

## Review Article

**An analysis of six cases of hysterical possession**

Zhang, Xiang-Feng. An analysis of six cases of hysterical possession (Chinese). *Chinese Mental Health Journal*, 6: 175-176, 1992

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There is a generally held impression among cultural psychiatrists that dissociation disorder and/or possession disorder are relatively less commonly observed in the contemporary European/American societies, but that it is still prevalent in other traditional societies. In Southeast Asia, not only is it frequently observed, but it is occasionally occurs as a collective dissociation or group possession, particularly among family members (Tseng, 2001, pp 275-278 & 317-334). In the article reviewed below, Zhang (a psychiatrist from the Liao-ning Province Psychiatric Hospital, in Liao-ning, China) reports on six cases of collective hysterical possession. Liao-ning Province is located in the Northeast of China, near Siberia and North Korea. Out of a total of 4,714 cases that underwent forensic psychiatric assessments in this hospital (during an unspecified duration of time), Zhang reported 52 cases of homicides committed during spirit(s) possession. Of the 52 cases, there were six cases of 'collective possession' involving a total of 32 individuals. In these cases (described below), more than one person was possessed at the time when the homicide was committed.

First case Mrs. Wang, a 47-year old housewife with a fourth-grade education and a history of hysterical disorder, claimed that she was often possessed by her deceased mother-in-law. Her husband was a 50-year old cadre (a political party worker) with a ninth-grade education. They had two sons, of 24 and 18 years of age. Their eldest son cohabited with his girlfriend illegally (i.e. against Chinese social law of the time). He began to get isolative, and less talkative than usual. He hid inside his house, and seldom came out. He claimed that he was a "headless ghost," and intended to kill the rest of his family. This caused great fear amongst his family members. One night, Mrs. Wang heard a noise on their roof. In the belief that a ghost was walking on their roof, she got frightened and became 'possessed'. She claimed that she was possessed by a great spirit that was going to expel her son's headless ghost. Her husband and younger son also heard the noise on the roof and were frightened. Under her influence they too became dissociated and 'possessed' at the same time. Together they held the elder son, nailed 43 nails into his head and body, and stabbed him in the abdomen with a knife. This resulted in his death. They claimed that they killed the headless ghost who possessed their son.

Second case Mrs. Wang, a 43-year old housewife with a sixth-grade education, had a history of hysterical attacks and had been treated by a shaman. Her husband, Mr. Wang, was a 40-year old laborer with a sixth-grade education. They had a 19-year old daughter and a 14-year old son. One day, Mrs. Wang suddenly became dissociated, claiming that she was possessed by her (deceased)

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father-in-law's spirit. She stated that her eldest daughter was possessed by the spirit of the "white-tiger-star" and that she would cause disaster to the family. Mr. Wang, the father, was frightened on hearing this. He too became dissociated when he heard his own daughter acknowledging that she was actually possessed by the spirit of the white-tiger-star. Mr. and Mrs. Wang, joined by their 14-year old son during their collective possession state, killed their daughter.

Third case This case involved Ms. Xue a 22-year old with a third-grade education; her elder brother, Mr. Xue, a 24-year old sixth-grade educated farmer, and his wife (Xue's sister-in-law) a 22-year old fourth-grade educated housewife. The Xues' mother was very superstitious. She claimed that in her dreams, she often encountered a stranger – a man with whom she would have sexual intercourse (in her dreams). Mrs. Xue told her daughter, Ms. Xue, about this. After hearing of this, Ms. Xue began to have dreams in which she had sexual intercourse with her brother-in-law. One evening, Ms. Xue saw a shooting star, which seemed to fall onto her head. She believed that disaster was about to strike. She was frightened, and began behaving strangely, and claiming that she was possessed by a fox spirit. Her brother-in-law then claimed that he was possessed by a four thousand year old tiger-spirit; and her brother and sister-in-law claimed that they were possessed by spirits as well. One night, the four of them, all claiming they were possessed, talked until midnight, discussing who had been possessed by the most powerful spirit. Ms. Xue's brother-in-law had sexual intercourse with both Ms. Xue and her sister-in-law in the presence of the latter's husband, Ms. Xue's brother. The next day, early in the morning, her sister- (should this be brother-in-law) in-law attempted to make love with Ms. Xue again. At that point, Ms. Xue declared that her brother-in-law was possessed by an evil spirit, With the help of her brother and sister-in-law, the three of them, while in their 'possessed state', jointly killed her brother-in-law, chopping off his head, extremities, and his penis as well.

