

Do the Hong Kong Chinese experience ghosts, hauntings, spirit mediumship, ESP and other paranormal phenomena just like British and Americans? Or is their culture so different that the ghost accounts in this book will seem bizarre to anyone else?

This classic presentation of cases is based on 3,600 interviews, questionnaires and observations in Hong Kong in 1980/81, updated by recent materials over 30 years later. Interestingly, in spite of clear influences from ancestor worship and Confucian/Taoist/Buddhist culture, parapsychological theories of apparitions from the West also apply to the Chinese cases.

For this 2017 edition, Charles Emmons has revisited his earlier conclusions and added new material that has come to light in the intervening years. This book remains the only major cross-cultural study comparing Chinese with Western ghost experiences.

# CHINESE GHOSTS REVISITED

A STUDY OF PARANORMAL BELIEFS  
AND EXPERIENCES

*Charles Emmons*

**BLACKSMITH BOOKS**

## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to three men who, in the 1960s, both in their scholarly work and in their personal encouragement to me, helped plant the seeds of curiosity and enthusiasm that eventually produced this study: Dr. P. Ward Peterson, Vice President and Professor of Foreign Languages at Gannon University, Dr. John Fleming, Professor of Psychology at Gannon University, and the late Dr. J. B. Rhine of the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man.

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Note: Cases of firsthand reports are given consecutive three-digit reference numbers representing the order in which they appear in this book, categorized by the following letter code:

E001-E026: ESP

FT001-FT012: fortune telling

G001-G127: ghosts

M001: monster

P001-P014: poltergeists and other psychokinetic (PK) effects

R001-R005: reincarnation

SM001-SM008: spirit mediums

SP001-SP012: spirit possession

## I

# STRANGE CASES ON EXHIBIT

This chapter is a window on the rest of the book. The cases exhibited here, however, represent only a few of the hundreds of firsthand accounts reported to me in Hong Kong in 1980.

Many of the most significant reports involve ghosts, or “apparitions.” Ghosts are by no means always frightening to the people who experience them, but the man who told me the following recalled it with genuine dread.

### **G001. The Smokey Ghost**

One night I heard someone coming slowly up the stairs. I thought it was a burglar. I picked up a knife, put my left hand on the door knob, and my right hand on the light switch. As I heard the intruder going across the marble floor on the other side of my door, I raised the knife and quickly opened the door. There was no one there!

A few nights later, I was asleep in bed with the door open. I woke up scared when I heard someone coming up the stairs again and across the marble floor outside. Since my bed was against the same wall, I could see through the crack where the door hinges were and into the hall. By telling myself that I was a twenty-two-year-old man and shouldn't be afraid, I got the courage to roll over in bed and look through the crack. Then it came into

the room floating sideways, as if being pulled along on a tray. I could vaguely distinguish the facial features. Its expression did not change. It was a thin, grayish light, very smokey but not changing shape. I could see through most of it. It stopped at the foot of the bed, and then started moving in, as if floating forward right through the bed. When it got to my waist, I said, "In the name of Christ, leave me!" Then it backed off, and when it reached the foot of the bed, disappeared. It was petrifying. I was left with pain in that part of my body [up to the waist].

If the next man's memory is accurate, his case, which happened in China, represents the largest number of people to see an apparition at one time in any apparently reliable case I have ever heard or read.

### **G002. Harvest Homecoming**

It was after the harvest, and we had nothing to do. Twenty or thirty of us were sitting and talking on a patio of one house on our street. One person was telling stories, another one singing. About 2 or 3 a.m., we decided to have a snack. All of a sudden a huge guy in a white robe appeared. My aunt yelled, "Look who's here!" and we all saw him walk from one side of the patio to the other and go in the house. We went into the house and asked the woman who lived there who had come in. She was asleep inside, hadn't seen him, and said that nobody had come in. We couldn't find him. But we had recognized him. He was her deceased husband. I don't remember how long ago he had died, but he had died in that house. When he crossed the patio, it took only three or four seconds, and he looked exactly realistic. However, my aunt was immediately afraid when she realized that she had been the first to see the ghost. She got very sick one week later, and died a month later.

Did the ghost really cause the aunt's death? What part do culture and psychology play in such cases? At any rate, reports G001 and G002 illustrate the Chinese fear of ghosts. The apparition in the next report, however, the respondent's mother, seems to have had kindly intentions.

