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**NETHERWORLD MARRIAGE IN ANCIENT CHINA:
ITS HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND IDEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

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Abstract: The netherworld marriage or the wedding for dead persons is a folk religious ritual in ancient China. It is based on ancient Chinese folk belief of afterlife in the netherworld. Through a textual research and investigation based on relevant historical records and other ancient documents, as well as some archeological discoveries, this paper tries to give a brief account of the origin and development of netherworld marriage and its cultural and ideological background in ancient China. It finds that netherworld marriage might originate from human sacrifice in early ancient times, and its name varies in different periods. It has gone through its prevailing in the Tang Dynasty, declining in the Song and Yuan Dynasties, and reviving again in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. During the long history, this custom was generally criticized and condemned by orthodoxy Confucian intellectuals, yet it was practiced and sometimes even prevailed among both noble class and common people, due to its deep root in the folk belief. The paper also intends to clarify some misconceptions and misunderstandings concerning the study of this unique cultural phenomenon.

Key Words: netherworld marriage, ancient China, folk religion, afterlife, Confucianism

Introduction

Netherworld marriage, also commonly known as “marrying a dead person”, is a unique and odd folk religious ritual in ancient China. A typical netherworld marriage involves a dead man and a dead woman (in many cases a boy and a girl die prematurely) who had not a marital relationship in their lifetime at all, but after their death, their parents or family members arrange a wedding for them, move and bury their corpses or remains together, and let them become a couple in the netherworld. In terms of rituals, it usually consists of two stages of two different ceremonies, i.e., a wedding and then a funeral*.

Historical records indicate that netherworld marriage was not uncommon in ancient China. Its cultural diffusion also spread through the nearby areas such as Vietnam, Korea, Japan and some Southeastern countries¹. It even has a far reaching influence in modern China and occasionally occurs today. For instance, according to a report published in 2007 on *Legal Daily*, the most important official newspaper in the legal areas in China, netherworld marriage still happens in some places in Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces. Some parents are eager to find and buy a corpse in order to arrange a marriage for their dead children, while the corpse traders sell corpse for money. In a few astonishing criminal cases, the trader even killed people and sold the corpse². It not only happens in those remote rural areas, but also in modern metropolitan cities such as Hong Kong³.

Ancient scholars have recorded and discussed this interesting and strange custom here and there in their writings. It also attracted the attention of some researchers in recent years⁴. Yet there are some problems and controversial issues that should be further explored. For instance, when and how the netherworld marriage started? What is the relation between netherworld marriage and those normal rituals of wedding and funeral? What is the mainstream intellectuals’ attitude towards it? Does it really prevail all the time in China’s long history? What kind of historical, cultural and religious ideological factors have affected the evolution of it? This paper intends to provide a textual investigation on the relevant historical records and archeological discoveries in order to give an account of the origin and development of netherworld marriage in ancient China, and tries to answer some of the questions mentioned above.

Ancient Chinese folk belief of afterlife and the “netherworld”

Although never being officially integrated into the very sophisticated and complicated ritual systems in ancient China based on Confucian social-political ethical principles, netherworld marriage was widely

practiced in certain times and areas by people from both noble and lower classes.

The earliest record of “netherworld marriage” appeared in the book of *Zhou Li* 周礼, one of the earliest Confucian classics, which records the ancient official system designs. In section two of the book of *Zhou Li*, an official position called “*Mei Shi* 媒氏”, who is in charge of mediating marriage, is described as having the responsibility of “prohibiting migration of the buried and marrying the dead”⁵. According to the comments and explanations made by ancient scholars, “migrating the buried (迁葬)” means: a man and a woman had not been a married couple during their life, but after their death, their corpse or remains were moved and buried together⁶. This usually involves opening the tomb and moving the coffin, along with the remains of the one who died earlier, in order to re-bury it together with the newly dead. As for “marrying the dead”, it just means to marry dead persons, but here it actually means a combined-burial for a boy and a girl who both died in their premature age⁷.

