

From Ritual to Custom: The Ghosts and Gods Seen in the Grave-Securing Writ of the Eastern Han Dynasty as the Center

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Abstract: The grave-securing writ of the Eastern Han Dynasty recorded the ghosts and gods that people believed in. The grave-securing writ drew upon the language and format of the documents used during the Qin and Han dynasties. Through the writing of grave-securing writ according to a specific formal program, people informed the deities that the deceased had entered the underworld. This act proclaimed the deceased's legitimate residence in the underworld and sought peaceful rest for their soul. The name of the ghost officials in the grave-securing writ is consistent with the official titles in Qin and Han dynasties, showing a clear hierarchy of ghosts and spirits system. At that time, the people imagined and constructed the system of the underworld ghost and god by drawing lessons from the real system, which was the result of the transition from ritual to custom. The study of grave-securing writ in the Eastern Han Dynasty from the perspective of ritual and custom is helpful to promote the study of folklore in the Eastern Han Dynasty and even in the Qin and Han Dynasties.

1. Introduction

“Ritual-custom interaction” is a new theory and perspective put forward by Chinese folklore scholars in recent years to study China's social system and folk tradition. Zhang Shishan believes that in the complex social system of traditional China, the interaction of ritual and custom lays the foundation for the national political design and the operation of the whole society. For the understanding and practice of the discourse of ritual and custom, different social strata have their own way, thus forming the cultural identity of the society of ritual and custom ^[1]. In fact, in the long course of Chinese social history, the two often exchange lessons or confront each other. It is in this constant movement of mutual immersion and communication that the interaction is realized. As the ruling means of the ruling class, ritual is bound to contact with the people actively and be understood and accepted passively in practice. In the interaction between ritual and custom in ancient Chinese society, the most easily observed phenomenon is that the discourse of ritual enters the field of custom, that is, from ritual to custom. The grave-securing writ refers to the plague relief text written in cinnabar or ink on pottery jars in the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty ^[2].

2. The ghosts and gods seen in the grave-securing writ of the eastern Han dynasty

There are records of officials of the underworld in the grave-securing writ, such as: The County Magistrate in Charge of Graves, The Directorate of Fate, Spirit Gate Pavilion Leader, The Patroller in the Underworld, the High Official of the Underworld. The Captain of the underworld Squad ^[3]. In addition, the language and format of the grave-securing writ are similar to the language and format of administrative documents in the Qin and Han dynasties, and the influence of the latter on the former is obvious. It is no coincidence that there are so many elements of secular bureaucratic administrative system in the underworld in the folk understanding, nor is it a simple generalization that people can make up based on common processing and fabrication of people and things. In my opinion, the officials in the underworld seen in the grave-securing writ are closely related to the secular bureaucratic administrative system, which is not only the result of the long-term implementation of the national system by the official force, but also the result of the people's understanding and acceptance of the long-term symbiotic coexistence with the national system, either passively or actively, which reflects the relationship between ritual and custom. For a long time, the Chinese academic circle has studied the grave-securing writ mainly based on the relevant materials in the grave-securing writ to discuss the origin of Taoism and the relationship between witchcraft and Taoism ^[4]. However, there are few studies on the ghosts and gods seen in the grave-securing writ, so this paper studies the ghosts and gods seen in grave-securing writ from the perspective of the interaction of ritual and custom, hoping to deepen the understanding of the relationship between ritual and custom in the Eastern Han Dynasty.

People in the Han Dynasty generally regarded death as the departure of the spirit from the body or the transfer of life from the world to the afterlife, and believed that people would become ghosts after death ^[5]. Wang Chong's "Balanced Discourses" contains: "The world says that people die as ghosts, have knowledge, can harm people" "people die in the world is called ghosts, ghosts like the shape of the living, see the same as people" ^[6]. Such superstitious notions of ghosts and gods that pervaded the folk of the Eastern Han Dynasty are more fully reflected in the grave-securing writ in the tombs of commoners.

The "Zhang Shujing's grave-securing writ" is the one with the most ghosts and gods among the grave-securing writ of the Han Dynasty. The original text is as follows.

