

# Death and Abuse in Marriage Laments: The Curse of Chinese Brides

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In China marriage is traditionally known as the "Red Affair" in contrast to the "White Affairs" of death. The red of marriage symbolizes sexual maturation and celebrates the joys of life. Elaborate rites are carefully arranged to guarantee a happy and fruitful union. Everything remotely suggesting poverty and barrenness, death and decay is purged from the thought and talk of those assembled. But as with all iron laws, there is one exception: For three nights and days prior to her departure, the bride laments her fate in marriage which she likens to a death in Hell! These laments include morbid wailing and rancorous cursing.

Aside from some May Fourth folklore studies and several recent articles, few scholars have devoted their attention to the bride's laments; among these, there is only passing mention of the morbid and abusive content which so many contain. Indeed, many scholars of things Chinese and Chinese themselves, laboring under stereotypes of Chinese proprieties, are surprised to learn of the bride's cursing. They often dismiss the curses as either a barbarian residue, a regional or class phenomenon. While those who are aware of them tend to dismiss them as superficial face-saving devices.

The most recent and complete study of marriage laments is Chang Cheng-P'ing's *K'u-ko-tzu-tz'u*.<sup>1</sup> However, this is a polished selection of native verse from the Cantonese villages in the Yuen Long market of the Hong Kong New Territories. Chang characterizes these laments by the way they invoke good fortune for the bride's family, obtain luck for the bride and expell noxious influences in the neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> Chang

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1. Chang Cheng-P'ing. *K'u-ko-tzu-tz'u*. Hong Kong New Territories Folk-literature Study, Volume I. Yu Hua Publishers: Taipo, Hong Kong, 1969.

2. Chang Cheng-P'ing. *K'u-ko-tzu-tz'u*, p. 131.

recognizes the similarity between "mourning laments" (*sang-ko*) and "marriage laments" (*hun-ko*) in the sense that both are different species of the same genus, "weeping songs" (*k'u-ko*), which mourn the departure of a loved one. "These are the expression of younger sons and daughters toward parents with the deepest feelings of depletion, longing, pain of continuing life without them, and regret for unfulfilled filial piety."<sup>3</sup> With the exception of his review of the earlier folklore literature, Chang's own collection does not indicate the bride's indignation.

In fact earlier scholars such as Wei Cheng-Tzu observed that among the mountain people of Kwangtung, "the bride weeps many kinds of farewells to her family including scolding of her husband's (sic) people."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Liu Wan-Chang, recorded among Cantonese the cursing of the groom's family as "dead people."<sup>5</sup>

The King of Hell is protected,  
The family is destroyed;  
The earth is leveled,  
The nunnery is raised;  
Seven Sisters of the Great Hall  
Kill the dead people —  
And restore the light to me.

Unfortunately, Chang comments that such verse as this from other places is "inferior" to the verse in his Yuen Long collection.<sup>6</sup> Liu says there are many such verses in the bride's repertoire; however, he, too, dismisses such curses by saying that "this is only one kind of song, and it is not willfull cursing. . . ." This kind of unreasonable outbreak is simply called "*T'an-ch'ing*" ('unleashing the feelings').<sup>7</sup>

Liu also says that "with the exception of father and mother, almost everyone receives a scolding by the bride."<sup>8</sup> This does not accord at all with my data. My data will show that the parents are the only ones among the bride's group who are criticized by the bride. Other scholars such as Hsieh En-T'an observed in P'ing-nan county, Kwangsi that "while the bride weeps for two or three nights her verse includes many

3. Chang Cheng-P'ing. *K'u-ko-tzu-tz'u*, p. 132.

4. Wei Cheng-Tzu. *Kwangtung Ling-shan Hun Sang Kai-shu*. Quoted in Chang Cheng-P'ing. *K'u-ko-tzu-tz'u*, p. 120.

5. Liu Wan-Chang. "Kwangchou ti Chiu Hun-su," In *Su, Yueh ti Hun Sang*. Ku Chieh-Kang and Liu Wan-Chang (eds.). Originally published in 1928. Reprinted by Folklore Books Company, Ltd. Taipei, China, 1969.

6. Chang Cheng-P'ing. *K'u-ko-tzu-tz'u*, p. 127.

7. Liu Wan-Chang. "Kwangchou ti Chiu Hun-su," p. 48.

8. Liu Wan-Chang. "Kwangchou ti Chiu Hun-su," p. 48.

rebukes of the match-maker along with her father and mother while giving filial instruction to her brothers and sisters."<sup>9</sup> However, like Liu, Hsieh implies that her rebukes are merely in good form, that it is superficial.

