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## Employing A Chinese Ghost Story to Teach the Syncretism of Chinese Religions

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# Employing A Chinese Ghost Story to Teach the Syncretism of Chinese Religions

## Abstract

Upon its release in 1987, the Hong Kong blockbuster *A Chinese Ghost Story* resulted in sequels, adaptations, and two remakes in 2011 and 2020. Despite its popularity, only a few critics have noticed its eclectic representations of Chinese religions, nor has there been any evaluation of its pedagogical potential. This article details how the author employs this 1987 work to teach the syncretism of Chinese religions in an undergraduate course “Asian Religions in Film.” By decoding the embedded concepts, the meanings and history behind “the Jade Garland talisman,” the inclusion of the *Diamond Sutra* for exorcistic efficacy, and the portrayal of paper offerings, this article argues that while *A Chinese Ghost Story* initially seems like a simple horror romance comedy, it nonetheless provides instructors with valuable sources to educate students about the complex and longstanding Chinese culture. Broadly, this article contributes to pedagogy of Asian religions in film by leading students to recognize how this media presents Chinese religious elements to heighten students’ intercultural understanding and awareness of the relationship between humans and spirits in Asian religions.

This paper was part of a panel on “Teaching Asian Religions Through Film” presented at the Association for Asian Studies conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, March 24–27, 2022. The panel offered concrete examples on how to adopt cinema and TV to discuss Asian religions, culture, and modernity in the classroom and contributed to the developing analysis concerning the use of visual media in Asian studies pedagogy.

## Keywords

A Chinese Ghost Story, Daoism, Daoist talisman, Buddhism, Diamond Sutra, paper offerings, Chinese religion, teaching Asian religions in film

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## Author Notes

Gloria I-Ling Chien is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University, where she teaches Buddhism and Asian religions in film. Her peer-reviewed articles concern topics such as Tibetan Buddhist mind-training (lojong) meditation, the Tibetan Buddhist master Tokmé Zangpo’s (1295–1369) biographies and Collected Works, Ignatian pedagogy, and teaching Buddhism in higher education. Inspired by her research, she became a certified instructor in the Cognitively-Based Compassion Training® contemplation program developed at Emory University. To promote scholarly discussion on teaching Buddhism, she established and co-chairs the Buddhist Pedagogy Seminar at the American Academy of Religion (2019–2023). She is grateful for Gonzaga University’s International Education Council’s grant to present the initial version of this research at the Association for Asian Studies conference from March 24–27, 2022, in Honolulu. She thanks Matt Bolton, Matt Rindge, and Todd Lewis for their lively and insightful discussions. She appreciates her students, who accompanied her journey in learning about the film examined in this article, *A Chinese Ghost Story*. She credits Caitlin Conley and Cecily Boles for their editing work. She thanks John C. Lyden and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this article. Also, she would like to recognize the outstanding work of the film crew and particularly the female lead Joey Wang, the late male lead Leslie Cheung, and the late supporting actor Wu Ma.

## Introduction

Upon its release in 1987, the Hong Kong film *A Chinese Ghost Story* enjoyed box-office success and resulted in sequels and adaptations.<sup>1</sup> It has attracted scholarly discussions, but only a few have noticed its eclectic representations of Chinese religions, and there has been no mention of evaluating its pedagogical potential to help deepen students' learning of the complexity of Chinese religiosity and culture. By revealing this potential, this article shows instructors who are interested in teaching Chinese religions through film ways to use this repository of rich information.

This article details how I employ *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) to teach the syncretism of Chinese religions in my undergraduate course "Asian Religions in Film," which I developed and began teaching in 2021 for twenty-five students. The class explores non-Abrahamic religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religions, and Shinto. Most students enrolled in this course are unfamiliar with Asian religions, so the films I choose have obvious religious symbols and agendas that allow students to identify longstanding Asian religious teachings through contemporary cinema by investigating how the films reflect or critique Asian religious practice while exposing cultural values.

For one of the "Chinese Religions" sessions, we watch and study the original Cantonese version of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, which narrates a romance

between a debt collector Ling Choi San (or Ning Caichen in Mandarin, played by Leslie Cheung) and a female ghost Nip Siu Shin (or Nie Xiaoqian in Mandarin, played by Joey Wang). As a homeless ghost, Nip is controlled by an “Old Dame,” an androgynous tree demon called Laolao, meaning “Grandma” (played by Lao Siu-ming). By forcing Nip to seduce men, Laolao drains their life energy to prolong its vitality and power. With help from the Daoist master Yin Chik Ha (or Yan Chixia in Mandarin, played by Wu Ma), Ling and Nip battle with Laolao and the underworld ruler Black Mountain so Nip can be reincarnated in the human realm.

To present my pedagogical reflections, this article begins with how I introduce students to Hong Kong cinema, the production of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, and previous research on this work. The paper next decodes some cultural concepts embedded in the film, such as homeless ghosts. I further examine exorcistic techniques, which are central in this work, with a focus on Daoist talismans and the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra*. The analysis ends with students’ learning about the film’s portrayal of paper offerings, a popular practice in contemporary Chinese communities. This research contends that *A Chinese Ghost Story* offers students quality visual interpretations that reflect the long history of Buddhist and Daoist practice as they have been shaped by demonological concerns, as well as the multivocality of Chinese religious traditions.

### **Hong Kong Cinema and the Production of *A Chinese Ghost Story***

I place *A Chinese Ghost Story* in the Hong Kong cinematic history which began in the early 1900s while Hong Kong had been under British rule for decades. The Hong Kong film industry is marked by a merging of British and Chinese culture until it was repatriated to China in 1997. This cultural outlook and changing political situation distinguished Cantonese-language films produced in Hong Kong as an idiosyncratic category. It was a dynamic and influential contributor to filmmaking; by the early twenty-first century, Hong Kong cinema had become the world's third most active film industry per capita following India and the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1960s, Hong Kong kung fu films came into vogue and reached the international stage.<sup>3</sup> From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Hong Kong was the first of any Chinese community to produce its own New Wave films, that is, films made by a new generation of directors influenced by Western techniques and concepts.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s, horror movies grew popularity and incorporated elements from other genres, including comedy, melodrama, kung fu, and thrillers. In fact, the thirteenth Hong Kong International Film Festival in 1989 featured “Phantoms” as the theme.<sup>5</sup> A variety of factors contributed to the growing interest in ghost movies, including the advancing special effects technology, a sudden fascination with fortune-telling, Hollywood's blockbuster *The Exorcist* (1973), and political

concerns about China's restored sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> The 1987 *A Chinese Ghost Story* was arguably the most influential film of its genre in terms of its popularity, sequels and remakes, and awards received.

In an interview conducted by the company Hong Kong Legends,<sup>7</sup> the producer Tsui Hark shared that this work was inspired by his childhood memory of watching Li Hanxiang's (1926–1996) 1960 Mandarin film *The Enchanting Shadow* (Chinese: *Qiannü Youhun*, literally “Fair Maiden Tender Spirit”).<sup>8</sup> Li based his work on the story “Nie Xiaoqian” from Pu Songling's (1640–1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi*, or *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (hereafter *Strange Tales*),<sup>9</sup> which is one of the most prominent Chinese *zhiguai* (strange account) novels and a renowned source for Chinese plays, TV shows, and films.<sup>10</sup> The novel narrates the relationships between humans and ghosts, animals, fairies, etc.<sup>11</sup> Tsui Hark adapted Li's 1960 work in 1987, keeping the same Chinese title and integrating many elements depicted in *Strange Tales*.