In the second year of xi ping, on the sixteenth day of the twelfth month, the Envoy of the Celestial Monarch informs the Zhang family, Three Hills and Five Tombs, The Left Guard of The Tomb and The Right Guard of The Tomb, Central Tombmaster, The County Magistrate in Charge of Graves, The Directorate of Fate, The Spirit Gate Pavilion Leader, The Patroller in the Underworld, etc.: they dared to tell The Chancellor of the Underworld, The High Official of the Underworld, Marquis of East Grave, Marquis of West Grave, The Captain of the underworld Squad, etc.: Today is an auspicious day (to disturb you) for no other reason than the fact that the dead man, Zhang Shujing, had a short life and now his soul has returned to the ground. The Yellow God built the Five Mountains and is in charge of the directory of the living, and (the Yellow God) is able to invoke the souls of people and is in charge of the directory of the dead. The living live high above the ground and the dead live deep underground. His eyebrows and beard have fallen off and turned to earth and ash. The divine medicine that can ward off calamities is specially presented today, so that there will be no more dead in the future generations. A total of nine pieces of ShangDang and ginseng are used in place of the living, and bronze men are used in place of the dead. The dead take soybeans and melons as an underground tax. YuShi and DuLi are used as divine medicines to get rid of calamities. The official document was delivered to bind the officials of the underground not to bother the people of the Zhang family any more. It was enforced immediately as if it were a law ^[7].

The following is a selection of the names of several spirits and gods to analyse.

The Envoy of the Celestial Monarch is the wizard who writes the grave-securing writ and performs the rituals of the grave-securing. They use the name of the deity, the supreme ruler, the Celestial Monarch, to obtain the enchantment of divine otherness and sanctity or to become the incarnation or agent of the Celestial Monarch for the purpose of communicating with the gods and demons, and only after they have detached themselves from the human world and become part of the system of demons and gods can they have the power to present their case. The Envoy of the Celestial Monarch is presented to the lower officials of the underworld. For example, The Left Guard of The Tomb and The Right Guard of The Tomb, should be the low-level ghost officials who stand to the left and right of the Central Tombmaster. Central Tombmaster belongs to the central god of the five gods of Taoism and has the responsibility of suppressing evil spirits and managing the first dead. County magistrates, county chancellors and county lieutenants were the main governors of county-level administrative divisions during the Han Dynasty, with county magistrates and county chancellors in charge of administrative affairs and county lieutenants in charge of military affairs. The terms magistrate, chancellor and lieutenant were specific names for officials of the time. According to Han dynasty documents, if there was a murder, wounding or robbery in the county, the county government had to immediately send officials to pursue the case, with the county lieutenant and the county magistrate personally in charge. If more than three cases of assault and theft occurred in a year and were not detected in time, the magistrate, the county chancellor and the county lieutenant were all removed from their posts ^[8]. It is clear that the magistrate, the county chancellor and the county lieutenant shared the responsibility of apprehending thieves. The mound chancellor and mound order, as recorded in the grave-securing writ, mean the principal officials in charge of the prefectures of the underworld. In the Han dynasty, there were county officials such as the Patroller and the Pavilion Leader. Patroller was mainly responsible for hunting down thieves and catching fugitives. The duties of the pavilion leader are divided into two parts, one is to maintain local law and order, and the other is to mediate civil disputes. In addition, there was the post of Head of the Government Gate, who was responsible for guarding the gates of the prefectural court and checking that the officials were properly dressed ^[9]. The Patroller in the Underworld in the grave-securing writ is the official responsible for apprehending evil spirits in the underworld. The Spirit Gate Pavilion Leader also has this role, in addition to its responsibility for guarding the gates of both the living and the dead.

Other officials of the underworld recorded in the grave-securing writ are The Chancellor of the Underworld, The High Official of the Underworld, Marquis of East Grave, Marquis of West Grave. Judging from the terms marquis and chancellor, this category of ghosts and gods should belong to the senior officials of the underworld. The syntax of the grave-securing writ also suggests that such ghosts and gods held a high position in the underworld. The phrase 'the Envoy of the Celestial Monarch informs so-and-so', 'they dare to tell so-and-so, please convey the news', is also found in other excavated documents. Such as Bamboo slips of Qin Dynasty from Liye, Bamboo slips of Qin Dynasty from Shuihudi and Bamboo slips of Han Dynasty from Juyan ^[10]. We can see from the terminology of the administrative documents in the excavated documents that the Eastern Han period grave-securing writ were written in a manner that drew heavily on the administrative language of the Qin and Han bureaucracy. The text cited above, 'The grave-securing writ of Zhang Shujing', is in fact the text in which the master of the rituals of the grave-securing at the time (during the Eastern Han period), in his capacity as the Envoy of the Celestial Monarch, informs the lower level ghost officials underground and asks them to inform the higher level ghost officials that the life span of the owner of the tomb has ended and that the spirit has come to the underworld. The presiding officer of the rituals of the grave-securing, in his sacred capacity as the Envoy of the Celestial Monarch, uses a standardised form of ghostly paperwork to announce that the ghosts of the deceased have arrived in the underworld. From this point on, the deceased (Zhang Shujing) completed the process of transferring from the Yang world to the Yin world, gaining legitimacy to stay in the Yin world, and