### **G003. Looking After the Family**

Seven days after my mother died, I was half-asleep when I saw her standing beside my bed, looking at me. She called my name twice. I was scared, but not scared, since she was my mother. She stood there for two or three minutes, and I couldn't move. She looked normal but not really that clear, more like a shadowy figure than a real person. She didn't move. All of a sudden she disappeared.

A couple of days later, one of my children, the baby, was sick. I saw my mother following my wife around, carrying some baby clothes while my wife was carrying the sick baby. My mother looked very worried. My wife wouldn't have been able to see her because my mother was behind her. She followed her for a couple of minutes. Again she was shadowy but looked normal otherwise. This time she said nothing. She disappeared all of a sudden again. I haven't seen her since.

G003 raises a number of questions. Is there any significance to when the ghost appeared (seven days after death, a common Chinese theme) or to whom she appeared and in what circumstances? Is it typical for ghosts to look "shadowy" (cf. G001, "The 'Smokey' Ghost")? How could the baby clothes she carried be part of the apparition? Do clothes or other material things have a "spirit," too?

The following apparition, also apparently involving a relative, was experienced by a fifteen-year-old girl in Hong Kong in 1949. Why do



you suppose the ghost did not face them? <sup>8</sup> Why was there only half a body?

#### **G004. Encounter in an Alley**

My father and I were just leaving the hospital where my sister had died unexpectedly from cholera that day. It was around midnight. There, in an alleyway by two shops, we saw a half-body with no legs, the back toward us, with black hair, not moving. I asked my father who it was, but he just dragged me away. I think it was my sister.

In Chinese culture, important relatives are not limited to the immediate “nuclear” family. Likewise, important family ghosts include a group of ancestors who are worshiped at a family altar. Each ancestor has his or her name written on a wooden tablet before which incense is burned, or sometimes, as in G005 below, an oil lamp.

#### **G005. The Noisy Ancestor**

For several nights in a row, I saw the tablet of one of my ancestors moving and making a strange noise, like bamboo knocking against a glass cup. I’m not sure whether it was the doing of a ghost or of a god. But the most suspicious thing is that the strange noise happened every night at about 3:30a.m. I told my mother. She said the oil lamp in front of the tablet usually ran out of oil at that time. So the ancestor thought we didn’t respect him and got angry.

If the sixteen-year-old girl who reported the above was actually seeing the tablet move, then the case might be classified as a “poltergeist,” literally

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8 Perhaps the apparition did not want to show her sickly face caused by the cholera ordeal. This is reminiscent of an apparition discussed by Tyrrell (1963: 62, 63) in which the ghost of a woman with cancer of the face entered the room backward with part of her face still hidden by the door.

a “noisy ghost,” involving physical movement of real objects. However, I am inclined to call this one an apparition because the unusual noise seemed to come from a nonexistent glass cup.

*2017: G005 is also an interesting example of how people try to attribute meaning to their ghost experiences. Notice that the girl wonders if it's a ghost or a god. I'm thinking that 3:30 a.m. is around that time when people are most likely to have dreams they can remember or to go into altered states or creative states. I often wake up at about that time having thought of great lecture ideas in my sleep. The girl's mother, who is probably responsible for ancestor worship in the family, thinks about the oil running out.*

So far, all of our ghosts have been human. Case G006, reported by another sixteen-year-old girl, suggests they need not be.

### **G006. Animal Spirits?**

I believe that animals have spirits, too. Facing the hill near our house there used to be a very shabby pig-slaughterhouse. It was like two sheds linked together. I even visited the slaughterhouse; I knew the place well. At noon, I always heard people slaughtering the pigs, and the pigs cried and screamed horribly, and their voices carried far away. I always felt sorry for the pigs and shed tears for them. Later on, the slaughterhouse was torn down because it was too shabby. After one or two months of peacefulness, opposite the hill at night we could hear pigs crying like when they were being slaughtered. It lasted a long time; my brother and I both heard it. My hair stood on end when I heard it. But now we can't hear it any more, because a road was built and cars go by.