Upon its release, *A Chinese Ghost Story* enjoyed critical recognition and financial success, placing fifteenth on the year's box-office list and taking in nearly nineteen million dollars.<sup>12</sup> It won twelve awards locally and internationally out of eighteen nominations, such as, the Special Jury Prize at the Avoriaz Festival in France; Best Direction at Fantafestival in Italy; Best Costume Design and Best Adapted Screenplay at the Golden Horse Film Festival in Taiwan; and Best Original Film Score at the Hong Kong Film Awards.<sup>13</sup> It was ranked fiftieth in “The

Best 100 Chinese Motion Pictures,” a list created by the committee of the twenty-fourth Hong Kong Film Awards in 2005.<sup>14</sup> The film’s popularity made it a Hong Kong cinema cult classic, resulting in two sequels in 1990 and 1991 as well as a 1997 animated adaptation.<sup>15</sup> This 1987 masterpiece was turned into a 2003 Taiwanese TV series and two Chinese remakes in 2011 and 2020.<sup>16</sup>

### **Approaches to Interpreting *A Chinese Ghost Story***

To analyze and understand *A Chinese Ghost Story*, I provide students with the summary of academic discussions concerning several interrelated aspects: (1) political allegory; (2) sexuality and queer practice; (3) Tsui Hark’s contributions to film; and (4) *Strange Tales*. For example, Audrey Yue relates the film to Hong Kong’s identity crisis in the 1980s before its repatriation to China. Yue argues that the Daoist and Buddhist exorcistic elements in *A Chinese Ghost Story* represent nostalgic sensibilities that intermingle with Hong Kong’s anxiety about returning to the motherland.<sup>17</sup> Both Yue and John Zou examine the film through the lens of sexuality, which associates the tree demon’s, Laolao’s, bisexual features and phallic tongue (that aims to penetrate Ling Choi San’s and other men’s mouths) with homosexuality.<sup>18</sup> Zou mentions that Ling’s heterosexual obliviousness changes him from a potential victim of seduction into a benefactor for Nip Siu Shin.<sup>19</sup> His masculinity is humorously presented and subordinated to Nip’s femininity, which camouflages her power and agency.<sup>20</sup>

As a prolific New Wave director, and one of the most influential filmmakers in Hong Kong cinema, Pak Tong Cheuk and Ho Wai-leng among others note Tsui Hark's use of sophisticated special effects.<sup>21</sup> As Cheuk articulates, the film successfully depicts "the horror of the ghost regime and the unfathomable depths of the mysterious forces" seen in the fight between Laolao's flying tongue and Nip, the martial arts, the blazing fires, explosions, etc.<sup>22</sup>

Luo Hui points out that, unlike "Nie Xiaoqian" story from Pu Songling's *Strange Tales*, neither Li Hanxiang's 1960 work nor the 1987 adaptation includes Nip's return to Ling's home and her adaptation to a human life.<sup>23</sup> Instead, they showed Nip asking Ling to help with her reincarnation. The ghost in the film is uninterested in obtaining a familiar human life but rather desires a new identity and to be reborn into an unfamiliar world. Luo Hui argues that this new identity alludes to Hong Kong's uncertain future with a sense of hope.<sup>24</sup>

Comparing the 1987 work with the original tale, Marc Moskowitz argues that the film changes the original polygamous household into a monogamous love match to make the gender roles more palatable for a modern audience.<sup>25</sup> Moskowitz implies that Pu's Ling is a Confucian elite with a promising future, unafraid of ghosts, and uprightly resists Nip's bribe and seduction. However, in the film, Ling is a poor fearful tax collector, who clearly desires Nip, but maintain his honor. Pu's Nip overcomes her predicament and reintegrates into human life by accepting Ling's superiority and fulfilling her filial piety. By contrast, when not playing the



seductress, Nip in the film is a warrior who effortlessly kills wolves and snakes, and who battles with Laolao and Black Mountain. This comparison indicates how audience expectations have changed regarding concepts of manhood, love, and gendered power within relationships.<sup>26</sup>

In their essays, most students were intrigued by the lens of sexuality. They explained that the connection between Laolao and homosexuality was the least expected aspect and appreciated Nip's strength and agency rather than being cast as the typical female "sidekick" as seen in previous films.<sup>27</sup> There are only a few references to Chinese religiosity in *A Chinese Ghost Story*. Moskowitz and Suzanne Cahill note the Daoist association with *yangqi* (life energy) and *qi* (vital breath) respectively.<sup>28</sup> Cahill further discusses Daoist and Buddhist exorcist techniques, and she connects Ling Choi San and Yin Chik Ha with Daoist character values.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the cross between a romantic comedy and a horror film, or the mixture of jocularity and invented exorcistic performance with martial arts makes *A Chinese Ghost Story* seem incongruent with the solemnity often associated with the study of Chinese religions. However, as this article will reveal, the film presents a complex intermixture of Chinese religiosity and culture. Therefore, the class aims to highlight how this work reflects and reimagines Chinese religious elements by focusing on the central theme of exorcistic performance.<sup>30</sup>

### Contextualizing the Homeless Ghost, *Qi*, and Laolao

Students read Poo Mu-chou's "Imperial Order and Local Variation: The Culture of Ghost in Early Imperial China" for the cultural background of 1987 *A Chinese Ghost Story*. This article investigates ghosts in Chinese culture and how the tendency of humanizing ghosts in tales gradually evolved into the *zhiguai* (strange account) literary genre, which developed during the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE).<sup>31</sup> This helps students situate Pu Songling's seventeenth-century *Strange Tales* in the long history of *zhiguai* writing,<sup>32</sup> and why the 1987 plot can be regarded as a modern adaption.

I next discuss Nip Siu Shin's identity as a "homeless ghost." Nip was unable to become an ancestor because she died before she could marry and join her husband's family lineage. As a result, she turns into a homeless ghost, a miserable being whose descendants do not provide postmortem offerings. Laolao takes advantage of Nip's state to control her. From there, we consider ancestor worship in the late Shang dynasty (around 1200 BCE), evidence of which was found on oracle-bone inscriptions, and its later emphasis in Confucianism.<sup>33</sup> The class further introduces students to ancestor worship adopted by households without male heirs, or with unmarried deceased female offspring. The patriarchal nature of Chinese communities requires these households to consider uxorilocal marriages, when the man enters the bride's family, sometimes takes her surname, and transfers his ritual

obligations to his wife's ancestors.<sup>34</sup> Another solution that stunned students was spirit marriages. In one case, two unmarried deceased sisters ritually married their surviving sister's husband.<sup>35</sup>

A previously overlooked fact worth examining is that the film is set during an annual "ghost festival," which is not included in either Li's 1960 *The Enchanting Shadow* or Pu's story "Nie Xiaoqian." The festival is subtly introduced when Ling Choi San arrives in Guobei's county market. Colored banners printed with four black Chinese characters: *yü lan sheng hui* (the Great Yü-lan Assembly, 0:06:22) hang from shops.<sup>36</sup> This phrase refers to the Chinese Buddhist *yülan pen* festival, which includes the ritual practice of making food offerings to monks, ancestors, wandering ghosts (the non-kin dead), and hungry ghosts (a Buddhist state of being) on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The meaning of *yülan pen* is popularly understood as filling a *pen* (bowl) with offerings to save ancestors from hanging *yülan* (upside down) in purgatory.<sup>37</sup> This festival influenced the popular Daoist *zhongyuan* (middle primordial) festival during which gods, ancestors, ghosts, immortals, and hell-dwellers all have a chance to visit the human realm for a day to receive offerings.<sup>38</sup> Both the Buddhist *yülan* and the Daoist *zhongyuan* are commonly referred to as ghost festivals. In one scene, Nip tells Ling that she only manages to recover her portrait during the *yülan jie*, or *yülan* festival (0:46:05). While the English subtitle translates the term as the "Festival of Hungry Ghost," implying the Buddhist festival, Nip's statement also reflects Daoist concepts. In a

twist on the Daoist *zhongyuan*, instead of being released from hell for one day, Nip is able to briefly escape from Laolao and retrieve her portrait from a vendor.

When asked which scene they find most intriguing, many students mentioned when Nip explained to Ling why she is forced to harm people (1:06:43–1:07:45). Students empathized with Nip’s predicament, which was caused by her murder and subsequent burial under the tree demon Laolao, who makes her seduce men to harvest their *yangqi* (life energy). Students are surprised that Nip retains her humanity and kindness because they are more familiar with the typical malevolent ghosts as portrayed in Western popular culture. Furthermore, I draw students’ attention to the translation “energy” in the English subtitles (1:07:35) for *qi*, which they often know. This presents an opportunity to delve into its nuances in different contexts. For example, I compare Nip’s harvesting of *yangqi* to Laolao’s remark about replenishing *yuanqi*, which is translated as “chi” (0:41:32). We explore its various meanings in Daoist texts, such as *Zhuangzi*,<sup>39</sup> the painting of *daoyin* (guiding and pulling) excavated from the Mawangdui tomb in China,<sup>40</sup> and the fight between Kai and Master Oogway in the beginning of *Kung Fu Panda 3*.<sup>41</sup> In the film, *qi* in both *yangqi* and *yuanqi* implies a life-giving essence. *Yang* is a principle associated with life, a commonly accepted explanation suggested by Confucian and Daoist philosophers.<sup>42</sup> In particular, the maintenance and nourishment of a person’s *yangqi* is crucial to their health and lifespan, as explained in the foundational ancient Chinese medical text *Huangdi neijing su wen*, or *The Inner Cannon of*

*Yellow Emperor: Basic Questions*.<sup>43</sup> *Yuanqi* (primordial energy) is a Daoist concept that can be metaphysically related to the Dao's creation of the universe or to a physical presence within a person's body.<sup>44</sup> Laolao's usage of *yuanqi* concerns the aspect of physical vitality. Nip's assistance allows Laolao to exhaust men's *yangqi* (life energy) for Laolao's own *yuanqi* (primordial energy). Before Yin understands Nip's dilemma, he aims to exorcise both Nip and Laolao for their crime of killing men. In their reflection on concepts clarified in class, most students responded that the lecture on *qi* helped them understand this concept as well as the rationale behind the plot.

