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*2025 2nd International Conference on Global Economics, Education and the Arts (GEEA 2025)***Attribution Controversies in Classical Chinese Fiction: The Case of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits***Miaoyan Hua ^{1,*}¹ Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai, China

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Abstract: Since the late Ming dynasty, the phenomenon of falsely attributing supernatural tale collections to Tang authors has been widespread, a fact well acknowledged by scholars. Amid the corrective efforts starting in the Qing dynasty, *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* (Ling Gui Zhi), traditionally attributed to the Tang author Chang Yi, has been widely regarded as a spurious work. By clarifying the life of Chang Yi, analyzing the entries in *Records of Ghosts and Spirits*, examining the biases of its compiler, and exploring the nature, targets, and impact of false attributions by late Ming booksellers, this paper seeks to substantiate the likelihood of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* being a forged text. This analysis contributes to the study of the creation and reception of Tang dynasty supernatural tales and the broader phenomenon of literary forgeries.

Keywords: *Records of Ghosts and Spirits*; Chang Yi; supernatural tales

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of literary forgeries has long intrigued scholars, particularly the widespread practice of falsely attributing works to prominent historical figures. One such case is *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* (Ling Gui Zhi), traditionally ascribed to the Tang author Chang Yi. Since the late Ming dynasty, this text has been regarded as spurious by many scholars, who argue that it was pieced together from preexisting works such as the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era. Early research, including the findings of Mu Zhiwen and Li Jianguo, suggests that late-Ming booksellers deliberately attributed this compilation to obscure or fictional authors to evade scrutiny. However, this paper challenges the prevailing consensus by reevaluating Chang Yi's attribution.

Through an analysis of historical references, textual content, and the compiler's potential biases, this study explores the authenticity of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* and the plausibility of its Tang origins. By contextualizing the work within the broader tradition of Tang supernatural fiction, this paper not only reexamines its disputed authorship but also contributes to the understanding of late-Ming forgeries and their impact on literary reception. Ultimately, it argues that the likelihood of Chang Yi being the genuine author has been underestimated, offering fresh perspectives on the transmission and compilation of classical Chinese texts.

2. Content Analysis: Thematic and Structural Examination of the Stories

A review of the entries on *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* in the Comprehensive Catalogue of Classical Chinese Fiction reveals that earlier scholars have extensively debated

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and reached conclusions regarding the authenticity of this work [1]. In summary, the earliest version of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* is attributed to Xun Shi and consists of three volumes, as recorded in the Bibliographical Treatise of the Sui Dynasty. This version primarily contains accounts from the Jin dynasty, with three of its stories also appearing in Tao Yuanming's Sequel to Records of Searching for the Supernatural from the early Song dynasty, and one story found in Qi Wangyan's Records of Auspicious Signs from the Netherworld. Scholars generally agree, based on historical evidence, that Xun Shi's *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* was compiled in the late Jin dynasty.

A version of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* attributed to a Tang author appears in the Shuo Fu, credited to Tang-era Xun Shi. However, in He Ke San Zhi (Combined Three Records), Anthology of Tang Writings, Dragon Prestige Compendium, Tang Dynasty Compendium, and Sixty Stories from the Jin and Tang Dynasties, the work is attributed to Chang Yi of the Tang dynasty. On this point, scholar Mu Zhiwen remarked: "(For the entries attributed to Tang Xun Shi) ... this version is, in fact, a Ming compilation borrowing from Tang works while misappropriating the title of a Jin-era book of the same name, falsely claiming it to be Tang in origin — an utterly absurd act." Regarding the version attributed to Tang Chang Yi, he further noted: "An examination of the text shows that most of it is derived from works cited in Extensive Records of the Taiping Era, such as Records of Strange Tales, Wide Records of the Unusual, Anecdotes of the Strange, Records of Natural History, and Youyang Miscellany. Clearly, this is a Ming fabrication falsely attributed to Tang authorship."