*2017: G006 doesn't seem as strange to me today as it did then, now that I have run across, for example, spirit mediums (Emmons and Emmons, 2003: 38-39) who bring in animal spirits. My favorite*

*example is a medium who relayed a message from a cigar-smoking dog. The sitter (person getting the reading) confirmed the validity of the image and said that their milk man used to throw his cigar into their yard, and their former dog used to pick it up and run around with it, appearing to be smoking it.*

You may think that this report has the ring of sincerity and truth. On the other hand, you may wonder if teenagers are overly imaginative. The next respondent, a seventeen-year-old girl, shows a self-critical attitude toward her own strange experience which nevertheless made a strong impression.

### **G007. A Bathroom Ghost**

One evening this April or early May, I got up to go to the bathroom. My back was facing the toilet as I pulled the drapes closed. When I turned around to go to the toilet, I saw a blurry figure getting up from the toilet and pulling his pants up with his hands. When I saw that, I quickly ran out. It's my impression that it was not a grownup but a boy around ten years old. At that time, my whole family was home, and it was not too deserted or quiet.

Later on, my classmates analyzed this incident, and they thought that I was very emotional then because I had been preparing for my exams all day and couldn't relax. I could have been going crazy.

At that time I saw only a shadow, but the shape was very clear. I knew right away it was a person wearing clothes, but I couldn't see his face. His head was bending low.

The following case is not the first "collective" apparition, that is, experienced by more than one person at once (cf. also G002, G004, and G006). However, the fact that some but not all of those present saw it

poses an interesting paradox. If this apparition was merely a hallucination, why did *several* boys see it? If it was real, why didn't *everybody* see it?

*2017: Over the years this has become my favorite case of a partially collective apparition. It is perhaps the clearest demonstration of evidence for an experience that is neither materially real nor just an individual's imagination.*

### **G008. Boy Scout Picnic**

In 1973, when I was fifteen years old, I went on a Boy Scout picnic. A whole gang of fifteen or twenty of us were marching along with our leader. I was last in line. It was late in the evening, but there was moonlight. I saw two white spots approaching, self-lit, like two spotlights. When they came close by, I could see that it was a very old couple. They had no expression on their faces, and were not looking at anybody. Both of them were wearing white robes. Their hair was old-fashioned and parted and short, although the woman's hair was longer than the man's. They walked very strangely. First, they would swing their arms together, and then jump, the two of them at the same time. Everybody should have seen the couple, but only five or six of us claimed to have seen them. Our leader did not see them. I was very scared, and turned around to look at them again when they passed by, but they were gone. I'm very sure of what I saw.

Could the old Chinese couple have been a glimpse out of the past, seen by "retrocognition" (literally "knowing backwards") on the part of the more psychically sensitive boys? With the possible exception of the ghost in G003, who seemed concerned about the present health of her grandchild, the other cases might involve retrocognition as well. The next apparition report, however, from a fifty-year-old woman, seems to involve *precognition* (seeing the future).

*2017: Theoretically there should be no difficulty with there being precognitive apparitions. ESP (psi) should connect without limitation of time or space. If hauntings, like G009, represent an emotional attachment (based on a traumatic event like the fire in this case) of a spirit to a place, it's an interesting question why they would or wouldn't manifest backwards in time. At any rate, this is a rare case in my experience.*

### **G009. Destiny in Bangkok**

In 1972, I was returning from England when there were problems with the plane, and we had to stay over in Bangkok. My friend and I stayed in separate rooms in the hotel. Since it was very hot, I went to take a bath. When I opened the bathroom door, I saw a few people in there, some male, some female, all in airline uniforms. At the time, I thought they were regular people, although they didn't move at all. I saw them clearly. But then they disappeared! I was very scared. I shut the door and went to stay with my friend.

Three days later, after I returned to Hong Kong, that hotel had a fire in which a few airline hostesses were burned to death. A pilot with a beard was also killed; I had seen a man with a beard in the bathroom.

If the previous case is a precognitive apparition, the following might be a precognitive dream, a form of extrasensory perception (ESP), although the respondent thinks that there is also something magical about the number two in his life.

### **E001. The "Lucky" Number**

Number two is my lucky number. Two years ago I dreamt that I was on the second floor of the hospital in room two, the second bed. This year it happened.

The next report, from a thirty-year-old mother, is also an ESP dream, either clairvoyant (seeing the event) or telepathic (communicating with another mind), this time simultaneous with the event.

### **E002. Mother and Infant**

My baby was living with a babysitter. One night I dreamt that the baby was spitting up milk. I woke up and tried to use a cloth to catch the milk but realized then that the baby wasn't with me. The next day I called the babysitter and found out that the baby had been spitting up a lot of milk at exactly the same time as my dream.