It is worthy to the attention that when the practice of netherworld marriage was first recorded, it appeared in a context of being officially banned. Although the authenticity of the book of *Zhou Li* as a real codex of institution of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BCE) is questionable, it is still reliable enough to evidence the later mainstream Confucian negative attitude towards netherworld marriage. However, the ban has never been successful enough, as we will discuss in the following sections, netherworld marriage continues its development during its long history. The reason for this, as we understand, is because this practice has a deep root in the ancient Chinese folk religious ideology, especially the belief of afterlife in the netherworld. It is also due to the Confucian ambiguous attitude toward afterlife, ghosts and gods.

In early ancient China, the concept of immortality of soul after death was widely accepted, people usually believed that death was not the end of the soul, but rather, the soul will become a “*Gui* 鬼 (ghost)” after the death of the body. The same syllable “*Gui*” also represents another character “*归*”, which means to return or go back. This homophonic relevance suggests that ghosts are just souls of human beings who have returned or gone back to the netherworld, where they will exist in another state.

The ancient Chinese concept of “Netherworld” was originated very early. It is called in Chinese as “*Yin jian* 阴间” or “*ming jian* 冥间”, which literally means the space of *Yin* or the space of darkness. It is contrasting to “*Yang jian* 阳间”, which means the space of *Yang* or the space of brightness, referring to this world we are living in. These concepts are based on the old Chinese cosmology that everything in the universe,

including the universe itself, is composed of the Yin and Yang. It is hard to define where the Netherworld is physically located. Sometime it is also called “huang Quan 黄泉” or “di xia 地下”, indicating that it is in deep underground, but that doesn’t mean it can be reached by digging the land deeper, since it is not really a physical place at all. Chinese people believe that after death, all men’s spirits will become ghosts and will live their life in the Netherworld. The Chinese concept of Netherworld is neither the Heaven nor the Hell, albeit it has acquired some features of Hell due to the influences of Buddhism and Christianity. According to some Chinese folklore, the Chinese netherworld generally has a social structure similar to that of the real world: There is a Netherworld King (*Ming Wang* 冥王) with his officials, there is also netherworld currency (*ming bi* 冥币) used by ghosts to do their business. The dead persons are just transformed to another form of existence and live a new secular life in the Netherworld, where they will be physically separated from the land of living forever. That is why in a traditional Chinese funeral, many imitative human utensils such as paper houses, paper furniture, paper cars, even paper cell phones today, are buried or burnt together with the dead, since people believe that their dead relatives will still use these things in the Netherworld.

Consequently, the dead should be treated as if he or she is still alive, otherwise their ghosts will cause trouble for the living people. Therefore, funeral ceremony and the ancestor worship were very important in traditional rituals. An elegant and elaborate funeral ceremony with rich burial objects will not only be considered as the expression of filial piety, but it will also hopefully bring back blessings and protection from the ghosts of their ancestors in the future.

However, the mainstream Confucian ideology concerning afterlife and ghost is vague and ambiguous. It can be traced back to the attitude of Confucius himself. On the one hand, Confucius seldom talks about ghosts and gods and keeps a distance from those supernatural things; on the other hand, he emphasizes the social functions of those quasi-religious rituals such as ancestor worship and religious fiesta ceremonies. Once a disciple asked Confucius how the ghosts and the gods should be served, and Confucius answered: “You are not able to serve living human, how can you serve the ghosts?” “May I ask about death?” the disciple asked again. Confucius said: “You don’t even understand life, how can you understand death?”⁸ Confucius’ attitude is also presented in another dialogue between him and one of his disciples:

Zi Gong(子贡) asked Confucius whether the dead is conscious or unconscious. Confucius said: “If I say the dead is conscious, I am afraid those filial and dutiful sons and grandsons will make light of their

life to follow their dead parents. If I say the dead is unconscious, I am afraid those unfilial sons and grandsons will abandon the corpse and don't even bother to bury them. You really want to know whether the dead is conscious or unconscious? After your death you will naturally find it, it's not too late."⁹

In general, Confucius is realistic and rationalistic; he does not really believe in any supernatural beings such as ghosts and gods. Yet he highly values those worship ceremonies of ancestors and gods for educational and social-political purpose. Therefore, although Confucianism opposes those superstitious practices such as human sacrifice and netherworld marriage, it never tries to eliminate the folk belief in ghosts and gods etc. from people's ideology. This may explain why netherworld marriage has a space for development in later generations despite the fact that it was banned as early as when the book of *Zhou Li* was compiled.

