

## Witchcraft in Western Rural China: An Investigation in County M

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**Abstract:** Witchcraft, a primitive religious phenomenon dating to the origins of mankind, has not vanished in the modern era, but survives in many places, including rural China. This article examines patterns of witchcraft in certain west China villages and shows that it still plays a vital role in the lives of rural peoples and their cultures.

**Keywords:** witchcraft; religion; rural society; cultural.

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### Overview of Witchcraft Studies

#### Studies in China

“NuWu” (女巫) is the closest Chinese equivalent of the English word ‘witch’. It means a woman having the ability to conduct a conversation with gods through prayer. According to archaeological discoveries of Chinese scholars, shamans (from which ‘witches’ devolved) -- particularly those associated with divination and astrology -- played between 5000 to 2000 BC a vital role in social life from Yangshao (Neolithic culture in middle reaches of Yellow River), to Longshan (middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River region). Many will be surprised to learn that since prehistorical eras, “witches” have been prevalent among ordinary people. From 69 BC, they were sanctioned and administered by the State. In the Han Dynasty, witches were observed in Shi Ji (《史记》), edited by Si Maqian of the Han dynasty, circa 100 BC. Roughly speaking, witches emerged among ordinary people from Spring and Autumn period (770 BC-221 BC) to Wei and Jin period (222- 589). From these figures, all later witches have evolved. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the craft became recognized and respected, as the magic arts became more complex and sophisticated. Some scholars hold the view that there are two essential reasons for the spread of witchcraft in China: first, the official acknowledgment from the authority and second, the fervent interest of scholars. These two factors not only boosted its development but legitimated such magic practices in the eyes of the public. In this period the utilitarian purpose of witchcraft reached its peak. The Ancient Witch in China: the Origin and Development of Religion, by Liang Zhaotao [1] is an early example of Chinese scholarship in this area based on the philosophy of Sir James Frazer.

#### Witchcraft in Western Theory

In western theory, there have been several views of witchcraft. Ruth Benedict [2] holds that from the anthropological perspective witchcraft is a symbolic attempt to control the world around us. James George Frazer [3] argued that witchcraft is a pseudo science, yet a kind of art. Such thinkers suggest that in its spells and divine invocations, witchcraft anticipates modern technology. Another writer in this tradition is Eric Vogelin, who argued that magic and science were originally both efforts to control the natural world. Following David Hume and J.S. Mill, Edward Burnett Taylor criticized witchcraft as a misuse of the concept of association. Descending from Taylor’s idea, Frazer held that the two operative concepts of witchcraft may be denominated as the “similarity law” and “contact law.” The “Similarity law”, also known as *pars pro toto* witchcraft, usually acts upon symbolic fragments of the target to achieve the desired outcome [3]. “Contact law” means that “once objects are in contact with each other, interaction between them will continue function in a distant way when contact pauses [3]. The third view of witchcraft is basically utilitarian. Malinowski [4] claims modestly that witchcraft is merely a set of practical behaviors designed to achieve a certain goals. Or, one may think of witchcraft as complementing a deficiency in human nature. Jean Selerville [5] thinks witchcraft supplements craft. Max Weber [6] contends that Sinological witchcraft is essentially malignant. He asserts that it is a Chinese axiom that bad accidents imply that the cosmic Harmony has been ruptured by supernatural manipulations. Weber [6] sees western religion as a process of dismissing the mysterious from nature whilst Asian religion (particularly in China) remains generally animistic.

## **METHOD**

Since 2014, the author has investigated witchcraft in rural County M in northwest China. The following methods were used. The first is field observation. The author went to M County from 2014 to 2016 to do research, observing the processes of witchcraft of local villagers. Including funeral ceremony, prayer rain ritual, and familial necromantic witchcraft. By observations and in-depth interviews, the author obtained direct and vivid detailed first-hand information about the entire range and practice of witchcraft. In addition, the author sought to achieve an appropriate and useful *Verstehen* as to indigenous peoples, based in part on maintaining good reciprocal and empathetic relations with villagers. In addition more than one hundred local people were interviewed, most of them over the age of 50, to understand their *Weltanschauung* and the role played therein by witchcraft.

### **Several Varieties of Witchcraft in County M**

Let us examine characteristics and patterns of witchcraft in County M, located in Loess Plateau, a place with over 31 million inhabitants. It is a traditional agricultural county with average per capital income of 3800 Yuan. Most villagers grow crops and in the off season find employment in urban areas. The author chose this county as a representative case, because from the county's regional characteristics, production methods, cultural composition and other aspects it reflects the general conditions of western minority areas. Here witchcraft is broadly divided into two general categories: black and white.

