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## CHINESE GHOST MARRIAGE

THE concept *xiao* 孝 is one of the most important guiding principles of the Chinese family. Usually translated 'filial piety', it is perhaps better glossed as obedience to parents during their lifetimes and worship of their souls after death. Unfilial behaviour is regarded as deeply reprehensible and until recent times was punishable by law. Likewise, parents have the reciprocal duty of caring for their children, just as ancestors are supposed and expected to help their descendants. The son's most important duty is to keep alive the patriline and to provide descendants to worship the ancestors. In the fourth century BC the Confucian philosopher Mencius said, 'there are three ways of being unfilial; the most serious of these is to have no heirs!' Hence it would follow that failure to produce heirs might create problems for the Chinese family for which various solutions need to be found. Let us look briefly at the Chinese paradigm of the family before considering some of these solutions.

Jordan argues (1972: 89) that the people in the area of Taiwan which he studied have an ideal image of the family, summed up in the notion of roundness, *yuan* 圓, which he glosses as 'structural completeness'. That is,

*Note:* This paper is based on my B.Litt. thesis, completed in 1977. Maurice Freedman, who was to have been my supervisor, died suddenly the day before I was to discuss possible thesis topics with him. Although I can find no mention of ghost marriage in his writings, I believe and hope that the topic would have appealed to him as one in which the study of marriage and religion converge. A preliminary version of this paper was read at a meeting of the American Anthropological Association held at Cincinnati, USA, in November 1979.

the family consists of a father, who lives in the paternal home, and a mother, who is completely assimilated to her affinal home and family. They have sons who grow up to marry, stay within the home, and rear their own sons. Daughters, temporary members of the natal family, grow up, marry strangers, and become complete members of their affinal families. When the parents die, they should die in the central room of the house where the ancestral altar is kept. Ancestral tablets are made for them out of wood, bearing their names, titles and dates of birth and death. These are placed on their altar. On the anniversaries of the death day, it is the duty of the children and grandchildren to commemorate them by burning incense and bringing food offerings. No one who is not a *bona fide* member of the lineage, and hence a contributor or potential contributor of future heirs, may die in the central room or have a tablet on the altar.

Needless to say, reality frequently fails to fit the model, and so there exist various well-established remedies for correcting the defects. Maybe the couple have no children. In this case, if it can be arranged, a son will be adopted into the family, preferably from among patrilineal kin. If there are only daughters, the parents may attempt to arrange an uxori-local marriage: a young man will be found who will marry the girl and sign a contract to the effect that some or all of the children will bear their matrilineal grandfather's name. This is an unpopular solution as the young man is open to the charge of neglecting his own ancestors, the girl finds it humiliating to have to marry someone prepared to neglect his duty and who is likely to be poor and of low social status, and the parents fear that the son-in-law will create conflicts of loyalty between their daughter and themselves.

Of course, not all children live to maturity, let alone achieve marriage and parenthood. Yet there is no place in the ideal of the family structure for those who die prematurely. Ahern (1973: 125-6) reports that in the part of northern Taiwan where she worked, there is the belief that such a child was not a real lineage member at all but the soul of someone to whom the parents owed a debt. When the parents have fed and clothed the child for a time, the debt is paid and the child dies. It is given a perfunctory burial in a shallow grave, and its brief existence is quickly forgotten. However, it is also possible that certain subsequent events, such as sickness in the family, will be seen as being caused by the ghost of the dead child, who was in fact a real lineage member and is demanding recognition as such. In that case, an ancestral tablet will be made and placed on the altar.

In the case of a boy, an heir might be posthumously adopted for the dead child. When a girl dies in childhood the story is more complicated. A girl belongs only temporarily to her natal family. She does not, except in the case of an uxori-local marriage, contribute to the lineage. She is not, therefore, allowed to die in the central room, and she has no legitimate

place on the altar and no one to bring offerings to her. Families fear that if they were to place the tablet of an unmarried daughter on the altar, the anger of the other ancestors would be provoked and disastrous consequences would ensue. One of Wolf's informants said (1974: 148), 'the ancestors would be angry if you put an ugly thing like that on the altar'. They believe that if they do, the ghost itself will haunt them. In lieu of a tablet for the daughter, some families place a sachet of incense ashes in an out-of-the-way place, such as behind a door, on a shelf in a store-room or in a dark corridor. In some areas of Hong Kong, as Potter has shown (1974: 215), the tablet is taken to the temple of a female spirit medium who specializes in the care of the souls of dead girls. In some of these temples the souls of the girls become a corporate deity worshipped by prostitutes. Some families do nothing at all to provide for their dead daughters, and in Taiwan in such cases it may at some later date be considered necessary to marry the girl's ghost to a living man to provide her with an affinal altar and descendants.

The idea of marriage with or between the dead has widespread currency among the Chinese. At least as early as the 1600s and probably much earlier, a girl whose fiancé died and who nevertheless went through the marriage ceremony with the corpse and lived the rest of her life as his widow was regarded as especially virtuous. Numerous eulogies commemorate such a sacrifice in the Chinese writings. Around 200 AD the prevailing custom was to place deceased girls in the tombs of boys who had died unmarried. The practice evidently got so much out of hand that legislation was passed to prevent the corpses of girls from being stolen from their graves and transferred to those of boys. De Groot writes:

Such posthumous marriages are peculiarly interesting as showing that the almost unlimited power of parents in choosing wives or husbands for their children does not cease to exist even when the latter have been removed to the Realms of Death, so that in fact children are there subject to the will of their parents. They further prove how faint the line of demarcation between the living and the dead is in China, even if it exists at all. (1897: 806)

However, in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore in recent years, ghost marriage has had different forms and functions. Usually some years after death, the ghost of the dead child manifests itself in such a way as to persuade the parents to consult a spirit medium and arrange a marriage for it.

