Ghost Brides and Crime Networks in Rural China

T. Wing Lo

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Abstract
The custom of ghost marriages has been passed down since the ancient times in China. Adults who died before marriage could not be buried with their ancestors. Their families did not want to leave bodies outside, as they believed that the spirits would become lonely. Instead, they wished to find husbands or wives for their dead relatives to continue the family tree. The custom has spawned a large ghost bride market, resulting in the trading of female corpses. This industry and its profits have driven criminals to kidnap and murder women, raid tombs and morgues, steal and traffic corpses. The study demonstrates that while in the folklore the stigma of being unmarried should apply to both men and women, the corpses trafficked are mainly women and in poorer provinces. While ghost marriages create a market of supply and demand in booming rural China, the market also indicates income and gender inequality behind the crime.

Keywords Ghost marriage · Ghost bride · Corpse trading · Gender inequality · Economic approach in crime

Introduction

Ghost marriage or posthumous marriage is a custom which has been passed down for a couple of centuries in China. It is a marriage for the deceased, an uncommon tradition in the rural society of China. According to folklore, the following scenario is a form of marriage in ancient times: If a daughter from a rich family, who died at an age appropriate for marriage, her family would find a matchmaker to look for a male of similar age. The ghost marriage ceremony was the same as a formal marriage, but the daughter was dead, on her bed; the etiquette of the ceremony was shortened because the body had to go through funeral services after. The husband found by the matchmaker, under the request of the family of the deceased, was usually a poor and ordinary male. The agreement was either to pay him a lump sum or to arrange another marriage for him later. The couple would wear wedding clothes during their wedding. After the ceremony, the husband would take a pair
of the wife’s shoes, to be placed in the shrine for the wife when he returned home. The two families would become in-laws, as in normal in-law relationships (Wang, 2007).

In the old days, regardless of whether the deceased was male or female, as long as they reached the adult age and died before getting married, they could not be buried with their ancestors. The family did not want to leave the body somewhere outside because the spirit would become lonely. The family would feel sorry and would want to adopt a spouse for the dead to continue the family tree. In particular, the spirits of unmarried females would wander around because they belong nowhere. If a deceased female married posthumously, her spirit would be able to join her husband’s family, receive tributes from her offspring, and would be at peace (Wang, 2007). The marriage allowed the family to bury the body with their ancestors instead of burying it in the woods and the deceased becoming a wandering ghost. After burying the deceased with their ancestors, they (the spirits) could accept the offerings and worship of the deceased’s offspring. This folklore has been deeply rooted in the consciousness of indigenous village people and cannot be erased easily, even when China becomes a communist country (Shi & An, 2016).

To date, ghost marriages continue in rural areas, but now only corpses are used. It is directly related to folk sorting (Huang, 2009; Lu, 2016). The sorcery is not uncommon among indigenous villagers, who appreciate the concept of ghosts and spirits, feng shui, and other fortune-telling methods that explain the occurrence of disasters, thus maintaining and spreading the mysterious and spiritual culture. When the ghost matchmakers, usually yin yang and feng shui masters, discover the death of a male within a household, they will find a dead female for ghost matching, actualizing the concept of ghost marriage while also profiting from the business. The existence of ghost brides depends entirely on the demands of the villages. Therefore, they are the products and inheritors of a mysterious culture (Huang, 2009). Moreover, the majority of rural families choose burial while few decide on cremation, allowing the corpses to be stored underneath the ground; this becomes the potential foundation and channel for ghost marriage (Hou, 2010).

To date, this custom has spawned a ghost bride market in the rural areas of Central China (as reflected in the data below), where the trading of female corpses is the key feature (Xu & Xiao, 2018). The industry and its profits have driven criminals to kidnap and murder women, raid tombs, steal and sell female corpses, and be involved in morgue robberies (Liu, 2017; Tsoi, 2016). The tradition of ghost marriage is seen not only as a feudal tradition of farmers, but also a tradition which attract criminals who have committed gender-based violence in exchange for money. For instance, as reported by Huang (2005), a criminal from Houzhou heard that a female corpse was sold for several tens of thousands of RMB, and came up with the idea of committing a crime. The criminal lured and killed an elementary school girl and sold her body to Hongtong County for RMB23,800 (RMB6.33 = USD1).

In China, the eighth and ninth articles of “Body Exit and Disposal of Dead Bodies Regulation” state that buying and selling of corpses is prohibited. It also prohibits the use of dead bodies for commercial purposes, except in hospitals, medical schools, medical research institutions, and for forensic, clinical, medical education, and research purposes. All other units or individuals cannot receive donations for the corpses. The prohibition of selling corpses can prevent ghost bride-induced crimes, such as the theft of corpses, killing of women for corpses, or other criminal activities caused by the trading of dead bodies (Shi & An, 2016).

Ghost bride-induced crimes indicate a developing trend of violence against women and selling of female corpses in rural China. However, there is no academic research on crime related to ghost brides. To fill this research gap, we go beyond social culture and folklore.
to investigate the criminal business processes in this emerging economic market. Against this background, the present study aims to address two research questions: First, it investigates the nature and substance of ghost bride–induced crime, including what types of crimes are committed, how they are committed, who the victims are, and the market information of the commodity. Second, it investigates the criminal business processes of ghost bride–induced crimes through the lens of economic perspective.