In their recent review of the Chinese literature, Kani Hiroaki, Nishimura and Yu follow the traditional line of interpretation. They include only one scolding song, the bride's rebuke of the match-maker. Their explanation (with which my data does not accord) is that this is a Cantonese boat people's lament and that boat people are simply "more direct" (unrefined) than land people.<sup>10</sup> An earlier observer of the Cantonese boat people was Burkhardt: The boat bride cries that she is dying, that her sisters had better go to the coffin-maker and buy grave clothes. Burkhardt says "as a rule the subject of death is strictly avoided by the Chinese, so the leave-taking of the old life and home must have been framed before the boat people absorbed their civilization."<sup>11</sup> Burkhardt incorrectly associated the bride's morbid thoughts with barbarian or non-Chinese customs.

The only substantial study of the bride's laments in a Western language is Yang Pi-Wang's collection from the Shanghai hinterland.<sup>12</sup> As a folklorist in the People's Republic of China, Yang takes a different tack from his bourgeois colleagues. Yang considers the laments to be much more substantive as protests against traditional marriage: "The daughter fearing maltreatment by her in-laws and stern rule of her husband would be reluctant to leave her home."

A sugar bowl in the honey pot,  
Is no sweeter than my life at home;  
A shock of rush inside a shoe of straw,  
Is not better protected than I  
by my mother's side.

Yang makes no attempt to unravel the meaning of these provocative metaphors; undoubtedly they smack too much of bourgeois erotica. What is more, in those laments where the bride is obviously cursing the

9. Hsieh En-T'an. *Kwangsi P'ing-nan Hsien ti Hun-su*. Quoted in Chang Cheng-P'ing. *K'u-ko-tzu-tz'u*, p. 119.

10. Kani Hiroaki, Nishimura and Yu. "Hong Kong noson no Minkan Kayo." *Bungaku*. Vol. 38, No. 6, June, 1970, p. 651.

11. Burkhardt, V. R. *Chinese Creeds and Customs*. Volume I, South China Morning Post: Hong Kong, 1952. p. 84.

12. Yang Pi-Wang. "Ancient Bridal Laments." *China Reconstructs*. Volume 12, Number 4. October, 1963. p. 43.

instruments of her fate, such as the bloodthirsty match-maker, Yang tends to deflect the bride's personal attack on the match-maker to an attack on the feudal society.

In the recent studies there is a tendency to lose contact with the ethnographic realities. Chang's brides seem overly refined in the Confucian mold While Yang's brides are overly endowed with class consciousness. Nevertheless, it is clear that themes of cursing and death pervade the laments of marriage in areas other than where the Hakka live. I feel constrained to mention this fact at the outset to obviate any of the usual explanation that only the Hakka (or only the boat people) are mean enough to have such customs.

*The Socio-cultural Context of the Hakka Laments*

The following selection of verse is from a Hakka-speaking village in the Sai Kung market area of the Hong Kong New Territories. This area is hilly, arid and agriculturally poor. The Hakka inhabitants are descendants of 19th century refugees from the internecine wars of Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces. For a century the Hakka women of Sai Kung cultivated narrow terraces of paddy and potato, while their menfolk sought to profit in the burgeoning Hong Kong entrepot. The traditional remittances from overseas provided more secure lives for the villagers. The building of a road between Sai Kung and urban Kowloon in 1960, greatly expanded the local market economy.

Although the local marriage customs are maintained with great tenacity, the two most dramatic traditions, the ride in the red sedan chair and the bride's lamentation, are rapidly fading. When we lived there,<sup>13</sup> the sedan chair was still used to carry the bride over the narrow stone paths which linked mountain villages. However, in places made accessible by new roads, the sedan chair is being replaced by the hired automobile.

The laments seem to be part of the traditional social organization of arranged marriage. Now that the conjugal couple are having more say in each other's selection, people say that marriage is becoming a happier affair, and there is less need for the bride's weeping. However, these laments were never obligatory to begin with; they are not part

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13. The materials used in this article were collected in 1972 during a two year residence in Sai Kung. My wife, Linda Chock, was most helpful in obtaining access to the materials on which this article is based. Others who have helped with particular problems of translation include University of Hawaii students, Chan Yuk-Yun, Joan Chen, and Li Ka-Hing.

of the formal rites. They are, on the contrary, the licensed expression of the bride—in some sense they constitute her personal commentary on the formal rites. For at no other time in the prime of her life does she have such freedom to express her feelings. When her feelings are given form, they are much encouraged by the audience (especially women), and it is the lament that provides the form.

The laments are intimate, sad, sarcastic, and contemptuous, all expressed through local and classical idioms blended with idiosyncratic and cryptic metaphors. The bride sighs, recites, chants or sings with great variation in form, and they rarely adhere to the prosody of the classical 7-syllable line folksong. Some are memorized, others cued by the surrounding sisters and aunts, but the emphasis is on the bride's spontaneity and personality. Thus, it is not altogether clear to what degree the range of present performance or lack thereof is a victim of "modernization." In one case we witnessed a bride whose every utterance was a lament, even when she called from her loft to relieve herself! Yet her family, one of the few still engaged in traditional rice farming, was politically progressive and patriotic. Most other brides made little or no attempt to lament, although some of their impertinencies might have been better received had they been couched in a more poetic form.

