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## **Historical Sciences**

# **DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING: TIBETAN GHOST CULTURE IN THE EYES OF "THE OTHER"**

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### **Abstract**

“Ghost culture” is a global cultural phenomenon, and Tibetans have a long history about the “ghost culture”, which occupies an important part in Chinese traditional culture. From the perspective of “the other”, a Chinese scholar, can be called a reference that is both different and related to the subject, it is found that the Tibetan ghost culture also has its own indigenous characteristics reflected in definition, origin, and demonstration, etc, and much different from the English ghost culture.

This different understanding and interpretation of ghost culture is the root of Tibetan culture, which in turn makes the Tibetan people pay more attention to adaptation rather than struggle in the relationship with nature. And it is much necessary to develop “ghost culture” into “human culture” gradually for better cultural exchanges and for the construction of ethics and morality in various countries.

**Keywords:** Tibetans, ghost culture, understanding, “the other”.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

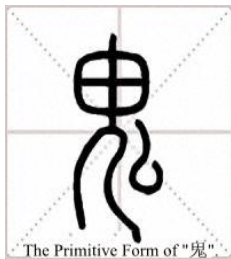
Both in the field of philosophy or cognition, “the self” and “the other” are a pair of conceptual categories of interdependence and mutual reflection. “The other”, as an important reference element for constructing self-awareness, is true for specific historical individuals as well as an important coordinate for different cultural systems--determining their meanings and locations. The difference between “the self” and “the other” is the main cause of cognitive response; the conflicts and collisions in the process of interaction between heterogeneous cultures also bring about further development. Thus no matter from the perspective of history and reality, the diversified development of culture is a real existence rather than a fiction. On the one hand, the inheritance of cultural system depends on the transmission of its own mainstream cultural values from generation to generation; on the other hand, the inheritance comes from the exploitation or collision with the heterogeneous culture. It is in the mutual interaction with other cultures that self-culture can be continuously enriched and expanded.

As Le Daiyun, a professor from Beijing University has mentioned that, “to re-comprehend ourselves in a reference system outside us is some kind of methodology and epistemology, which are beneficial to cultural development”.<sup>[1]</sup> In comparison with the heterogeneous cultural system, only by jumping out of the “the self” can we have a deeper understanding of “the self”, which is exactly the theoretical method and research method advocated by professor Le to view “the self” from “the other”. And as Hans-Georg Gadamer holds on that only through “the other” can we gain true knowledge about “the self”.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

In terms of Tibetan 鬼(*gui*) culture, or Tibetan ghost culture, one important part in traditional Tibetan culture, as well as one of the objects of cultural anthropology. It cannot be simply degenerated as superstition, for Tibetan ghost culture involves various cultural phenomena in human beings’ psychology, beliefs, history, and folk customs, which has a considerable value. Some Tibetan ghost culture can be called survivals--many original functions maybe lose with the social development, but the quintessential parts had survived or passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, from the perspective of “the other”, a Chinese scholar, similar to a reference that is both different and related to the subject of Tibetan ghost culture to analyze this kind of culture, people can better protect and inherit Tibetan traditional culture and promote cultural exchanges among different ethnic groups or nations.

## II. DEFINITION OF 鬼(*GUI*) IN TIBETAN CULTURE

Strictly speaking, it is inaccurate to name it 鬼(*gui*) culture because the full name should be 鬼神(*guishen*) culture, the former means “ghost culture”, the latter “god and ghost culture”, and they are relative between each other--鬼(*gui*) means “ghost”, 神(*shen*) means “God or deity”. But it should be accepted that “god and ghost culture” is a kind of special subculture. This may be drawn from the definition from E.B. Tylor (1958), the founder of anthropology, who holds on that “culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”<sup>[4]</sup> Tibetans have a very long-standing “ghost culture”. They think that the 鬼(*gui*) with greatness are 神(*shen*) --gods or deities, that is, after people died the bad go to the hell and then became 鬼(*gui*); and the great go to the heaven or the other world and thus became 神(*shen*). It is hard to separate 鬼(*gui*) and 神(*shen*). But in any case, it is a kind of mysterious, and unique culture that the scholars or literates gave birth to 鬼(*gui*) and 神(*shen*), consequently they have the life, behavior, speech, emotion, environment and others, etc.