It is at this point necessary to outline briefly Chinese beliefs in ghosts: who becomes a ghost and what powers does it have? For the purposes of discussion, I shall simplify the writings on ghosts to state merely that after death a person becomes either an ancestor or a ghost. If you have heirs, you become an ancestor and your needs are taken care of. If you have no heirs or if your death was in some way untimely or shameful, such as by execution, drowning or suicide, you are likely to become a wandering

ghost and a source of fear and anxieties. Such ghosts are thought to return to pester the living in revenge, causing illness or damage to property. Hence in Taiwan there are corporate shrines to the 'Good Brothers', as they are euphemistically called, where offerings are made to propitiate them. Ghosts with families are liable to direct their discontent within the family circle, and it is here that ghost marriage becomes operative.

Several writers and anthropologists have recorded the practice of ghost marriage either in passing or in more detailed accounts that form part of wider studies of Chinese religion. Archdeacon Gray of Hong Kong called the custom 'as wicked as it is absurd' (1878: 216). Arthur Smith, in *Village Life in China*, records that he was acquainted with the family of a Chinese girl who died and who was married after death to a dead boy from another village. The father admitted to Smith that it was not a rational procedure but said that the girl's mother was in favour of it (1899: 298).

It is interesting that ghost marriage seems to have one form in Hong Kong, Singapore and, probably, pre-revolutionary China, and a quite different form in Taiwan. There, it is always a dead girl who initiates the marriage, and she is always married to a living man (Jordan 1972: ch. 8). The man is free to marry again, or if he is already married, the ghost becomes his retrospective first wife. In other areas, in all cases I have come across, both parties are dead, and the wedding can be initiated by either of them appearing in a dream to a parent or other relative. The exception to this is when one partner of an engaged couple has died and is then married by the survivor.

In the summer of 1976 I spent two months in Hong Kong attempting to find out what I could about ghost marriage. I collected information, always through interpreters, from informants selected in a somewhat haphazard way. My main sources of information were brought to me by English and Chinese District Officers who always responded to my requests for information about ghost marriage with great interest. Through them, I met some of their Chinese colleagues and friends of colleagues who were able to tell me about ghost marriages that had taken place in their own families. I also received information from friends I had made at the University of Hong Kong, from their *amabs* (domestic assistants) and from all kinds of casual contacts. I was puzzled that the initial raising of the topic produced two distinct reactions: either that this practice must be very rare nowadays, as they had never themselves heard about it; or, by contrast, that it was very common and that their own brother, cousin, wife's sister, neighbour, etc. had been involved in a ghost marriage.

At all events, it does not seem to be a topic that is raised very frequently, as it carries with it, so some of my informants told me, overtones of 'silliness' and 'superstition'. Hence it is possible that many Chinese are themselves not aware of its occurrence unless they or their

friends experienced it. On account of the nature of my contacts, and above all my own inexperience in asking questions of informants, my information is regrettably not as full as I would have hoped. However, I shall recount some tales of ghost marriage and then identify some of the issues they raise.

The first case I was told about was narrated to me by Mr Ho of Tsuen Wan in the New Territories. He was a man in his forties and he told me that his sister had died at the age of fourteen, thirty-two years before. About six or seven years before, a friend of his mother, whose son had died some time ago—he was not sure when—dreamt that her son came to her saying that he had grown up and now wanted to raise a family. This lady told her friends about it, amongst whom was Mr Ho's mother. The latter made the tentative suggestion that maybe their dead children could be married to each other. However, the boy's mother was uncertain what to do about it. She consulted a spirit medium somewhere in Kowloon, who told her that the two ghosts would agree to be married. The spirit medium fixed an auspicious day for the wedding in six months' time. Gifts were exchanged between the two families. On the appointed day, more gifts were exchanged, then a feast was held. Only about twenty-four people were invited to the wedding, most of whom were from the groom's family. Mr Ho did not know of any particular reason for this. He said that the feasting and the gift exchange were on a much simpler scale than would be the case at a normal wedding. He also thought that in the old days in Guangdong, a ghost marriage would have had a much more elaborate ceremony than his sister's. The boy and the girl were both represented at the wedding by wooden ancestral tablets inscribed with their names. The boy's tablet was carried into the main room first, then the girl's. Both were made to bow to the ancestral altar. The tablets were then put on the altar and worshipped on festival days along with all the other ancestors. There have been no more dream appearances. Since then the two families have considered themselves related and kept up contact like ordinary relatives. Mr Ho said he did not attend the ceremony for two reasons: first, he had no time, and second, he doesn't believe in such things.