Similarly, Li Jianguo, another editor of the Comprehensive Catalogue of Classical Chinese Fiction, classified *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* as a spurious work in his book A Narrative Overview of Tang and Five Dynasties Supernatural Tales. His perspective closely aligns with that of Mu Zhiwen [1]. Li Jianguo, another editor of the Comprehensive Catalogue of Classical Chinese Fiction, classified *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* as a spurious work in his Narrative Overview of Tang and Five Dynasties Supernatural Tales, with conclusions largely consistent with those of Mu Zhiwen [2]. Following the publication of the Comprehensive Catalogue of Classical Chinese Fiction: Classical Chinese Volume, many scholars regarded *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* as an unequivocal forgery pieced together from the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era, adopting the conclusions therein. For instance, in the study Research on the Anthology of Tang Writings, the author identified *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* among thirty-four works deemed forgeries assembled from disparate sources. Building upon the findings of predecessors such as Mu Zhiwen and Li Jianguo, the study further posited that these works were compiled based on shared themes, as seen in the three entries of The Story of Li Jian Playing the Flute, all drawn from the "Music and Flute" category in volume 20 of the Extensive Records of the Taiping Era. Additionally, to obscure the forgeries, booksellers often attributed these works to obscure or entirely fabricated authors, leaving readers unable to verify their authenticity [3].

If the claims of these scholars are accurate, then *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* — as referenced in this paper using the version from Dragon Prestige Compendium, with cross-references to the Shuo Fu and Anthology of Tang Writings — belongs to the category of works "designed to leave readers with no means of verification", being falsely attributed to the Tang author Chang Yi. A thorough examination of historical records reveals only three references related to Chang Yi. The first appears in volume 187 of Song scholar Li Fang's Wen Yuan Ying Hua (Anthology of Refined Literature), specifically in the section "Provincial Examinations, Part Eight", which includes four poems titled Spring Pines in the Imperial Court. Among them is the following poem:

Spring Pines in the Imperial Court

By Lu Zhi [At times attributed to Bai Xingjian]

In the serene, secluded court, verdant pines abound,

Their lush green touched by celestial grace.

Basking in dews and nurturing warmth, their hues grow richer still.

High branches part the morning light,

Their divine resonance mingling with the midnight chime.
 The mist lends its distant fragrance to the censer's curling smoke,
 Shadows interlace, forming layers like a canopy.
 May their thousand-year vitality align with eternal blessings,
 Unmoved by the lure of five trees bearing immortal fame.
 Should they long enjoy Heaven's favor,
 They would surpass even the enduring old peaks of Bi Feng.

Same Title

By Chang Yi

The pines gracing the palace shine with singular beauty,
 Dense and solemn, they line the imperial court.
 Clustered branches drink from sacred dews,
 Sparse canopies draw in the emperor's noble breeze.
 Evening shades merge with Qin's imperial gardens,
 Spring's fragrance fills every corner of Han's grand palace.
 Steadfast as jade and stone, their virtue mirrors upright ministers,
 Their emerald shadows complement the azure latticework,
 While slender boughs rise to pierce the cerulean sky.
 Basking in Heaven's care,
 They thrive lush and green for countless ages more [4].

The entry in Complete Tang Poems (Quan Tang Shi) largely mirrors the record of Chang Yi's Spring Pines in the Imperial Court found in Anthology of Refined Literature (Wen Yuan Ying Hua), with only slight differences in the poem's content:

Chang Yi

A contemporary of Lu Zhi, known for one poem:

Spring Pines in the Imperial Court

The pines gracing the palace shine with singular beauty,
 Dense and solemn, they line the imperial court.
 Clustered branches drink from sacred dews,
 Sparse canopies draw in the emperor's noble breeze.
 Evening shades merge with Qin's imperial gardens,
 Spring's fragrance fills every corner of Han's grand palace.
 Steadfast as gold and stone, their virtue mirrors upright ministers.
 Emerald shadows complement the azure latticework,
 While slender boughs rise to pierce the cerulean sky.
 Basking in Heaven's care,
 They thrive lush and green for countless ages more [5].