**Literature**

**The Folkloric Tradition and Emerging Market**

There are several reasons for the continuation of ghost marriages in rural China. First, villagers fear that the evil spirits of those who die prematurely will cause trouble for the living, such as causing them to fall ill, and thus the living need to be saved through folk rituals (Hou, 2010; Huang, 2005). Premature deaths are considered unnatural. Those who die have not exhausted their natural lifespans, nor have they fully experienced humanity, leading to an imbalance in their *yin yang*. Such spirits are full of resentment, have nowhere to go, and become a risk to their families. According to traditional Chinese beliefs, a spirit with a place to which it belongs will not cause evil or harm. However, following the death of an unmarried person due to unnatural causes, rituals are required to calm the spirit; otherwise, it will bring instability wherever it wanders. Villagers are afraid that unnatural and premature deaths will bring bad fortune to living due to the resulting *yin yang* imbalance (Huang, 2005; Yang, 2007).

Second, villagers consider marriage to be one of the most important events in one’s life, which parents want their children to participate in. In traditional Chinese culture, a complete life has three stages: birth (receiving life), marriage (experiencing life), and death (the end of life). For the dead to join the normal social order, allowing their existence to continue, they must have passed through all three stages. Therefore, the spirit of an unmarried person has an incorrect status and form (Hou, 2010). More specifically, a deceased unmarried male or female is not recognised as a member of the family, and thus cannot be buried with the family’s ancestors. Ghost marriage overcomes this problem by linking marriage with death. After marriage, the body can be buried with the family’s ancestors (Chen and Chen, 2012; Huang, 2005).

Third, it has been suggested that when a family cannot accept the premature death of a family member, they have to overcome their sorrow and find comfort through other means (Yang, 2007). Arranging a ghost marriage can alleviate some of the pain and sorrow associated with bereavement (Jiang, 1993). The younger generation may even help the older generation with “bone matching” (Liu, 2009), a tradition that has been passed down over many years. When a man dies before he is married, the next generation may be responsible for arranging a ghost marriage.

In the past, the benefits of ghost marriages came in kind. One of the reasons contributing to the existence of ghost marriages was the establishment and solidification of social relationships for upward social mobility. A marriage that brought two families together expanded each family’s influence in the town, strengthening its position and status (Chen and Chen, 2012; Hou, 2010; Yang, 2007). To date, ghost marriages have become means of obtaining wealth. Because of the large demand in female corpses, people who sell female corpses for ghost marriages collect cash as income. Folklore has provided a solid base for
the development of a ghost bride market that addresses villagers’ emotional and spiritual needs. Superstition, close familial relationships, and the tradition of filial piety have produced a demand-driven market with concrete economic goals for flexible entrepreneurs, some of whom are criminals who supply the commodity (the female corpses or victims) to meet market demand.

**Economic Approach to Crime**

The economic approach to crime is characterised by the existence of a business market governed by the principles of supply and demand. Under this approach, the operation of illegal businesses, similar to that of legal enterprises, is subjected to a cost–benefit analysis. This approach incorporates the basic economic ideas of supply and demand and adds enterprise management and business process principles to explain the structure and operations of crime (Schelling, 1967). As this approach is centralised by economic theory, all of the personnel involved in illegal business activities are assumed to be rational and efficient and to focus on profit maximisation (Reuter, 1983; Rubinstein and Reuter, 1978; Savona, 1990). This approach treats crime and its structure as a result of market forces, with some elements of human relations (Fiorentini and Peltzman, 1995). A crime group is understood to function like a legitimate business, working to maximise profits based on the demands of the market, monitoring its competitors, and looking out for regulators.

Reuter (1985) added property rights and transaction costs in the explanation of the market for crime. He argued that the large-scale monopolisation of the market is difficult for crime groups because of market fragmentation resulting from changes in economic forces. Relatively small criminal enterprises control the supply of illegal goods (Paoli, 2002). The illegal nature of the business restricts their ability to expand. To remain undetected, crime group leaders have to limit the flow of information, the number of people involved, and the production of proof of transactions and agreements, keeping as much as possible hidden from law enforcers. This requires a smaller operation than that of a legitimate business, with fewer operators and reduced financial exchange to achieve higher flexibility in management (Reuter, 1983). Collaboration with other criminals for business is one of the features of small groups. This allows for risk management and resource sharing when establishing partnerships (Haller, 1990). Williams (2001) listed various examples of cross-ethnicity collaborations between small crime groups and explained their reasons for co-opting resource suppliers to guarantee a dependable source of production.

In Asia, research has found that the majority of prostitution businesses are operated by local groups (Chin and Finckenauer, 2012). These are characterised by a small organisational structure and independent and strong ties with the local communities, to achieve high adaptability and productivity in response to changing environments (Chin and Finckenauer, 2012). Zhang and Chin (2002) also reported a preference for a small, horizontal, and loose-structured crime groups in Chinese human smuggling transnational crime groups. Similar observations were made by Block (1979) with regard to cocaine trade, where small, loose, and flexible crime groups were the preferred mode of operation for adaptation to the environment.