A future class should consider Laolao's character more deeply. Students were curious about the film's depiction of Laolao as a tree demon. Lisa Morton perceptively connects this character to the demon-possessed trees in Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* films.<sup>45</sup> I would note that the concept of a scary tree spirit dates to at least the fourth century BCE in Chinese texts. For example, *Zuozhuan*, or the *Commentary of Zuo* (ca. the fourth century BCE),<sup>46</sup> contends that the harmful *chimei* spirits are generated from the uncanny *qi* (vapors) in mountains and forests; *Guoyu*, or *Discourses of the States* (ca. the third century BCE) refers to *kuai* as tree and stone monsters.<sup>47</sup> Later *zhiguai* (strange account) novelists Gan Bao (?–336 CE) and Ji Yun (1724–1805) continually adopted these concepts. Ji Yun even says that animals and plants can be transformed into demons if they are old enough.<sup>48</sup> As a thousand-year-old tree, Laolao reflects this cultural heritage.

Second, the two stories “Huapi” (“Painted Skin”) and “Liansuo” (“Locket”) from Pu’s work narrate a monster eating men’s hearts for survival and a female ghost being revived by her human lover’s blood and essence, respectively.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the yaksha demon consumes men’s blood in the original “Nie Xiaoqian” story, and the film changes blood to *yangqi*, which is portrayed as all the fluids in a body.

The film also gave Laolao a giant tongue, which could have been inspired by the tale “Hai Gongzi,” or “Sea Prince,” which appears shortly after “Nie Xiaoqian.”<sup>50</sup> The protagonist Zhang in “Hai Gonzi” journeys to an island and is intimate with a beautiful girl he meets there. Before their full consummation, the girl frantically runs away and yells about the arrival of the Sea Prince, which is a huge snake thicker than a bamboo bucket. It wraps Zhang tightly, penetrates his nose with its tongue, and laps the blood that falls on the ground. Zhang luckily saves himself by mixing fox poison with his blood, which kills the snake. The similarity between Laolao using its tongue to wrap victims and Yin Chik Ha and the Sea Prince’s long body trapping Zhang (0:49:45; 1:13:45) leads me to suggest that “Hai Gongzi” could have influenced *A Chinese Ghost Story*.

### **Daoist Talismans in *A Chinese Ghost Story***

After exploring the homeless ghost, the class examines the exorcistic techniques presented in the film. I explain how Daoist exorcism originated from a belief that

worldly troubles can be caused by *xieqi* (evil energies), *gui* (ghosts), or *guisui* (demonic haunting). These malevolent forces can manifest from animals, plants, minerals, or the spirits of the dead, which are the most feared and prolific forms and were believed to cause illness, destroy family harmony, spread social disorder, or even impact a nation's well-being.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, the *danuo* (Great Exorcism) ritual took place at the imperial courts from the Han to the Tang dynasties (approximately from the first to the ninth centuries).<sup>52</sup> The ritual was performed at the end of every year to cleanse lingering evil.<sup>53</sup> As the belief in exorcism for therapeutic purposes or to resolve other troubles spread, it also influenced the development of Daoism. Demonology was at the heart of medieval Daoist practice. For example, the greatest demonological catalogue, *Nüqing guilü*, or the *Demon Statutes of Nüqing*, dating to the fourth or fifth century, aims to regulate the living's morality and attempts to exercise authority over myriad demons.<sup>54</sup> In response to the rich demonological concerns during its complex course of Sinicization, Chinese Buddhism drew upon Indic texts and borrowed from Daoist techniques centering on exorcism. In China, after the Han dynasty, Buddhism and Daoism shaped each other even as they asserted their own exorcistic efficacy.<sup>55</sup> While these practices are no longer important in modern Chinese Buddhism, they remain vital to contemporary Daoism and folk Chinese religions. Based on this foundation, the class specifically analyzes how the film employs *fu* (talisman), which appears in neither Li's 1960 work nor Pu's tale "Nie Xiaoqian."

Talismans are one of Daoism's most prominent exorcistic methods. They serve many other purposes and are commonly deployed with incantations or spells. Talismans contain esoteric scripts, graphs, stellar diagrams, or iconographic depictions that are either engraved on pottery or written in black or red ink on oblong pieces of wood, metal, or paper. Talismans represent the manifestation of the Dao's power or carry an edict from immortal gods in the Daoist pantheon. Talismans have been ubiquitous since the advent of the first Daoist community, the Tianshi (Celestial Masters), formally known as the Zhengyi (Orthodox Unity) school, which appeared in the second century CE. Throughout the development of the main Daoist schools, including Shangqing (Highest Clarity), Lingbao (Numinous Treasure), and Shenxiao (Divine Empyrean), talismans were used for healing rites, exorcism, demarcating sacred space, protecting practitioners' visualization meditation, and guarding practitioners as they enter mountain retreats. Talismans were deployed for funerary rites and communication with the dead, and they appeared in rites to end epidemics, droughts, and war.<sup>56</sup>

I also point out to students that Daoism influenced the Chinese Buddhist tradition in the use of talismans, texts, and rituals to expel specific ghosts and demons. These practices were prominently featured in *Foshuo qiqian fo shenfu [yisuan] jing*, or *The Sutra of the Divine Talismans of the Seven Thousand Buddhas [to Increase the Account] Preached by the Buddha*, composed around the seventh century and modeled on the Daoist *Sutra Increase the Account*.<sup>57</sup> From the Song



dynasty (960–1279 CE) onward, the sheer number of talismans cumulatively recorded in Daoist literature is enormous. Contemporary Daoist ritual specialists mainly use talismans for exorcism, healing, funerals, and various other rituals. Most talismans are incomprehensible in mundane linguistic terms.<sup>58</sup> This opacity safeguards the knowledge generally only shared after initiation and is passed down orally from master to disciple. Even masters from different lineages may not understand each other's talismans.<sup>59</sup>

Due to the extensive research and complex explanation required to interpret and teach each talisman, I only investigate the one with the clearest connection to contemporary practice. Figure 1 shows the same talisman presented in two scenes. In the left image Yin Chik Ha pastes it on his wooden box to summon his sword for his fight with Laolao (1:12:59). On the right Yin spits his blood on an underworld army general and throws the talisman to freeze him (1:28:13). At the top, the talisman has a red circle, under which, there are three Chinese characters: *yu hua si*, or “Jade Garland Department.” Coincidentally, I found these three characters arranged similarly in a talisman that Roderick Cave includes in his discussion on the usage of apotropaic paper charms (Figure 2).<sup>60</sup>

Deciphering the background of Figure 2 will help decode Figure 1, which has less text. Reading from right to left, there are four lines in the Figure 2 talisman. The five large Chinese characters in the second line, *yu hua si chi ling*, mean “the edict from the Jade Garland Department.” According to the instructions, this

talisman should be used to purify water; on the first line, the four characters *jing shui ling fu* translate to “the talisman for water purification.” The characters in the second line under those five large characters, *yu hua si chi ling*, and those on the third and the fourth lines, claim that two Daoist celestial generals, Liu and Song, will carry out the edict given by the Jade Garland Department to destroy evil defilement in water. These two generals have the role of “*jiufeng posui*,” or “nine-



Figure 1: The talisman pasted on Yin’s wooden box (left); the talisman used to freeze the underworld army general (right)

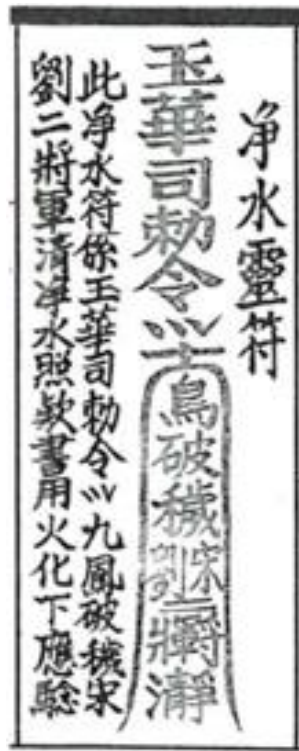


Figure 2: The Jade Garland Department talisman for water purification

headed phoenix destroying evil defilement.” The Figure 2 talisman, known as *yuhua si jingshui fu*, or “The Jade Garland Department talisman for water purification,” continues to be popular today and various versions can be purchased at Daoist centers or online.