The above is a fairly typical tale of ghost marriage taking place in order to provide the dead with companionship in the next world. Another ghost marriage arranged for the same purpose in 1972 was followed by the girl's mother writing, in March 1976, to the Chinese Temples Committee of the Home Affairs Department to ask permission to move the boy's body to her daughter's grave. This was not a case of uxori-local ghost marriage, merely the fact that the boy was buried in a temporary cemetery, whereas the girl was in a permanent one. The girl's mother wrote:

My deceased daughter died in September 1968 and was buried in Cape Collinson in Chaiwan Cemetery, grave number [—]. According to Toi Shan custom, since the girl died young she had to look for a deceased husband so that her soul may rest in peace and she can have someone to depend on, and

so as to console her parents. Therefore we found the son of Mr Ng, who died in March 1970 and was buried in Wo Hop Shek Cemetery, grave number [—]. Since Mr Ng's son died unmarried, his father hoped to find a wife for him. So following Toi Shan custom, we had a go-between. With the consent of both sets of parents, we married them in April 1972, strictly following all the requirements of the customs of Toi Shan county. The ceremony took place at Tin Hou Goddess of Heaven Temple in Shaukiwan. Now since they are husband and wife, married in front of witnesses A and B, we request your permission to move the remains of our son-in-law, so that he can be buried next to his wife's grave at Chaiwan. I hope to hear at your earliest convenience.

This request was granted. I hoped that I might be able to talk to the letter-writer herself. The City District Officer of Eastern District where she lived sent a colleague to ask her if she would meet me. But although three neighbouring families on the estate confirmed the story, she herself denied that it had happened.

The simple motive of providing companionship for the dead can sometimes be combined with another: that of not upsetting sibling hierarchy in marriage. This is shown by another case, related to me by the above-mentioned official of the Home Affairs Department. This ghost marriage had taken place in Sichuan while the official was there in the mid-1940s.

The eldest son in a family had died aged thirteen. Some years later, just as the second son's marriage was about to take place, he collapsed and, speaking with the voice of his elder brother, said: 'I am the eldest son. I object to this marriage taking place while I'm still single. There will be no peace for the family unless I'm married.' Apparently the family were not aware of the practice of ghost marriage, as it was not well known in the area, but people they asked about it advised them to appease the ghost. So they contacted a go-between to find a bride, being extremely careful to find a girl whose status and family background were appropriate to their own. They chose three names and when, as usual, the horoscopes were checked for compatibility, one was selected. The girl's parents consented, and the marriage took place. The second son was then at liberty to marry.

I was told of another example in which sibling hierarchy was important. A pregnant woman in Guangdong died as a consequence of someone in the family moving a grave during her pregnancy, and so the baby was never born. The husband married again and had two sons by his second wife. Just as they were about to start school, the second wife dreamt of the baby ghost—apparently a boy—who scolded her for thinking of educating her own children before concerning herself with him. He instructed her to burn books, stationery and paper pens for him. She did so before her own sons started school. Ten years later, she dreamt about the ghost again. He wanted to be married. So she found a girl he

had mentioned in the dream and arranged the wedding. I was told that she still dreams about him if she 'does anything wrong'. This woman's particular psychological make-up may partly account for these occurrences, but the belief has to be part of the society's collective representations before it can be invoked by an individual.

Since one of the reasons for marrying dead children is said to be to provide them with heirs, it is perhaps surprising that I was told of only one case where an attempt was actually made to provide them. In this case, in 1971, five years after the ghost wedding, the girl-ghost's mother adopted her son-in-law's brother's child on behalf of the couple. The child is being brought up by his own parents. When he is older, he will have the duty of worshipping his deceased adoptive parents.

I was also told that if a man's fiancée died, he was obliged to go through a wedding ceremony with her, usually the day before he married a living woman. My informant's father's brother had been engaged to a girl in Fanling in the New Territories about fifty years previously, when they were both ten years old. The girl died when she was sixteen, and a marriage ceremony was performed for them when she would have been eighteen. The fiancé delivered a bag of tea-leaves to the girl's family. I was told this was a Cantonese custom from Bao'an County in Guangdong signifying the fiancé's wish to marry the girl, but no one could tell me what the tea-leaves might represent. On a chosen date, the young man took cakes, wine, pork and rice to the girl's family, and on the wedding day sent them a sedan-chair containing a wooden rice-measure. A woman who was overseeing the ceremony—not the go-between, it was emphasised—accompanied the sedan-chair. At the girl's house, certain objects were placed in the chair, inside the rice-measure. These were a red paper name-card with the girl's name on it in black characters, a comb, face-powder, lipsticks, a paper fan and some handkerchiefs. The woman overseeing the ceremony then accompanied the sedan-chair back to the man's house. On its arrival, the young man put the rice-measure and all its contents in the corner on the left side of the room with the family altar in it. There was no bowing before the altar, nor feasting. Throughout the ceremony, the bridegroom wore his ordinary clothes. In this case, the ceremony was performed twice that day, as he had been engaged to two young girls who had died. The following day, when he left the house to go to fetch his living bride, the old women of the family put the paper name-card of the first dead bride on a shelf on the left side of the room, and that of the second bride on a shelf on the right side. They were worshipped here along with the other tablets until years later, when the man's child married. Then the cards were moved to the family altar itself. The wife always had to consider the two dead fiancées as her sisters and visit their families and attend their parents' funerals as a daughter.