Crime operations dealing with illegal goods and services often operate through an underground network (Naylor, 2003). Criminal business networks comprise numerous legal and illegal operators, such as housewives, gangsters, businessmen, politicians, and union leaders (Block and Chambliss, 1981). Race and neighbourhood have also been shown to play important roles in the collaboration between criminals (Ianni and Reuss-Ianni, 1972).
The resulting crime networks are shaped by a combination of environmental factors and opportunities available to members (Morselli, 2009). Such networks are dynamic because of their ever-changing environment and structure of members, and thus vary with location and time; they may be formal or informal, fixed or loose, and organised or disorganised (Morselli, 2009). Broker is a key feature of the crime network in cases of human trafficking (Zhang and Chin, 2002). A broker controls the information flow between parties and resources but may or may not directly or actively participate in criminal activities. The information controlled by the broker gives the broker an advantageous position in connecting different parties (Morselli, 2009). Due to the sensitive information they possess, brokers are key participants within a crime network (Morselli, 2005; Morselli and Tremblay, 2004). A network may have more than one broker, and the greater the number of brokers, the more complex the crime network (Coles, 2001; Klerks, 2001; Williams, 1998).

Methods

The legal case study method was used to investigate ghost bride–induced crime in China. All cases were collected from court judgments searched from China Judgements Online (2013) (中國裁判文書網), which covers all court cases in China. The website was officially developed by the Chinese Supreme People’s Court. Documents related to all judgments decided by Chinese courts in criminal cases, civil cases, criminal reviews, and supplementary information on criminal and civil cases are expected to be published on this website. On 23 August 2017, more than 32.47 million documents had been uploaded to the website, with 17.5 billion visitors from more than 210 countries and regions (Caixin Global, 24-8-2017). The website is the largest online platform for Chinese court judgments, thus providing a comprehensive database of Chinese legal cases for the present study.

The research team used key phrases such as “ghost marriage” (冥婚, 隱婚, 嫁殤, 鬼婚), “stealing corpses” (偷屍, 盜屍), “paying for burial” (繳費土葬), and “stealing and selling corpses” (屍體盜賣) to search for relevant cases in the China Judgements Online. Eventually, we found relevant court judgments on criminal cases and civil litigations in relation to ghost marriages. The search results were classified into three categories: (1) judgments relating to ghost marriages, without connection to criminal cases and civil litigation, (2) judgments on criminal cases and civil litigations related to ghost marriages, and (3) judgments on criminal cases and civil litigation related to stealing corpses. The number of judgments within each category is shown in Table 1.

| Category | China Judgement Online |
|----------|-----------------------|
| 1. Judgments relating to ghost marriages, without connection to criminal cases and civil litigations | 77 |
| 2. Criminal cases and civil litigations directly related to ghost marriages | 117 |
| 3. Criminal cases and civil litigations related to stealing corpses | 36 |
| Total judgments | 230 |
As the legal case study approach adopted in this study aims to investigate the criminal and not sociological aspect of ghost marriages, only the criminal cases mentioned in categories (2) and (3) were used as samples. Civil litigation cases were excluded. Among the criminal cases, those that were tried in both the courts of first and second instance were combined. A total of 84 criminal cases were identified. The crimes committed in these cases took place between 2003 and 2018. A descriptive analysis of these cases was conducted to provide a background for ghost bride–induced crimes in China.

To demonstrate the criminal business processes of the ghost bride market, a detailed analysis of two widely reported cases was conducted to illustrate the processes involved in ghost marriages. The first case was chosen as it was widely reported by 20 news media outlets in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau. The second court case was chosen for its richness, as it has the potential to explain the complex criminal business structure well.

Results

Crimes Committed Among the 84 cases, some involved the commission of multiple crimes (Table 2A). More than 60% (66.7% and 61.9%) of these cases involved the stealing and trading of corpses. About one-tenth (9.5%) involved murder, attempted murder, or bodily harm. Five cases (6%) were related to tomb robbery. It is worth mentioning that

Table 2  Characteristics of criminal cases (N = 84)

| A. Crimes committed                      | No | %  |
|------------------------------------------|----|----|
| Corpse stealing                          | 56 | 66.7|
| Corpse trading                           | 52 | 61.9|
| Murder/attempted murder/bodily harm      | 8  | 9.5 |
| Tomb robbery                             | 5  | 6.0 |
| Fraud                                    | 5  | 6.0 |
| Abuse of power/neglect of duty/bribery   | 4  | 4.8 |
| Blackmail                                | 3  | 3.6 |
| Concealing criminal proceeds             | 3  | 3.6 |
| Kidnap of women                          | 2  | 2.4 |
| Robbery                                  | 1  | 1.2 |
| Corpse destructing                       | 1  | 1.2 |
| B. No. of criminals involved             | No | %  |
| 1                                        | 29 | 34.5|
| 2                                        | 23 | 27.4|
| 3                                        | 9  | 10.7|
| 4                                        | 9  | 10.7|
| 5                                        | 5  | 6.0 |
| 6                                        | 2  | 2.4 |
| 7                                        | 4  | 4.8 |
| 8 and above                              | 3  | 3.6 |
| Average                                  | 2.7| /  |
| C. No. of cases with recidivists involved| No | %  |
| Recidivist                               | 41 | 48.8|
| Non-recidivist                           | 43 | 51.2|
two cases (2.4%) involved the kidnap of women and four cases (4.8%) involved the abuse of power or bribery of office-bearers working in institutions concerned (e.g. hospitals). The fact that only 84 cases were convicted in court over a 15-year period suggests this crime is either a very rare phenomenon or the chances of being arrested and prosecuted are extremely low.