I show students two texts that offer relevant background for this talisman. One is *Lingbao yujian*, or *Numinous Treasure Jade Mirror*, compiled between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>61</sup> It mentions that an immortal celestial general, who rides a nine-headed phoenix, makes pure vapor descend into a jade pool. Then,

a great deity, Song Di, transports the sacred water from the jade pool and uses it to purify evil defilement in the world.<sup>62</sup> The other is *Daofa huiyuan*, or *Unified Origins of the Dao and Its Rituals*, dating to about 1400 CE, an important compilation of talismans prevalent from the tenth to the thirteenth century.<sup>63</sup> The text summons the great nine-headed phoenix-riding general who destroys evil defilements, the first deity listed from the Jade Garland Department to purify the ritual platform.<sup>64</sup> The aforementioned texts suggest that the film's talisman, which has Jade Garland Department printed on it, has roots that can be traced back to the fourteenth to fifteenth century.

Furthermore, there is a talisman called *yuhua si zhenzhai pingan fu*, or “the Jade Garland Department talisman for stabilizing the house and security.” Fortunately, I found the sixty-fifth Celestial Master Zhang Yijiang's explanation of this talisman to share with my students. Zhang analyzed this talisman during a 2020 lecture series about Daoism and medicine organized by National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in Taiwan.<sup>65</sup> For the sake of comparison, Figure 3 includes Zhang's depiction on the left and the first talisman from Figure 1 on the right. They are strikingly similar.<sup>66</sup>



Figure 3: Zhang's talisman (left); the talisman pasted on Yin's wooden box (right)

Zhang divides the talisman into three parts with two horizontal lines. The top is called *futou* (head of the talisman) which in this case indicates that the power source is from the Daoist celestial bureaucracy. The black oval represents a constellation related to three deities, jointly called the “Star Lords of Three Altars,” who care for a person's *yuanshen* (primordial spirit). Under this oval is *fushen* (body of the talisman) which conveys the Star Lords of Three Altars' administrative department. This piece includes three components: the three Chinese characters *yu*

*hua si* (Jade Garland Department); a group of three horizontal lines; and a U-shaped line with loops. The Jade Garland Department is responsible for taking a person's primordial spirit to a household for their birth and sending it back to a celestial realm after their death. The U-shaped line symbolizes the celestial boat used for these tasks. The curly line on the left starting in the middle and extending to the bottom symbolizes ribbons decorating this boat.

Beneath the U-shaped line is *fluxin* (heart of this talisman). The bottom part signifies the celestial generals subordinate to the Jade Garland Department who must execute the task. They are depicted in three merged Chinese characters: *wang* (king), *tian* (heaven), and *gang* (the *gang* star).<sup>67</sup>



Figure 4: The fifth hexagram (left); the hexagram from Zhang's talisman (middle); the hexagram from the talisman pasted on Yin's wooden box (right)

In the middle, the three horizontal lines and the three loops on the U-shaped line together denote the fifth hexagram recorded in the classic Chinese divination text *Yijing*, or the *Book of Changes*.<sup>68</sup> The fifth hexagram, *xu*, can be translated as “nourished while waiting.”<sup>69</sup> Figure 4 shows the fifth hexagram alongside the

Figure 3 hexagrams. Zhang explains that the hexagram on the talisman represents the resources a person's primordial spirit needs during transportation.

The film's talisman varies only slightly from Zhang's talisman. The Chinese characters *yu hua si*, or "Jade Garland Department," are printed, while Zhang's are closer to cursive. The top is a circle instead of an oval. The boat's symbol is drawn with loops (also used to symbolize part of the hexagram), but it does not have a U-shaped line. There are two curly lines, one on the left and one on the right, symbolizing ribbons. The main distinction is the last Chinese character, *gang*, at the bottom. Zhang clarifies that it is a common mistake to write this word as a combination of two characters: *si* (four) and *tu* (earth). Interestingly, the film uses the incorrect form. Both versions are commonly seen today, but the general public is not aware of this mistake. Nevertheless, the comparison with Zhang's talisman proves that *A Chinese Ghost Story* used *yuhua si zhenzhai pingan fu* (the Jade Garland Department talisman for stabilizing the house and security). In actual practice, the Jade Garland talisman's function includes stabilizing the household, subduing demons, and expelling ghosts and evil spirits. At the same time, this talisman will not obstruct ancestral spirits' access to the household and should be pasted on a wall in the living room, kitchen, or dining room.<sup>70</sup>

There are hundreds of talismans used in Chinese communities today, yet both Zhang's 2020 lecture and the film employ the same talisman, indicating its popularity from 1987 till the present. Along these lines, Jave Wu, who is affiliated

with the Zhengyi Longmen Daoist school, points out that the Jade Garland talisman is still commonly used in modern Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia in his discussion on the deities related to this talisman.<sup>71</sup> This analysis demonstrates that *A Chinese Ghost Story* borrows from an actual contemporary practice rooted in Chinese religiosity.

Next, I draw students' attention to the actor Wu Ma's (1942–2014) comments, which suggest that local exorcism ritual specialists likely recommended the Jade Garland talisman to the crew. Concerning his exorcism performance as Yin Chik Ha, Wu Ma said in an interview:

As I've done many films in a similar genre, sometimes we would ask professional exorcists for advice. Those exorcist things have specific hand signs . . . What we often used were bigger gestures with meanings. There were many smaller gestures that we didn't use because in a film, it looks better when you use bigger gestures . . . [like] drawing talismans [in the air through hand movements]. All of them are based on legends, so we asked some Buddhists for advice. We learned some of them and acted them out on site.<sup>72</sup>

Professional exorcists might also have recommended the Jade Garland talisman for the fights with Laolao and with the underworld general. Intriguingly, while the talismans used in the film are highly relevant to Daoism, Wu Ma did not identify their consultants as "Daoists." Moreover, Wu Ma mentions that "Buddhists" were asked for further information. As Daoist centers commonly pay homage to certain Buddhist deities, it is possible that Wu Ma mistakenly referred to Daoists as Buddhists, or that he meant "Buddhists" more generally as folk religious ritual



specialists. Wu Ma's statement shows students that how the boundaries between Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religion in Chinese society are blurred by the general public.

Talismans in *A Chinese Ghost Story* also offer an opportunity to examine "money for the dead," specifically in the scene when a storekeeper removes the talismans stuck to Ling Choi San's back (0:07:35) (Figure 5). These papers are mistakenly called "money for the dead" in the English subtitles because of the incorrect characterization in the original Cantonese. If those papers were money for the dead, or spirit money, Nip Siu Shin would not be afraid of their marks on Ling Choi San's back (0:21:30–0:21:38). Figure 6 shows these marks on the left and Nip's fear of them on the right. This mistake could be purposeful for comedic effect, as the difference between talismans and spirit money is common knowledge in Chinese communities.

The scenes that portray Yin Chik Ha using talismans to fight against evil and Nip being terrified by the talisman markings on Ling's back reflect a long history of demonological concerns in Chinese religiosity, a tradition that has persisted since the Han dynasty. In this way, I demonstrate to students that these talismans are not just random props but are reflections of contemporary practice. Decoding the Jade Garland talisman sheds light both on the film's production and



You've money for the dead stuck to you!  
Trying to take advantage of me?

Figure 5: The talismans stuck to Ling's back



Figure 6: Talisman marks on Ling's back (left); Nip's fear of those talisman marks (right)

on the little-known history of a popular Chinese religious tradition. Many students find this analysis meaningful. For example, one commented in their essay: “I think knowing that the Talisman used was real also added a layer of depth to the film.”

Similarly, another reflected:

Since many of the people who watch the film probably don’t know have [*sic*] the cultural insight on Daoism and exorcistic practice to identify the actual meaning behind the talisman, they could’ve gotten away with using an incorrect script or making up a talisman for the film, but seeing this . . . shows the film crew’s goal of making this film depict Chinese religious practices with some authenticity.

While talismans play a prominent role, the most powerful weapon that expels demons in the plot is a well-known Māhāyana Buddhist text, the *Diamond Sutra*. In the end, it is the determining factor that defeats the underworld ruler Black Mountain.

### **The *Diamond Sutra*’s Exorcistic Efficacy**

The *Diamond Sutra* first appears when Yin Chik Ha gives it to Ling Choi San so he can protect himself. After opening the text, Ling asks about the language and how to read the first line. Yin replies that it is Sanskrit and says, “Prajna Paramita” (1:04:03–1:04:30). Figure 7 includes two moments from that scene.