Similar examples, also involving two ghosts and the initiation of the

marriage by the male ghost's parents, were documented by Topley in Singapore (Topley 1955, 1956). Here ghost marriage is quite common, and ghost marriage brokers' signs are to be seen in the doorways of Taoist priests. Topley (1956) quotes a priestly informant as saying that Cantonese ghost marriages are not at all rare and that he is mainly engaged to perform them by women, of various occupations and incomes.

The marriage Topley (1955) describes was arranged for a boy of fourteen who had died away from home in obscure circumstances. He appeared to his mother in a dream saying that he wanted to marry a dead girl. The mother went to consult a spirit medium, who gave details of the girl and found that the horoscopes of the pair matched. Topley does not state this to be the case, but I assume that the dead girl was a fiction and that the spirit medium invented a matching horoscope. The marriage was arranged by a Taoist priest and was attended by the boy's parents and siblings. After the wedding, in the evening, post-mortuary ceremonies were held for the pair.

Here the underlying motive for the marriage seems to be simply to provide the boy with a companion. Other reasons Topley lists for ghost marriages are to acquire a grandson after the death of a son, to prevent disaster consequent on the loneliness of the dead, and to cement friendship between families. These reasons were also mentioned by my informants in Hong Kong. In none of the cases cited from Hong Kong was I told of any disaster, to do with either health or financial circumstances, that prompted the dream appearances asking for a wedding. In addition, in spite of it being possible to place a boy's ancestral tablet on the family altar and to adopt someone to worship him, a dead boy was just as likely to initiate a wedding as a girl. By contrast, it seems to be accepted in Taiwan that ghost weddings are always initiated by a girl who is then married to a living man. In Hong Kong, when I asked my informants what they thought of this custom, they were nonplussed, commenting that it seemed to be an unnecessary amount of trouble to go to.

Jordan, during a field trip in south-west Taiwan, came across several ghost marriages. Quoting the work of a well-known Chinese anthropologist, Li Yi-yuan (1968), he outlines the traditional form for that area. The dead girl appears in a dream to her parents asking to be married. The family then take a red envelope—usually used for gifts of money—place it in the middle of the road, and hide. When a male passer-by picks up the envelope, the family quickly emerge from hiding, announcing to the man that he has been chosen to marry their ghost daughter. He is unlikely to welcome this idea but will nevertheless not dare to refuse for fear of the ghost's vengeance. In the last resort, his reluctance can be overcome by an offer of money. A marriage ceremony is then conducted following the usual pattern, with the girl represented by her ancestral tablet. The tablet is placed on her affinal family's altar, and her natal family is thus



rid of the ghost. No affinity is established between the two families.

However, in Jordan's village, Bao-an, ghost marriage follows a different pattern. There is seldom a dream appearance of the ghost. Instead, she causes misfortune to her natal family, or to the families of her married sisters. The misfortune usually takes the form of the sickness of family members persisting despite medical attention. Divination is resorted to, and in a seance the family learns of the ghost's plight. It is important to emphasise that, in these cases, the causing of sickness is thought to be merely a way of drawing attention to the ghost's unhappy state rather than a malevolent or vengeful act. Usually several sessions are held with mediums of different gods before the family agrees to arrange a marriage. In this village, there is a female medium of a domestic god, known as the 'Little God', who specializes in ghost marriages and hires out ritual equipment for use in the marriage ceremony. In recent years nearly all the bridegrooms have been the husbands of married sisters of ghost brides. In one case described by Jordan, the man in question dreamt of a woman during a difficult period in his family affairs. His mother visited a spirit medium, who revealed that a ghost was haunting the man. After prevaricating, trying to get rid of the ghost, and further seances over a period of three years, he finally married the ghost of his wife's sister. Since then, he says, nothing unfortunate has happened in his family.

In the eight days that I spent in south-west Taiwan in October 1976, I was given detailed accounts of two recent ghost marriages. The first had taken place the previous month. It was reported in the *China Daily News*, and with the help of a young Chinese Hokkien-speaking student, I managed to trace the family concerned and talk to them about the marriage. Their story was as follows.

The wife had been ill for some years. After attempting various medical cures, she finally consulted a spirit medium. The medium had diagnosed that the illness was being caused by the woman's two younger sisters, who had died some years previously. The problem was that they wanted to marry her husband. The woman told me that she had come across that kind of story before but had never thought it would happen to her. She ignored the diagnosis for two or three years, only to give in finally, as her health continued in the same bad state. Without telling her husband, she consulted the spirit medium for an auspicious day and then went ahead with the arrangements. There were fewer guests than usual at a wedding feast, as only members of the husband's and wife's families were invited. The two sister-brides were represented by their spirit tablets placed on chairs at the wedding feast and at the ceremony of bowing to the ancestors. Afterwards, the tablets were placed on the husband's family altar. The wife emphasised that since then, her health had improved a great deal. It was she who told me most of the story. The husband looked embarrassed and said it was all his wife's doing and that he had not known

anything about it till just before. He said ghost marriages were always happening, and it was just his luck that there was a reporter around on the day of his ghost wedding. They were both most reluctant to tell me who the spirit medium was and where I could find her. They said they didn't know where she lived, as spirit mediums were always changing addresses. Eventually they took us to a medium who, they said, knew something about spirit marriages. This medium turned out to be the one who had been involved in their own case.