In *The Dictionary of the Origin of Chinese Characters*, a dictionary first systematic analysis of the Chinese characters and the study of their origins compiled by Xu Shen, a famous philologist in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), explains that people became 鬼(*gui*) after they died. This Chinese character (see the figure above) is an associative compound Chinese character, used 人(*Ren*), means people, as the side, like the head of a ghost, meaning a ghost is like a person.<sup>[5]</sup> Later, its meaning gradually evolved into a form after people died. But the concept of ghost originated from the notion that the soul is immortal in ancient times.<sup>[6]</sup> The concept of the Tibetan ghost is related to the “Animism” (all things having souls) and “Samsara” (or metempsychosis) in Tibetan Buddhism. It is believed that everything in the world is a combination of outer shell (or body) and soul, and man is the crystallization of spirit and flesh, and the shell is nothing but the carrier of the soul, death. The soul escapes from the old shell and casts another new shell to continually exist, and repeats the eternal cycle of birth and death. In Tibetan areas, people often resolve things or abnormal events that cannot be understood in productive labor or daily life to ghost actions. It is general believed that the concept of ghosts is opposite to the concept of deities. In terms of roles the deity is positive and the ghost is negative and destructive.<sup>[7]</sup> *The Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary* believes that deities help people, while ghosts harm people. Usually, ghosts may be divided into two: living ghosts and dead ghosts.

The former means a ghost-like person featured by both people and ghost. It can live like a human being; also it can be as harmful as a “ghost”.<sup>[7]</sup> And the latter means that, after people died, the soul reincarnates into a ghost, who at ordinary times exists like a person, while at night haunts the isolated places with strange clothes, long hair, long tongue, big breasts and other strange appearances, and can be come across only by some special persons. Another, it is said that ghosts often attach their souls to a certain human so as to control people’s thinking, disturb his or her life, make the host sick and even being in endanger, etc. In short, the ghost culture existing in the Tibetan spiritual world is a fantasy, and has an important impact on the production, life and thought of Tibetans.

From definitions of “ghost” in Tibetans, we can understand that firstly the basic idea of “ghost” in Tibetans is a kind of ominous soul after death; secondly, the appearance of ghosts look alike those in English-speaking peoples--fuzzy, amorphous appearance, may exist as a human or a monster. Thirdly, the ghosts in Tibetans almost haunt at night and they with strange clothes are much different from ordinary people. Finally, they are mostly regarded as those with negative and destructive role to humans. All these (definition, form and haunting time) are much similar to those descriptions in English.

### III. THE ORIGIN OF TIBETAN GHOST CULTURE

Consciousness is the reflection of material, without material there is no consciousness. Ghost culture also comes from objective world, a twist reflection of life. In Tibetan areas, the beliefs and legends of ghost are ubiquitous, so that when talking about the ghost people often feel horrible, and thus derive many ghost cultures. In the matter of origin, roughly there are four as follows. Firstly, the Tibetan ghost culture is derived from the concept of the soul; especially the shadow and dream are the deep-rooted reasons for the concept. The early Tibetan ancestors often used the shadow as a symbol of the soul, and believed that the shadow is a true image of humans and animals and a part of life. If the shadow is hurt, the human body will suffer the same damage. Tibetans in Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces, Baima Tibetans in particular, are extremely protective of their own shadows. Tibetans strictly forbid others, especially women, to trample on their own shadows, thinking that the action on the shadows means trampling themselves.<sup>[8]</sup> They can not even overlook the valley or a deep well, worrying about that the shadow will fall down and lose, causing illness or death. At the same time, the Tibetan ancestors could not correctly interpret and distinguish between the feelings in waking time and the illusions in their dreams, and then separate the spirit from the body. They depend on the former as the entity independent of the latter. This doubt about the dreams also leads to the concept of ghost and ghost culture.

Secondly, the Tibetan ghost culture is derived from the low productivity in early time, which reflects the Tibetan ancestors’ fear of the unpredictable natural forces or complex natural phenomena. In the extremely harsh living conditions, their thinking and fear of death strengthen the concept of soul, and then the concept of “soul out of body” and “immortal soul” comes into being.