henceforth "living and dying on different paths", free from calamity ^[11]. This is not an isolated case of borrowing and invoking relevant systems from the real world, adapting and transforming them into underworld systems. During the Western Han Dynasty, there was a system of "ZhiFu", which means "Zhi" for shift duty and "Fu" for credentials, and "ZhiFu" was the official on duty with a credential. The system is recorded in the Bamboo slips of Han Dynasty from Juyan ^[12]. The duty of the ZhiFu is to carry out daily inspections, checking the seals of the government's treasures, documents and archives, as well as the integrity of doors and windows, and to prevent leaks, fires and theft ^[13]. In the Eastern Han dynasty, the ZhiFu system was folklorized and mystified. The most prominent manifestation of this was the belief that ghosts and gods, like officials in the human world, were also required to be on duty ^[14]. Wang Chong's *Balanced Discourses* and Wang Fu's *QianFu Lun* both devote several chapters to this phenomenon. ^[15]

3. Grave-securing writ of the eastern Han dynasty as the center of the study of ritual and custom interaction

The discourse of ritual, represented by the bureaucratic system of clerical forms and ZhiFu, was the art of governing and managing the people in the ruling class of the state. The mundane discourse, represented by the system of ghosts and gods in the grave-securing writ and the idea of ghosts and gods on duty in shifts, was in the hands of the people a tool for understanding the workings of the world and society. The system of ghosts and gods seen in the grave-securing writ is closely related to the present-day bureaucratic administrative system, both as a result of the official implementation of the state system through coercive force over time, and as a result of the people's understanding and acceptance of it, either passively or actively, in their long-term symbiosis and coexistence with the state system. At the level of social practice, there is a great deal of tension between the regulatory nature of the state system represented by 'ritual' and the spontaneity of folk life represented by 'custom', which is both mutually beneficial and mutually exclusive. The most easily observable phenomenon in the interaction between ritual and custom is the transformation of ritual into custom, where state governance changed the face of folk culture, prompting it to undergo new changes. ^[16] As the historical facts cited here show, part of the imperial administrative system entered civil society and was imagined and transformed by it, projected into the invisible world of ghosts and gods, and had a profound impact on the customs and traditions of civil society ^[17]. The design of the state system was macro and complex, and it was not possible for all of it to reach civil society, to be understood and accepted by them. For a vast empire, the real governance of the people by the state does not lie in the grand events recorded in the history books, in the debates in the court, or in the profound words of thinkers and philosophers that pass by like a comet, but in everyday life, in the entry of the state system into and its influence on the field of custom through the discourse of ritual. This entry is not violent and sudden, but rather it is the form of daily rule that penetrates the everyday life of the people, making them use it without knowing it ^[18]. The daily rule means that the officials and officials at the grassroots have to deal with the smallest of tasks, such as the movement of people, the transmission of documents and the delivery of goods. These grassroots affairs were in close contact with the people. It was through the contact with the grassroots operations and the low-level officials that the popular sphere, the people, developed an understanding of rituals, which they gradually accepted, understood, adapted and applied ^[19]. In the interaction between ritual and commonplace, although the most obvious phenomenon was that rituals entered the commonplace, the commonplace did not have no influence on rituals; it was the commonplace discourse that gave the people recognition of rituals, of the state and of themselves. The feudal dynasties of ancient China were always underpinned by a system of values that were intricately interwoven with religious teachings, myths and other supernatural beliefs. Thus, not only the structure of government but also its function simply could not

exist independently of the religious system ^[20]. The system of ghosts and gods seen in the grave-securing writ of the Eastern Han Dynasty is closely related to the bureaucratic system and the system of grassroots management, which is the result of the interaction between the rituals of the state at the political level and the customs of civil life. The idea of the interaction of ritual and custom has been widely influential in Chinese folklore studies, and this is a useful insight into the relationship between ritual and custom in the Eastern Han and even the Qin and Han dynasties, for the study of Qin and Han folklore and civil society.

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