Although the emphasis is on spontaneity, much of the verse is learned from older women in the village, especially a village spinster, an elder brother's wife, or a father's younger brother's wife. But it is never learned from one's own mother. The verse is traded among the "sisters" (*tsu-mei*) which include girl friends in neighboring villages and nowadays their classmates from the public primary school in the valley. In fact the laments which are translated here are gleaned from a corpus of notebooks in which the village "sisters" recorded this oral tradition. The recent penetration of these mountain villages by public schools has thus served to preserve much of the marriage custom albeit in literary rather than oral form.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, this corpus of lament is the private pro-

14. The fact that my primary materials are written rather than oral presents a different set of problems in translating them. There is no question that the girls who wrote down these laments were most faithful in their adherence to the oral performance. They made no attempt to refine them. The main problem in translating them is the girl's use of Chinese ideographs for their sound rather than their meaning since all Chinese vernaculars such as Hakka contain numerous unwritten words. Even where a word has a proper graph, she may not know how to write it. The confusion is sometimes increased by the importance of punning in the oral tradition itself. But in this case, having the ideograph more often reveals a pun that might otherwise be obscured in a tape recording.

My collection contains about 46 laments from the notebooks of one village.

perty of the village "sisters" and is as difficult to obtain for our scholarly purposes as is the men's written genealogy. In other words, because of or despite "modernization," these two documents still bear great relevance to the social and cultural life of the village.

Among Sai Kung Hakka the generic term for marriage lament is *chiao* ("to call out"), or *chiao-ai* (literally, "to call for love"). In "calling for love" these laments are by no means "love songs" with respect to the groom's side. In this case, "love" is associated with "mother," hence "calling for mother." In fact, the bride "calls for" each of her close relatives as she feels herself slipping away from them with each rite of bridalhood. Toward her natal side she associates warmth, light, life (*Yang*). Toward the other side to whom she is being "sold," she feels nothing but contempt. This side is cold, dark and deathly (*Yin*). Hence, another oft-used term for these laments is *ma-ko* ("cursing song"). In almost everyone of her laments the bride includes her curses. Most ubiquitous is her denunciation of the groom and his mother, then the marriage broker. But the scolding also extends to her own parents, though with much greater restraint.

#### *Lamenting Her Death*

Marriage is very much the affair of women. Among the most important participants are the bride's unmarried "sisters." It is they who afford the greatest sympathy as they sit by the bride for three days and nights. Over and over the bride contrasts their benevolence and sacrifice in coming to escort her with her own feelings of wretchedness and demise:

Sisters are possessed of compassion,  
As high as the sky;  
I am possessed of feelings,  
As low as the earth;  
Sisters are possessed of sympathy,  
As broad as the earth;  
I am possessed of feelings,  
As narrow as the well.

The average length of one lament is around 50 lines, excluding address phrases which are inserted between each verse. There is much repetition or only slight alteration of verse among and within the different laments. Much of the meaning is constructed out of alteration of single words between couplets and quatrains. Also it is important to note that there is as much communication in the form and mood of presentation as there is in the bare content of the words. In this article I have focused on the content and have taken little or no poetic license with the materials.

The bride draws a series of analogies which end with the feeling that her heart is as narrow as the space of a well. The well stands for her feelings of confinement and restriction which are part of the binding rites of marriage. The well also raises the spectre of death. It is a passage into the bowels of the earth, and it is the customary site of the unhappy daughter-in-law's suicide.

In another verse the bride contrasts the luck of her "sisters" who are able to return to their parents with the awful fate that awaits her as she departs in marriage:

Sisters turn to go home,  
 There to see fathers and mothers;  
 But I am dying in a land of shadows,  
 About to see the King of Hell!

In the following passage the bride contrasts her departure to vegetarian sisterhoods (or Buddhist nunneries) and to families whose members are divided into separate rooms but are never completely separated:

Though vegetarians are divided into rooms,  
 Their numbers have limits;  
 But as I am from my sisters divided,  
 I have no limits.  
 Though children in a family are  
 Divided into rooms,  
 They still keep family ties;  
 But as I am from my sisters divided,  
 I have no home.  
 As this head is cut off,  
 We depart down different roads;  
 Today I and my sisters become separate persons,  
 Take separate paths, have separate things.  
 Sisters are in the East,  
 Arising in the East;  
 But I am in the West,  
 Departing, extinguished and lost.

The bride's separation in marriage is like dying; it is a completely irrevocable break from her "sisters" and her family. According to a study by Marjorie Topley, "strong emotional attachments sometimes developed in villages where groups of young girls slept and ate together. Informants have described how the betrothal of one of their number would be treated as if it marked her impending death; members of the group

would wear mourning clothes for her."<sup>15</sup> In Sai Kung villages, girls do not live in sororities, but as their laments indicate, the village "sisters" possess the same emotions at their separation in marriage: While her "sisters" remain in the East, symbolic of the rising sun, dawn, spring, youth and life, the bride is in the West, the direction of the setting sun, autumn, demise and death.

