

SPEAKING TO SPIRITS

靈界的譯者

The true story behind the hit HBO Asia series The Teenage Psychic.

The book that made a hundred thousand readers think about ghosts in a whole new way.

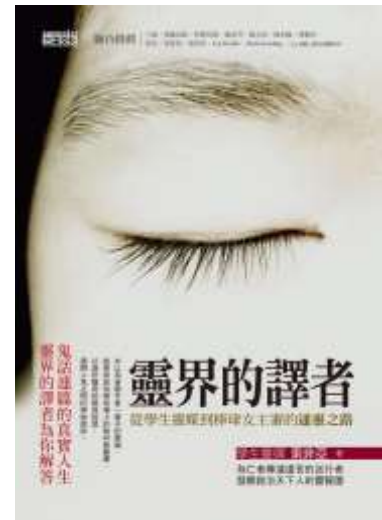
If *The Sixth Sense* was set in Asia, it would look a lot like the life of the uniquely gifted Sophiyah Liu. Ever since she was little, Sophiyah has been able to see and hear messages from the spirit world. The grown-ups around her would be telling her off for talking nonsense one minute, then begging her for lottery predictions the next. She became a spirit medium while she was still in junior high, offering healing, prayers and exorcism at the local temple after homework and dinner. Her time on the borderline between the mortal realm and spirit world granted her access to the whole spectrum of human suffering and emotion, and in this book she shares what she learned: *no matter what ghosts or divinations we turn to, it is the way we act that ultimately determines our fate.*

A medium works much like an interpreter, using their own experience and understanding of society to seek out the answers lying beneath the surface. In *Speaking to Spirits*, Sophiyah Liu shares her professional expertise and overturns some of the common myths and misconceptions concerning ghosts, rituals, and magic. Is the mortal realm really overrun with ghosts during the seventh month of the lunar calendar? Do malicious spirits always dress in red? Are you more likely to run into a ghost while travelling? Is it possible to communicate with foreign ghosts? Are there any proven methods for acquiring good luck and avoiding bad? These practical tips will reassure the reader and allow them to understand the world beyond ours.

Resisting any sensationalism of the spirit world, Sophiyah Liu uses real-life examples to illustrate the humor and the absurdity of translation across different planes of existence.

Sophiyah Liu 索菲亞（劉柏君）

Born Liu Po-Chun, Sophiyah Liu became a convert to Islam after she stopped working as a spirit medium in temples and started to explore



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the wider world of religion. A keen baseball fan with a background in social work and religious studies, she has worked as an interpreter for the New York Yankees and the Australian national team. After travelling to the States to attend the Jim Evans and Wendstedt schools of umpiring, she was the first Taiwanese woman to become an international baseball umpire. In 2017, Taiwan Public Television Service collaborated with HBO Asia and Singapore's InFocus Asia Broadcasting to produce *The Teenage Psychic*, a coming-of-age tale about a girl who can communicate with spirits. Inspired by Sophiyah Liu's story, it was the first HBO show produced in Taiwan to be broadcast entirely in Chinese (Mandarin and Hokkien), and has been aired in 23 countries around Asia.

SPEAKING TO SPIRITS

By Sophiyah Liu

Translated by Jim Weldon

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Why Be Afraid Of Ghosts?

When the average person thinks of "ghosts" they think of a being with magic powers that flits about, perhaps even that they bring fortune and misfortune. They see vengeful female ghosts in movies or on TV and decide they shouldn't do bad things. Do ghosts really come and go as they please and have unlimited magic powers and the ability to see into the future? I have to tell you that ghosts of that sort are the very elite of the spirit world. Most ghosts, while having some little power, are a great deal more clumsy and hapless than that!

Whenever I say this there will immediately be a whole host of people trying to put me right: "That's because you only contact low-level spirits which gives you a narrow view." It's true; I freely admit that I don't really understand the intelligence of even the least grain of sand in the universe, but then why are these high-level spirits bothered about a husband's extra-marital affairs, or the state of someone's business, or how well a student does in their exams? If

they really are high-level spirits why are they interfering in the world of the living and making trouble for ordinary people? Since most people can't see ghosts anyway, why don't we each just go our separate ways in peace?

If these ghosts were really as fearsome as those portrayed in films and on TV, would we even still be alive? If even a fraction of what we see on TV were real I expect a good half the people in Taiwan would be rushing to emigrate. It's simply not so! Why make out that Taiwan has ghosts and spirits everywhere? Perhaps future adverts from the Tourism Board will say, "Want to meet a ghost? Visit Taiwan! If you want to see spirits, we have them all." And there'd be small print under with a warning, "This offer operates by appointment dependent on each individual's different natural predestination, we cannot guarantee that you will see your preferred deity. We respectfully suggest you make your appointment at the earliest opportunity."

It would still be the same people going to visit the shrines, while those who never go now still wouldn't. It makes no sense to imagine that the experience of the few we see on TV can be applied universally, otherwise how come the ancients used "ghost stories" as a way of saying "a pack of lies"? Based on my experience with the ghost friends I've made, the phrase is certainly appropriate.

The spirits of the dead love to give themselves a mouth then go about conning food and drink, which they achieve by going on about how strong they are and what great spirit powers they have! Or else they try threats: if you don't make offerings to them, what great misfortune will befall you! Come on! Surely they'd be the unfortunate ones? We at least are not going to starve to death and we don't have to go around begging for food and offerings of incense like they do. They've come to such a pass but still they act all high and mighty?