The following experience, also involving a dream, is categorized as a reincarnation case because that is how it was labeled by the forty-nine-year-old woman who reported it. Can you think of any alternative explanations?

### **R001. Soul of the Fair-Skinned Girl**

The time I was pregnant with my third daughter, I went into labor during my sleep. My husband woke up and told me he was dreaming that a woman floated in through the window. She was naked, and had long hair and very fair skin although she was Chinese. I gave birth to a girl with fair skin. I think it's reincarnation.

Case R001 focuses on the entry of a soul into a new body, but R002, from a thirty-two-year-old woman, allegedly documents the other end of the process.

*2017: At the time this case (R002) appeared in 1982 I was not familiar with the pattern of birthmarks indicating a connection to a person in a previous incarnation. For a discussion of Ian Stevenson's*

*studies of birthmarks in reincarnation cases, see Science and Spirit (Emmons and Emmons, 2012: 140-141).*

### **R002. The Recycled Soul**

When I was very little in my village in China, a very rich man in his sixties, a neighbor of ours, was very ill and dying. His relatives were all crying, but he said. “Don’t cry. I’m going to be reborn in the next village, as a boy again.” He died. Then his relatives went to the next village and found a boy born exactly at the time of the old man’s death. He even had a mole at the exact same place on his face, and they knew it was him.

The next case involves spirit possession rather than reincarnation. Is this what happens when a soul or ghost temporarily enters a body that is already occupied?

### **SP001. The Unexpected Guest**

As far as I can recall, it happened when I was about ten years old. I saw a ghost-possession case at my adopted father’s birthday feast. I was with my adopted father’s sister taking shells off shrimps. All of a sudden, her hands started to tremble, and she called my adopted father’s name. I was very frightened and screamed. My adopted father and his friends came over to see what was going on. She became very heavy and needed four people to hold her up. They carried her to another room, where she continued to shake. My adopted father held her middle finger, and she started to talk. First, she called his name; then, she asked him to burn her a paper mahjongg set and a paper *cheungsam* [long dress]. She was my adopted father’s mother. Finally, his father also came and talked to him, saying that if my adopted mother wanted to see them, they could appear in her dream. The rest I don’t quite remember.

Knowing something about Chinese culture certainly helps in understanding this report, not only the fact that people burn paper effigies of articles to send them to their ancestors in the other world (like clothing, or a set of mahjonn, a gambling game) but also the belief that holding a possessed person's middle finger will get the spirit to speak.

The next report, concerning a monster, could use some illumination as well. First, there are separate male and female *po to* trees, each with its own guava-like fruit. The monster here is described as a tree *spirit*, leading one to wonder whether it might be more like a ghost than like a Bigfoot, for example. The expression "three-inch gold embroidered shoes" is the literal Chinese for "bound feet," possessed traditionally by Chinese women. Finally, it should be said that the respondent, a forty-nine-year-old man, sounded perfectly serious.

### **M001. The Canton Tree Monster**

When I was fourteen years old in Canton, I climbed up a male *po to* tree to pick some fruit. Each year, at least three or four people were killed by a monster while they picked these. As I held onto the trunk with one arm, I turned to pick a fruit from a branch, but something kept moving the branch just out of my reach so that I couldn't pick it. Then, I clearly saw that it was the spirit doing it three feet away from me. He was three feet taller than me. But I couldn't see the face because the sun was shining behind him. I just saw the bottom part. The legs were hairy at the bottom, and he had human clothes on. He also had three-inch gold-embroidered shoes. The amazing thing was that the bottoms of the soft shoes were perfectly clean, which means that he didn't come up from the ground, or they would have been dirty. I climbed down without any fruit. I was so scared I almost broke my skull. [His wife noted that he was lucky not to have been killed.] Other people in the village saw the monster, too. Some of the ones who fell out of trees talked a little before they died and said that the *po to* monster had thrown them down.



I hesitate to state that I do not believe any particular firsthand report. However, some reports, like the last one for example, seem less likely than others, either because of a lack of internal consistency or plausibility or because they are not supported by similar reports from others. Fortunately, very few cases fail to fit into consistent patterns.

Now that we have sampled some accounts of ghosts, spirits, and ESP in a Chinese setting, the next chapter will consider how certain theoretical approaches can help make the strange more explainable.