In her opening verse to her older sister, the bride contrasts her feelings on this day of departure to happier times in the past:

In times past when big sister arrived,  
Big sister was asked if she'd taken dinner yet;\*  
But today as big sister arrives,  
Yellow ginger is passed through little sister's mouth—  
and the ginger stalk is bitten\*\*  
In times past when big sister arrived,  
Little sister was as lovely as peach blossom;  
But today as big sister arrives,  
The peach blossom is changed into a dead person!

Other images the bride uses to express her anxieties include riding in a boat which is breaking apart in rapid waters and being bound and strangled. Throughout her lament to her elder sister, the bride beseeches her to come save her:

My big sister!  
The dead people are coming now,  
The reason for their coming is known;  
They are carrying a sash  
To force around my waist.  
In times past when elder sister arrived,  
Your little sister's sash was loosely tied;  
But today as elder sister arrives,  
Little sister's sash is tied in a deadly knot.  
I'm watching the tips of big sister's fingers,  
They strain to undo the knot;  
Big sister's ten fingers are straining,  
But the knot will not come free.

As elder sister's fingers fail to untie the knot, the bride begs her sister

15. Topley, Marjorie. "Immigrant Chinese Female Servants and Their Hostels in Singapore." *Man*. Number 333. December, 1959. p. 214.

\* "Have you taken dinner yet?" is a polite greeting in Chinese.

\*\* Yellow ginger is old, stringy and especially pungent; the bride has only pungent things to say to her guests.



to use her teeth, but again to no avail.

To her elders the bride is constantly begging their pardon for having been born female and making this a day of sadness. To her father she laments:

Had father been lucky,  
I'd have been born a son;  
This morning father would've hired many people  
To fetch a red flower (maiden).  
But father and mother had no luck;  
A daughter was reared  
So this morning father prepares,  
His daughter is dead!

The rites of bridalhood are conducted by the elder brother's wife. These rites are designed to protect the bride's purity and fertility while she is in transit to her new home. The mostly cosmetic rites transform her into an elegant creature, a veritable empress.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, as the bride becomes ever more elegant and imperial in her regiments, the dreadful imagery of death becomes more uncanny. One of the first rites is the bride's purifying bath on the eve of her departure. This is her last bath, and she associates it with the breaking of an egg:

The chicken egg is broken,  
The yellow spreads;  
Tonight I am separated  
The four walls of sister's bathroom are open.  
The chicken egg is broken,  
The white spreads;  
Tonight I am separated,  
The four corners of sister's bathstone are cracked.

The bath is also associated with the bride's first step into the yellow river, which, given the Chinese peasant's aversion for entering river water, is a most graphic boundary between life and death:

The tips of my poor fingers strive  
To sever the old ties;  
To sever the old —  
And to seize the new;  
But to seize new ties  
Is to cross the yellow river;

16. Blake, C. Fred. "Empress For A Day: Metaphor and Meaning in a Hakka-Chinese Wedding." (unpublished manuscript), 1976.

Crossing the yellow river  
 My heart is not yet dead;  
 But once across the yellow river,  
 My feelings will be extinguished.

In another verse she notes how similar bathing rites are conducted for the dead.

In yet another rite, her elder sister-in-law teases the bride's eyebrow hairs and powders her face. The bride laments over and over how her elder sister-in-law is robbing her of her "protective ornament" (eyebrow hair) and is making her look like a dead person being readied for the coffin.

In one of the final and most critical rites just prior to the bride's departure, the elder sister-in-law combs and pins the bride's hair. The combing is symbolic of fertilization and the pinning stands for impregnation—the golden pin which holds the coiffure in place is sent by the groom. The bride's anxiety is obvious as she stands on that symbolic bank of the yellow river:

If the yellow river is not crossed,  
 The heart can never rest;  
 But to approach the yellow river,  
 The heart is sorely distressed;  
 As the foot steps into the river water,  
 Each step sinks further in;  
 Only I can feel  
 How the heart does throb;  
 As the foot steps into the river water,  
 Each step goes deeper in;  
 Only I can know,  
 How much the heart does grieve;  
 What course does this yellow river follow?  
 Its waters seem so vast and vague;  
 But Only I can feel  
 How the bowels are severed.

#### *Scolding Her Parents*

The bride has tender feelings toward her parents, and expresses them toward her mother, but the parents also bear the onus of having "sold" ("betrayed") their daughter into marriage. In Sai Kung, the parents take no part in the rites of the bride's removal since that would reveal even more their complicity in the scheme of "betrayal." In fact the parents wear their work-a-day clothes (in sharp contrast to the

parents-in-law); and the bride's parents must forebear her unkind words which sometimes verge on denunciation.

Toward her mother the bride recalls tender loving memories. She intones the pain her mother suffered in giving her birth followed by a year-by-year account of her mother's travail and sacrifice. The lament ends in the ninth year thus invoking a mood of everlasting life with mother's love. Ten is an inauspicious number in that it suggests "completion," hence, "extinction," which is precisely what this part of the marriage entails; that is, in this case, the cutting of the mother-daughter bond.