That's why when certain people become ill due to "yin energy blockages" – a haunting – my treatment method is to engage with the ghost possessing the patient, asking it if it wants to come out. If the ghost has any sort of genuine power I'll even offer it guaranteed bed and board by enlisting it to be an "employee" of the shrine! Otherwise I'll ask Master K to perform a ceremony to lay the ghost. "Ceremony" is a nice-sounding way of putting it; it actually involves bribing the ghost with some travel expenses, burning a bit of paper money then everyone shouting "Out!" on the count of three. Everyone leaves happy and both parties know what's required of them. This method of ghost-laying is fairly straightforward; everyone just goes their separate ways.

I've seen some places where ghosts accumulate in the temple. The Master or the shaman will expel ghosts as a way of curing yin energy blockages among the faithful but those ghosts then hang around in the temple as they have nowhere to go. The temple has to hold regular ceremonies of general release or "recalling the spirit army". This situation is bad for the health of both the living and ghosts, because we have different auras and these actually conflict with

each other. Even if the ghosts have no intention of harming us, the very fact that they are there alongside the living causes harm! Their energy can make us ill. I often advise those spirit mediums who cannot themselves expel ghosts to be careful, even if many of them claim to be chosen by Heaven and able to lay ghosts, or that ghosts fear them and cannot harm them and so forth. Fine, have it your way.

Yet actually most spirit mediums are in poor health. And even the ones who are okay end up in hospital right after they stop being a medium, or they have a stroke or succumb to some other illness. This isn't something the average believer would be aware of though. I really don't understand why the living insist on provoking ghosts and spirits.

The upshot is you get shrines and temples who offer the faithful these ceremonies for changing luck and if there is a ghost involved they'll bribe it by burning a bit of paper money, but if there isn't any ghost they'll still go ahead with the ceremony as if there was. Whether it works or not is entirely down to the individual involved because in fact any effect is by and large all in the mind. My advice to you all is not to spend your money like this! They're printing ghost money and swapping it for your hard cash!

What exactly are we praying to?

Shrines will venerate various sacred effigies such as the Life Protection Emperor, the Lord of the Soil, Nezha, the Dark Emperor and so forth; you can mostly guess at the powers of these gods from their name. They reflect things that people desire such as cures for sickness, the dispelling of ghosts and evil spirits, riches or peace of mind. There's not a great deal wrong with this on the face of it, in terms of our basic human condition. Particularly when the supplicant is a non-believer praying for a peaceful life, it hardly seems a big deal; but has anyone stopped to consider what exactly it is that dwells in these shrines?

I often find myself wondering why it is the gods want us to burn paper money, make offerings and light incense. Why would these gods aid living beings? And what of foreigners who do not pray to them? Why are there instances when the gods don't answer our prayers? Why do people believe that statues made of better quality materials have greater spiritual powers? Surely the gods don't offer greater protection to the wealthy just because they have more money to spend on offerings and better quality idols? When we pray what exactly are we praying to?

I remember one time when a friend from abroad asked me to accompany him to make offerings at a shrine. He wanted to pray there because he had read in a travel guide that Lord Guan Yu was a god of love. Good Heavens! That was certainly news to me! I tried to put him right, "Are you sure about that? In the stories I read Guan Yu never married and I don't think he ever even had a girlfriend, are you sure he's the one to pray to for love?" This of course made my friend curse his useless guidebook, but then maybe if I hadn't said anything he would have

carried on believing that praying to Guan Yu would help him in love. In truth, much of the value of prayer is generated by the power of wishing something were so. In Buddhism it is said that the power of karma is no match for the power of the will. Perhaps the most important factor is not how much paper money is burned but how great the mental effort.

It seems we have grand ceremonies for the release of souls almost every day in Taiwan, so why are there still so many lost souls and wandering ghosts? If you read a little history it becomes clear. The idea that people become ghosts when they die began back in the Shang and Zhou dynasties but it wasn't until the Tang that the burning of paper money was invented, while the laying of ghosts was a product of the arrival of Buddhism and its fusion with Daoism. Well! If it really is true that a person becomes a ghost when they die and that they require the burning of a great pile of paper money and paper credit cards, then we who are due to die in later times are truly fortunate: the value of paper money burnt keeps on going up and now we get US dollars, cheques and stock certificates as well!

These questions played on my mind a great deal and assisting at funerals also caused much doubt. Often when I arrived at a bereaved household, instead of the ghost of the departed I found a lot of silly ghosts would come and say they were the dead person. Come on now, the departed was an elderly man but you are the ghost of a young woman! If you're going to impersonate someone you could at least make a bit of an effort to dress the part! So the first thing I would do when working at a funeral was a "rectification of names". I would confirm that the spirit of the departed was indeed the person in question by obtaining certain personal information from their relatives, such as how many children they had, where they hid their money or what their favourite food was. Even then I couldn't guarantee locating the spirit of the departed every time. In my experience you could still locate the soul of the dead person in the first three days, seven days at the outside, but there were instances where things happened very fast and almost immediately after death there was no sign of the ghost. This is why I was always so anxious to get to a funeral as soon as possible and treated it like an emergency.

Right from when I first became a spirit medium I have tried to discourage superstition but I found that the particular atmosphere of a shrine makes it impossible to ask people not to be superstitious or even not to take me at my word. People just carry on in the manner to which they have become accustomed. This strengthened my resolve to give up being a medium, as my original intention had been to help people but here I was leading them into the dead end of superstition! That really is a terrible wrong! I truly did want to use what little power I had to reduce belief in superstition but that is easier said than done. There are many things that cannot be changed simply by dint of your own effort.