



D. Jordan

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In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 127 (1971), no: 1, Leiden, 181-189

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TWO FORMS OF SPIRIT MARRIAGE IN RURAL TAIWAN

The present paper is based on fieldwork conducted between 1966 and 1968 in Shigaang township of Tainan county in the Chinese province of Taiwan. The village in which I lived and where the events I shall discuss took place I have called Bao-an.¹

Observers of things Chinese have often pointed out the importance of the descent line and of care of the elderly and the deceased in the ideology of Chinese family organization. When we turn our attention to ghosts, we find that the same principles arise. People who die without having descendants, that is without becoming links in a continuous descent line, are believed to be deprived of the offerings which their descendants would normally provide, to be tragically impoverished in the land of shades, and to make all possible efforts to induce the living to take note of their condition and, if possible, to correct it. Although the basic eschatology remains the same at different times and in different regions, one finds differences in the ways in which it is connected to the realities of social life.

For present purposes I shall limit discussion to examples of a single ghostly activity, called in Chinese *Minghuen* or 'hell marriage', though it is perhaps more happily designated 'spirit marriage' in English. There are of course other kinds of ghosts and ghostly phenomena, and a longer paper would want to consider them.

Spirit marriage occurs when a girl who has died in childhood appears to her family in a dream or through a medium some years later and asks to be married. A groom is found by the family by laying 'bait' in the middle of a road. This 'bait' usually takes the form of a red envelope

¹ This research was financially supported by the (United States) National Institute of Mental Health under grants 5-F1-MH24,257 and 1-RO4-MH13526-O1. This public support is gratefully acknowledged. A more complete description of Bao-an and of what I found there may be found in JORDAN 1969. All Chinese words other than *Taiwan* and *Taipei* are here spelt in the National romanization system. I am grateful to Marc J. SWARTZ and Thomas W. JOHNSON for their criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.

of the kind used in China for gifts of money. A passer-by sooner or later picks up the envelope, and immediately the family of the spirit come out of hiding beside the road and announce to the young man that he is the chosen bridegroom. If he refuses, he is of course in danger of vengeance by the ghost, but his enthusiasm for the venture can be increased by an offer of a large dowry if necessary. The ghost is married to him in a rite designed to resemble an ordinary wedding as closely as possible, although the bride is represented only by an ancestral tablet. (No affinity is established between the groom and his spirit-bride's family in this way, nor does his marriage to the spirit affect his marital status among the living. The only obligation which he and his family have is to accommodate the ancestral tablet of the ghost on their family altar and to provide it with sacrifices as though the spirit-bride had married him in life.)

This seems to be the traditional form of spirit marriage. It is approximately the form that Bao-an informants report for times past (except that they are rather more vague about the details), and it is the form of spirit marriage described by LI Yih-yuan (LI 1968) on the basis of fieldwork in Janghuah county. It is convenient to call it Type I.²

Today in Bao-an and the surrounding area spirit marriage occurs differently. The ghost seldom appears in a dream to her parents to demand a husband. In the cases with which I am familiar she strikes misfortune upon her natal family or the families of her married sisters. This usually takes the form of sickness of one or more family members. If the sick cannot be cured by medicine or is part of a larger pattern of misfortunes, the family may turn to a spirit medium for advice. The medium, representing a god, announces that the disaster is caused by the deceased girl (daughter, sister, wife's sister, or whatever), and proposes that the ghost is doing it in order to call attention to her plight, and that the way to solve the problem or cure the disease is by finding a husband for the ghost.

Typically the family is first faced with a problem: illness unresponsive to normal medical treatment. They also have a deceased, unwed girl in the family history, or, as is the case with the present examples, in the wife's natal family. The medium puts these two facts together and decides that the ghost is causing the illness, and adds that her motivation in doing so is that she wishes to be married. The cure is to marry her,

² This label is adopted for convenience only. It probably is not the case that that Type I and Type II differ as structurally coherent and mutually opposing cultural forms.

so that she will stop making a nuisance of herself and retreat back into ghostly oblivion where she belongs.