Netherworld marriage was originated from human sacrifice

The record of "prohibit migration of the buried and marrying the dead" in the book of *Zhou Li* proves that the practice of netherworld marriage already existed at the time when *Zhou Li* was compiled. But the date of *Zhou Li* is a controversial issue among scholars. Researchers generally don't believe it as truly being a book of the early Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BCE) created by the famous politician Duke Zhou. Yet most scholars accept it as something that appeared no later than 221 BCE when the first unified Chinese empire, the Qin Dynasty was established. Scholars like Gu Jigang 顾颉刚 and Guo Moruo 郭沫若 established that *Zhou Li* is a genuine work of the late Warring State period (771-221 BCE), and they even went so far as to speculate on the particular identity and provenance of the author¹⁰.

However, the origin of the custom of netherworld marriage might be earlier than the book of *Zhou Li*. Based on their reading of a group of inscriptions on oracle bones or tortoise shells, some scholars believe that the netherworld marriage might appear as early as the Shang Dynasty (16th-11th century)¹¹. In these inscriptions, a concubine of the King Wu Ding 武丁 named *Fu Hao* 妇好, was said to become the "netherworld wife" of several other deceased Kings after her death¹². But other scholars don't agree with this opinion¹³. In our view, these inscriptions only reflected the Shang people's idea of afterlife superstition, and didn't involve any substantial information about the ritual of netherworld marriage. Therefore, they cannot be used as evidence to support the opinion that netherworld marriage appeared in the Shang Dynasty.

The form of the rites of a netherworld marriage is quite similar to the funeral rites of burying or re-burying a married couple together, or *he zang* 合葬, which, according to *The Book of Rituals* 礼记, started in the early Western Zhou Dynasty. In the chapter 3 of *The Book of Rituals*, Ji Wuzi 季武子, a senior official of the Lu State was recorded saying: “Combined-burial for couples is not very ancient, yet it has never been changed since the time of Duke Zhou.”¹⁴ The same chapter also recorded that Confucius himself managed a combined-burial for his parents. His father died when Confucius was only 3 years old, his mother never told him where his father was buried. Many years later when his mother also died, Confucius tried very hard to find his father’s tomb by consulting one of his senior neighbor villagers and eventually re-buried his parents together¹⁵. This story is also recorded in Sima Qian’s *Biography of Confucius*¹⁶. In *The Book of Rituals*, Confucius also said that the people of the Wei State bury and memorialize their dead “separately” from their ancestors. While the people of the Lu State “combine” the newly dead with their ancestors, Confucius thinks “combining” is “good”¹⁷. This evidence indicates that in Confucius’s time, combined burial was popular at least in Confucius’s home state and was considered by Confucius as appropriate.

Although we should not confuse netherworld marriage with joint burial of married spouses, the similarity in terms of ritual forms between the two suggests that, logically, netherworld marriage could not appear earlier than the later. In other words, it could not be earlier than the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty. But it should be earlier than it has been recorded in the book of *Zhou Li*. Therefore, we may conclude that the netherworld marriage was originated at approximately the end of the Spring-Autumn period.

As for the question of why the netherworld marriage was initiated at that time, we suggest a hypothesis: netherworld marriage probably first appeared as a kind of replacement of human sacrifice.

The origin of sacrificing human in funerals took place very early. It especially prevailed in the Shang Dynasty (1600 to 1050 BCE). Archeological discovery has confirmed that 3,684 people had been sacrificed during the Shang Dynasty, plus some other unconfirmed and suspicious cases, the total number of human sacrifices that happened in Shang Dynasty may have reached over four thousand¹⁸. In the Zhou Dynasty, human sacrificial cases were greatly reduced, but still happened occasionally. For instance, according to the records of Sima Qian, when the Duke Wu of the Qin State died in 678 BEC, 66 persons were sacrificed¹⁹. In 621BEC, when the Duke Mu died, 177 people became sacrificial victims, among whom were three famous excellent senior officials from the Zi Ju 子车 family, to whom the people of the Qin State expressed deep regret and sympathy in a famous song titled “*The Yellow Bird*”²⁰.