Subsequently, in the Examination Records (Dengke Jikao) by Qing scholar Xu Song, the entry follows the version

recorded in Complete Tang Poems, summarizing the details as follows:

(Dali Era) Eighth Year, Gui Chou

Thirty-four Successful Candidates for the Jinshi Degree

Lu Zhi... Chang Yi

(Excerpt omitted)

Chang Yi's poem Spring Pines in the Imperial Court reads:

The pines gracing the palace shine with singular beauty,
 Dense and solemn, they line the imperial court.
 Clustered branches drink from sacred dews,
 Sparse canopies draw in the emperor's noble breeze.
 Morning light blends with Qin's imperial gardens,
 Spring's fragrance fills every corner of Han's grand palace.
 Steadfast as jade and stone, their virtue mirrors upright ministers.
 Emerald shadows complement the azure latticework,
 While slender boughs rise to pierce the cerulean sky.

Basking in Heaven's care,
They thrive lush and green for countless ages more [6].

The three records cited above, which refer to the provincial examination records, all use the year of Lu Zhi's successful examination as a reference point. Among these, Chang Yi's poem *Spring Pines in the Imperial Court*, when considered alongside the works of fellow examinees such as Lu Zhi, strongly suggests that it was composed as part of the provincial examination. Therefore, based on the available records, it can be reasonably concluded that Chang Yi passed the imperial examination in the same year as Lu Zhi, specifically in the eighth year of the Dali era (773 CE).

Based on this assumption, it can be inferred that Chang Yi's birth year likely falls within 723-753 CE, and his death year is estimated to be between 790 and 820 CE. Due to the limited availability of further evidence, this estimation might have a margin of error of up to ten years, though a deviation exceeding this range seems implausible. Establishing this approximate timeframe for Chang Yi's life is crucial for the subsequent analysis of the originality of the entries in *Records of Ghosts and Spirits*.

A comparative analysis of different versions of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* reveals that after the inclusion of the "Ji Kang" entry in the *Anthology of Tang Writings*, the collection expanded from fourteen to the current fifteen entries [7]. The *Dragon Prestige Compendium* adopted this fifteen-entry version, which has since been preserved [8].

A review of the entire work shows that nearly all the entries in *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* can be traced back to records in Tang-era or earlier fiction, and they are also found in *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* [9]. However, this alone does not definitively prove that *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* was fabricated in the Ming dynasty as a compilation based on *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*. The authenticity of the collection must instead be determined through a detailed examination of each individual entry.

Not all entries in *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* can be found in Tang-dynasty or earlier fiction, nor can they be found in *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*. At the same time, the Song-dynasty compilers of *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* listed *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* as one of their source texts. However, it is now impossible to determine whether the *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* cited in *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* refers to the Jin-dynasty version by Xun Shi or the Tang-dynasty version. It is more likely that the compilers referenced the Jin-dynasty work. At that time, the *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* by Xun Shi and a potential Tang-dynasty version of the same name might have already been conflated. This confusion is reflected in Shuo Fu, which attributes *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* concerning Tang events to Xun Shi, a Tang author. It was only when the work was included in the *Anthology of Tang Writings* that the second author, Chang Yi, appeared. Chang Yi may have been a fictitious figure created by Ming-dynasty booksellers or the actual Tang-dynasty author of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits*. Whether the compiler or author of the work attempted to appropriate or extend Xun Shi's Jin-dynasty work is impossible to verify.

The hypothesis that some entries in the Tang-dynasty *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* are original, and that Chang Yi may have been the author, is supported by the fact that the fifth entry, "Wang Yuan-zhi", is recorded solely in *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* and does not appear in any other extant sources, nor is it found in the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*. This suggests it might be an original creation by the author of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits*. The narrative follows the familiar "encountering a spirit" (yuxian) framework, in which a scholar meets and falls in love with a ghostly woman. Set in Gaomi, the story describes how the scholar Wang Yuan-zhi encounters a beautiful woman and forms a romantic connection, only to discover she is the ghost of a lady who, after enduring mistreatment by her husband, returned to her father's home and died of illness, a reflection of the tragic fate often faced by women in traditional Chinese society. While it is possible that "Wang Yuan-zhi" originated from a lost pre-Song work, its narrative structure and themes are not particularly novel. Nonetheless, its inclusion in *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* suggests it might be an original creation by the compiler or author.