**Number of Criminals Involved**  In 29 cases (34.5%), only one criminal was involved, and two criminals were involved in about one-quarter (27.4%) of the cases. Another one-fifth of cases involved three to four criminals (10.7% each). Some criminal gangs were quite large, involving five people or more (16.8%). The average number of criminals per case was 2.7 (Table 2B).

**Number of Recidivists**  About half of the 84 cases (48.8%) were committed by recidivists who had previously committed similar or multiple crimes related to ghost marriages (Table 2C). If a crime was committed by a group of criminals in any single case, we considered the case as committed by a “recidivist” when at least one of the criminals was recidivist.

**Corpses and Victims**  The 84 criminal cases involved 250 corpses (98.4%) and four living persons (1.6%) who were victims of the crime (Table 3). Corpses are defined in the present study as the body of the dead, regardless of whether they are intact, including the remaining bones and bone ashes of the dead if they have been buried for a long time. Victims are defined as those living persons who are victimised for ghost marriages but exclude those victimised because of other causes.

**Gender**  In terms of gender, the majority of the corpses were female (90.6%), and all four victims (100%) were female (Table 3). To a certain extent, this reflects that the crimes committed were gender-specific, indicating the existence of a ghost bride market. This finding echoes the report in an ethnographic study which found that “the female corpse is a merchandise now. Usually, the buyer is a male and the female corpse is for sale” (Liu, 2009:54).

**Characteristics of Corpses and Victims**  It is extremely difficult to determine the characteristics of corpses because these individuals are dead. However, in a limited number of cases, we were able to identify some characteristics of 37 corpses and 4 victims. Close to half (48.6%) were newly buried corpses, which were buried within a period of 6 months before

| Table 3 | Gender of corpses and victims |
|---------|-----------------------------|
| **Gender** | No. of corpses (N=250) | No. of victims (living person) (N=4) | Overall (N=254) |
| | No | % | No | % | No | % |
| Male | 23 | 9.4 | 0 | 0 | 23 | 9.2 |
| Female | 222 | 90.6 | 4 | 100 | 226 | 90.8 |
| Unknown | 5 | / | 0 | 0 | 5 | / |
| Total | 250 | 100 | 4 | 100 | 254 | 100 |
the crime was committed. About a quarter of the corpses’ (27%) graves or residences were in the same neighbourhood as the criminal’s residence. For instance, they lived in the same or the next village. Seven corpses (18.9%) were relatives of criminals. All four living persons who were victimised lacked the ability to protect themselves, such as children or the mentally retarded (Table 4).

Locations of Demand and Supply Of the 84 cases, 83 mentioned the provinces where the crimes were committed, and 67 cases mentioned where the corpses were required for ghost marriages. Based on this information, we can construct the demand and supply sides for the corpses or victims for the arrangement of ghost marriages. On the demand side, the provinces with the highest demand for corpses were Shanxi and Shaanxi (40% and 31.4%, respectively; see Table 5). Situated in the region between Central and Northern China, these provinces are neighbouring each other (see red circle in Fig. 1), suggesting that a culture of ghost marriage has been established in this region.

On the supply side, the provinces with the highest supply of corpses were also Shanxi and Shaanxi (32.6% and 24.4%, respectively), followed by Henan (18.6%). Shanxi and Shaanxi topped both supply and demand lists. In terms of GDP, these two provinces were the poorest ethnic Han provinces. Although Inner Mongolia and Ningxia are also poor, they are ethnic minority-run self-autonomous regions. They are not ethnic-Han dominated, and thus the culture of ghost marriages may not be implanted into the culture of the ethnic minority groups.

Another observation is that quite a large number of crimes (18.6%) were committed in Henan; however, this area did not have a high demand for corpses, probably because Henan is a highly populated province that neighbours Shanxi and Shaanxi, the two provinces with a high demand for corpses (Table 5).

Locations of Buyers When we investigated the specific locations of buyers, we found that approximately two-thirds came from villages (62.5%) (Table 6).