However, this cruel and inhumane practice was severely criticized by enlightened scholars and statesmen in the later Zhou Dynasty, when the earliest trend of humanistic and rationalist thought appeared in China. Although Confucius thought a reasonably elaborate funeral was necessary for mourning the departed parents, he didn't advocate extravagant burial. He said: "With the rites, it is better to err on the side of frugality than on the side of extravagance; in mourning, it is better to err on the side of grief than on the side of formality."²¹ He criticized a noble man who had spent more than three years to prepare a stone coffin case, saying that: "extravagance as this, I wish his body would rot quickly after his death."²² Confucius even considered the use of human form figures as burial objects as unacceptable, cursing the inventor of human burial figures as deserving to not have any progeny, for these figures suggest human sacrifice²³. Another Scholar Mo Zi, who advocated "thrift in funerals", also severely denounced the rulers and noble class for killing and burying lots of people to follow their own death²⁴.

These criticisms along with the general wakening of humanistic consciousness aroused the respect for the value of human life and formed a great social pressure to abandon the inhumane practice of human sacrifice. However, the belief of the immortal soul, and the care for afterlife in the netherworld did not disappear. Actually, from the perspective of the dead, sending someone along with the dead to accompany him or her in the netherworld can also be considered as a type of humanistic care. Just as some Qing Dynasty scholars have keenly observed, some kind of human sacrifice and combined burial were arranged between those lovers whose relationship had not been approved by existing social law and etiquette, and could not be accepted as a legal union during their life time. For instance, the Queen Mother Xuan 宣太后 of the Qin State once suggested her young lover, Wei Choufu 魏丑夫, should be buried with her after her death²⁵. And the Princess Guantao 馆陶, an aunt of Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty, was finally buried together with her long time secret lover Dong Yan 董偃 after her death²⁶. This is a kind of complement of their banned love in this world and a comfort to their loneliness in the netherworld.

As a result, two kinds of substitutes were suggested to replace human sacrifice: one is using wood or pottery figurines to replace persons; the other is to find another dead person and move his or her remains to burry together with the newly dead, i.e., let them have a netherworld marriage.

Thus we may infer that the netherworld marriage should have appeared no earlier than the later Spring-Autumn period. It was originated as a replacement of human sacrifice. The records of "prohibiting migration of the buried and the marriage of adolescent dead" in the book of *Zhou Li* is the only, but nevertheless, very clear evidence of the existing netherworld marriage in that time, which shows only a "tip of

the iceberg” if we consider that the majority of the historical materials of the pre-Qin times was destroyed by the biblioclast Emperor Qin Shihuang.

The conflicts between netherworld marriage and Confucian Rituals

As we have discussed earlier, “migrating the buried and marrying the dead”, or netherworld marriage, was banned in the book of *Zhou Li*. The reason according to Zheng Xuan 郑玄 is that “Since they had never gone through the wedding in their lifetime according to the rituals, therefore, joining them together after their death is against human relations”²⁷.

In terms of rituals, netherworld marriage should begin with a wedding, which is a very important rite in Confucian rituals. As expressed in the *Book of Rituals*: “A wedding will join the goodness of the two families, succeed the worship to their ancestors, and perpetuate their future generations. That’s why it was emphasized by the superior man.”²⁸ Therefore, it should go through all the complicated ritual processes including accepting gifts, inquiring maiden name, securing the engagement, sending betrothal gifts, selecting the date of the wedding, etc., in order to legitimize the marriage and maintain the ethical code and family order. Without going through all the formal processes, a marriage will become an elopement and thus illegitimate, which is usually considered a sign of social decline. Obviously the dead boys and girls cannot go through those processes; and thus their marriage after death does not conform to Confucian rituals. That’s why Zheng Xuan considered netherworld marriage as being “against human relations”. On the other hand, netherworld marriage cannot really bring any descendants, thus will not be able to function as to “succeed the worship to their ancestors, and perpetuate their future generations”. That’s why after the netherworld marriage, some families even have to adopt an offspring for the dead couples, either for comforting the dead or for making up the deficiency of the ritual process.