#### **Black Witchcraft**

Black witchcraft refers to practices intended to harm others. In Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* black witchcraft is seen as only one of a number of popular approaches to nature, liable to fall into desuetude as scientific thinking takes hold. For example, in Malaysia, guided by the law of similarity, when a person's death is sought, his body parts such as nails, hair, eyebrows, saliva, etc., are combined with beeswax to form a small icon which is burned slowly for seven nights [7]. This technique is found in China in M County. Various harms are produced. Case 1: In 1996, villager F.D. helped his son marry a woman in a neighboring village. After marrying the couple resided with his father (F.D.) and frequently quarreled. The bride would then retreat to her mother's home. F.D. feared that the couple would divorce and that he would not be able to recover the bride price. In addition, if his son divorced, it would be difficult to get remarried in that rural area. F.D. believed his daughter-in-law was abetted by her parents and a bad influence. That is, he believed the daughter-in-law's parents were making a harmful divorce likely. So distraught was he that he began to consider eliminating her parents via some act of secret violence. He felt that might stop the quarrels

but preserve the marriage. However this would only succeed if he were not associated with the deed. He therefore invited a witch from another county to possibly assist him with this project. At her instruction, F.D. buried many talismans in the wife's parents' yard, such as a pair of hexed chopsticks, a wooden figurine, and pair of scissors. All these devices bore the customary curse of the "rival." Not yet satisfied, he stashed additional objects in their neighbor's chimney, on the theory of blood kin efficacy. It should be noted that FD had bad relations with numerous other households in this very village, households occupied by other relatives of his daughter-in-law. In a frenzy of opportunism F.D. undermined an additional thirteen villager's places. Later, when bizarre accidents exploded among the villagers, the daughter-in-law resorted to the local police and divorced her husband. When villager C.H. died mysteriously of liver disease at a young age, his parents blamed their son's death on the buried talismans with predictable results. F.D.'s father committed suicide by hanging himself. Case 2: F.C.'s eldest son suffers schizophrenia and fails to be treated. He ends his life by jumping off a building when working in Xi'an city. F.C.'s family is in great grief, and struggle with the loss of their son. They then learn that a neighbor, C.Y., has used witchcraft on F.C.'s son and "stolen his spirit." Additionally, these men have had a poor relationship for a long time. F.C. attributes his son's illness and death to C.Y.'s witchcraft. F.C. and C.Y. arm themselves with implements and fight. Many people are injured. To-day witches are not subject to any penalty because government will not recognize that death can be caused by witchcraft.

#### **White witchcraft**

Compared with malignant black witchcraft, white witchcraft tends to help people. Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski taught that in the face of unruly elements and destiny, people seek refuge in the exploitation of supernatural forces. To this day, in M County if an individual falls ill, especially seriously, there is no doubt he will be sent to the hospital. But if the symptoms are minor, the family will often resort to witchcraft. Witches often presume that sickness is the result of a disgruntled ancestor's untimely visit, and respond with rituals involving the manipulation of chopsticks and bowls of water. These rituals are designed to accomplish two principal aims: first to identify the ancestral spirit causing the unwanted symptoms, and secondly to placate the wrath of said spirit. Though there are no scientific tests demonstrating the success of such ceremonies, they remain popular amongst the autochthonous population. White witchcraft can be divided into conceptual witchcraft, Feng Shui witchcraft, divination witchcraft, spirit inviting witchcraft and inoculant witchcraft.

### **Conceptual Witchcraft**

Conceptual witchcraft commonly has recourse to the law of similarity. When a woman is giving birth, a family member will thrust a broom into the chimney while saying “Get down! Get down!” which is said to help the baby navigate the birth canal smoothly and alleviate mother’s pain. But with the development of medical science, this magic remedy is losing popularity. Other stratagems are directed to the accomplishment of pregnancy and gender selection.. Every April 8, non-pregnant women or exclusively female baby producers go to Nuwa Cave to set up symbols of male gender. There are many male clay babies in front of the Nuwa Cave, some are sitting, some creeping, some dancing. When making their petitions, women dedicate bunches of fresh flowers, do prostrations and express their hopes and wishes. They take a penis from the clay baby, grind it into mash, put it into a bowl of clean water, adding a few drops. They then drink this mixture water, hoping to conceive or deliver a male infant. If a male baby is successfully birthed, the mother must renew her temple vows and donations.

