



## The Macabre Affective Labour of Cadavers in Chinese Ghost Marriages

PC: Siilin.

Chris K. K. TAN

Recently, Chinese newspapers have captured the attention of their readers with stories of criminals robbing graves and murdering people to sell the corpses for use in ‘ghost marriages’ (yinhun 阴婚). The state casts ghost marriages as ‘superstition’, but the practice remains as a way for people to attempt to sooth the angst of the spirit of the deceased and its living relatives. In fact, the lifeless corpse used in yinhun must be considered alive during the ritual for the ghost marriage to achieve its spiritual and social efficacies. As such, yinhun cadavers perform a sort of macabre affective labour.

On 30 October 2014, the *South China Morning Post* reported a most bizarre and macabre crime: the police in Shandong province arrested 11 men for raiding women’s graves and selling the corpses for ‘ghost marriages’ (yinhun 阴婚, also known as *minghun* 冥婚) (Luo 2014). Earlier in March that year, the suspects had exhumed a woman’s three-month-old corpse, and sold it to a middleman for 18,000 yuan (2,600 USD). Depending on such factors as the age and physical appearance of the deceased,

her socioeconomic background before death, as well as the freshness of the cadaver itself, a corpse could potentially sell for more than 20,000 yuan. A just-deceased corpse would fetch a far higher price than bare bones. Through the black market, the family of a dead bachelor in neighbouring Hebei province eventually bought the stolen cadaver for 38,000 yuan (5,500 USD). Presumably, after conducting a wedding for the couple, this family reburied the woman next to her new husband. The newspaper article further warned that while the state treats *yinhun* as outdated and harmless superstition, grave robbery itself is a crime punishable with up to three years of imprisonment. Prices, it seems, have inflated tremendously with the times. A couple of years later, Li (2016) reported, '150,000 yuan (US\$22,000) won't even get you bones'.

Despite its illegality, *yinhun* persists in the rural areas of Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, Hebei, and Guangdong provinces (Luo 2014). In April 2016, three men from Gansu province murdered two mentally disabled women to sell their bodies as ghost brides (Global Times 2016). In a case in late 2016, a woman with multiple physical and intellectual disabilities narrowly escaped being buried alive. Fed powerful sedatives meant to kill her, she nevertheless regained consciousness during the burial, and alerted the horror-struck family who bought her by loudly thumping on her coffin walls. These victims were likely chosen specifically for their intellectual disability—they offered less resistance to the violence inflicted on them and were perceived as being 'less human', making it easier to morally justify their murders (Guo 2008). The police have since charged six suspects with abduction, human trafficking, and attempted murder (Gao et al. 2016).

Ghost marriages contradict the state's vision of modernity, so the state discourages their practice. Why, then, does *yinhun* persist? In this essay, I first discuss how ghost marriages are conducted, then move to examine the motivations behind them. In particular, I argue

that because *yinhun* placates angry ghosts and soothes the anxieties of their living kin, the corpses used in ghost marriages perform a sort of macabre affective labour.

## The Ritual

Historically, an *yinhun* ritual closely resembled a marriage between living people, albeit with some critical modifications. Unlike the contemporary cases entailing body snatching, the groom's family resorted to a spirit medium-matchmaker to propose the marriage to the bride's family, draw up the list of bride-wealth and dowry items, ritually seek the approval of the deceased for their upcoming union, and then perform the wedding ritual. Depending on the local custom, this ritual took place either at the groom's home or at a local temple. There would be a feast, and the dead could be represented in many forms: a spirit-tablet inscribed with his/her name, a white cockerel, a bamboo-and-paper effigy meant to be burned later as a funeral offering, or perhaps even the corpse itself.

These modifications are particularly obvious in the description of a Singaporean wedding that Topley (1955, 71) provides (see Figure 1). The effigy of the groom had a wad of imitation paper money stuffed into his suit's top pocket. Effigies of servants stood on each side of the couple. The newlyweds were surrounded by accoutrements that they would use in their new spirit home: trunks of clothing, rolls of cloth, furniture, modern electrical appliances, and even a large American-type car—all made of bamboo and paper. The following dawn, after the ceremonies concluded, all of the paper articles—including the newlyweds and their servants—were taken to the backyard. There, the couple was placed in their car, and everything was dispatched to the next world by flame. In cases where corpses represented the couple, an auspicious date and time were then chosen to bury the groom and his new bride.

Thereafter, the living relatives of both parties became each other's affines. Ghost marriages, like normal marriages, linked two lineages to maintain and enhance family wealth and social status (Jordan 1972; Martin 1991; Topley 1955).