Figure 7: Yin refers to the text as Sanskrit (left); the so-called *Diamond Sutra* (right)

In the grand finale, Yin, Nip, and Ling are about to lose the battle with Black Mountain, when the pages of the *Diamond Sutra* burst out from Ling's clothing, scatter in the air, and finally stick to Black Mountain's face. At this crucial moment, Ling stabs Black Mountain, who is shocked (and perhaps frozen) by the power of the sutra. After the explosion that represents the defeat of Black Mountain, the trio returns to the human realm (1:30:37–1:31:50). Figure 8 includes two moments, 1:30:43 on the left and 1:30:49 on the right, which both show a page of the supposed *Diamond Sutra*.

In class, I clarify that the text is written in Tibetan, not Sanskrit, as Yin mistakenly states. The script on the text in Figure 7 is written in Tibetan *uchen*, or



Figure 8: Black Mountain is shocked by a *Diamond Sutra* page sticking to his face (left); Ling stabs Black Mountain (right)

“with a head,” style.<sup>73</sup> This style is used for formal manuscripts. Figure 7’s *uchen* is in print, while Figure 8’s is cursive. The text in Figure 7, however, is not the *Diamond Sutra*, and is about paying homage to bodhisattvas and dharma protectors. The manuscript in Figure 8 is illegible and incomplete. Even though these Tibetan texts are not the Sanskrit *Diamond Sutra*, *A Chinese Ghost Story* nevertheless reflects a popular Chinese practice. They chose the *Diamond Sutra* based on the screenwriter’s, Yuen Kaichi’s, inspiration from his mother. As Yuen recalls in an interview:

I’d take time to try [Tsui’s ideas] and look for information . . . [I] needed to read extensively to find [relevant] material. When I went through my mother’s Buddhist texts, I noticed that every text began with “*bore boluo mi*.” Real Buddhists would not recite this phrase, but I thought that it would be interesting for Yin Chik Ha to say it [as an incantation] when he performs exorcisms.<sup>74</sup>

The phrase *bore boluo mi* is part of the title in the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit *prajñāpāramitā*, or “perfection of wisdom.” Composed in India between 100 BCE and 600 CE,<sup>75</sup> the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature is the first and most influential Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptural tradition, to which the *Diamond Sutra* belongs. The full Sanskrit title of the *Diamond Sutra* is *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā* (*Jinggang bore boluo mijing* in Chinese). *Diamond* is related to the *vajra* mentioned in the Sanskrit scripture title, referring to a mythical weapon capable of cutting the hardest matter, including diamonds. As Chiew Hui Ho suggests, the title should be understood as “the *vajra* of perfection of wisdom that is capable of shattering or destroying all forms of delusion.”<sup>76</sup> For a film that needs a lethal weapon to combat powerful demons, the insinuation of destruction embedded in the title of *Diamond Sutra* coincidentally matches the exorcistic plot.

Yuen Kaichi’s description explains why Yin and Ling (their pronunciation is *boye boluo mi*) utter the phrase “*bore boluo mi*” throughout the film for various purposes. First, it functions as an incantation paired with the usage of Daoist talismans or exorcistic combat to activate apotropaic potency. This combination corresponds to the fact that applying talismans is often accompanied by an incantation in actual practice. Five moments concern this function, including: (1) Yin burning a talisman to destroy Hah Hau’s grasping corpse (0:18:52); (2) Yin using the Jade Garland talisman to summon his sword to fight with Laolao (1:12:59); (3) Yin shooting arrows marked with talismans into the trees (1:18:58); (4) Yin

shooting an arrow to kill an underworld army general frozen by the Jade Garland talisman (1:28:18); and (5) Yin shooting two arrows at Black Mountain (1:28:41).<sup>77</sup>

Second, *bore boluo mi* works as a spell to expel ghosts or monsters. This is portrayed both by Ling's recitation when he is afraid of Nip's ghost identity (1:04:35), and by Ling's yelling to expel Laolao (1:08:51). Third, the magic of the phrase helps humans to perceive evil and enable the underworld beings to see them. This is presented by Yin's hand signs along with his saying *bore boluo mi* in order to see demonic auras (1:23:30). Similarly, Yin inserts a burnt talisman into Ling's mouth along with reciting this phrase so the underworld beings will be able to perceive them (1:25:31). Fourth, concentrating on chanting *bore boluo mi* prevents Black Mountain from taking over Yin and Ling's souls during the fight. When Ling stops chanting to yell at Nip not to break her urn, both of their souls leave their bodies and are seized by Black Mountain (1:29:20–1:29:42).

The first, second, and fourth reasons to recite *bore boluo mi* during exorcisms and to receive protection from evil spirits may seem at first to be the film's invention. After all, they resulted from the screenwriter Yuen Kaichi's epiphany after noticing the phrase appearing in his mother's Buddhist texts. However, the *Diamond Sutra*'s cult in Chinese Buddhism had used it to ward off evil as early as the medieval period. While the main concepts of the *Diamond Sutra* do not focus on mundane well-being, the sutra became a prominent text that Chinese Buddhists rely on to resolve worldly concerns, such as exorcism,

prolonging lifespans, healing diseases, begetting children, etc. Records functioning as testimonies of the *Diamond Sutra*'s effectiveness have been included in many Buddhist narratives in the *yingyan* (proven response) and *ganying* (sympathetic response) genres, which began as early as the fourth century. Those narratives have inspired the creation of similar *Diamond Sutra* stories in Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, and central Asia.<sup>78</sup>

In his research on the popularity of the *Diamond Sutra* as it appears in these Chinese Buddhist tales, Chiew Hui Ho discusses *Jinggnag jing ganying gushi fenlei jiyao*, or *A Compendium of Classified Stories of the Sympathetic Responses of the Diamond Sutra* compiled by Wang Zesheng in 1761. Ho mentions eighteen categories that Wang sorted the tales into. Three of them relate to *A Chinese Ghost Story*: *quegui* (repelling ghosts), *bixie* (warding off evil), and *tuonan* (escaping from danger or trouble).<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Guo Shouqiong's tale in *Jinggang bore jing jiyuan ji*, or *A Record of the Proven Efficacy of the Diamond Sutra*, composed in the Tang dynasty (seventh century),<sup>80</sup> and Wang Tuo's tale narrated in *Taiping guangji*, or *Extensive Record of the Taiping Era*, compiled in the Song dynasty (tenth century),<sup>81</sup> are relevant to those three themes from Wang's work.

It is unclear to what extent the 1987 film crew was aware of the *Diamond Sutra*'s Chinese Buddhist history and its cult which last from the medieval period to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Nevertheless, by viewing the deployment of this text and the recitation of its title to expel evil and battle with Black Mountain and



Laolao, students see how *A Chinese Ghost Story* aligns with historical Chinese religiosity concerning the sutra's exorcistic power. To be bold, we could even consider the later part of the film as a *Diamond Sutra* tale. Even if the film had not borrowed this well-known sutra, or if it had invented a Buddhist text, this plotline would still have resonated with Chinese Buddhists' popular belief in a sutra's apotropaic magic. This belief is ingrained in Chinese Buddhist tradition. In addition to the *Diamond Sutra*, Chinese Buddhism has texts such as the *Guanyin Sutra* and the "Universal Gateway of Guanshiyin," the twenty-fifth chapter from the *Lotus Sutra*, which all have similar histories.<sup>82</sup> However, the film intentionally choose the *Diamond Sutra*, so I emphasize its presence is not a mere coincidence and tell my students that the plot manifests a religious sensitivity and cultural heritage that has been rooted in Chinese society for more than a thousand years. Some students shared that the sutra's salient information about demonology surprised them, as they had presumed that meditation was the only significant Buddhist practice. This background also clarified their confusion stemming from this preconception while watching the film. For example, they wondered, why a Daoist master relied on a Buddhist book for exorcistic efficacy. Also, I explained that the word *diamond* did not imply the text's preciousness, as some students assumed, but rather underscored its use as the weapon vajra that shatters the hardest matter, including diamonds and delusions.

Furthermore, connecting this analysis of the *Diamond Sutra* to the previous discussion on the Daoist talismans, the class compares the exorcistic elements in the film and the original tale, which states:

Suddenly a mighty noise erupted from the bag, which had meanwhile grown to the size of a huge basket of the sort used for moving earth, and something monstrous poked its head out and pulled the demon in. Then there was no sound, and the bag shrank back to its former size.<sup>83</sup>

Most students point out that the film provides a rich visual interpretation of these events. For instance, two students commented:

“The exorcism in the film is presented in a flashy, action-packed way. In the original tale there is a lack of detail about what is actually occurring . . .”

“The object that destroys the demon . . . [is] not clearly described, the tale only saying that there is “something monstrous” within the swordsman’s bag that “poked its head out and pulled the demon in”, whereas for the film . . .”

The film elaborated and expanded on both the original tale’s simple description and Li’s 1960 work to focus on the exorcism themes and exercise cinematic creativity.