Whereas the above case conforms to the new pattern of ghost marriages identified by Jordan in the same area, the other one I came across is closer to the old style. My informant was the brother of a ghost bride. His sister had died at birth, thirty-eight years before. Last year she had appeared to her mother in a dream, saying that she had fallen in love and giving the name and address of the man concerned. The address was some way away, and the brother assured me that the parents did not know this man. However, they managed to trace him and told him the story, and he agreed to marry their daughter. My informant told me that the ceremony, which he attended, was in every detail like that of a normal wedding, except that only members of the family were invited to the banquet and the bride was represented by a doll. The doll was placed in the bridegroom's bed for three days. (The bridegroom was in this case unmarried, but I was told that in the case of a married bridegroom, the doll or spirit tablet is put in the bed between the couple for a few days.) After three days, the doll was burnt. Since the wedding, the bridegroom has apparently been treated by the girl's parents as a son-in-law and by her brothers and sisters as a brother-in-law. The brother of the ghost-bride assured me that there had been no illness or any other kind of calamity preceding his mother's dream. If this is true, however, it does seem strange that the parents waited until their daughter was in her late thirties before finding her a husband.

I was not able to witness a ghost marriage ceremony or obtain detailed accounts of the ritual itself. However, Jordan has described the rites of the ghost weddings he observed. He found them to be almost, but not quite, the same as those of ordinary marriage. The most striking differences are that in Bao-an, where the ghost is represented by a doll rather than a tablet, stress is laid on how many layers of clothing are worn by the bride. As Jordan points out, it is corpses that are wrapped in several layers of clothing, not brides. The bridegroom's gloves are not white but black, the colour of darkness, secrecy and evil. The most striking difference is that the doll-brides he has seen have smiling faces, photographs from a Japanese calendar. According to Jordan, it is most unseemly for a Taiwanese bride to smile: instead, following propriety she should have her head lowered and her eyes cast down. She is supposed to feel awkward and embarrassed. Jordan maintains that a smiling bride is an odd and

uncomfortable phenomenon, emphasising the unusual and sinister nature of the proceedings, as do the other examples of reversal of normal wedding practice, such as the several layers of clothing and the black gloves, both strong reminders of death and mourning rather than of life and the joy usually associated with a wedding.

The doll that I saw in a shop in Taiwan specialising in paper funerary objects was pure white, made of cloth like a rag doll and with an expressionless face, made of what appeared to be a Japanese mask. The doll had no clothes and no hair, since the family who bought her would supply those. The day after I saw her, she was bought for a ghost wedding, but the shopkeepers were unable or unwilling to tell me where she had gone.

Wolf, working in north-east Taiwan, reports similar cases of ghost marriages whose purpose is to provide the dead girl with heirs. However, one that he described has an added twist, entailing a young man manipulating the institution of ghost marriage to his own ends. The groom was a married man with two children, and he had recently suffered burns at a fire-walking ceremony. He had participated in the ceremony despite his father's warning that he was polluted on account of having attended a funeral the previous day. Since the father's warning had been justified, the son was now more predisposed to believe that his father might also be right in insisting that it was his fate to marry twice. To try and forestall the death of his wife, the young man decided to marry a ghost, the ghost-bride becoming his first wife. The father's sister acted as a go-between and found a neighbour who had been trying for some time to find a husband for a daughter who had died fifteen years previously. A contract was prepared to identify the groom. It stipulated that his two children should become the bride's children. The contract was submitted to the bride for her approval, and luckily she approved, for had she not, the matter would have ended there. The families exchanged the usual gifts, 'the groom's side sending to the bride's wedding cakes and NT\$120 as a bride price and receiving in return a dowry consisting of a gold ring and gold necklace, several pairs of shoes and six dresses all fitted for the use of the groom's living wife' (Wolf 1974: 151). On the wedding morning, the bride's family held a feast for her benefit. The brother and the go-between placed her tablet in a taxi and went to the groom's house, where his friends and relatives were gathered for the second feast. Throughout the ceremony, the bride was always treated and talked to as though she were alive and fully participating. During the feast, her tablet was placed on the chair next to the groom, and afterwards in his bedroom. Local belief has it that the ghost comes to sleep with her husband on the wedding night, exhausts him and never returns. The next day, the tablet is placed on the husband's ancestral altar. The local theory underlying these cases in Taiwan is basically the same: a female ghost has nowhere to go and her

marriage provides a solution. Wolf's example also provides an illustration that fate is seen as something which can be manipulated—even deceived.

Ancestor worship, worship at graves, sessions where spirit mediums attempt to communicate with the dead, all show an attempt at a controlled continuation between life and death. Ghost marriages are another aspect of that continuation, all the more so where marriages between the living and the dead are concerned. Yet they seem always to be performed in response to a ghost's expressed wish. I have never heard of parents who took the initiative in consulting a medium about whether their dead child wanted to be married without the child first having made the request, though there is no reason why this should not, in theory, be possible.

The underlying theory behind all the ghost marriages I have outlined is basically the same: a dead child is unhappy and lonely in the other world and requires a spouse. If the request is not listened to and responded to, the dead child may, like other unhappy ghosts, cause trouble to those who are in a position to alleviate its unhappiness. That the child usually asks for a spouse rather than anything else from its parents follows from two things. First, it is, as I have shown, traditionally very important to the Chinese that everyone should be married. In a society where marriages are arranged and take place for considerations other than personal choice of partner, there is no reason, given a fairly equal balance of men and women, why almost everyone should not be able to marry. Secondly, it is the duty and the right of the parents to arrange their children's marriage. It follows, given the Chinese view of the underworld, that this would continue to be the case after death.