The credibility of such an explanation and such a proposed course of action in the eye of the participants hangs on a number of things. There is first, of course, the belief in ghosts and the belief that ghosts can make one sick. Then there is the belief, firmly anchored at many points in Chinese social theory, that one must have descendants to worship one's ancestral spirit. And finally there is the fact that descendants may be filiated only through their fathers. Given these few simple notions and practices, the remainder follows fairly easily. Males who die before marriage may (and do) have children adopted in their name postmortally. This process is impossible for females because a woman can have children only in the line of her husband, and if there is no husband, then there is no line. Culturally and structurally there is every reason not to be surprised that it is the girls who become ghosts, and that they are pacified and laid to rest by providing them with a husband and line of descendants who undertake to worship them.³

To rural Taiwanese there is also nothing particularly odd about the ghosts striking now one member of the family and now another. The familial dead are not normally seen as being malignant. So long as their situation is comfortable they do not interfere with mortal affairs. When they are not comfortable, they cause trouble not out of spite, but only to attract attention to their plight. They may inflict their baleful influences as readily upon one family member as upon another, or upon more than one at once, for the objective is not to spur some particular sufferer to action, but to inspire action on the part of the family as a unit. There are cases in which one member of the family is struck ill to alert the family as a whole and another performs the necessary 'correction' of the ghost's position on behalf of the family. There is nothing inconsistent in this, for each individual is an equally satisfactory representative of the family group to which the ghost is appealing. The use of unwed ghosts as an explanation for ill-health does not jar Taiwanese credulity, therefore, regardless which member of the family is sick.

³ As any enthusiast for Chinese short stories knows, there are plenty of male ghosts in China too. But in Bao-an, although there were tales of male as well as female ghosts, the shades that actually bothered anyone enough to require exorcism or other protective measures were inevitably female (though not all brides) and inevitably unsettled about abnormalities in the structure of the descent line. V. JORDAN 1969.

In the spirit-marriage cases which came to my attention, the ghost specifically demanded to marry her sister's husband and brought disaster upon his family of procreation, a point which I shall return to below. We may call this Bao-an variant Type II.

Here let me briefly rehearse two case histories. In the first case the bride was the spirit of a woman from Bao-an village who would have been in her middle forties if she had not died in her first year of life. After her death her mother bore a second girl, who in time married a man who lived in a village some ten kilometres from Bao-an. This husband was the groom that the ghost selected. In 1963 or 1964 the groom dreamt an odd dream of a woman wanting to marry him, and his mother inquired of a spirit medium about it, spirit mediums being a particular addiction of elderly women in the southwestern Taiwanese countryside. The medium announced that a ghost wanted to marry him. Little more was said until a year or two later, when members of the groom's nuclear family began to take sick in succession. More visits to the medium convinced them of the inevitability of giving in to the ghost, and at length to cure the sickness of his family the groom agreed, through the medium, to marry the spirit.

In the second case a single groom married two spirits at the same time, shades of deceased younger sisters of his wife. The wedding was performed in order to pacify the ghosts and cure his wife, who had been subject to periods of weariness and unlocalized aches which were considered to be related to each other and to form a pattern of generalized misfortune, ill-health, and subnormal functioning. Diagnosis and communication with the spirits was sought through a spirit medium. One of the two ghosts sought marriage directly with her sister's husband, while the other initially preferred the traditional bait-in-the-road style match-making. They coöperated in bringing about illness to attract attention to their common plight. (The older-style match went amiss when the victim proved to be a disreputable character of the wrong political faction. The ghost immediately changed her mind and joined her sister in a polygynous rite.)

There are several significant ways in which Type II marriages are distinctive. First, the spirit is suddenly calling attention to herself by causing disease or (theoretically) other misfortune rather than by appearing in a dream. It is not clear to me whether this is a difference in region between Shigaang and Janghuah, a difference that has come about over time, or the chance that both forms occur but that LI noted only the one and I only the other. Ghost lore in China includes both

modes for spirits to make themselves known to the living, and in Bao-an tales are told of both sorts of encounters with the world of the dead, though the only ghosts that inspired any overt action while I was in Bao-an or that occurred in 'real-life' tales told me in Bao-an were those that were held responsible for disaster. For the time being the best guess is that in Bao-an ghosts seeking mates have probably always made people sick.⁴