### **Feng Shui Witchcraft**

Like the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and ancestor worship, Feng Shui proceeds from the family as cultural foundation in China. Rural folk naturally want to tap and transform the spiritual power of the family into a pragmatic force. Thinking of the house or home of the family leads inevitably to the idea that the domicile manifests or represents the potency of those who have lived within. It follows that, properly handled, ancestry can be a source of blessing. On the other hand, where the departed souls are scanted perils loom. Contrary to western misconceptions, Feng Shui has application beyond the four corners of the residence. Chthonic forces emanating outward extend more widely as a field of vital force, and are certainly credited in, say, customs surrounding death and burial. Case3, H.G and H.Z were cousins. H.Z had two sons while H.G had five daughters. In rural China, to have no sons is still considered very shameful. H.G solicited a geomancer who said the situation or attitude of the collective ancestral tomb benefited H.Z’s family, not H.G.’s. The natural Feng Shui was occluded. The only solution would be to move that tomb. H.Z predictably balked at H.G’s suggestion. Later the conflict became physical. Eventually H.G moved the tomb as he wished. But H.Z was never comfortable with this and claimed that he would take revenge. A new round of conflict is now brewing.

### **Divination**

Divination is a form of magic in which the future is foreseen or predicted, especially an individual’s fate. Early Chinese folk performed divination with tortoise shells or animal bones. In Gansu province, Wuwei Huangniangniang, (approximately 4000 years ago),

sheep, cow or pig bones were frequently employed. Today, people usually turn to divination when they lose their belongings. Details are reported to the shaman or witch, who calculates and predicts the position and location of the loss according to the cycle of sixty years of Zhou Yi(《周易》). If the property is especially valuable, the villagers go to the temple to cast the sticks. The abbot then personally interprets the signs and tells the owner the exact place of the loss.

### **Spirit Inviting Witchcraft**

The concept of spirit is an important part of tribal psychology. Suppose a child is visibly dysphoric. Villagers may attribute the child’s low-spirits, lassitude and other symptoms to loss of soul. Parents often urge the afflicted child’s spirit to return. Suffering children are transported to remote place and subjected to various regimens, e.g., shocked with paper-cuts, hearing their names called by broom-wielding relatives who implore them thus: “AA, come back! We are waiting for you home!” At the same time, someone might respond “I’m coming!” The sweeping and calling evoke the return of the victim’s missing soul, which is being summoned back. A like pattern is found in funeral ceremonies. When the villagers carry the coffin beside the river, the son of the dead calls out, “Dad/ Mom, please come across the river,” the followers answering “I’ve already come!”, meaning the deceased has forded the river successfully. At the cemetery, a horse is burned in effigy while the deceased’s sons call out “Dad/Mom, please ride on the horse!”, and circumambulate the tomb three times, chanting “I’m on!” Qin Zhaoxiong has studied such a case in Hubei province; the process is similar. He conjectures that the treatment of death in China manifests the desire for eternal life, which is reflected in the practice of filial piety. Confucianists treat the formal soliciting of the missing spirit as an affirmation of life, which reconciles the people with the inevitability of death, assuaging its concomitant anxiety [8].

### **Characteristics of Witchcraft in Local Area**

According to my survey of County M, local witchcraft exhibits certain typical features.

### **Witchcraft still exerts its influence**

Though it exists amongst County M villagers, its impact is not as pervasive as previously. The majority, especially the young people, show vague or uncertain attitudes towards witchcraft. These doubts are probably associated with the increasing ubiquity of modern science and technology. With the increasing knowledge of science, people are more skeptical of the ‘cunning’ arts. However, villagers do still feel fearful about “black magic”. Facing the uncertainties of abnormalities or omens, they reason that it’s safer to credit reports of supernatural agency and make efforts of control it. How

much locals accept often depends on how many negative events occur in their family. As the Chinese adage puts it, "Even the dead caterpillar still wiggles its feet."

### **Lay Witchcraft**

Quite often there is no professional witch in a village. Hence the villager himself becomes his own magus. Anyone, male or female, may be a witch so long as he does not direct his powers against his neighbors [2]. As witches are themselves an ordinary villager and not highly paid, they have scant prestige, often receiving as little as some cigarettes as compensation. But if the witch declines an assignment, he/she will be scolded by the villagers. Therefore, as Weber said, the witch is never promoted to the status of the sacred. Also the tools he uses are everyday objects, such as grain, red cloth or farm tools. Why, then, shouldn't the folk themselves do their own spells and incantations?