In present times, the *yinhun* ritual has not undergone significant changes. In October 2016, my research assistant went back home to Hebei province's Guangzong county to interview her fellow villagers who had conducted ghost marriages before. One informant had a younger sister who died of cancer in 2010 at the tender age of 16. Just two days after her death, parents from a neighbouring village came seeking the sister's hand for their high school-educated son who had died in a car accident when he was 20 years old. Knowing that she could not be buried alongside the ancestors, and fearing that her body might be stolen, the informant agreed to the match. The groom's family gave him a symbolic bride price of 4,000 yuan (670 USD), and the sister was married off three days later. The entire *yinhun* ritual took just one day to complete. The informant and his relatives delivered the bride in a coffin draped with festive red cloth. Together with the groom's family, they celebrated with a wedding feast. After the meal, they waited for more than an hour before they were told to go and cry at the burial. The informant remarked:

This wedding was simpler than a regular one. We didn't have the usual steps such as 'formal proposal' (纳采), 'checking for compatible birthdates' (纳吉) and 'delivery of bride-wealth' (纳征). The groom's side prepared all the things for the wedding and the funeral. We just brought along some clothes to be burned at the burial.

As one can see from the example above, the *yinhun* groom's family provides the bride-wealth and the material preparations for the entire ritual, as a living groom would have. However, *yinhun* lacks the complicated matchmaking rituals of a living marriage. Its secretive nature necessarily means that only the immediate kin of the bride and groom are



Fig. 1: A ghost wedding feast in Singapore. PC: Topley 1955, 71.

invited. Reflecting also the social awkwardness of an auspicious wedding that is followed immediately by a ritually polluting funeral, this limited number of guests prevents the boisterous liveliness that marks any social event in China as truly successful (Chau 2008).

## Soul-soothing Relief for Unsettled Ghosts

Nevertheless, one question still remains: why would anyone go through a ghost marriage? Since antiquity, the Chinese widely accepted the idea of life after death in the netherworld. In traditional Chinese cosmology, both our earthly domain and the divine realm shared the same social structure. Hence, just as China had the emperor, his imperial court, one's kin, and socially marginal beggars and bandits of this earthly domain, the godly realm had the Jade Emperor, the other gods, one's ancestors, homeless ghosts, and demons (Ahern 1973). As such, the underworld was also believed to have its own king, system of currency, and a China-like social structure. Unsurprisingly, souls had social needs that mirrored those of the living, including the need for marriage.

In an example from Chinese history, thinking that his favourite but dead son Cao Chong needed companionship, the warlord Cao Cao (155–220 CE) married him to a certain also-deceased Miss Zhen. Nonetheless, mainstream Confucianism objected to *yinhun* as something that went ‘against human relations’ (反人伦). Confucius himself firmly detested human sacrifice and its analogues. Subsequent generations of literati also held that a ghost couple could neither go through all the formal processes that legitimated their marriage nor produce living offspring (Gu and Xu 2014). The practice waned, especially during the sexually conservative Qing dynasty (1644–1911 CE), which promoted the idea of chaste widowhood (Li 2009), but it never died out completely.

Given the belief that souls had social needs, someone who died unmarried could spell trouble for his/her living relatives. In the past, if a man died without issue, his family could find him a ghost bride, then adopt an heir posthumously (ideally from a relative with the same surname) to extend his patriline. Custom also dictated that senior children should marry before their juniors. A family would arrange a ghost marriage for its eldest son who died prematurely, so that his younger brothers could marry (Martin 1991; Topley 1955). In the case of a woman, she typically married out to contribute to her husband’s lineage. She had no right to be enshrined as an ancestor on her natal family’s altar. If she died unmarried, nobody would offer her anything to appease her neglected and dissatisfied spirit. Indeed, some Chinese believed that placing the spirit-tablet of an unmarried daughter on the ancestral altar would only provoke the wrath of the other ancestors, and invite disastrous consequences (Wolf 1974). Whether male or female, a lonely and angry ghost might return to visit its living kin with all kinds of misfortune, or it might appear in its mother’s dreams to convey its desire for marriage.

A ghost marriage could also occur where only one partner was dead. In dynastic China, a girl might love her fiancé so much that she would carry on with the planned wedding even

though he had died. Widowed immediately upon marriage, she would be expected to live chastely in her husband’s home thereafter (Mann 1987; Yeung 2003). Although it was applauded as an act of supreme virtue and sacrifice, this move could never have been popular for obvious reasons. Alternatively, a man might ‘take a ghost-wife’ (娶鬼妻) to fulfil his vow to marry his fiancée who died prematurely. Given the male prerogative to beget heirs, this first marriage would not stop him from remarrying. From the above explanation, one can tell that despite its ghastly reputation, *yinhun* remains at its core a caring and humane practice that aims to provide soul-soothing relief to unsettled ghosts. Their living families are also relieved, because they hold the menacing spirits in abeyance by incorporating them as honoured ancestors. An otherwise-unpredictable force is hence contained and laid to rest.