The second difference relates to the first, for it involves the conditions under which a ghost may raise her head. This is hardly the place to attempt a general discussion of the relations between the living and the dead in China, and it must suffice to say that in China familial dead are assumed to smile gently and good-naturedly upon the fortunes of the family with little power or inclination to affect them for good or ill. They receive no attention as personalities and are normally honoured only by infrequent and formalistic worship. Save for this ancestor worship, the familial spirits come to people's attention (come into existence, as it were) only in some funeral ceremonies and when needed to explain illness or other misfortune. Should hard times come upon a family, the spirit medium need only find one of the family to have died without offspring or for other reasons to be without a descent line, and the ghost is immediately asserted to be the cause of the current disaster, a desperate being working havoc in the human world to call attention to its plight in the land of the dead.⁵ These structurally anomalous dead are explanations *in posse* which can be actualized when there is need for supernatural explanation.

When somebody is sick he is treated with western or Chinese me-

⁴ Lou in an anecdotal chapter (1968: 23 ff.) discusses a southern Taiwanese case in which the ghost manifests herself by attacking her younger brother but is married to a groom selected by placing a red envelope on a road. Although this muddies our Type-I and Type-II distinction, it suggests that apparition of the ghost through someone's illness need not be an idiosyncratic thing for Bao-an and the vicinity or even a recent thing. The point is important even though want of evidence forces me to treat it lightly, for a ghost that appears in a dream to demand correction of her structurally anomalous position presumably is a manifestation of guilt on the part of the dreamer, while a ghost diagnosed by a medium to be causing a disaster is closer to censorship of the family by an external agency on behalf of community norms. A demonstrable transition of the same community from one form of ghostly manifestation to the other would therefore be evidence of an important change in the locus of enforcement of the structural norm having to do with marriage and descent-line membership.

⁵ More exactly, the ghost is assertable, since other diagnoses do exist which may also be used. V. inf.

dicine, or both. It is only when medical science has been tried and has failed to cure the disease, or when the patient is troubled by illness after illness in rapid succession, or when several members of the family become sick with different diseases, or when illness accompanies financial reverses or other misfortunes that supernatural causes are considered and a spirit medium is consulted. A few mediums seem to specialize in solutions of this kind, discovering maiden shades in a markedly higher proportion of cases than do the bulk of spiritualists. Some even maintain certain ritual equipment which may be leased for the spirit marriage. Because of this we may reasonably suppose that the decision that an unwed ghost is involved is, if not made overtly, at least initiated by the family in its selection of a medium known to mediate an unusually large proportion of spirit-marriage cases.

Third, the ritual itself has been elaborated somewhat in Bao-an and surrounding villages, for the bride is no longer represented only by her ancestral tablet but by a paper, wood, and cloth dummy, which represents her in a more graphic way and, to me at least, increases her dramatic value considerably. The rites themselves are intended to resemble weddings among the living, but by deft manipulation of incense, details of clothing, and other means, give constant reminder of the grotesque rather than festive nature of the celebration.⁶

The fourth feature is perhaps the most puzzling: the groom seems inevitably to be the spirit's sister's husband. Why a sister's husband? It is not a necessary match, informants insist, but a recent development (though presumably it was not unknown in the past). In the second of the case histories cited one of the brides tries first to find a husband by the traditional, more or less random, means and then changes her mind. Among the living it is not even clear that such a marriage would be quite moral. Still sister's husbands are apparently the preferred form for ghosts undertaking Type-II marriages.

One attractive hypothesis arises if we take the view of the medium. A client arrives suffering from illness and we know that each deceased, unwed sister or daughter is a potential cause. These are of course limited in number (the more so in recent years as infant mortality drops). If we are free to utilize his wife's sisters as well, we have increased the chances of being able to find a deceased, unwed girl who has not already been postmortally married, and thereby we have increased our chances of delivering our client from his misery, and incidentally

⁶ For more detail, v. JORDAN 1969: 224-233.

of being able to lease the client equipment for a spirit marriage.

If we take this view, then it begins to make sense that informants report the match with the ghost's sister's husband to be more prevalent in recent years. Remembering that villages tend to have heavy surname clusterings in southern Taiwan and that surnames are exogamous groups, most marriages take place between villages. It may be that the supply of deceased, unwed girls of a village gets 'used up' in a period of popular enthusiasm for this kind of explanation. They must then be replaced as more babies die over a period of years, or they must be supplemented by changing the explanation so as to allow the introduction of other dead babies from villages where the fashion has not come at the same time: hence the admission of deceased sisters of wives whose families of orientation live in other villages where the supply of deceased, unwed girls has not been used up.

