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Village Ghosts, Village Gods

An old woman sits in her village house and talks about birth and death. She smiles as she tells her stories.

A month after a child is born the family holds a feast for the newborn. If the child is a boy the family has a big dinner for him during the next spring festival.

When a villager dies, everyone in Long Wan learns about it quickly. In the old days someone always seemed to be dying in the village but now people live longer.

When a family member dies, the family leaves the village to buy a coffin. It's usually a simple wooden coffin. The coffin is red with gold lettering on the outside.

The family places the corpse in the coffin and lets it lie in the house for a few days. The family waits for close relatives to arrive before carrying the corpse out to the graveyard at the edge of the village.

Close relatives are expected to cry when the body is being buried; if they don't cry the deceased person's spirit will become angry and return to haunt the family.

Ghosts of the dead must be handled carefully; every effort must be made to appease their spirits; if their spirits aren't appeased they will return to disturb the family.

The body is washed and dressed in new clothes before burial. Men attending the funeral often wear white headbands and women a piece of cloth called a ma. After the burial the family and friends of the deceased return to the house for a big dinner.

Twelve days after the burial the family holds a Zhao Ju, a ceremony in which a group of men chant words to calm the spirit of the deceased. Often only the old people of the village attend the Zhao Ju. The young people don't think about death. It's the old people who feel close to it.

During the Zhao Ju, family and friends weep once more for the deceased. After the ceremony, the family has another large dinner.

Ancestors

In a clearing at the edge of the village rice paddies, farmers stand outside a small brick house. Firecrackers explode in the distance as they enter the simple one-room building. Inside the house it's dark and shadowy, lit only by candlelight.

The farmers approach the altar and place thimbles filled with rice and wine before statues of the village's ancestral gods. They light incense and candles and kowtow before the gods, praying for the well being of their families.

Today is Qing Ming, the day the Chinese pay their respects to the dead. Many villagers have come to the temple to pray to the local gods, who represent the mythical parents of the village.

Statues of the gods - a man with a long flowing white beard and a woman dressed in long robes and a veil - stand at the center of the altar. Chinese characters tell of the origins of the ancestral gods, explaining that the village originally belonged to the goddess, who allowed the man to come to Long Wan to live

with her, and that all of the villagers are their children.

The villagers come and go quietly, their faces bathed in flickering light. The air is redolent of incense and burning wax. An elderly woman solemnly kowtows before the altar. The faces of the gods glow eerily in the wavering light.

The farmers say they come to the temple - called the Happiness Kindness Hall - to pray for a rich rice and sugarcane harvest or for the health of their families.

Many women pray to the local deities for help in conceiving a boy. Village women always feel pressure to conceive a boy child. The pressure is especially severe now because of the government's one-child-per-family birth-control policy. On the temple walls the villagers hang small flags petitioning the village goddess for help in conceiving a son or thanking her for answering their prayers and granting them one.

A small table has been set up on the grass in front of the temple for the food and beverages offered to the gods; the villagers have brought whole duck, eggs, rice, rice wine, and tea.

After the villagers pray inside the darkened temple, they return to the yard to burn yellow paper money and light firecrackers. Plumes of smoke drift across the nearby fields.

In the grassy area outside the temple, a woman kowtows before a stone dog perched atop a high cone-shaped pedestal. The villagers say the dog protects village homes from evil intruders.

One woman kowtowing before the ancestral gods and the stone dog says she prays that her children will be healthy and that the family will have enough food. A middle-aged woman prays that her son will pass the upcoming college entrance examination.

In times of trouble, the farmers pray to the village gods and seek help from their ancestors.

Ancestral ghosts can return to the world and have either a positive or negative effect on the living. If a family prays and offers symbolic gifts to the dead, they are more likely to bring good luck to the family.

Most of the farmers visiting the temple today are woman. The villagers say it's usually older people and women who pray to the deities and visit village temples. Those who worship generally visit the temples on important festivals such as Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Qing Ming.

Most of the younger villagers have little knowledge of religion. In the years following the communist revolution, religious practices were largely suppressed by the Communist government, which taught that religion was a form of superstition.

Young people now are too preoccupied with doing business and earning money to pay much attention to religious ideas and rituals. They seem just as indifferent to the ideas of Mao Zedong, who is still viewed as a kind of deity by many older villagers.

But interest in the supernatural is unmistakable on days like Qing Ming when even children go out to the village cemetery to kowtow before the graves.

Translated as "clear bright," Qing Ming is one of the 24 climatic periods of the Chinese lunar calendar, which synchronizes village activities with the rhythms of nature. Qing Ming is celebrated in early April when the weather

changes from gray and rainy to bright and sunny. At about the same time the spring rice and sugarcane crops are planted.

Qing Ming

Village families move in single-file caravans across a freshly planted field, carrying baskets of food to the village graveyard. Marching across the field, the villagers look like pilgrims journeying to a holy place.