If *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* cannot completely rule out the possibility of original content, the chronological and narrative progression of its fifteen stories become worthy of attention. Regardless of whether the author lived in the Tang or Ming dynasty, the absence of major temporal conflicts between the stories and their sources indicates that stories set closer to the author's lifetime are more likely to be original. Among the fifteen entries, excluding the fifteenth entry, "Ji Kang", which was clearly not authored by the compiler of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits*, eight stories explicitly reference a timeline: "Han Zhong" (set in the Spring and Autumn period under King Fuchai of Wu), "Liu Dao" (set in the eleventh year of Emperor Wu of Liang's Tianjian reign), "Cui Luoshi" (set during the Tian Tong reign of the Northern Qi), "Li Tao" (set during Emperor Xuanzong's Tianbao reign), "Cui Shusheng" (set during Emperor Dezong's Zhenyuan reign), "Yan Jun" (set during Emperor Wuzong's Huichang reign), and "Tang Xuan" (set during Emperor Xuanzong's Kaiyuan reign, 730-732 CE). Based on the previously estimated timeline for Chang Yi, "Yan Jun" was almost certainly sourced from another text. Similarly, "Han Zhong", originally from *Records of Searching for the Supernatural*; "Liu Dao", from *Records of the Strange*; and "Su Shao", from Wang Yin's *Book of Jin*, either date too far back or derive from sources with sufficient influence by the Tang dynasty, making them unlikely to be original creations.

Entries cited in *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*, such as "Cui Luoshi" (from *Miscellany of Youyang*), "Li Tao" (from *Records of the Strange*), and "Zheng Demao" (from *Records of the Chamber*), as well as entries like "Cui Shusheng" (from *Supplement to Natural History*), "Cui Shao" (from *Xiaoxiang Records*), "Sheng'er" (from *Records of Extraordinary Tales*), "Xu Sheng" (from *Addendum to Records of the Extraordinary*), and "Tang Xuan" (from *Records of the Beyond*), present potential ambiguities regarding their sources. Notably, *Addendum to Records of the Extraordinary* and *Records of Extraordinary Tales* have themselves been criticized as forgeries.

Interestingly, while "Sheng'er" and "Xu Sheng" share late-Tang settings with "Cui Shusheng" and "Yan Jun", the former two convey a strong sense of nostalgia for a past golden age and a lament for its loss, as reflected in Liu Jingfu's poetry which emphasizes contemporary political concerns, much like Bai Juyi's *Song of the Pipa*. For instance, in "Sheng'er", Liu Jingfu's poetry reflects strong contemporary political concerns and shows traces of influence from Bai Juyi's *Song of the Pipa*. These features are absent from "Cui Shusheng" and "Yan Jun". Due to insufficient evidence, determining the authenticity of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* and similar works like *Addendum to Records of the Extraordinary* must be left to future scholars.

Whether or not Chang Yi was the compiler of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits*, it is valuable to consider the potential qualities of such a compiler, particularly their familiarity with supernatural narratives, scholarly figures, and regional folk beliefs, as well as their ability to weave historical and speculative themes into the narrative. Despite the prevalence of "encountering a spirit" narratives in Tang-dynasty supernatural tales, *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* maintains a unique consistency: all protagonists are scholars, and all stories revolve around their interactions with ghosts. The most common narrative mode is the "encountering a spirit" framework, where a scholar meets a ghostly woman, often a noble lady or a maidservant, which aligns with the tradition established by *The Story of Yingying*. Additionally, entries such as "Sheng'er", "Xu Sheng", "Su Shao", and "Tang Xuan" reflect a sense of historical contemplation or speculation about the afterlife. These features are not only common in classical Chinese fiction but also reflect the identities of their creators and audiences, as well as the narrative traditions from which they emerged.

Upon examining the timeline and narrative structures, the geographical settings of the stories in *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* stand out as particularly significant. Among the fourteen entries, the Wu region accounts for the majority of settings, followed by Chang'an, the capital of the Tang dynasty. Notably, the collection opens with "Han Zhong", a story set in the Wu region during the Spring and Autumn period, and includes several entries located in Suzhou or Nanjing, with precise references to sites such as the

"Tile Palace Pavilion" and the "Wu Taibo Temple". These narratives frequently incorporate elements of local folk beliefs, reflecting the compiler's evident familiarity with and preference for the Wu region. Conversely, stories set in Chang'an, such as "Liu the Assistant", display meticulous attention to the city's neighborhoods, a natural expectation for tales situated in the Tang capital. This geographical pattern suggests that the compiler was likely a native of the Wu region and, if active during the Tang dynasty, had likely traveled to Chang'an. Such a profile aligns with what is known of Chang Yi.