The mood in another lament addressed to *Ngai ai* (which has the same sound as the first lament to "my love" and the same reference to "my mother," but literally means "enduring sorrow") is full of grievous irony verging on indignation. It is the intensity and trust in the mother-daughter bond which gives such poignancy to the bride's sense of betrayal. In this lament the bride asks 'how can you be so hard-hearted to sell me at such a tender age?' 'Even your cabbage and livestock are fully matured before you sell them!'

Most accounts of Chinese marriages mention the profusion of tears a mother sheds at her daughter's departure. In this lament the bride imputes a tone of insincerity to her mother's tears:

When my mother like an old hen cries  
Each phrase sounds good;  
But when your daughter the tender chick cries,  
Even the toughest mountain grass is disturbed!

This theme recurs in a number of forms and in a number of laments. In another verse, mother is capable of genuine grief except when it involves the carrying away of her daughter's virtue.

When a book is seized, bent and forced apart,  
Its binding is bursting, bursting;  
Mother puts on grief,  
Her emotion is pretentious.  
When a book is seized, bent, and forced apart,  
The thread is stretched and torn;  
Mother puts on grief,  
Her cry rings untrue.<sup>17</sup>

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17. A song from the Hakka area of eastern Kwangtung imputes similar sentiments to the mother and daughter at their separation (quoted in Chang Cheng-P'ing. *K'u-ko-tzu-tz'u*, p. 95):

The leaves of a book are like the generation of a family.

In succeeding verse the bride begs her mother to keep her several more years. She argues that the household economy can easily support her: "There is no fear of impoverishing the house; there is no fear of defaming the family!" Then the bride addresses the customary assumption that to keep a daughter is to drain the family resource—first in food then in dowry—without compensating the family. Many of the laments include apologies for having been born female. But in this verse she asks if she is really good for nothing by reminding her mother only when she is gone will her parents appreciate all the work she did for them as a daughter:

My mother in times past the grass on the mountain was not cut,  
 Yet the grass knew how to return;  
 The firewood in the hills was not gathered,  
 Yet the firewood knew how to return;  
 The millstone was not turned,  
 Yet the rice knew how to be husked;  
 The stove was not tended,  
 Yet the rice knew how to turn soft.  
 Today, my mother's stupid daughter is sold;  
 If my mother does not cut the grass on the mountain,  
 The grass will no longer return;  
 If my mother does not collect the firewood in the hills,  
 The firewood will no longer return;  
 If my mother does not turn the millstone,  
 The rice will not be husked;  
 If my mother does not tend the stove,  
 The rice will no longer turn soft!

The bride then compares herself with the garden vegetables which are not picked for the market until fully matured. She asks her mother, 'since I'm still so young, how is it that those people from Hell are able to seize me?' Then she contrasts her fate with that of the family cow: "In the field the cow eats your rice; But stupid I am raised to be given to the dead people in exchange for their wealth; My mother, it is better if you have no more daughters!"

The Sai Kung father plays a lesser role in the formalities of his

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People rear girls,  
 To exchange for pigs;  
 When the pig arrives,  
 Mother is very happy;  
 When the sedan chair arrives,  
 Daughter is heartbroken!

daughter's departure than does the mother. Father silently putters about the house. He bears the most guilt for "selling" his daughter. Of course he never talks in such terms as "selling." But the groom's side customarily talks of "buying a daughter." And the bride accuses her parents of selling her. In one verse she seems to compare her father's betrayal with those people at the crossroads who sell lotus-flower bowls (symbolic of the female sex). Then she warns: "This morning when your daughter goes out this door, It'll not be a daughter that returns."

It is never clear which side profits on the exchange. Both sides generally claim to have taken the loss. But from the bride's point of view the whole deal is a cold-hearted calculation of her worth in which everyone except she receives recompense. The bride decrys her father's niggardly regard for the value of her life in which father never counted, much less requited, the worth of her labor:

From the first month your daughter began to work —  
 Worked until the winter;  
 Never before did venerable father  
 So much as count the work (I did).  
 In the second month your daughter began work —  
 Worked all the year through;  
 Never did venerable father  
 So much as calculate a wage.  
 This morning your daughter's hand  
 Seizes the abacus;  
 Father was never scrupulous  
 In reckoning my wage.  
 Your daughter would count little more than a dime  
 To be of sufficient wage;  
 But one dollar and some  
 That would be fair!

In other words, even a tenth of what is owed to her would be some satisfaction. The bride ends her lament with an account of her father's household budget pointing out that the family could easily afford to keep her several more years.

#### *Reviling the Match Maker*

The marriage broker stands for social propriety against the individual's feelings. In every culture the conjugal relationship includes sexual love; but where marriage brokers are employed the motive of sexual love is curtailed by the proprieties of social alliance. A traditional Hakka couplet expresses the view that "Without clouds there is no

rain; without a match-maker there is no marriage."<sup>18</sup> Clouds dispersing rain is also a metaphor for sexual union.