Thirdly, for the shadow legend mentioned above, the Tibetan ancestors believe that everything in the world has spirituality, that is, all things have souls advocated by Tibetan Buddhism. Although the modern Tibetans are dominated by animal husbandry and supplemented by agriculture, the early ancestors are mostly nomadic people, living on hunting. All the year round they deal with the natural world (mountains, grasslands, birds and beasts, etc.), and hold on that the plants will thrive and wither, and there are births and deaths in the livestock... Everything has the same spirituality as human beings.

Fourthly, the Tibetan ghost culture comes from Tibetan religion. Tibetan Buddhism points out that all lives are reincarnated in “The Three Circles” or “The Six Realms of Existence”.

Those with good deeds may have three benevolent destinies, or three good ways--(1) entering into heaven, or (2) reincarnating as human being or (3) Asura. And those with evil deeds will receive three unfortunate destinies, or three evil ways-- (1) entering into hell, or (2) being animals, or (3) hungry ghost.<sup>[9]</sup> In this regard, people are eager to have three benevolent destinies, to avoid falling into three unfortunate circles.

Tibetan Bonism also believes that “ghost belongs to the deity of this kind, and most of them are deities, devils, and goblins”.<sup>[10]</sup> “There are two reasons that the soul becomes a ghost: firstly, there is no “Releasing-the-Soul-Ritual” for the deceased, such as death in non-hometown places or sudden death and failed to hold ritual in time; secondly, the Ritual does not achieve the expected results due to the powerfulness mana or unqualified Ritual.”<sup>[11]</sup>

The ghost culture in Tibetan people has its profound social roots. On the one hand, it is a religious product of Tibetan ancestors in the society with low productive forces and a spiritual worship of irresistible natural forces or natural laws when scientific knowledge is much backward. On the other hand, the ghost culture originates from ghost concept of the Tibetan people who fear death. This concept of soul has become one of the reasons for the ancestors to begin to bury the dead, and also the main reason for the ghost culture. Relatively, Tibetan ghost culture originates from the idea that all things have souls and the soul is immortal, while English ghost culture is out of the belief that the soul is not extinguished. The former advocates “The Three Circles” or “The Six Realms of Existence”, but the latter believes that “paradise” and “hell” are binary opposite. The former relies on Tibetan Buddhism and the latter relies on Christianity...although the two emphasize something in different aspects, the ghost culture has a long history and has its own merits in educating the people in the world.

#### IV. FORMS OF TIBETAN GHOST CULTURE

There are two systems of organizations in Tibetan monastery. One is political system and the other is the system of religious affairs. The former consists of the administration, economy and laws, etc. People who worked for it were abbots or the living Buddha, the housekeepers, Gegu and Geyue (lamas with iron poles to protect the rules), Chongben (businessmen), etc. The latter system is responsible for the religious activities in the monastery, all kinds of education, such as monastic school, scripture school, the practice school and preservation and printing of the classics, management of the implements used in the worship and the images of deities and Buddha, the buildings in the monastery, and organizing all kinds of religious activities in and out of the monastery. People who work for this system are: the abbot (including the living Buddha and dGe-bshes, Wongze (lama who leads the monks to recite scriptures), Laba (in charge of descending the deities and divination), etc.<sup>[12]</sup> From a religious point of view, Tibetan ghost culture is closely related to kinds of worship, such as nature, animal, totem, ghost, ancestor, and ancient deity (or hero), etc. The ghost culture contains witchcraft that drives away demons and ghosts to keep safety of humans and animals, and that calls souls in order to cure diseases, and contains some divinations. Witchcraft serves as a technique or aspiration that Tibetan ancestors attempted to overcome supernatural power. Divination is an important part of witchcraft activities, but it is based on the principle of pursuing good fortune and avoiding misfortune. Tibetan witchcraft includes three forms: séance (descending the deities), dispelling the disease, and casting magic spells. Divination also includes such things as the shoulder-skinned bones, rosary beads, dices, chess, black and white gems, drums, lines, arrows, rounds, astrology, among which the most popular are rosary beads, dices, diagnosis, and astrology. Here are two examples given to illustrate the two major forms of ghost culture in Tibetan, which are witchcraft and divination.