### **No Obvious Gender**

In traditional Chinese culture there is a prejudicial idea that men are clean and women are dirty, which reinforces general patriarchy. In the beginning of sacrifice to the gods, although women must prepare for needed oblation, they are forbidden in the ritual site in order not to soil or contaminate the celebrants. But discrimination against women does not exist in wizardry. In matriarchal settings, witches are mediators between ghosts /gods and real world, As such, they enjoyed higher social status than their male partners. But in the patriarchal society, witches were devalued. In Han dynasty (BC 202-220), rulers drew lessons from witchcraft's riots and kept under strict control the practitioners of witchcraft, whose numbers dwindled. Later with the development of the society, witches became a part of collective life in the manner of midwives and wet nurses, in so doing with craft left a very deep impression on the folk. Witches may be either male or female. However there is a substantial preponderance of male practitioners. If the magus is female she can have no other occupation.

### **Ethical Value**

Getting rid of pain and disaster and pursuing happiness are the eternal aims of mankind. In contemporary Chinese culture it is still believed that magic and witchcraft can be instrumental in achieving those aims. Empirical research shows that there are far more acts of white magic than black. In both cases, the reality of a spirit dimension is always acknowledged. Thus it is that Chinese witchcraft bears a family relationship with traditional ancestor worship, to which it is essentially pendant. Feng Shui, warding off unlucky spirits with fireworks, prayers for good luck, venerating "door gods," etc., all bespeak the close relationship of witchcraft with the pervasive spiritualism of Chinese culture and history.

### **Views on Witchcraft in Rural Areas in Northwest China**

Witchcraft seeks to exert influence or control on objects through supernatural power. Different from religion, it does not involve the concept of gods. Therefore, it could be treated as a proto-religion. From religious perspective, witchcraft and religion are two different cultural phenomena, but they are associated to some extent, witchcraft being more utilitarian than religion [9]. When people have no idea about what to do, they pick up the method-witchcraft used by their ancestors, and are free to improvise spontaneously. Chinese people focus on how effective their efforts to obtain results are. So-called "religion" of any type is in their eyes no more than just a way of seeking welfare. Even if the Chinese people revere a certain god, that admiration will be eroded or enhanced depending on the performance of that deity. If He has brought a blessing this year, it's expected He will do so next year, or devotion will suffer.

Witchcraft is the first attempt on the part of humans to control their environment intellectually or mentally. That's why Frazer characterizes witchcraft as primitive science, as reflected in the maxim: "witchcraft-religion-science". That is, witchcraft is a forerunner of science. Despite its unsophisticated status, many have spoken of the magical arts as praiseworthy. Ruth Benedict [2] also places witchcraft in a high position. She says "without the love of witchcraft, sexual desire will not be aroused; without the recalling of witchcraft, the earth has no wind." Witchcraft plays an important role in maintaining order in villages [10]. In reality, economic differences exist in all places and the current law cannot rectify disparities. It is witchcraft that can achieve balance and integration of the resources. When conflict happens between the strong and the weak, the strong one is easily over-acting relying on his power. Thus the weak party is overcome. But under the aegis of witchcraft, there is no absolute strong one. In villagers' mind, their over-acting behavior probably brings revenge by witchcraft secretly. Under such instruction and conformity, their survival philosophy "better not to offend others" promote people's friendly and kind relationship. There is no doubt witchcraft plays a moral role and exercises a stabilizing influence.

Witchcraft has the function of psychological anodyne. The New York Times reported on September 20, 2009, that US doctors were employing Shaman doctors to relieve patient stress. It also states that "witchcraft doctor[s] cure mental weakness [12]." Witchcraft has the benefit of soothing and comforting peoples' minds.

The application of witchcraft in villages does not mean the invalidity of science. Early witchcraft and

science both explore the cause and effect of things. Science studies the real being while witchcraft relies on assumptions. Then their paths of development have shifted: witchcraft was alienated into belief while science still adheres to technique. Witchcraft confirms Jesus's saying "man shall not live by bread alone," which then developed into a principle beyond science. In a word, witchcraft is popular and an integral part of civil society's life principally in backward areas. And it has not been washed away by the tide of human civilization. On the contrary, it is likely to exist for a long time. As Fei Xiaotong [11] asserts that only a more effective way to control nature by human could eliminate witchcraft. Since it is impossible to have scientific method control nature right now, it is difficult to eliminate witchcraft completely in human culture. This is the law of history and the truth we should respect. What we can do is take good advantage of its positive aspects and discard its negative aspects. Do not blindly blame and criticize.

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