Prices of Corpses and Victims Matching for the dead used to be free, but it costs more now than matching the living, ranging from several thousand to ten thousand RMB due to the lack of supply (Liu, 2009). Overall, our data reveal that the prices differ greatly among the corpses, ranging from RMB1,125 to RMB135,000, with an average price of RMB23,913. For living persons, the prices ranged from RMB14,000 to RMB70,000, with an average

| Table 4  | Identified characteristics of corpses and victims |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Characteristics of corpses ($N=37$) | No | % |
| Newly-buried (within 6 months) corpses | 18 | 48.6 |
| Corpse’s grave or residence is in the same neighbourhood as the criminal’s residence | 10 | 27.0 |
| Corpse is a relative of the criminal | 7 | 18.9 |
| Corpse’s body is intact | 1 | 2.7 |
| Grave unattended | 1 | 2.7 |
| Characteristics of victims ($N=4$) | | |
| Victims lack the ability to protect themselves | 4 | 100 |
Table 5  Locations of demand and supply

| Province/region | Population 2018* (0,000) | GDP2018* (billion) | Demand—corpses required (N = 67) ** | Supply—crimes committed (N = 83) ** | % | |
|-----------------|---------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Shanxi          | 3718                      | 1,595.813           | 28                   | 28                   | 40.0 | 28 | 32.6 |
| Shaanxi         | 3864                      | 2,394.188           | 22                   | 21                   | 31.4 | 21 | 24.4 |
| Hebei           | 7556                      | 3,249.461           | 6                    | 5                    | 8.6  | 5  | 5.8  |
| Shandong        | 10,047                    | 6,664.887           | 5                    | 4                    | 7.1  | 4  | 4.7  |
| Inner Mongolia  | 2534                      | 1,614.076           | 4                    | 2                    | 5.7  | 2  | 2.3  |
| Jiangxi         | 4648                      | 2,271.651           | 2                    | 1                    | 2.9  | 1  | 1.7  |
| Henan           | 9605                      | 4,993.590           | 1                    | 16                   | 1.4  | 16 | 18.6 |
| Guangdong       | 11,346                    | 9,994.522           | 1                    | 3                    | 1.4  | 3  | 3.5  |
| Liaoning        | 4359                      | 2,351.054           | 1                    | 1                    | 1.4  | 1  | 1.2  |
| Gansu           | 2637                      | 810.407             | 0                    | 0                    | 0    | 0  | 1.2  |
| Heilongjiang    | 3773                      | 1,284.648           | 0                    | 0                    | 0    | 0  | 1.2  |
| Ningxia         | 688                       | 351.021             | 0                    | 0                    | 0    | 0  | 1.2  |
| Jiangsu         | 8051                      | 9,320.755           | 0                    | 0                    | 0    | 0  | 1.2  |
| Hubei           | 5917                      | 4,202.195           | 0                    | 1                    | 0    | 1  | 1.2  |
| **Total**       |                           |                     | **70**               | **86**               | **100** | **100** |
| Unknown/N.A     | /                         | /                   | 17                   | 1                    | /    | /  | /    |

*Population and GDP in Chinese Provinces 2018 (https://data.stats.gov.cn)

**There were cases in which crimes were committed in more than one province, so the total (70 & 86) is more than the N (67 & 83)

Fig. 1  Locations of demand and supply
price of RMB 26,333 (Table 7). Interestingly, the fact that the average price for a living person is approximately the same as for a corpse suggests that perhaps majority of consumers may not favour living persons as this involves a highly serious crime: murder. As reported by Liu (2009), in the ghost bride market, the prices of the goods (corpses) are also dependent on age, whether they are dried or wet goods, and body type, such as wounds, intact or missing parts, or being in a state of decomposition. Among the 254 corpses and victims, 22% were resold by one buyer to another buyer (Table 8), indicating that they were treated as a commodity in the business market.

**Case Study 1** To clarify the criminal business network of the ghost bride market, the GWC case is used as an illustration. As reported by Liu (2009), on 14 November 2006, a family in Nanzhuang Village spent RMB14,000 (see Fig. 2) for a ghost bride for a companion burial for their 53-year old son, GWC, who died from a car accident. The incident became involved in the case of serial killing. The killer, MUR, was a farmer. Between March and December of 2006, in order to sell corpses, MUR killed six individuals. The ghost bride of the GWC family was the fourth victim. This case exposed the market for ghost brides and a long supply chain. In this case, the ghost bride is the fourth place in the chain as the body had been resold twice.

The ghost bride was eventually delivered to the GWC family by GM1 for RMB14,000. Once GM1 heard that GWC family was looking for a ghost bride, GM1 was initially planning to sell the “dried good” (a body that is long dead, likely stolen from a grave) to the GWC family for RMB5,000 but the family declined, because it would be unfitting for their child. GM1 agreed to continue searching and to deliver a corpse by the day of the burial. GM1 got a “wet good” (fresh corpse) from another matchmaker, GM2, for RMB8,500 and managed to deliver it on time. GM2 bought the “good” from MUR, the killer, for

| Locations       | No. | %  |
|-----------------|-----|----|
| City            | 7   | 10.9|
| County          | 10  | 15.6|
| Town            | 7   | 10.9|
| Village         | 40  | 62.5|
| **Total**       | **64** | **100** |
| Unknown/N.A.    | 20  | /   |

**Table 6** Locations of buyers (N = 64)

| Corpse (N = 250)          | Chinese RMB |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| Lowest price              | 1,125       |
| Highest price             | 135,000     |
| Average price per corpse  | 23,913      |

| Victim (N = 4)            |               |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| Lowest price              | 14,000        |
| Highest price             | 70,000        |
| Average price per living person | 26,333    |
The person that connected GM1 with the GWC family was their nephew, NN, who received RMB1,000 from GM1 in return, as a referral fee (Fig. 2).