At least until the marriage the parents treat the marriage broker with obsequious politeness. But the bride does not restrain her sentiments. On the day before the bride's departure the match maker, accompanied by several emaculated women from the groom's side bring baskets of chicken, pork, duck eggs, salt fish, sometimes gold jewelry as a final installment on the purchase of the bride. At this encounter the bride may revile the match maker: In the first couplet, the bride likens the image of the "marriage broker" (*Mei-jen*) to the "death broker (*Szu-mei*)!"

My old match-maker!  
With my death-maker,  
I am dying;  
Left with my big brother,  
I'd be happy.

In the next verse the match-maker's feelings are nourished on excrement!

My match-maker,  
You have such feeling;  
By the roadside lie dog feces,  
They are eaten all.  
My match maker  
You are so full of feeling;  
By the roadside lie dog feces,  
With which your teeth are cleaned!

The bride goes on to curse the match-maker's bully:

My old match-maker!  
Daring to eat the pig's liver,  
Your gall is so great;  
Inspecting my whole life through,  
From my birth you've watched me grow.

The bride ends this lament by inferring that the match-maker is a depraved procuress of "little plums" (pun for "little girls"). The bride also seems to be cursing the match-maker with female offspring in contrast to how the bride invokes the luck of "little dragons" (sons) when describing elder sister-in-law's children.

18. Chung Ching-Wen. "Hai Lu Jen Piao-hsien yu Ko-yao Chung chih Hun-yin Kuan." In *Hun-yin Ko-yao yu Hun-su*. Tung Tso-Pin and Po Ch'i-Ming (eds.). Reprinted by the Orient Cultural Service: Taipei, China. 1973. p. 88.

My old match-maker  
 Match-maker looks like a pomelo fruit,  
 When the pomelo fruit blooms,  
 It is perfectly round.  
 When match-maker returns home,  
 Her net is opened;  
 Its stuffed with little plums,  
 Laughing ha, ha.

*Cursing the Groom's Side*

None of the laments address the groom's family directly. In Sai Kung the bride must end her weeping and cursing at the point halfway between her father's and father-in-law's houses. This also occurs just past noon as the diurnal Yin begins its ascent and the Yang its descent. Ritually, this is the point at which the bride crosses from the shore of life to the shore of death. Her older sister-in-law drapes the bride's face in a veil, and her retinue of fellow villagers charge her sedan chair to the groom's entourage. After her veil is removed and she is reborn into her new house several hours later, she assumes the stoic presence of the proper wife and humble daughter-in-law.

However, the three days and nights in which she undertakes the rites of bridalhood in her father's house, she peppers each of her laments with curses directed against the groom's house, especially him and his mother. The fact that no names are mentioned not only maximizes her contempt for the other side but obviates her liability for such horrendous slander. She associates the other side with death, dirt, darkness, confusion, cold, poverty, meanness and sterility. All of these are characterized by the cosmic principle of *Yin* as opposed to *Yang* (light and order). The bride refers to the groom's place as *Yin-chien* (the shadowy regions of purgatory). She calls the groom's family *Yin-jen* (dead people or "shades"), or even *kuei* (ghosts). Their house is a *sang-chia* (house in mourning) or *lan-wu* (broken home). The head of the household, father-in-law is mocked as *Yen-wang* (King of Hell). Or the household head may be called more sarcastically, *hsia lao hsien-sheng* (ignorant venerable master). The groom is imagined to be a *szu-tzu* (little corpse) with the connotation of "runt" or "rascal," a term often used for street urchins. Worst of all is the mother-in-law who is simply a *kou-ma* (bitch). For instance, in a lament to her mother the bride contrasts her mother's happy lot with that which is in store for the bride:

When my mother turns to her left side,  
 There is elder brother to give a troubled heart relief;

When my mother turns to her right side,  
 There is little sister to serve her daily fare.  
 But as your daughter is dying in pergatory,  
 Your daughter is truly afflicted with a grievous fate.  
 Turning to my right side,  
 There is that miserable little rascal;  
 Turning to my left side,  
 There is that ghost of a bitch!

In another lament the bride invites her father's younger brother's wife and her elder brother's wife to pull up a stool and chat. With these in-laws the bride feels a sense of unrestraint, and she contrasts their warm and congenial relationships in her family to the tribulation she expects at the hand of her new in-laws. The bride notes that when her sister-in-law's dress is soiled there is warm water to wash in, fresh water to rinse in, and brother's tall golden bamboo\* to dry it on under the heat of the sun:

But as I am dying in Hell,  
 I become ever more sordid;  
 As my dress is soiled,  
 There is no place to wash.  
 When I ask the bitch where to wash,  
 The bitch bids me to wash in the fields;  
 When the wash water is finished,  
 I must walk through the pig's piss.  
 When I ask the bitch where to dry it,  
 The bitch summons me to where three roads part;  
 As I dry it up high,  
 The bitch calls out not so high;  
 But as I dry it down low,  
 I fear the little rascal's dirty affections.