**Séance:** It means inviting the visit of spirits or sorcerer’s dance in trance. Before the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet on May 23, 1951, the witchcraft was popular in Tibet. This custom believes that the ghost can be attached to the human body through certain witchcraft, and the person attached by the ghost can speak on behalf of that ghost.

Sine the establishment of the Kashag (cabinet) government of Tibet in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was stipulated that in the event of important government affairs and military actions, it must hold séance in advance, asking for the fortune or misfortune and remove the doubts. The professional sorcerer was also awarded a high position. The folk rituals are generally like that the sorcerer is dressed in a sacred costume, and attaches the ghost to him by chanting Buddhist scripture. The asker tells the specific divination content, and then listens to deity's instructions. During this ritual, people have to do activities such as incense and worship and replacing liquor.

**Astrology:** It is a method, even an art interpreting omens and signs based on the astrology, calendar, *Yin and Yang* and the Five Elements to predicate something good or bad, and it is said that this custom was brought to Tibet by Princess Wencheng (625—680) in the Tang Dynasty (618—907). <sup>1</sup>When in funeral or weddings, Tibetans must turn to the astrologer. When a man propose a marriage, he must first go to the astrologer for divination; before the wedding, he needs to ask the astrologer to calculate the auspicious day; after the death, the family members must go to the astrologer for the cause of death, and when do they recall the soul, and the way to releasing the soul such as what scriptures need to be recited, what kind of Buddhist activities need to be done, etc.; other things such as day, time, and rituals need to be calculated, too. In the minds of Tibetans, astrology is a major ritual related to life, so this kind of ghost culture has an important position in Tibetan daily life.

## V. FESTIVALS IN TIBETAN GHOST CULTURE

The day on December 29<sup>th</sup> each year in Tibetan calendar is the “Evils Dispelling Festival” for Tibetans. Driving ghosts in Tibetan language is *Guo Duo* or *Gu Duo*, so the Ghost Festival is also called Guo Duo Festival. The Tibetan people believe that a new year is coming soon and they must ward off evils and pray for good luck. On that day, every household cleans and dusts house to show that all the garbage from the old year has been swept away. In the first night of the New Year, each household holds a torch with ghost-dispelling murmurs. Beyond the gate, they dump the rest of the porridge--offering the food to the hungry ghosts, so that the ghosts of the year go away. At the same time, temples around the country will also hold a grand dance and offer the food to the ghosts.

In addition, the seventh day of February is the “Seeing-off-Ghost Festival” of the Tibetans. On that day, a grand Cham dance<sup>2</sup> will be held in each monasteries headed by the Potala Palace. In most cases, they will employ a poor people with money, dress up him as a devil, wearing a half-black half-white fur, means a *double-colored person* in Tibetans, as well one white and one black in the face, and feathers on the head. After the various religious rituals were held in the Great Sutra Hall, the Buddhists in Temple recited *Dorqin* and dispel the *double-colored person* to the other side of the Daxia River<sup>3</sup>, not returning to the temple within seven days.

In addition to the “Evils Dispelling Festival” and “Seeing-off-Ghost Festival”, which are the main activities of the Tibetan ghost culture, there are other activities, such as the Tibetan Cham dance, *Chaqing* in Loba Tibetans and some others unique forms in Tibetan areas. *Muya* Tibetans (only about 16,000 Tibetan people in China) and *Ersu* (only about 22,000 Tibetan people in China) in the Xieluo Tibetan Township of Shimian County, Sichuan province will annually hold a ghost-exorcising dance in the square, full of characteristics of Tibetan Buddhism, which can also be regarded as the manifestation of the ghost culture in Tibetans.

<sup>1</sup>By the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the Tibetans and Hans had, through marriage between royal families and meetings leading to alliances, cemented political and kinship ties of unity and political friendship and formed close economic and cultural relations, laying a solid foundation for the ultimate founding of a unified nation

<sup>2</sup>It is a kind of classic religious dance in temples or monasteries, also called mask dance performed by dancers such as Lamas, or sorcerers wearing masks.

<sup>3</sup>Daxia River is a tributary of the Yellow River. The ancient name is Lishui, which is called “Sang Qu” in Tibetan language. It originated from the north and south of Dabuleka Mountain in the Gansu and Qinghai border of Gannan Plateau. The river has a total length of 203 kilometers and a drainage area of 7152 square kilometers.



