of heat. On Geller, see Randi (1982).

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