As one student noted:

“What the film also did to expound on the aspect of exorcism was showing different Buddhist/Daoist/Sanskrit writings and symbols on the tools used for exorcism. By doing this, the audience is given more than just, “the item is magical,” and can have a better basis for interpretation of why certain things can perform exorcism, such as the *Diamond Sutra* used towards the end of the story (1:03:56).”

After examining the syncretism of Daoism and Buddhism in exorcistic techniques, the last class session explains the film's portrayal of paper offerings, a popular Chinese practice.

### **The Film's Portrayal of Paper Offerings**

We discussed two paper offering scenes during a funeral procession (0:35:1–0:35:44) and burning spirit money (1:33:38–1:33:45). Few students realized what was happening, so I described several aspects of contemporary Chinese funeral processions.<sup>84</sup> The middle image in Figure 9 shows the Chinese word *dian*, which signifies a funeral. Meaning “libation or offering to the dead,” *dian* is printed on the two huge globes the two people walking behind the Daoist priest in yellow robes are carrying. The funeral is also indicated by the men in blue-and-black outfits playing mourning music, which is replaced by spooky background music as Nip enters the scene. I refer to the character with a yellow robe as a “Daoist” priest because he wears a hat with a *taiji* (supreme ultimate or great ultimate) symbol. This Daoist icon is a circle that combines black and white comma shapes.<sup>85</sup> *Daoist* in this case is a general term. In today's Chinese death ritual practice, the ritualists are commonly addressed as *daoshi* (Daoist master), who may not be Daoist masters affiliated with specific traditions.



Figure 9: The Daoist priest wearing a hat with a *taiji* symbol (left); the Chinese word *dian* printed on a globe (middle); the Daoist priest throwing spirit money in the air (right)

I further point out that the Daoist priest throws spirit money in the air as an offering to malevolent spirits so they will not interfere with the deceased's journey to the underworld.<sup>86</sup> Spirit money or *zhiqian* (paper money), imitations of coins or paper currency, comprise a main part of contemporary Chinese paper offerings that are burnt for ancestors, spirits, ghosts, or deities as part of rituals or funerals.<sup>87</sup> The practice is portrayed at the end when Ling burns spirit money for Nip. This is the second scene that features paper offerings (Figure 10). Many students are confused by Ling's actions. Due to time restrictions, the class does not delve into the history of burning spirit money and other paper items, but instead presents contemporary examples. To put it succinctly, this practice has its roots in ancient Chinese *mingqi* (bright vessels or otherworldly vessels) that were interred in tombs for the dead to



Figure 10: Spirit money burning in front of Nip's tomb stele (left); Ling making paper offerings to Nip (right)

use in the afterlife. The development of paper inspired the idea of making such goods from paper. People transmitted them to the dead using fire, the bright nature of which resonates with the numinous nature of things belonging to the spirit world. As investigated by Fred Blake, the custom of using fire to send spirits paper money has been prolific among common people since the early Song dynasty (tenth century).<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, while this custom is aligned with ancestor worship, many Confucian scholars remonstrated it due to the labor it wasted and its alleged link to Buddhism.<sup>89</sup>

Colorful paper servants are paraded by the mourners during the funeral possession as they walk behind Nip. The linen gown and white triangular hat shown in the film are commonly worn in contemporary Chinese death rituals. The paper figures will be burnt at the gravesites as offerings and represent servants who will

follow the deceased to the underworld. At the end of this scene, Ling is holding a female paper servant; this insinuates that Nip is not a living person because she is associated with a paper offering to the dead (Figure 11). Interestingly, as previously explained in the section “Contextualizing the Homeless Ghost, Qi, and Laolao,” the film sets this funeral procession scene during a ghost festival. Both funerals and the ghost festival involve sending ancestors paper offerings by fire.<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, I show students images of life-size funeral paper servants, such as those used in Beijing,<sup>91</sup> and a variety of paper items burnt for beloved relatives,



Figure 11: The mourning people displaying paper servants (left); Ling holding a female paper servant (right)

pets, festivals, other occasions,<sup>92</sup> and post-mortuary rituals, including a luxurious paper mansion worth \$10,000 for the deceased celebrity Zhugeliang in 2017 in

Taiwan.<sup>93</sup> Certainly not every household could afford this grandiose gesture. Students had different opinions about this practice. Some considered burning paper offerings, no matter what the cost, to be just a waste of money. One found it interesting that “people believe that their deceased relatives will have this in the underworld.” Another said: “The intricate and luxurious paper houses are a way for families to show their continued love and appreciation for their ancestors in a very positive and vibrant way.” The film creatively integrates prominent and popular Chinese religious practices with its plot, giving students an opportunity to consider a unique approach for commemorating the deceased.

### **Conclusion**

This article explores the less acknowledged pedagogical potential of the Cantonese blockbuster *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) in an “Asian Religions in Film” course. It allows undergraduates to discover the syncretism of Chinese religiosity by unraveling religious practices and cultural concepts embedded in the film. The class begins by placing this work in 1980s Hong Kong cinema when horror films gained popularity. To cultivate students’ critical eye for context and plot, they read my summary of the scholarship on several interrelated interpretations of the film including political allegory, sexuality, Tsui Hark’s contributions, and Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales*. After students’ reflection on the previous research, we move to the main topics: Chinese religious elements embedded in the film concentrating on

exorcism. Teaching about why certain practices and concepts are integrated in *A Chinese Ghost Story* is like accompanying students on an investigative journey.

We begin by contextualizing the plot in *zhiguai* (strange account) genre, studying ancestor worship and the homeless ghost Nip, deciphering Laolao's rationale for killing men to seize their *yangqi* (life energy), and noting the twist on the Daoist festival of *zhongyuan* (middle primordial) when Nip retrieves her portrait. Students learn to identify the film's references to longstanding Chinese traditions through exploring images and terms in relevant texts and contemporary practices.

Based on this foundation, the class delves into the film's use of Daoist talismans and the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra* for its exorcistic plot to show students how demonological concerns in Chinese history shaped Daoist and Buddhist practice. My research shows that the film refers to an actual talisman, the Celestial Daoist master Zhang's "Jade Garland Department talisman for stabilizing the house and security." The deities of Jade Garland Department date to ca. 1200–1400. I suggest that local exorcism ritual specialists likely recommended this talisman to the film crew based on Wu Ma's interview. I further point out to students that while the use of *Diamond Sutra* may have seemed like a cinematic invention based on the screenwriter's epiphany and the film using unknown Tibetan manuscripts (Figures 7 and 8), nevertheless the use of the *Diamond Sutra* reflects a long history of Chinese Buddhists' belief in this text's exorcistic efficacy from the medieval period to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The class ends in discussing paper offerings, the



popular Chinese practice for commemorating the deceased, when students reflect on their use during a funeral procession (Figures 9 and 11) and later burning spirit money for Nip (Figure 10).

In sum, this research argues that while *A Chinese Ghost Story* initially seems like a simple horror romance comedy, it nonetheless provides instructors with valuable sources to educate students about the syncretism of Chinese religiosity from the past to present. It is uncertain to what extent the screenwriter, director, and film crew were consciously aware of the texts and the historical development examined in this article. It is unlikely these concepts were mere “coincidence,” but rather indicates choices influenced by collective religious and cultural customs rooted in a repertoire of models and systems. Broadly, this article contributes to pedagogy in teaching Asian religions through film by leading students to recognize how Chinese religious images, texts, traditions, and rituals presented in film can increase their intercultural understanding and awareness of the relationship between humans and spirits in Asian religions.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Ching Siu-tun, *A Chinese Ghost Story* (Golden Princess Film Production Limited, 1987), 1 hr., 38 min.

<sup>2</sup> Poshek Fu and David Desser, “Introduction,” in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, ed. Poshek Fu and David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>3</sup> David Desser, “The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema’s First American Reception,” in Fu and Desser, *The Cinema of Hong Kong*, 19-43.

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<sup>4</sup> Pak Tong Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema: 1978-2000* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2008), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Li Cheuk-to, ed., *The 13th Hong Kong International Film Festival: Phantoms of the Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong: Urban Council Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 9. For discussion on how the 1980s ghost films reveal Hong Kong's complex feelings toward China, see Yingchi Chu, *Hong Kong Cinema: Coloniser, Motherland and Self* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 70.