## Affective Labour

For ghost marriages to achieve their spiritual and social efficacies, however, the normally lifeless corpse must be treated as if it were alive and capable of affecting living beings during the entire wedding ritual. Therefore, an *yinhun* corpse is simultaneously dead and alive. This granting of agency to cadavers resonates with the ability of inanimate objects to elicit powerful emotional responses from us living humans that Appadurai (1986), Gell (1998), and other anthropologists have emphasised.

Specifically, *yinhun* channels the despair, anger, anxiety, and care that the cadaver, the restless ghost, and their living kin express to one another. This care-work to placate the anguished ghost, this outwardly directed ‘affective labour’ (Hardt and Negri 2004; Ngai 2005), resembles that given by housewives to revitalise their families. Since this revitalisation occurs in private domestic spaces that we often regard as external to capital, affective labour is generally devalued. However, affective labour

replenishes the housewife's husband-worker for further capitalistic production, making it an integral part of the long chain of capitalist relations (Fortunati 1995; James and Dalla Costa 1975). Similarly, affective labour is also essential to *yinhun*—without it, it would not have made sense to carry out ghost marriages, and there would have been no reason to rob graves or murder people to obtain *yinhun* corpses for sale. The key difference lies in how *yinhun*'s affective labour takes on a particular macabre shade because of the ritual's necromantic nature.

Contrary to the criminal associations conjured by media accounts of body snatching, ghost marriage remains by and large a custom untainted by illegal dealings. Robbing graves and murdering people to obtain *yinhun* corpses severely contradict both national desires to project a modern and socially enlightened image (Rofel 2007) and the general religious reverence for ancestors (Ahern 1973). However, morality in China is more particularistic and relational than its Western counterpart (Pye 1992). In his famous articulation of the 'differential mode of association' (差序格局), Fei Xiaotong (1992) views Chinese society as composed of multiple, categorically different sets of relations, each with their own specific ethical principles. Within this ethical framework, the Chinese treat allegiance to a body of law as foreign, even potentially unethical if it negatively affects one's social relations. The morality of any given act depends on whether the observer stands within or outside the actor's social network (Osburg 2013).

In light of China's subjective ethics, trafficking in *yinhun* cadavers can be regarded as something positive. During fieldwork, one interviewee reported on a wedding organised for her neighbour's father in 2015. The father worked as a secondary-school teacher, and he had already divorced his wife when he died at 72 years of age. The ghost bride was a 35-year-old housewife from Handan, a city also in Hebei province. She had never attended school, and had died from an illness. The neighbour had wanted to find a new wife for his deceased

father for some time, so his classmate helped him via a third party for a sum of 70,000 yuan (12,000 USD). The interviewee did not know anything about the bride's family, as none of them had attended the *yinhun* ceremony. She said:

The old man taught all his life, but he had a terrible relationship with his old wife. After they divorced 20 years ago, she returned occasionally before abandoning him altogether. She maintained contact with her son (the neighbour), but this son was an unfilial brat. He didn't take good care of his father before his death. I suppose this *yinhun* was him trying to fulfil his filial duties. He said so himself, so he spent quite a sum on it.

Here I suspect that the neighbour might very well have bought a stolen corpse bride. After all, he paid an inordinately large sum of money for her (70,000 yuan, compared with the few thousand that a bride's willing family would normally receive as bride-wealth), and her biological kin were conspicuously missing from the wedding itself. Nevertheless, he might have thought: 'So what if I really bought a stolen corpse? I don't have to know where it came from. If I can provide my deceased father with a wife, then I'm a good son in the eyes of my village. That's all that matters.' Given the role of filial piety, some Chinese may empathise with *yinhun* practitioners, even if they themselves would never resort to it.

## An Unmodern Shadow on Chinese Modernity

As I conclude this essay, I would like to ruminate on why ghost marriages have taken a criminal turn in recent years. I cannot be certain that the Chinese never committed murder or body-snatching for *yinhun* purposes in the past, but there is little doubt that China's neoliberalisation has exacerbated the current

situation. Yan (2009) already observes that decades of hyper-accelerated economic growth have led to greater individualism, and the erosion of genuine love and care. As the state decreases the social welfare benefits it doles out, the Chinese correspondingly develop a greater urgency in their quest for individual economic livelihood. This quest now includes the sale of cadavers for non-medical, marital use, which despite its criminality, ironically reasserts the social importance of affect. The recent resurgence of *yinhun* in the news highlights the existence of an occult economy that appears coldly modern in its money-centredness, but is actually an instance of resistance against this inhumane modernity with its emphasis on warm human-centred care. This occult economy highlights the coexistence of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern practices in a rapidly modernising China. In this ‘compression of history’ (Zhou 2013, 250), *yinhun* reminds us that the idea of the family is still powerful in contemporary China. As long as kinship remains at the core of a certain kind of Chineseness, *yinhun*’s spectre will likely continue to haunt Chinese modernity as its distinctively unmodern shadow. ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 2, 2020*,  
edited by Ivan Franceschinim and Nicholas Loubere, published 2020 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.12](https://doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.12)