As reported by Liu (2009), MUR has been in the upstream portion of the “ghost bride” chain for the past 10 years. The ghost brides that he initially provided came from grave robberies. In 2006, MUR strangled a mentally handicapped female in the woods around the outskirts of the village by luring her with food. He brought the body home in a bag and buried it under a dog ranch in the dark. The other murder cases were committed in similar ways. Moreover, the ghost matchmakers originally worked as normal matchmakers, but after they discovered the new market for “ghost brides”, they changed occupations (Liu, 2009). As shown in Fig. 2, ghost matchmakers are situated at the central nodes of the criminal business networks. For instance, GM1 and GM2, utilising their social capital gained from the market, found the required “ghost bride” provider and the buyer.

Case Study 2 The crime occurred in a family in Shaanxi Province, which had adopted a baby girl many years ago. In 2013, the victim’s (i.e. the girl’s) mother asked her uncle to help her find a partner. The victim was aged 19 years at the time and was physically and mentally handicapped. The victim’s uncle asked matchmaker 1 to help him, but was unsuccessful. Matchmaker 1 asked matchmaker 2, who asked matchmaker 3 to help the victim get married. Matchmaker 3 asked leaders 1 and 2 for help. Leader 2 asked matchmaker 4 for help. At the same time, a family in Shanxi Province wanted their deceased son to ghost marrying and contacted matchmaker 4. The family indicated that wanted to offer RMB60,000

Table 8 Whether corpses and victims were resold

|                  | No. of corpses and victims |
|------------------|-----------------------------|
|                  | No | %    |
| Yes              | 56 | 22.0 |
| No               | 198| 78.0 |
| N                | 254| 100.0|

Fig. 2 Criminal business network of case 1
for the ghost marriage. Leaders 1 and 2, matchmakers 2, 3, and 4 all worked together to plan the ghost marriage.

Matchmaker 4 explained that the deceased’s family wanted a “dead body from the morgue” with an ID card, and a death certificate or other authorisation documents. Leader 1 approached a local hospital to make a fake death certificate and leader 2 was asked to raise money for the transaction (Fig. 3). He managed to raise RMB30,000 from various sources. Leader 1, and matchmakers 1 and 2 brought the victim’s identity documents to the hospital. Matchmaker 1 lied saying that she was the victim’s grandmother, and bribed hospital worker 1 and a doctor, so that the doctor would issue the death certificate. Hospital worker 1 told the doctor that his friend’s son had passed away and that he needed a death certificate. The doctor did not check whether leader 1 was telling the truth and just issued the requested death certificate. For ease of work, hospital worker 2 stamped and authenticated the death certificate without checking. Both hospital worker 1 and the doctor received RMB1,000 as a service fee.

Matchmaker 3 prepared a transaction agreement for the ghost marriage. Leaders 1 and 2 and matchmakers 1 and 2 visited the victim’s family in Shaanxi Province. The victim’s uncle received RMB30,000 from the criminals and gave RMB20,000 to the victim’s parents, and RMB10,000 to the criminals as an agent fee. The victim’s father signed the agreement, implying that all involved parties agreed on the wedding. The victim was taken away by the criminals to the hospital in Shaanxi Province (Fig. 3). On the way, leader 1, assisted by matchmaker 2, unsuccessfully attempted to kill the victim. Leader 2 and matchmaker 1 simply did not participate in the killing. When the criminals arrived at the hospital, they wanted to place the victim temporarily in the morgue but hospital worker 1 refused. The criminals continued onward to meet the deceased’s family in Shanxi Province for the ghost
marriage, but they were caught and arrested on the way. They were found guilty of various offences and were sentenced in court as shown in Table 9. The following is a reflective summary of their roles in the ghost marriage.

Leaders 1 and 2 received the most severe punishment, indicating that they were the mastermind and linchpin of the entire crime operation, respectively. They had intimate understanding of what they had to do to complete the ghost marriage. Based on the swiftness of the initial hospital visit, it is likely that they harnessed fraud and bribery as the main tactics to commit their crime. Their use of bribery and providing convincing actors in their fraudulent act highlights their knowledge of playing the game. However, leader 1’s failed murder attempt and leader 2’s insistence not to participate in the murder show that they likely did not have much experience committing violent crime.

Matchmakers 1 and 2 were specialised in arranging ghost brides. As matchmaker 1 enlisted the help of matchmaker 2, it is likely that they had a mutual understanding around operating their agency. Based on their role in the hospital visit operation, it is clear that they were willing to go to any lengths to commit the crime, even if it was fraudulent. Matchmaker 2’s willingness to help murder the victim exacerbated his motivation for the monetary gain they were to receive for a successful job. The duration of their sentence, which was comparatively longer than that of the other matchmakers involved reflects their criminality.