<sup>7</sup> Hong Kong Legends is a defunct DVD distribution company (1999–2007) that was located in London, United Kingdom. They interviewed Tsui Hark and other actors for a special edition of the DVD that details the production of *A Chinese Ghost Story*. Those interviews were conducted after the tragic suicide of the male lead, Leslie Cheung (1956–2003). The DVD was released in 2003 and is no longer available for purchase. I am thankful that the YouTuber Onionsan confirmed the DVD publication information and made the content accessible online. See Onionsan, "A Chinese Ghost Story-Tsui Hark Interview," YouTube Video, February 28, 2018, 0:24 to 1:45, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cPUTp3wIVs&list=PLyWvxcZUDTFcJLGlb6JoVMXYSVaY0vEO0&index=4&ab\\_channel=Onionsan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cPUTp3wIVs&list=PLyWvxcZUDTFcJLGlb6JoVMXYSVaY0vEO0&index=4&ab_channel=Onionsan).

<sup>8</sup> Li Hanxiang, *The Enchanting Shadow* (Shaw Brothers Pictures International Limited, 1960), 1 hr., 20 min.

<sup>9</sup> Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi: Huijiao huizhu huiping ben* [Annotated Strange Tales from A Chinese Studio], ed. Zhang Youhe (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), 160-68. For an English translation, see Pu Songling, "The Magic Sword and the Magic Bag," in *Strange Tales from A Chinese Studio*, trans. John Minford (London: Penguin, 2006), 168-179.

<sup>10</sup> Luo Hui, "The Ghost of Liaozhai: Pu Songling's Ghostlore and Its History of Reception," PhD diss., (University of Toronto, 2009), 3, note 5.

<sup>11</sup> Luo Hui, "Mastering a Minor Tradition: Pu Songling and the Chinese Ghost Tale," in *A Companion to World Literature*, vol. 3, ed. Ken Seigneurie (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 1-11.

<sup>12</sup> The returns were \$18,831,638, see Lisa Morton, *The Cinema of Tsui Hark* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2001), 74.

<sup>13</sup> "A Chinese Ghost Story (1987) Awards," The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), accessed January 14, 2022, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093978/awards/?ref=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093978/awards/?ref=tt_awd).

<sup>14</sup> "The Best 100 Chinese Motion Pictures," The Internet Archive, accessed January 14, 2022, <http://www.hkfaa.com/news/100films.html>.

<sup>15</sup> The sequels are Ching Siu-tun, *A Chinese Ghost Story II* (Golden Princess Film Production Limited, 1990), 1 hr., 42 min.; Ching Siu-tun, *A Chinese Ghost Story III* (Golden Princess Film Production Limited, 1991), 1 hr., 49 min. The animated version is Andrew Chan, *A Chinese Ghost Story: The Tsui Hark Animation* (Golden Harvest, 1997), 1hr., 24 min. These three films are in Cantonese.

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<sup>16</sup> For the TV series, see Li Huizhu, *Eternity: A Chinese Ghost Story* (Hong Kong: China Entertainment Television Broadcast, Limited, 2003). For the remakes, see Wilson Yip, *A Chinese Ghost Story* (Golden Sun Films, 2011), 1 hr., 40 min.; Lin Zhenzhao, *The Enchanting Phantom* (Decade Entertainment Co. Ltd. 2020), 1 hr., 36 min. These TV series and remakes are in Mandarin. Regarding scholarly discussion on the 2011 remake, see Sarah Woodland, "Ghosts of China's Past and Present," in *Remaking Gender and the Family: Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese-Language Film Remakes* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 78-102.

<sup>17</sup> Audrey Yue, "Preposterous Hong Kong horror: Rouge's (be)hindsight and A(sodomitical) Chinese Ghost Story," in *The Horror Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder (London: Routledge, 2000), 364-67.

<sup>18</sup> Yue, "Preposterous Hong Kong horror," 371-72; John Zou, "A Chinese Ghost Story: Ghostly Counsel and Innocent Man," in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (London: BFI Pub, 2003), 42-44. Both Yue and Zou use the spelling for the Mandarin pronunciation, which is "Ning Caichen."

<sup>19</sup> Zou uses the spelling for the Mandarin pronunciation, which is "Nie Xiaoqian."

<sup>20</sup> Zou, "A Chinese Ghost Story," 45.

<sup>21</sup> Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave*, 93-95; Ho Wai-Leng, "From the Local to the Virtual: On Special Effects," in *Jian xiao jiang hu: Xuke yu xianggang dianying = The Swordsman and His Jiang Hu: Tsui Hark and Hong Kong Film*, eds., He Siying and He Huiling (Xianggang: Xianggang dian ying zi liao guan, 2002), 228-37.

<sup>22</sup> Cheuk, *Hong Kong New Wave*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Pu and Minford, "The Magic Sword," 175-79. After Ling removes Nip's bones from the tree, she escapes from Laolao's control. To repay Ling for his help, Nip follows Ling home, learns to be a human being, serves his mother, and marries Ling after his wife passes away. Their two sons, and a later son whom a concubine bears Ling, become eminent mandarins.

<sup>24</sup> Luo, "The Ghost of Liaozhai," 230-31; 240-41.

<sup>25</sup> Marc Moskowitz, "Yang-Sucking She-Demons: Penetration, Fear of Castration, and Other Freudian Angst in Modern Chinese Cinema," in *The Minor Arts of Daily life: Popular Culture in Taiwan*, eds. David Jordan, Andrew Morris, and Marc Moskowitz (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 206.

<sup>26</sup> Moskowitz, "Yang-Sucking She-Demons," 209-11.

<sup>27</sup> We compare Nip with the characters Jaggu in Rajkumar Hirani, *PK* (UTV Motion Pictures, 2014), 2 hrs., 33 min., and the young woman portrayed in Kim Ki-duk, *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2003), 1 hr. 43 min. For discussion on Jaggu, see Sheila J. Nayar, "Media Review: Bollywood Religious Comedy: An Inaugural Humor-neutics," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 83, no. 3 (2015): 820. For the woman in *Spring, Summer*, see Sharon Suh, *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 18-19; 88-90.

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<sup>28</sup> Moskowitz, “Yang-Sucking She-Demons,” 213-16; Suzanne Cahill, “What to Fear and How to Protect Yourself: Daoism and Hong Kong Horror Movies,” in *Journal of Daoist Studies*, 4, (2011): 204.

<sup>29</sup> Cahill, “What to Fear,” 211-16.

<sup>30</sup> Exorcism does not play an important role in every ghost movie in 1980 Hong Kong cinema, such as Stanley Kwan, *Rouge* (Golden Harvest, 1988), 1 hr., 33 min. However, exorcistic performance is nevertheless a prominent feature in this genre and has noticeable similarities across different works. A common ground is the usage of Daoist talismans, for example in Ricky Lau, *Mr. Vampire* (Golden Harvest, 1985), 1 hr., 36 min. How exorcistic performance in *A Chinese Ghost Story* is different from these films deserves its own discussion and is beyond the scope of the author’s class. To put it simply, a mix of today’s Daoist talismans, the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra*, and a battle in the underworld is not seen in other films.

<sup>31</sup> Poo Mu-chou, “Imperial Order and Local Variation: The Culture of Ghost in Early Imperial China,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 56, no. 2/4 (2003): 295-308.

<sup>32</sup> For a succinct introduction to the *zhiguai* genre, see Tak-hung Leo Chan, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts: Ji Yun and Eighteenth-Century Literati Storytelling* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 6-11.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Eno, “Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 41-51.

<sup>34</sup> Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972), 191-204.

<sup>35</sup> David K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 144-55.

<sup>36</sup> This citation format indicates the start or duration of the scene.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Teiser, “Ghost and Ancestors in Medieval Chinese Religion: The Yü-Lan-P’ en Festival as Mortuary Ritual,” *History of Religions* 26, no. 1 (1986): 48.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 35-38.

<sup>39</sup> Chapter twenty-two from *Zhuangzi* mentions that a person’s life is a coming together of *qi*. If *qi* scatters, there is death. See Zhuangzi and Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 235.

<sup>40</sup> Wang Shumin and Penelope Barrett, “Profile of a Daoyin Tradition: The ‘Five Animal Mimes,’” *Asian Medicine* 2, 2 (2006): 225-29.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Nelson and Alessandro Carloni, *Kung Fu Panda 3* (20th Century Fox, 2016) 1hr., 35 min.

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<sup>42</sup> E.g., Luo, “The Ghost of Liaozhai,” 33-34, 46; Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 106.

<sup>43</sup> “Sheng Qi Tong Tian Lun (On the Human Vital Energy Connecting with Nature),” in *Huangdi nei jing* [The Inner Cannon of Yellow Emperor], annotated by Wang Bing (ca. 710–805 CE) and translated by Nelson Liansheng Wu and Andrew Qi Wu (Beijing: Zhongguo ke xue ji shu chu ban she, 1997), 18-24.

<sup>44</sup> Gu Ming Dong, “From *Yuanqi* (Primal Energy) to *Wenqi* (Literary Pneuma): A Philosophical Study of a Chinese Aesthetic,” *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 1 (2009): 28-30; Robinet and Brooks, *Taoism*, 107.