She ends this verse lamenting how cold and dark it is in the house of the dead where "The venerable blind master disperses the light of the sun; There is no moon light either." She wonders how the body is to keep warm? How can she bear little dragons (sons)? This in reality is her greatest anxiety.

Another contrast between the two sides is rendered in the bride's lament to her father's younger brother, who is the object of the bride's affection and respect. In this verse the bride depicts how she will conduct the crucial tea ceremony for her in-laws and how she would have

\* In this and other laments, her big brother's "tall golden bamboo" has obvious phallic connotations.



done it for her own elders had she been lucky enough to have been born their son. In serving tea to her new in-laws the bride is supposed to act with extreme deference and complete devotion as their daughter-in-law. She goes from the head of the house down a row of seated elders with most guarded propriety serving each a cup of tea; and then she must go back again to serve a second helping:

Had father and mother been lucky,  
 I'd have been born a son;  
 Tomorrow I'd have served tea,  
 Going from the head to the tail and back;  
 And I would have used both hands,  
 To exchange with uncle a golden tea cup;  
 But father and mother had no luck,  
 I was born a mere daughter;  
 So tomorrow I'll serve tea,  
 Going from the head to the tail and back;  
 But I will use only one hand,  
 To exchange with the dead people their yellow worm cup!

The contrast between the "golden tea cup" and "yellow worm cup" is obvious enough. However, the way she handles the respective cups is equally telling. To give honor and face one makes an offering of utensils with both hands. To use only one hand indicates deception and subterfuge—or rude equality. This is true for everyday interaction thus making the use of both hands an absolute requirement for formal situations. To handle tea cups on the occasion of meeting one's new parents with a single hand would be the expression of utter contempt. And so there were probably few brides who ever actualized such fantasies.

Most of these curses are descriptive and indirect. A few are more direct in saying how the other side should be cursed. For instance, there is the verse quoted by Liu Wan-Chang in which the bride calls on the Seven Sisters "to kill the *Yin* people!" In the laments of Sai Kung brides there are verses in which the bride compares herself to "a newly forged scissors" which can "cut to death" and "curse to death" the *Yin* people.

The crucial rite of "combing up the hair" provides another opportunity for the bride's curse. While elder sister-in-law is combing the bride's hair into three plaits to "pin" them in a coiffure (symbolic of her impregnation), the bride begs her sister-in-law to leave one plait hanging free as a curse on the *Yin* people. Then she invites all the women of her village to visit her in her new home. This custom is called

*sung-ch'a* ("bearing tea") :

My elder sister-in-law and sisters,  
 After several days, go for a visit;  
 Sisters and aunts, go bearing tea,  
 And go some more.  
 Go and eat all their flesh  
 And eat their bones too;  
 Having eaten all their bones,  
 Go out their door!

*The Experiential and Ritual Contexts*

Some informants dismissed these laments as pure form having little substance. 'The bride doesn't really mean all these things.' Some argued that such verse as the bride intones to her uncle (as in the above example) serves to give the uncle face at the expense of the groom's side which is not present. In other, words, the bride gives her uncle face by sharply distinguishing between her regard for him and her disregard for the other side. Other informants argued that the bride secretly yearns to marry—indeed there are subtle indications of that throughout all the laments—but she dare not face by admitting as much. In fact she gains face by lamenting her sadness at departure. There is no question that in all these ways the laments tend to be superficial face-giving performances. But I think they have much deeper symbolic significance. After all there are many ways of giving face. Why are these particular symbols chosen? How does scolding the parents give any one face? In fact, this aspect seems to be the most difficult for Chinese informants to explain. Liu Wan-Chang even suggests that the parents are exempted from the bride's scolding. Finally, what redeeming qualities does the use of death imagery have? Death imagery after all subverts the whole effort to make this a celebration of life. We must look deeper into the symbolic representations of the bride's experience.

To reiterate, the laments are not ritually obligatory. They are rather the individual bride's spontaneous commentary on her ritual experience. They are like the icing on the ritual cake—or, in the present study, the spice on the sacraments.

The bride is departing from her father's house, from a place in which she has found a certain amount of indulgence and sympathy. At least this is the only world she has ever known. Now she is being taken to a completely strange place where she knows she will be little more than a miserable handmaiden burdened with unreasonable trials and con-

stant tribulation; it is a place from which there is virtually no escape much less return. Even at this level of experience, the analogy with dying and going to Hell is imposing. But the analogy of death is even more compelling as this more general experience is actually belabored in the rites of bridalhood.