Li Jianguo has offered critical insight into the phenomenon of forgeries attributed to ancient authors, observing: "During the Ming dynasty, such forged works were often attributed to obscure or relatively unknown figures, making it difficult for readers to verify their authenticity. Forgers rarely used the names of prominent figures like Han Yu, Liu Zongyuan, Yuan Zhen, or Bai Juyi, as doing so would easily expose the deception, underscoring the calculated strategy of the forgers." Building on this, the author of *Research on the Anthology of Tang Writings* identified 34 forged works within the anthology, including *Records of Kaiyuan* and *Tianbao Anecdotes* falsely attributed to Wang Renyu, *Secrets of Painting* to Wang Wei, *Records of Strange Illnesses* to Duan Chengshi, and *Records of Thunder Spirits* to Shen Jiji.

Analysis of these forgeries reveals a clear pattern in the choice of authors. While forgers typically avoided attributing works to highly prominent figures like Han Yu or Bai Juyi, they did not limit their choices to entirely obscure individuals. The forgeries fall into three main categories. The first comprises Tang-dynasty elites, including officials and poets of moderate renown who were not primarily celebrated for their literary contributions. Examples include *Records of Ghostly Tombs* attributed to Chu Suiliang, *Records of the Mountains* to Su Ting, *Old Records* to Liu Gongquan, *Secrets of Painting* to Wang Wei, *Records of Strange Creatures* to Niu Qiao, *Records of Delusions* to Zhu Xiji, and *Records of Phantoms* to Xue Zhao-yun. These names carried significant cultural cachet, making them attractive to forgers seeking to enhance the appeal and plausibility of their works.

The second category includes renowned compilers of Tang-dynasty notebooks and supernatural tales, such as *Tales of the Yaksha* and *Records of Strange Illnesses*, both falsely attributed to Duan Chengshi, the author of *Miscellany of Youyang*, and *Records of Spectacle and Play*, attributed to Jiang Fang, the author of *The Story of Huo Xiaoyu*. The third category consists of completely obscure or fictitious figures. While such attributions may have minimized the risk of detection, they typically offered less benefit to forgers than the first two categories, as they lacked the cultural authority or recognition to attract readers.

Given these patterns, it seems highly unlikely that *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* would have been falsely attributed to Chang Yi, whose limited recognition in the Tang dynasty would not have provided the necessary appeal for Ming-dynasty booksellers aiming to attract readers. As a relatively obscure figure even in the Tang dynasty, Chang Yi had minimal historical or cultural prominence. It is implausible that late-Ming booksellers would have selected such a figure as the putative author of a forged text to maximize readership and profit. If their primary goal was to generate economic returns by attracting readers, attributing a collection of supernatural and romantic tales to someone as marginal as Chang Yi would have been counterintuitive. His name would have offered little to enhance the appeal of the text compared to the use of more renowned figures, such as eminent officials, celebrated poets, or established authors of supernatural literature.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, as argued by Mu Zhiwen, Li Jianguo, and other scholars, the phenomenon of late-Ming booksellers forging texts is well-documented. These forgeries were often attributed to obscure historical figures or entirely fictitious names. However, in the case of *Records of Ghosts and Spirits*, the likelihood of it being falsely attributed to Chang Yi by later booksellers appears less significant than previously assumed. Instead, there

remains a plausible case for the work being genuinely authored by Chang Yi himself or another figure from the Tang dynasty.

While *Records of Ghosts and Spirits* does not occupy a position of singular importance within the vast corpus of ancient Chinese notebooks and supernatural literature, and its literary or cultural significance is not exceptional, the investigation into its authorship and the attribution controversy yields meaningful scholarly insights. In particular, the exploration of Chang Yi's life and potential contributions enriches our understanding of Tang-dynasty supernatural fiction authorship and the textual transmission and compilation practices of such works.

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