By late morning families have begun to arrive at the graves scattered across a low circle of hills. A small pool of water - a tradition in Chinese cemeteries - lies at the base of the hill.

When deciding on a burial site, villagers consider the "feng shui" or "wind and water" condition of the location. They believe that a grave overlooking water is propitious and that burying parents in a place with good "feng shui" will bring the family good fortune.

By late morning the graveyard has taken on an almost festive air. Families dot the hillside, gathering in small groups around the graves of their ancestors. The elders of the family suspend long streams of red firecrackers from a stick and suspend them in front of the grave. The firecrackers explode in a staccato fury of orange flame and smoke.

Two men from one family move from grave to grave hauling a roasted pig as an offering to their ancestors. Small children watch in awe as the firecrackers explode across the hillside. Clouds of white smoke and the pungent smell of burning gunpowder fill the air.

Scattered among the villagers are people dressed in bright dresses and suits that seem out of place in the village. Former villagers who live in the city often return to the village on Qing Ming to pay their respects to deceased parents and grandparents.

In a crowded section of the cemetery, a family of seven brothers and cousins, most of them dressed in white shirts and black suits, move with their children from one family grave to another. Like other villagers, they carry baskets of food and bright red packages of firecrackers.

Unlike some of the other families, the Liang family tradition only allows males to visit the cemetery on Qing Ming. If the women really want to participate they can, says one brother, but generally they have stayed home.

While some of the Liang family graves are marked by long cylindrical concrete tombs, most are simply mounds difficult for an untrained eye to see. When the Liang family arrives at a grave, one brother searches for clumps of earth to rebuild the grave mound. Every year on Qing Ming the grave mound is rebuilt and swept as a gesture of respect for the deceased. Not showing such respect can bring bad luck to the living.

Once the mound has been rebuilt so that it remains visible in the coming year, baskets of food are placed in front of the grave. Today the Liangs have brought a whole cooked goose, rice balls, eggs, and rice wine as offerings. After the rituals are performed, the family will consume the food.

As part of the Qing Ming ritual, one brother digs a small hole in front of the grave and pours rice wine into it. He then lights small candles to guide the spirits home again and burns small pieces of paper representing money, clothing,

gold, or a house. The smoke carries the family's offering to the ancestors, says one brother.

When the preliminary rituals have been completed, family members kneel before the grave and whisper a private prayer to the dead. There is a moment of silence in the fields when the dead and the living meet.

Then a child hands a long strip of red firecrackers to an adult who suspends it from a stick and lights it in front of the grave. The sound is deafening. Children hide behind adults or plug their ears as the graves dissolve in a swirl of thick white smoke.

For an instant the mystery and fear that only death inspires invades the hillside. A long drawn-out silence hovers over the land as the smoke slowly swirls and finally clears. An unspoken moment of memory lingers in the open graveyard as the family picks up their baskets and moves down the hillside to the next grave.

It's the sound of the exploding firecrackers, they say, that sends the spirits of the dead back to the spirit world. Although the villagers call on their ancestors to return to the graves to collect their offered gifts, the ritual ends by sending them back to the spirit world.

A ghost that follows them home can create mischief in the family, they say.

By the time the smoke has cleared, the Liang family has already moved on to the next grave. The one they just left belonged to their grandfather, one brother says, but the grave they stand before now belongs to an ancestor who lived maybe 300 years ago; they don't know who he is, he says, laughing. They only know he is their ancestor.

Most of the villagers visit the graveyard on Qing Ming, but not all of them are convinced of the existence of spirits. Some believe, some don't, says one brother.

But it doesn't matter if they believe or disbelieve, he adds. They visit the cemetery to show respect for their ancestors.

Another villager says most members of his family are skeptical. They don't believe much in a supernatural world, he says. They visit the cemetery out of respect for the deceased members of their family and to remember them.

When people die, they just die, he says, smiling. They come to the graveyard to thank their ancestors for bringing them into the world. If it weren't for them, none of us would be here today, he says.

Today's farmers believe that a person's happiness depends on himself, not on his ancestors, says another villager.

It has been a Chinese tradition to believe that a person's ancestors can help him through the trials of life, but many people no longer believe this. Still, he adds, smiling, it's impossible to know for sure what happens to a person when this life is over.

Spirit House

In a shady place hidden by trees, an elderly woman on her way to the rice fields stops at a small house to leave burning incense.

The house, or lin pai, is one of the many one-room temples in Long Wan where villagers pray to their ancestors. Dedicated to the ancestors of particular

families, these temples are usually close to the family house and visited by family members on important holidays or on the anniversary of a relative's death.

The villagers believe that the spirits of the dead will be drawn to these small houses where the deceased person's name has been written on a piece of wood or paper. More modest versions of lin pai are the small shrines often found in Chinese homes and businesses.