Fourth case This case involved Mrs. Wu, a 56-year old housewife, her son, and five daughters aged twenty to thirty, and her 35-year old son-in-law (the husband of the third daughter). All eight of them were in a dissociated ('possessed') state when they collectively committed the murder of the eldest daughter. The episode started immediately after Mrs. Wu's husband died suddenly from a stroke. Mrs. Wu denied that her husband had passed away, claiming that his spirit possessed her and wanted to choke her to death. She showed her children a mark on her neck, verifying that she was possessed, and that she was going to be murdered by her (deceased) husband. During her husband's funeral, when she heard her eldest daughter say to her "Mother, it is time ..." she suddenly acted as if she was possessed. She shouted loudly, demanding her children to burn incense, and kneel down in front of her. Hearing this, the rest of her family joined Mrs. Wu, all of them shouting loudly while in a dissociated or 'possessed' state. Their possessed state continued the following day, when the eldest daughter began to say something incoherently; the second daughter accused her elder sister of being possessed by an evil spirit. Mrs. Wu, in order to make peace in her family, asked them to kill the eldest daughter.

Fifth case Mr. Yu, a 35-year old, fifth-grade educated farmer was married to his 34-year old, sixth-grade educated, wife. Mr. Yu had an elder brother and a younger brother, both of whom were married and living in the same village in a remote area. Mr. Yu believed in spirits and ghosts. One day, after a quarrel with his wife, he began to behave as if he was possessed, claiming that he was possessed by "seven female spirits." Hearing this, his wife believed that her husband, who was intoxicated, had revealed his actual secret identity. Mrs. Yu began to worship him and become dissociated herself. Mr. Yu's sister-in-law, who came to visit them, under the influence of Mr. Yu, began to act strangely and became dissociated, claiming that she was possessed by the spirit of "a little old man.". Her husband became anxious and asked his brother, Mr. Yu, to expel his wife's spirit. Mr. Yu, tried to do so but failed. Finally, he took a sword and stabbed her in her chest,

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causing her death. Mr. Yu ordered his older and younger brothers to make a gesture of making love to the (murdered) sister-in-law, with the intent of providing the 'yang'-element (through sexual intercourse), to regain her life. However, it failed and her body was dumped into the river. They then had fireworks to celebrate her return to the heaven.

Sixth case Mrs. Hu, a 36-year old, fifth-grade educated female was married to a 47-year old, second-grade educated farmer, and they had a 17-year old son. Mrs. Hu had an extra-marital affair with a 36-year old married man, Mr. X. She invited her husband, her boyfriend, Mr. X, and Mrs. X to come together to worship the spirit, by meditation and fasting. During the meditation, Mrs. Hu and Mrs. X both fell into a dissociated state. Mrs. Hu claimed that she was possessed by the spirit of "an old sheep" and that she wanted to chase her husband and kill him. She pulled her husband down from the bed. She bit and kicked him on the ground, almost killing him. Mr. X joined her and killed Mr. Hu with an axe. After murdering Mr. Hu, Mrs. Hu, Mr. X and his wife, Mrs. X swore together to heaven that they were now a family. The next day, Mrs. Hu claimed that Mrs. X was possessed by a spirit, and that she wanted to help her by expelling her spirit. Mrs. Hu began acting strangely. She was naked, and holding her 17-year old son. She then began to make love to her own son.

Based on these six cases, Zhang commented that, in general, these patients who came from uneducated farming communities, were people who held the folk belief that a human being could be possessed by a spiritual being. The persons who were initially possessed were mostly female, inducing family members or relatives to be possessed as well, and the victims murdered were usually one of the family. The motive for killing, according to Zhang, was unclear. However, by reviewing these cases described by Zhang, it is tempting to speculate that jealousy and sexual conflict among family members is often the motive behind the homicidal behavior in a 'possessed' state. Family harmony and closeness were emphasized in their culture. However, at the same time, there existed complicated conflicts among family members - usually involving socially unacceptable (or incestuous) sexual relations. Cultural factors contributed to the development of such unique, collective possession disorders in a community in which people still strongly believed in supernatural beings, and spirit-possession. By becoming possessed, they tried to resolve the family conflict which they had difficulty dealing with it in an ordinary way. It is important to point out that Lao-ning province is located in the northeastern part of China, near Siberia, called Manchuria in the past, where the shaman used to be prevalent. Possession by spirits is still a part of the people's common folk concept and beliefs. The ties among family members are very close, perhaps making it easier to be influenced by the first person to become possessed, resulting in a contagious, collective dissociation and/or possession. Some of them, particularly the first patient, manifested 'possession psychoses'. One of the leading forensic psychiatrists in China, Li Cong-pei, commented in his article (1992) that family-related occurrences of possessed states was still commonly observed in China, particularly in rural and uneducated areas, and the homicide of family members under such group possession was not infrequent, and was causing forensic concern.

Severe crimes, usually murder, committed under such a possessed state, have lead to disagreements among forensic psychiatrists in different societies (Tseng et al., 2004, pp 120-125). For instance, in America, it is difficult for the offender to escape their legal responsibility even when the offenders claim that they committed the crime during a dissociated state; that they were not aware of what they were doing, and had no recollection of their criminal action. However, in some societies, including China, some of the cases may be waived of legal responsibility by a judge because they were considered to be in a transient insane condition when they committed the crime

(Liu, 1992). This illustrates that, even with the same psychopathology, they may be viewed and regarded differently by the legal system in terms of their legal responsibility.

*Reviewed by Wen-Shing Tseng*

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