In fact, this can be said to be the only duty that the parent owes to his child after the latter's death, as it is not appropriate for a senior to give offerings to a junior on the ancestral altar. Indeed, the child is unlikely to have an ancestral tablet at all unless, in the case of a boy, he has younger siblings or the children of an elder brother to worship him. So maybe it is also a way for the parent to keep up some kind of contact with a dead child similar to contact with ancestors. It may, as the letter-writer who asked for her ghost son-in-law's grave to be moved wrote, 'console the parents'.

Having gathered together these cases of ghost marriage, the consistency of detail is encouraging. Many features appear again and again, and the theme of the dead needing a companion, for whatever reason that might be, is fundamentally the same throughout. Even in those cases where a deceased first brother is resentful of a living second brother's marrying before him, the elder brother's need of a companion is sharply focused by the imminent marriage of the younger one.

It is interesting to look at some of the elements of how a ghost marriage is set in motion. In most of the above data about Hong Kong and Taiwan ghost marriages and the one case from Singapore, the first

overt sign that a ghost marriage is required is when someone dreams that a child, now grown up, is asking to be married. In the Chinese collective understanding, a dream about a dead child asking to be married is no mystery: it is because there is a dead child connected with the family who is now grown up and wants to be married. Moreover, this belief is so strong that if someone who has had such a dream, without having had a dead child, or a sibling goes to a spirit medium for clarification, the medium is likely to inform the mother that she had unknowingly aborted a long time ago, or that a sibling miscarried or was stillborn and the mother had never told the other brothers and sisters.

In most of those cases, it is the mother who dreams the dream. It is not surprising that it should be the parents who deal with their children's marriages. It is probably fairly safe to suggest that in those cases where someone else is involved, the dreamer is *in loco parentis*. Although in traditional Chinese marriage arrangements, it is usually the father who formally opens negotiations with a family with a suitable marriage partner, or who instructs a go-between to do so, it is often the mother who, unofficially through her group of friends and acquaintances, makes discreet enquiries. Hence it is not surprising that in the case of a dead child, the mother should continue to keep up an interest in its welfare in the next life. In addition, accounts of Chinese religious practice in present-day Chinese communities suggest that it is still the women who worship in the temples in the traditional way more commonly than the men. Certainly the domestic worship of the ancestors has traditionally been the women's domain. It is also the case that more spirit mediums, especially those who communicate with the dead and who need the souls of their dead children to help them, are women. Given women's closer involvement than men with their children, their attention to the needs of the domestic ancestors and their greater continuing observance of Chinese religious practices, it follows that a dead child's mother would, on the whole, be more likely to set a ghost marriage in motion than a father. I have not heard of any active opposition to ghost marriage on the part of the father, and in fact many cases also involved the father in the arrangements, but in both cases where disbelief in such matters was professed it was professed by men.

The next stage frequently seems to be consultation of a spirit medium. In all cases where this takes place, there is an apparent reluctance to act on the evidence of the dream alone. Verification is needed from a medium. Even then, in two cases from Taiwan, the people being haunted tried to ignore the ghostly requests for two or three years.

In the cases where reluctance is shown, there is not usually any suggestion that the participants do not believe in the gods, or that ghosts do not exist. In fact, Mrs Wu in Taiwan specifically stated that she had heard about ghost marriages but had never imagined anything like that

would happen to her. Far from the reluctance being the result of disbelief, then, it would seem to be caused by a wish not to get too closely involved with matters concerning the supernatural. It is one thing to worship ancestors (whose goodwill is assured through regular offerings to their ancestral tablet) or to make requests of the gods in a temple, but it is quite another matter to enter into a close and possibly continuing relationship with the spirit of a dead child or with the gods. Such a relationship lays the living partner open to the possibility of all kinds of unpredictable future demands which he will be obliged to meet.

There are also, as we have seen, two cases where disbelief was expressed by men. In one case, Mr Ho was not directly involved in the marriage in the sense of organising the proceedings: his mother had organised the wedding for his dead sister. He had not attended the ceremony, one of the reasons being that he did not believe in 'such things'. This is strange, as he also told me that as an adolescent he had been involved in spirit possession sessions at the Mid-Autumn Festival, but having had only one meeting with him, I am not able to tell why he said he did not believe in ghost marriage. I do not know whether he meant what he said or whether he said it for the benefit of a Westerner.

In the other case, Mr Fu, who arranged a marriage for his dead brother, also professed disbelief initially. He had been educated in the USA and Canada, and maybe this experience had modified his belief in Chinese religious practices. Nevertheless, he visited a spirit medium in order to seek verification of his dream, and he was also sufficiently convinced to arrange the marriage and keep up some kind of affinal relationship afterwards. It is reported that Mr Fu and the mother of the ghost bride were initially suspicious of each other, as each wondered whether a deal was being made with the medium by the other party.

It may be that the profession of disbelief is of the same kind as that of many Western-educated people who claim not to be superstitious. Uneasy joking about Friday the thirteenth and the avoidance of walking under ladders (explained rationally as the fear of the ladder or of a pot of paint falling on one) suggests an eagerness to keep oneself covered against both human ridicule and supernatural danger. Thus Chinese ghost marriages may sometimes be conducted or a spirit pacified 'just in case'.