The rites of Chinese marriage conform to the three stages of the ritual process familiar to anthropologists in the works of Van Gennep and Turner.<sup>19</sup> In the first period the initiate takes leave of her old status as a daughter and a sister. In Sai Kung marriages this rite of bridalhood includes bathing, dressing in several layers of black clothes, honoring her ancestors for the last time, combing and pinning the hair into a coiffure, plucking the facial hairs, washing the feet, donning the red sequined dragon and phoenix dress, and being escorted (half-carried) to mount the sedan chair. In the second period the initiate is secluded from the mundane world. This is the period of transcendence, or what Victor Turner calls "liminality." For the Chinese bride it is the period in which she is carried from her father's to her father-in-law's houses. The third period is the reintegration phase when the bride assumes her new identity as a wife and daughter-in-law as she pays homage to a new set of ancestors.

In most cultures the metaphor for the ritual process is death. The period of liminality approximates the state of death in which the initiate is secluded from society, held incommunicado, and deprived of any claim to a former or a future status. The Chinese bride is neither a daughter nor a daughter-in-law; she is not a sister, not a wife; she is "lost in the interstices of the social structure." The in-between is a timeless, spaceless, undifferentiated state of nature, characterized by death, decay, cold and amorality, all the things that are anathema to marriage, fertility, warmth, continuity. This accounts for the bride's anxiety expressed in idioms of dirt, cold and disorder as she is separated from her own family. And it is precisely these dangers that the rites of bridalhood are designed to protect against.<sup>20</sup>

The metaphors of death, decay, darkness and cold are even more compelling when we consider the procedures in the period of departure:

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19. See Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process*. Aldine: Chicago, 1969.

20. The anxiety which is felt especially by the bride at being lost in the interstices is not only symbolic. There are reports of brides who smother to death in transit, and in one wedding I attended, the bride's dress caught fire from exploding firecrackers while she was sealed in the sedan chair. Many of the real dangers are from the symbolic prophylactic devices which are supposed to protect her and keep her warm while she is socially dead.

Her body is ritually bathed, purified and insulated. Then it is dressed in splendid repose somewhat as a corpse is prepared for eternity. She is increasingly secluded in her bridal chamber where her closest companions sit by her day and night as if they are keeping a vigil for the dead. Her parents appear begrieved, and on the morning of departure she is sealed in a narrow wooden box (albeit a sedan chair) somewhat as she might be sealed in a coffin. In one verse she even refers to the coffin which awaits her at the crossroads. In this she is born away forever.

Another property of liminality and death is license and "freedom." We can see this in the often loud and lewd behavior of old Chinese women. As the bride is being bound into a new life she is first removed from the normal strictures of her childhood. In the process of removal she is permitted to say things with little regard for normal social proprieties. In other words she is licensed to vent her feelings; and these are not simply superficial expressions. Indeed, most of her feelings are tender and sad. Others, as in this study, are dreadful and indignant. This last category includes 1) scolding the parents, 2) rebuking the match-maker, and 3) cursing the groom's side.

In a study of Taiwanese abuse terms, Wolfram Eberhard found that death and sickness were not very popular terms of abuse.<sup>21</sup> However, in light of what I have said about the impelling irony of death imagery in marriage rites, it is altogether reasonable that the bride's feelings toward the groom's side are expressed as the curse of death and perjury. The bride's curses are also spiked with curses of dirt, mud, urine, feces and a host of impolite behaviors. According to Eberhard's study, these are popular terms of abuse. Of course associations of putrefaction and amorality are integral in states of liminal undifferentiation and death. The groom's side is cursed with this state because they are not yet part of the bride's circle of moral obligation. She only knows that they have "bought" her through no choice of her own. The go-between by her very title (*mei-jen*) is associated with this liminal state of dirt and disgust—that is why she cleans her teeth with dog feces.

However, the bride does not rebuke her parents or anyone else within her family with such terms. The parents always remain within the circle of moral obligation (*Yang*). Yet they are subjected to the bride's indignant scolding. Here, we might distinguish between "criticism" and "cursing," although none of my informants made this distinc-

21. Eberhard, Wolfram. "On Some Chinese Terms of Abuse." *Asian Folklore Studies*, Volume 27, Number 1. 1968. pp. 25-40.

tion. The bride criticizes her parents for their betrayal of her and their insensitivity to her plight. Her parents have callously calculated her worth in dealing with the other side, so the bride merely replies in kind by counting her debits and credits *vis-à-vis* her parents. Such an accounting is quite within reason in the Chinese family,<sup>22</sup> although it may be surprising to find it part of the sentimental events surrounding marriage.

This paper has dealt with but one theme and a small fraction of verse from my total corpus of Sai Kung marriage laments. At first glance this verse seems anathema to the rites of marriage. However, a more in depth view shows that this verse is psychologically and symbolically compelling and that it is not simply a residue of barbarism, nor a superficial face-giving performance, nor even a direct protest against traditional society.

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22. Western scholars have put too much emphasis on the blind loyalty which the ethic of filial piety supposedly demands. Even in the *Analects*, Confucius made it clear that true filial piety must include the right of children to remonstrate with their parents when an injustice has been done.