The initial communication between matchmakers 3 and 4 and the two leaders shows the existence of social capital among them. The two matchmakers limited their participation in the operation only to the legitimate side, suggesting their unwillingness to be involved in the crime. This was confirmed by their non-participation during the transfer of victims. However, the punishments they received demonstrate their sense of naivety in the risk faced by the ghost bride market.

The victim’s parents’ role in the crime is reflective of their desperate need for money and inability to take care of the handicapped victim anymore. The fact that the victim’s mother asked her uncle to organise a courtship for the victim suggests that he had large social capital and connections with local people. That the victim’s family knew that they would be selling their daughter, who was alive, into a ghost marriage solidifies the idea that ghost marriages survive in conservative areas of rural China.

The hospital workers were able to issue an official death certificate without authenticating the identity or the death of the deceased. This highlights the bureaucracy and corruptibility prevailing in the hospital system. Though they received the bribe and falsified the documents, the fact that their criminal sanctions were waived by the authorities exhibits tolerance of such misbehaviour in the medical field.

Discussion

Entrepreneurial opportunities for the ghost bride market are created through the interaction of regional, cultural, and economic factors, as well as the availability of a social and business network that facilitates the exchange of information on supply and demand. It occurs in a region where traditional Chinese folklore is still widely practiced in rural areas. Ghost marriages have been practiced for centuries, but the trading of corpses to serve this end occurred only in recent decades when the Chinese economy prospered. Thus, the operation of ghost bride market is financially and culturally driven. Ghost bride–induced crimes
| Role/gender/age in 2013 | Found guilty of | Behaviour 1 | Behaviour 2 | Behaviour 3 | Behaviour 4 | Sentence (years of imprisonment) |
|------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| Leader 1/M/67          | Attempted murder | Masterminded hospital visit and bribery | Led the hospital visit | Abducted and transferred the victim | Attempted to kill the victim while transferring her | 7 |
| Leader 2/M/51          | Attempted murder | Raised money to buy the victim | Abducted and transferred the victim | 6 |
| Matchmaker 1/F/68      | Attempted murder | Prepared the victim’s ID and household registration | Acted as the victim’s grandmother during the hospital visit | Abducted and transferred the victim | 5 |
| Matchmaker 2/F/73      | Attempted murder | Prepared the victim’s ID and household registration | Joined the hospital visit | Abducted and transferred the victim | Assisted Leader 1 in attempting to kill the victim | 5 |
| Matchmaker 3/F/52      | Attempted murder | Prepared the agreement for the transaction | 3, suspended for 5 years |
| Matchmaker 4/M/59      | Attempted murder | Bridge between the buyer’s family and Leader 2 | 4 |
| Victims’ uncle/M/58    | Attempted murder | Bridge between the victim’s family and criminals | 3, suspended for 5 years |
| Victim’s father/M/55   | Attempted murder | Sold the victim for RMB 20,000 | 3, suspended for 4 years |
| Victim’s mother/F/53   | Attempted murder | Sold the victim for RMB 20,000 | 3, suspended for 4 years |
| Hospital worker 1/M/50 | Abuse of power  | Initiated the bribery | Received RMB 1,000 | Criminal sanction waived |
| Doctor/M/36            | Abuse of power  | Issued the death certificate | Received RMB 1,000 | Criminal sanction waived |
| Hospital worker 2/F/54 | Negligence of duties | Did not check the corpse | | Criminal sanction waived |
meet the definition of market-based crimes (Naylor, 2003, p.85) that consist of several elements: production and/or distribution of illegal goods and services; multilateral exchanges between producers, distributors, and retailers on the supply side, willing consumers on the demand side, an underground network; difficulty defining a victim; income earned by suppliers; cash transfers; fair market value; and ambiguous morality.

Ghost bride–induced crimes start with a demand in a culturally specific market—rural areas in Central China, where its economy is rising but still under-developed when compared with the coastal region. As the trading of corpses is absolute contraband, only a black market, not a parallel market, exists. The black market is institutionally and legally condemned but culturally supported. It serves as a venue where supply meets demand or vice versa, and prices are set according to market forces (Spapens, 2010). Sometimes, the quality of the corpse, such as fresh or dry bodies, determines the price. Within this black market, the acquisition of products (corpses or victims) involves different illegal means, including kidnapping, murder, bodily harm, tomb robbery, and corpse stealing. The products are then transferred across cities and provinces through various means.

Based upon this study, the criminal groups that supply corpses are relatively small in structure. Occasionally, only individual criminals were involved (34.5%, Table 2B). Thus, the market can be described as a business network of individual entrepreneurs and independent, smaller criminal groups, but not Triad-type criminal organisations (Lo & Kwok, 2013, 2014). The profits involved in trading are modest and widely dispersed among network participants. Within the small criminal groups, the ring leaders work with a small number of unskilled criminals to assist in the crime. Once the corpses are acquired, trading is facilitated by brokers or other agents, such as the clients’ relatives and neighbours. The finding that about a quarter of the identified corpses’ grave or residence was in the same neighbourhood as the criminals’ residence suggests that ethnicity and neighbourhood play important roles in collaboration between criminals and brokers (Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1972). The nature of these small criminal groups makes them highly adaptable to the dynamic and ever-changing market environment. This finding is in line with previous research on Asian human smuggling and prostitution gangs which are characterised by a small organisational structure and independent and strong ties with local communities (Chin & Finckenauer, 2012; Zhang & Chin, 2002) (Table 10).