I came across many other instances of a reluctance to make the details known. For example, in spite of the known existence of documentary evidence in the form of a letter to the Home Affairs Department and the testament of some of her neighbours, the mother of the ghost refused to talk to me on the grounds that no such event had taken place.

In another case, the young woman who told me the story emphasised that it was not much talked about in her family. She said, in English, that it was considered rather 'silly'. Yet the ghost marriage had been performed.

In the absence of any evidence as to what motivated this reluctance on the part of some informants, I can only surmise that it was on account of an uneasiness about letting outsiders know too much about these matters. It may well be, as some Chinese who live there told me, that in Hong Kong all English people are assumed to be members of the colonial administration. Hence there is a general reluctance to let them pass certain barriers to the understanding of Chinese life. I cannot tell whether this reluctance would have existed to the same extent, or less, or not at all if I had been asking about education or ordinary marriage. I would assume, though, that the degree of reserve had something to do with the matter being connected with the dangerous world of uncontained spirits.

When it has been decided to conduct a ghost marriage on behalf of a dead child, the steps taken closely resemble those of a wedding between living people. Thus, just as when a living pair are to be married, the horoscopes are in some cases checked for compatibility and an exchange of gifts takes place. In so far as the ritual of a ghost wedding is itself described, it conforms for the most part with that of a normal wedding. The checking of the dead couple's horoscopes may be due to the fact that the compatibility of the couple (which does not so much refer to how they will relate to each other but to the idea that if they are not horoscopically compatible disasters will happen to them) is also thought to be important after death, or it may have more to do with an idea that the ritual is a composite whole, so that to leave out any significant part of it would render the ceremony not really a marriage.

There is, however, an important and very obvious way in which proceedings at a ghost wedding differ from a real marriage, namely that one or both of the parties is, of course, not physically present. A symbolic substitute has to be found, which is always either a pair of dolls representing the bride and groom, or the ancestral tablets of the pair. The elderly lady in the village in the New Territories, who told me about her experiences of ghost marriage, said that small paper dolls were used to represent the couple. This is also the case in one example from Taiwan, where there was a living bridegroom.

It is, of course, the substitutes used and the treatment of them that emphasises that this is no ordinary marriage and that it has strong connections with death and burial ritual. Ancestral tablets commemorate the dead. In the weddings where these are used, their very presence is a reminder of death. When the ceremony is over, they are placed on the ancestral altar to join the other ancestors. When dolls are used, they are usually burnt at the end of the ceremony (sometimes they may be used in other ghost marriages). Paper models, of course, are used in present-day funerals. Models of houses, cars, servants and so forth are burnt in order to convey them to the world of the dead. In the Singapore case, Topley states that on the evening after the ghost wedding ceremony

a post-funerary ritual was conducted for the bride and groom together.

There is another way in which the ghost can signify his or her wish to be married: namely causing sickness to close members of the family, or in some cases in Taiwan to the man the ghost wants to marry. This seems to happen only in Taiwan. I have never heard of the ghost causing any kind of misfortune to attract attention to this wish in Hong Kong, yet in both cases in Taiwan a bad period in family affairs or a sickness was believed to be caused by a ghost. It is always emphasised that the ghost is causing these unfortunate occurrences not as a manifestation of malevolence, but merely as a way of drawing attention to itself. However, the fact that the ghost chooses to do harm rather than to manifest itself in a neutral fashion may be significant in reflecting an ambivalent attitude to family ghosts on the part of the living. This would be entirely congruent with what the Chinese expect from them, as I would like to show.

It is not obvious, *a priori*, why ghosts should be seen to be unhappy, nor why, given that they are seen in this way, this unhappiness should be thought to lead to malevolence on the part of the ghosts. However, there are several explanations. One is resentment on the part of the living, in this case the parents. The child should not have died and caused the parents unhappiness; it is therefore bad and will continue to be bad after death. There could be two reasons for this resentment. Either the parents are grief-stricken at their emotional loss and/or they are frustrated at the waste of a life, an uncompleted project or a loss of investment. Or it may be a combination of all those feelings. Another possibility is the existence of a sense of guilt on the part of the living in that they were unable to prevent premature death while they themselves are still enjoying life. Belief in a preordained life span must to some extent cater for that problem, but it could still be seen as somehow the fault of the living that the child died young. Moreover, dead brothers and sisters are thought to be jealous of their surviving siblings. They will manifest their anger at being robbed of life and what they could have expected of life.

At a less personal level, those who die young do not fit into the model of the social structure, that is, they do not grow up to marry and have children of their own. If they do not fit into society, they are therefore not bound by society's rules. Not being bound by these rules, they are uncontained and unpredictable. Not being predictable makes them dangerous. In many other societies, people in a marginal or liminal state between one status and another are temporarily not bound by society's rules. Marrying the ghost removes it from its dangerous state of being dead and unmarried and contains it within the framework of marriage.

Why the fear of the uncontained dead? The dead as such are not feared, for ancestors are contained and regulated and kept that way by being constantly worshipped and attended to. Only if they are neglected are they considered likely to act in an unpredictable fashion.