Some of the very old villagers, one woman explains, also turn to mediums to help them communicate with the spirits of dead relatives. The living can communicate with the dead only on certain days of the month, the woman says. The third, sixth, and ninth days of the month are considered auspicious, she says.

By the early 1990s, spiritual practices were becoming fairly commonplace in the village.

But during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Communist Party described religion as a form of superstition - a feudalistic practice that need to be uprooted from China.

The Communist Party is more tolerant of religious practices today, but it continues to be wary. Certain "superstitious" practices are still prohibited by law and can lead to arrest. Party officials continue to urge people - especially other party members - not to practice religion.

But despite its well-publicized distaste for religion, the Party claims that Chinese law grants people religious freedom as long as their practices don't threaten the stability of the state. In recent years, the people of Long Wan have gradually returned to the religious practices they knew before the 1949 communist revolution.

The Buddhist Temple

Hidden in a clump of trees on a hill overlooking the lowland fields stands the village's Buddhist temple.

Four golden Buddha statues stare down from the altar as incense burns nearby in a large vase. Offerings of flowers and oranges decorate the altar. A lone villager dressed in a black cape chants a Buddhist sutra and rings a bell.

About five years ago, the temple was built to replace one that had stood on the site for three or four hundred years. The original temple was closed and fell into disrepair during the Cultural Revolution. The old monk was driven away and the villagers were forced to practice Buddhism secretly, says Guang Chi, the Buddhist monk who organized construction of the new temple.

The villagers say that generally it's the old people who practice Buddhism and visit the temple.

An elderly woman shelling freshly picked peanuts in front of a house not far from the temple is one of the village's more dedicated practitioners. She says she visits the temple every day in the morning and in the evening to pray for good health.

She believes that practicing Buddhism will guide her to a better life after death. A good man will go to heaven after he dies, she says. An evil man will not.

Xu Mei, a 39-year-old woman, is also a believer. She says that lighting candles and incense and praying to the Buddha will bring God's blessings to her

family.

On festival days her family goes to their old village house to pray before the Buddhist altar there. We pray for a good life in this world, she says.

What happens to people after death is impossible to know, she adds. Only people who have died know where the dead have gone.

It is a Sunday afternoon and Guang Chi, the temple's principal monk, sits in a small dormitory room attached to the Buddhist temple.

Dressed in the traditional gray robes worn by Chinese Buddhist monks, Guang Chi has a shaved head and stares with an eye strangely frozen in its socket - a glass eye.

His room is disorderly, with empty bottles stored under the bed, and books, teacups, and scraps of paper strewn across the dresser top.

He says only since 1978 have the villagers been allowed to openly practice Buddhism again. The local officials have good relations with the monks because the Communist Party used to hold meetings in the temple before the 1949 revolution. This temple supported the Communist Party, he says.

Guang says he came to Long Wan five years ago to build the temple. He says about 100 villagers practice at the temple now, some visiting the temple only during important village festivals such as Qing Ming and Spring Festival, others practicing with the monks three times a day - in the early morning, at noon, and in the evening.

Many Buddhist rituals are similar to those performed to honor the village earth deities. Practitioners chant sutras, light incense, and ask the Buddha for help with the struggles of daily life.

Guang says he spends much of his time at the Buddhist temple in nearby Zhanjiang, but also lives at the Long Wan temple. He says the monks wake up at 4 a.m. to practice, which includes chanting, meditation, bell ringing, and drumming.

After a sunrise breakfast, the monks do farm work in the nearby fields, cultivating about 10 of the 50 mu of land controlled by the temple. We don't have enough workers, he says, so the crop isn't big enough to support us.

In addition to raising some of their own food, the monks accept donations of rice and money from the villagers, he says.

A monk since 1978, Guang says he initially learned about Buddhism from reading books. Without Buddhism, a man's life differs little from the life of an ant or an animal, he says. He lives and dies and life is worth nothing.

A young man walks his bicycle down a shaded village path. It's late afternoon and the day's last light filters through the trees. A wooden crate filled with incense, candles, and yellow paper money is attached to the rear of his bicycle. The merchant travels from village to village selling items used in religious rituals in the village's temples.

The peddler bangs a small tin drum as he moves down the village lanes. Women emerge from their homes and approach him as he passes by their courtyards. He sits on the ground and watches indifferently as they gather round his bicycle to inspect his goods.

The young man hangs his head to one side as the women inspect his candles

and incense; he seems bored with what he is doing, detached from the mournful rituals that fuel his business.

His face is expressionless as the women complain that his prices are too high. They ask him to lower his price, but he seems unmoved by their complaints.

The old women slowly drift away, shuffling empty-handed down the muddy village lanes. The young merchant lifts himself up from the ground and continues on his way, without a word spoken to anyone.


宗恩潤澤垂千秋
宗校發達垂澤長
地雲人傑起龍文


祖德宗功
祖德光輝源流遠
祖德流芳昌萬世