The operation of the ghost bride market is created as a result of market forces, with element of human connections (Fiorentini and Peltzman, 1995; Spapens, 2010). Within the networks, there is no restriction in membership, and economic relations precede social relations. Members’ participation is more likely to be opportunistic and financially driven who may not share similar criminal attributes and skills as shown in the two case studies.

| Table 10  | Criminal business processes |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| **Market**      | **Black market, not parallel market** |
| Kind of products| Gender specific: female corpses or women |
| Acquisition of products | Kidnap, murder, tomb-robbery |
| Sales of products  | Absolute contraband |
| Pricing           | Based on supply and demand, and the quality of corpses |
| Profits           | Modest, profits widely dispersed |
| Membership in crime group | No restrictions, opportunistic, legal and criminal operators |
| Facilitators      | Brokers, relatives, neighbours |
The criminals are entrepreneurs aiming at maximizing their financial benefit but not seeking other influences (Spapens, 2010).

Consisting of both legal and criminal operators, the network is facilitated by brokers, or ghost matchmakers, with market information and entrepreneurship. On the demand side, the information suppliers can be any ordinary person, such as the clients themselves, their relatives, neighbours, or hospital workers who pass on the supply information (e.g. someone passed away in hospital) to the matchmakers. On the supply side, however, they are criminals who are engaged in kidnapping, murder, or tomb robbery. It is interesting to know that the local hospitals’ morgues have become a supply platform for the trading of ghost brides. As reported by Liu (2009), a weird phenomenon at the funeral homes occurred, where most of the bodies that were cremated were males. Since women’s corpses can be sold, few were brought in for cremation. Based on the data collected, we suggest that the structure for a “one-stop service” may be available for ghost marriage—the service begins from the second the death is pronounced, the information flows from hospital support workers, to the unit managing the funeral, to the brokers or ghost matchmakers, and then to the family in need (Liu, 2017).

There are no fixed boundaries for business networks that can cross cities and provinces. A female victim may be kidnapped and murdered or a female corpse may be dug out from a tomb in one province and transferred to a buyer in another province. Within the networks, ghost matchmakers usually have abundant knowledge of the males and females within the villages nearby, and they match both the dead and the alive. By acting as brokers, they fill the structural holes (Burt, 1992), connecting otherwise disconnected networks. In other words, they connect criminals and clients. Situated at the central node of the network, they have the greatest connectivity to other partners and thus have access to most information on supply, demand, and pricing. They cooperate with each other but may or may not directly or actively participate in the crime. However, since the trading of corpses is illegal in China, the brokers are also criminals.

Conclusion

Chinese criminals are exceptional in developing entrepreneurship using guanxi (Jiang et al., 2012; Lo & Kwok, 2017). The present study demonstrates how a ghost bride market is created as a result of established historical culture and takes place in specific geographical regions of China. Ghost marriages have existed for a long time and have a direct relationship with folk sorcery, which is not uncommon among rural people who believe in the existence of ghosts and spirits. The sorcery is promoted by ghost matchmakers, who use feng shui and other fortune-telling methods to settle the occurrence of disasters and indirectly maintain and spread the mysterious and spiritual culture. When they discover the death of a male in a household, they bring together and promote ghost matching, profiting from the ghost bride business. The existence of these brokers and their numbers depend on the demands of the rural market (Huang, 2009). The present study confirms Skinner’s (1964–1965) classical research that considers geography and history in the establishment of trading networks in rural China. It also supports previous research that culture can shape economic behaviour and institutions, and that a market is an interaction between economic and cultural factors (Gudeman, 1986; Halperin, 1988; Lie, 1997). In addition, the ghost bride market can explain the actual social and economic lives in China’s rural areas. The present study shows that ghost bride-induced crimes often occur in poorer provinces, as
reflected by their relatively lower GDP. Most importantly, the majority of those used in ghost bride marriages were women. While ghost marriages create a market of supply and demand in booming rural China, the market also indicates income and gender inequality behind the crime.

In traditional Chinese beliefs, the problem of malign wandering spirits is attributed to both males and females, but the study found that gender distinction exists. Considering the continuing patriarchal systems in rural China, ghost marriages favour males. Death of an unmarried and childless male cuts off his family tree, resulting in the loss of his family’s property. After his ghost marriage, his family can adopt a child to become their new heir, continuing the family line. Therefore, the ancestral tribute and property inheritance system of the village community is the root of the custom of ghost marriage favouring male (Chen and Chen, 2012; Huang, 2009), which sparks a market of ghost brides.

Interpretations of research results should be tempered by the methodological limitation in which only aggregate court records were used for analysis. As a result, the court data do not allow us to conduct scientific social network analysis, such as the calculation of network density and network stability. Since no field interviews were engaged with a view of teasing out the grip on people’s mind of the folklore notion, the existing court data may limit our socio-cultural interpretations of the ghost bride market in the emerging economic market of rural China.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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