However, in spite of continued ritual contact with the dead, Chinese traditional thinking sees life and death as two separate and mutually exclusive categories; as in all oppositions, something is either one or the other. Indeed, contact with the dead, with its need for special formulae, special actors, intermediaries and rituals, reinforces the separation of the two worlds. To look at the matter in terms of time, the underworld is where we shall all one day be going, but having arrived there and having left the world of the living for ever, it is not permitted for the dead to return to the latter. When they do (as in dreams, for example) it is necessary for the living to propitiate them, to care for the needs whose neglect has caused them to make contact with the living, and thus to send them back where they belong.

The most obvious difference between the cases from Taiwan and those from Hong Kong, Singapore and China before the revolution is that whereas in Taiwan a woman requests a ghost marriage and is always married to a living man, elsewhere both parties are always dead (unless a man was marrying his dead fiancée) and the marriage could be initiated by either sex.

It is argued in Taiwan that there is no need for a male ghost to request a marriage. The problem is seen as the need of a homeless ghost who has no right to a place on the family altar to find a home. This problem does not affect males, as they are from birth potential contributors to the lineage and hence entitled to a place on the altar. If a dead boy is going to ask his parents for anything, he will ask them to adopt an heir for him. In Hong Kong, the theory of the need for heirs is the same, and yet dead boys are also seen to require ghost spouses. The problem here is defined as one of loneliness.

In Taiwan, the fact that the girl requests marriage (sometimes marriage to a particular man) is a direct reversal of the normal practice in life. Taiwanese girls, like all Chinese girls, are supposed to be modest and bashful. They do not initiate relationships with young men but submissively obey their parents and accept the choice of partner that has been made for them. That is the ideal. What is the mechanism that turns young submissive girls into powerful demanding spirits? Maybe it reflects a fear that the rules that constrain young girls do not apply to a ghost, who may therefore be likely to behave in a wilful fashion. Freedman also points out that many of the rituals of Chinese traditional wedding ceremonies are attempts to bring about the submissiveness of the bride. He adds: 'Chinese may hope that their brides will be meek, but they fear that they may not be' (Freedman 1979: 269).

Of course, beliefs about the dead express more about the living than the dead. Several anthropologists have noted that most ghosts, especially malevolent ones, are female. If a ghost is defined as one who has lived an anomalous life or died an anomalous death, it would follow that as

women's behaviour is more circumscribed than men's, it is easier for them to step out of line and thus attain anomalous status. For instance, there is the case of the woman in a Taiwanese village who married twice. She comes back as a ghost to haunt the village because she does not know whether to settle on her first or her second husband's altar. Or maybe, as Potter suggests, 'the frustrations of Cantonese women from one village could supply enough discontented, angry, revengeful ghosts to populate ten village hells' (1974: 229). There is not enough evidence, however, on the differences between women's situation in Hong Kong and in Taiwan to know whether this is a fruitful line to follow. This could be either a cause or an effect of the institution.

Another question is how far is it possible to find a consistent explanation for all these cases of ghost marriage? For instance, in Hong Kong it is also possible to place the tablets of unmarried girls on a spirit medium's shrine. Is there any consistent reason for doing that rather than initiating a ghost marriage? Or is it simply a matter of which remedy is available? Or even of individual preference? When I asked the spirit medium in the New Territories whose temple housed the tablets of dead girls about ghost marriage, she said she had never had anything to do with one. She went on to say that she could not see the need for such a marriage, as the ghosts could surely arrange their own marriages in the other world. However, it is fairly obvious that, given that parents are supposed to arrange their children's marriages, this solution would not be admissible. Again, opinions differ as to whether ghost marriage was becoming more or less frequent. Some informants in Hong Kong claimed that only the older generation performed it nowadays and that it was therefore much rarer than it had been. One might also surmise that the decrease in infant mortality might make it a good deal less likely to occur. On the other hand, in Taiwan the man who ran the shop specializing in paper funerary objects told me that the practice was on the increase. According to him, an increasing use of contraception meant that fewer babies were being born. This in turn meant that there were more souls in the other world who wished to be reborn but fewer opportunities for them to do so. Therefore there were more frustrated souls in the underworld whose solution to the problem was to get married. Another inconsistency is to be found in Wolf's account of a 40-year-old spinster who was knocked over and killed by a man on a motorcycle. Her mother offered the young man, who was an orphan, all her savings if he would become the dead woman's son and worship her as a mother (1974: 152). This is said to be a typical outcome of a large number of the many motor accidents that occur in Taiwan today. The absence of a husband or affinal family does not seem to matter here.

Ghost marriage is a remedy for many different situations. When someone is ill, the cause of the illness can be seen to lie in the ghost's

unhappiness—so the existence of the institution can be invoked when an explanation is needed. It can also be manipulated for other ends, as in the case cited by Wolf of the man who married a ghost in order to fulfil the prediction that he was fated to marry twice. It does not follow, however, that all folk explanations or solutions must be of the same kind, and I suspect that there is in fact no single tightly knit pattern which will explain why one solution is used rather than another in any given case. Nor is there any evidence that any particular social or economic group is more likely to practise ghost marriage than make use of any other solution. From the large body of beliefs and practices that are acceptable within the general framework of 'Chinese religion', it is no doubt possible to invoke one or other explanation or solution as the situation requires according to the perceptions of the people involved.

Not all ghosts cause problems. Millions of those who die anomalously are never invoked as agents of disaster or seen as needing a marriage arranged for them. But the concept is there to be applied, often retrospectively, if the situation requires it.

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