<sup>45</sup> Morton, *The Cinema of Tsui Hark*, 72. It is worth clarifying that the concept of possessed trees in *The Evil Dead* (1981) was reprised in *Evil Dead II* which came out in 1987, the same year as Tsui Hark’s *A Chinese Ghost Story*.

<sup>46</sup> For dating and authorship on *Zuozhuan*, see Anne Cheng, “Ch’un ch’iu, Kung yang, Ku liang, and Tso chuan,” in *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Michael Loewe Berkeley (CA: Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), 67-76.

<sup>47</sup> Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China: New Year and Other Annual Observances During the Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.-A.D. 220* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 102-03. For dating and authorship on *Guoyu*, see Chang I-jen, William G. Boltz, and Michael Loewe, “Kuo yü” in *Early Chinese Texts*, ed. Loewe, 263-68.

<sup>48</sup> Chan, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts*, 141-42.

<sup>49</sup> Pu and Minford, “The Painted Skin,” 126-32; “Twenty Years a Dream,” 280-89.

<sup>50</sup> Pu and Minford, “Snake Island,” 185-88.

<sup>51</sup> Christine Mollier, “Vision of Evil: Demonology and Orthodoxy in Early Daoism,” in *Daoism in History: Essays in Honour of Liu Ts’un-yan*, ed. Benjamin Penny (London: Routledge, 2006), 75.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>53</sup> Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China*, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Mollier, “Vision of Evil,” 82-83.

<sup>55</sup> For an example of a comprehensive study about how Daoism and Chinese Buddhism influenced and borrowed from each other to produce texts concerning exorcism, witchcraft, sorcery, etc., see Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Despeux, “Talismans and Sacred Diagrams,” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 500-504.

<sup>57</sup> Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism*, 126-27.

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<sup>58</sup> Gil Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism: Creation of Tradition* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 128.

<sup>59</sup> For example, because the Daoist ritual specialists I consulted about the film's talismans examined in this article were not officially affiliated with the Celestial Master tradition, they could not understand their meaning.

<sup>60</sup> Figure 2 is drawn from Figure 1.3 in Roderick Cave, *Chinese Paper Offerings* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>61</sup> DZ 547. To refer to a text in the Daoist Canon, this article uses DZ, an abbreviation for *Zhengtong Daozang* (Daoist Canon of the Zhengtong Era). Four different numbering systems have been developed to locate texts in the Daoist Canon. This article uses the system from The Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, no. 25. See Fabrizio Pregadio, "Index of *Zhengtong Daozang*," in *Golden Elixir Reference Series*, No. 2 (Golden Elixir Press, 2009). The Daoist Canon comprises around 1,450 texts. It was compiled and printed in 1445 during the Ming Dynasty. For a succinct introduction, see Livia Kohn, *Introducing Daoism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 240-44.

<sup>62</sup> DZ 547: 7.16a. 7 refers to the fascicle number. 16 is the spread number, and *a* refers to the right side of the spread.

<sup>63</sup> XiaoXiao Feng, Koichi Matsumoto, and Shigeo Sugimoto, "Uncovering the Secrets of Daoism Fus Using Digital Dao-Fa Hui-Yuan," In *Proceedings of The Outreach of Digital Libraries: A Globalized Resource Network: 14th International Conference on Asia-Pacific Digital Libraries, ICADL 2012*, Xinxin Chen and Gobinda Chowdhury eds. (Taipei, Taiwan, November 12-15, 2012), 1.

<sup>64</sup> DZ 1210: 18.1a.

<sup>65</sup> The talk was on August 6, 2020. The content of this lecture series is published in *Daoyi sixiang: Kua wenhua jiangzuo jishi* [The Philosophies of Daoism and Medicine: A Record of Intercultural Dialogue], ed., Jiang Xinxin (Xinzhu: Guoli yangmin jiaotong daxue chuban she, 2021).

<sup>66</sup> The left talisman in Figure 3 is drawn from figure 4-3 in Zhang Yijiang, "Daoyi de xunxi chang: fu yu lu" [The Field of Daoist Medicine: Talismans and Registers], in *Daoyi sixiang*, ed. Jiang, 171.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 172.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> For the history of *Book of Changes*, which has sixty-four hexagrams, and the meanings of the fifth hexagram, see Richard Wilhelm and Cary Baynes, *The I Ching; Or, Book of Changes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), lviii-xi; 24-27.

<sup>70</sup> The functions and usage of the Jade Garland talisman are on Zhang's institution Facebook page. See Zhang, "Yuhua si zhenzhai fu" [The Jade Garland Department Talisman for Stabilizing the House], Facebook, January 7, 2017, <https://zh-cn.facebook.com/CTS65/photos/pcb.1497957370221916/1497957273555259>.

<sup>71</sup> Jave Wu, “Daojiao keyi wenhua. Wulei Yuhuasi. Jiufeng posui hua shaer” [The Culture of Daoist Ritual. Five Thunder Jade Garland Department. Nine-Headed Phoenix Destroying Evil Defilement and Difficulties], International LSM Taoist Cultural Collegium, May 6, 2017, [http://javewutaoismplace.blogspot.com/2017/05/blog-post\\_6.html](http://javewutaoismplace.blogspot.com/2017/05/blog-post_6.html).

<sup>72</sup> My translation of Wu Ma’s statement is based on his Cantonese and the English subtitles. See Onionsan, “A *Chinese Ghost Story*-Wu Ma Interview,” YouTube Video, February 28, 2018, 16:40 to 17:26, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euFFIK0gXL8&list=PLyWvxcZUDTFcJLGlb6JoVMXYSVaY0vEO0&index=2&t=1047s&ab\\_channel=Onionsan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euFFIK0gXL8&list=PLyWvxcZUDTFcJLGlb6JoVMXYSVaY0vEO0&index=2&t=1047s&ab_channel=Onionsan).

<sup>73</sup> The Wylie transliteration of the Tibetan word *uchen* is *dbu can*.

<sup>74</sup> Sam Ho ed., “The One and the Many: Scriptwriters on Scriptwriting,” in *Jian xiao jiang hu*, eds., He and He, 201.

<sup>75</sup> Edward Conze, Preface to *Buddhist Wisdom Books: The Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1958).

<sup>76</sup> Chiew Hui Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives: Textual Production and Lay Religiosity in Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 11-12.

<sup>77</sup> Gil Raz, *The Emergence of Daoism*, 139.

<sup>78</sup> Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 264-93.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 277.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 44, 314-15, 324-25,

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 210-11.

<sup>82</sup> Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism*, 59-63.

<sup>83</sup> Pu and Minford, “The Magic Sword,” 179.

<sup>84</sup> For a description of Chinese funeral processions, see Susan Naquin, “Funeral in North China: Uniformity and Variation,” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, eds. James Watson and Evelyn Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 43.

<sup>85</sup> As the *taiji* circle includes the *yin yang* principles, which are represented by the black and white parts in the circle respectively, I briefly explain the meanings of *yin*, *yang*, and *taiji*. While *taiji* mainly symbolizes Chinese cosmology, the film borrows it for the scene in which Yin uses his blood to draw a *taiji* in his palm to perform an exorcism (1:13:19). The *taiji* circle is part of the *taiji* diagram, which has been widely researched by scholars. For example, see François Louis, “The Genesis of an Icon: The “Taiji” Diagram’s Early History,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 63, no. 1 (2003): 145-196.

<sup>86</sup> Cave, *Chinese Paper Offerings*, 67-68.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 2-3, 13-15. For the examples of more modern spirit bills, see Fred Blake, *Burning Money: The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 144, 149, 151, 154, 163-64.

<sup>88</sup> Blake, *Burning Money*, 53-54; 67.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 65-69.

<sup>90</sup> Teiser, "Ghost and Ancestors," 55.

<sup>91</sup> "Carrying Paper Servants, funeral," Duke University Libraries, accessed March 2, 2022, [https://repository.duke.edu/dc/gamble/gamble\\_112A\\_631](https://repository.duke.edu/dc/gamble/gamble_112A_631).

<sup>92</sup> See the sixty-four photos listed between the introduction and the first chapter in Janet Scott, *For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors: The Chinese Tradition of Paper Offerings* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007).

<sup>93</sup> The paper house was 26.2 ft long and 9.8 ft high. "Zhizha haozai ! Zhugeliang 30 wan lingcuo jiangyun nanbu shao" [Paper Mansion! Zhugeliang's NT\$ 300,000 Spirit House Will Be Transported to the South for Burning], TVBS News online, June 19, 2017, <https://news.tvbs.com.tw/entertainment/738339>.

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