We may well note in passing that the role of fashion in all of this is not to be discounted. Even within the short time I was in Bao-an the village underwent a glut of household exorcisms of a particular kind in the space of two months that exceeded all such instances in recent memory. People were not troubled by any remarkably different sort of symptom from normal, but seemed merely to be indulging a love of modishness. Available supernatural interpretations of human distress are many, and the preference for one diagnosis or cure over others is by no means divorced from the status-seeking and one-upmanship of other spheres of mortal activity.

If this restricted-supply model is tenable, a clever medium or two in one or two villages near Bao-an may simply have discovered a principle that allows the use of girls from other villages after the local supply is gone. This need not involve a conscious decision on the part of the medium to defraud anyone, but simply a greater attentiveness to the possibilities in that particular direction than formerly.

Without many more cases — and it is unlikely we shall ever have them since spirit marriages tend to be concealed — such a line of argument is destined to be nothing more than speculation. But even allowing that the mediums are to blame for the rise in Type-II spirit marriages, they could not make it work if such matches were not somehow credible, and we may reasonably ask what kinds of changes have occurred in Taiwan that might make it believable for my wife's sister to strike at me rather than at her natal family today when it would not have been credible (or would have seemed less likely) in the past.

GALLIN (1960) has pointed out the importance of affinal relationships in Taiwan. During the war they were sometimes utilized by refugees fleeing from the cities to the countryside to escape American bombing raids. However strong or weak affinal ties may have been in the more distant past, evidence suggests that they are becoming stronger in Taiwan today, promoted both by easy communication (and the wealth and liberty to use it) and by a gradual change in the marriage system so that even on the countryside marriages are now arranged largely, if not entirely, by the young people themselves (YANG 1962: 70f.). A man's family ties today include his wife's family to a greater extent than ever before, and a woman's ties to her natal family remain more intact than in the past. YANG's data (1962: 71) indicate, further, that

Today the husband treats his wife with much more consideration than he did before. This is shown in such conditions as the wife receiving from her husband more respect and understanding, more respectful affection, more equality, more intimacy and sympathy, more democratic treatment, more friendliness, and more companionship.

In combination, these changes may make it more believable than formerly for imperfections in the descent lines of my wife's family to make me (or her, or our children) ill, for I (or we) now assume a degree of responsibility for the welfare of her natal family which is substantially more than in former times. If this is the case, we have an instance of modernization of the marriage system producing an increase in instances of supernatural malice.

I do not particularly like this explanation — it has too important an *if* in it — but it has the advantage of providing directions for further inquiry that do not altogether depend upon the accumulation of impossibly many instances of spirit marriages for its demonstration or disproof.

What is of greatest interest for the present is this: in all instances of spirit marriage, the theology is the same: there are shades, and they suffer if they have no descendants; women have descendants only through their husbands; spirits cause illness in order to draw attention to themselves; and the like. At the same time rather important changes seem to be taking place in the way in which ghosts are recruited, that is to say in the social relations which are susceptible to manifestation in this form in the diagnosis of a particular disaster.

Be it due to changing attitudes towards affines or to increasing ingenuity of spirit mediums or whatever, there are important differences between Type-I and Type-II marriages. What is fascinating is not

that the ceremony of spirit marriage is being used in new ways — a phenomenon that would be in no way surprising — but that both the procedures of spirit marriage and the accompanying rationale (ghostly disaster and the preservation of the descent-line) are *together* coming to be attached to every-day social reality in a new way. Furthermore the shift from the more traditional way in which this custom has been practically understood and the way in which it operates in Bao-an today has not been accompanied by any noticeable weakening of belief in these ghosts or in the validity of ghosts as an explanation for misfortune. On the contrary the shift from Type-I to Type-II practices seems to have resulted in an increasing interest in the possibilities of this kind of explanation and even in elaboration of the ceremonies involved. A new and broader integration is apparently being achieved between social practice and religious beliefs.

DAVID K. JORDAN

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