All the activities of ghost culture reflect some religious characteristics and have the evil-dispelling function. Up to now, although Tibetan ghost culture is much different than many years ago, it still has the sacrificing and evil-dispelling functions. A special Cham dance performed by elder and younger monks in Ningsi Temple of Kham is a good example with a little amusement function because in which the little monks are often naive, lively and lovely. And in most occasions there is huge crowd in these activities.

Comparatively, the witchcraft and divination of the Tibetan ghost culture are various in forms, but the activities are much serious, what is shown to the ghost is the living's awe even retreat; while the English ghost culture rarely has witchcraft, divination, etc. and most activities are witty and relaxed, showing the people's the ridiculousness and transcendence to the ghost. <sup>[6]</sup> At the same time, the participants in "Tibetan Ghost Festival" are mostly adults, while those English ghost festival are mostly young people.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The long-standing ghost culture is a part of traditional Tibetan culture with unique ethnic characteristics besides the universal social functions--promoting good and punishing evil. The unique features are as follows: Tibetan ghost culture mainly relies on the influence of ghosts in people's minds to maintain traditional ethics. With the fusion of ghost culture and Tibetan Buddhism, the ideas of "The Three Circles" or "The Six Realms of Existence" and "Karma Retribution" are popular among the Tibetan people. The punishment of the three evils (hell, animal, hungry ghost) in ghost culture is used to alarm for the world. That makes the people extremely fearful of the unknown world (after death), subconsciously purifying the self and the soul and maintaining the traditional ethics. <sup>[13]</sup> For example, in Cham dance, although its main purpose is to show the power of the Tibetan Buddhism, Dharma, the Buddha, horse-head King Kong, and other Dharma Protectors, the exaggeratedly dancing and horrible mask in Cham dance greatly shock the crowd and warn those with evil deeds.

Relatively, English ghost culture relies on the belief of "The Last Judgment" to enhance people's willingness and motivation to do good deeds, and ultimately affects the secular ethical order. Most Christians believe that after death, they enter into Heaven, Hell and Purgatory according to their behaviors in life. The souls of Purgatory can be saved through torture, waiting for the coming of the final judgment, and which finally determines where they will enter, heaven or hell. Entering heaven means returning to the embrace of God, enjoying eternal life and even sanctification, and being sentenced to hell shows that he is forever abandoned by God..., the core of the belief lies in "punishment". Therefore, Christians who wish to ascend to heaven to be with God or to have eternal life are upholding the highest concept of goodness and practicing in daily life. This also makes them fear of the future and then actively doing goodness in the world so that they can successfully cross the River Styx and see St. Peter in heaven.

Under the background of the national exchanges, the purpose to discuss the Tibetan Ghost culture is not to popularize this culture, but to think about how to turn it into human culture. The unique understanding from the perspective of "the other" aims at contributing to inherit or protect the ghost culture. As an important part of Chinese traditional culture, Tibetan ghost culture with the social functions of promoting good and punishing evil, together with its compassionate and good thinking still provide reference for the construction of ethics and morality in various countries.

## VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# ИНОЕ ПОНИМАНИЕ ТИБЕТСКОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ ПРИЗРАКОВ ГЛАЗАМИ "ДРУГОГО"

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## Аннотация

"Культура призраков" - это глобальный культурный феномен, и у тибетцев есть длительная история о "культуре призраков", которая занимает важное место в китайской традиционной культуре. С точки зрения "другого", китайского ученого можно назвать эталоном, который одновременно может быть разным и в тоже время соприкасаться с предметом исследования. Показано, что тибетская культура призраков также имеет свои собственные коренные особенности, отраженные в определении, происхождении и демонстрации и т. д., и поэтому она сильно отличается от английской культуры призраков.

Это различное понимание и интерпретация культуры призраков является основой тибетской культуры, которая, в свою очередь, заставляет Тибетский народ уделять больше внимания адаптации, а не борьбе человека с природой. И очень важно постепенно превращать "культуру призраков" в "человеческую культуру" для лучшего культурного обмена и для построения этики и морали в различных странах.

**Ключевые слова:** тибетцы, культура призраков, понимание, "другой".

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