According to the Chapter *Da Zong Bo* 大宗伯 in the book of *Zhou Li*, ancient rituals were classified into five categories: 1. The rituals of auspicious events; 2. The rituals of calamity and misfortune; 3. The rituals of military; 4. The rituals for entertaining guests; 5. The rituals of celebration and praising²⁹. Under each category there are still many subcategories. For instance, wedding is a subcategory ritual under the category of celebration and praising, while funeral is under that of calamity and misfortune. According to Confucianism, the five categories of rituals cover not only all the social relations among human beings but also the relations between human being, Gods and ghosts. They constructed a general framework of institutions to regulate people’s activity and behavior in the world, and to maintain and enhance the human relations and social orders. However, the netherworld marriage, which combines

both a wedding and a funereal, crosses the boundary of two categories (number 2 and number 5). As a result, it cannot be classified properly in the five rituals category and causes disorder. Ancient scholars were quite divergent in classifying it in the existing category of rituals. Consequently, it leads to a similar phenomenon called by Mary Douglas as an “anomaly and ambiguity”³⁰; Douglas’s theory of “purity and danger” might also bring light to the understanding of why in its long history, netherworld marriage was generally rejected and condemned by Confucian intellectuals, even though it has sometimes been practiced by royal family members.

Another reason why netherworld marriage was opposed by Confucianism is because of its original relation with human sacrifice, as we have discussed earlier. Human sacrifice was extremely abominated by Confucianism. Confucius once praised the Shang Dynasty for using imitated household utensils to replace the real ones as sacrificial objects, for this can save the real utensils for the living people. But he severely criticized the Zhou Dynasty custom of using human figures together with those imitated household utensils as sacrifice object³¹. Despite the fact that here Confucius might have made a mistake by imagining that human sacrifice was triggered by a human figure sacrifice, while actually the human figure sacrifice was a substitute for a living person sacrifice, his attitude of detesting human sacrifice was clear and firm. Another Confucian scholar Xun Zi 荀子 advocated elaborate funerals, yet he also held a firm stance of opposing human sacrifice, saying that “to deprive the living to supplement offerings for the dead is called ‘delusion’; and to execute the living so that they can escort the dead is called ‘predation’.”³².

Since the netherworld marriage has an analogical relation with human sacrifice, it is understandable that it was opposed by orthodox Confucian scholars.

The first real case of netherworld marriage recorded in the official history books happened in the Wei State (A.D.220-266) of the Three Kingdoms period. In the year of 208, Cao Chong 曹冲(196-208), one of the sons of the famous Three Kingdom Politician Cao Cao 曹操(155-220), died at the age of thirteen. Cao Cao felt extremely sad about his little son’s death, and intended to arrange a netherworld marriage for him. He first discussed with Bing Yuan 邴原, a famous Confucian scholar whose daughter had also died recently, about a possible “joint burial” of his son and Bing Yuan’s daughter. This suggestion, however, was firmly rejected by Bing Yuan for the reason of “against rituals”³³, despite the fact that Bing Yuan was a subordinate of Cao Cao at that time. Afterwards, Cao Cao found another family who also had a deceased daughter and eventually realized the netherworld marriage³⁴.

In another case, when the eight year old daughter of the Emperor Ming of the Wei Dynasty has died, the Emperor not only formally entitled

her as “Princess”, managed a “joint burial” for her with a distant grandnephew who was also entitled as a marquis, but also arranged for someone as the offspring of the dead “couple” to inherit their titles in this world. The Emperor was so overwhelmed by his sadness that he wept day and night, and he even wanted to attend the memorial ceremony personally at the tomb site. The Emperor’s abnormal behavior was severely criticized by Minister Chen Qun 陈群, who advised the Emperor to give up this detrimental action, since it does not meet the rituals and had never been done by any previous emperors³⁵.

Bing Yuan and Chen Qun were all well-known Confucian literati and officials of that time, both of them opposed netherworld marriage for the reason of “going against the rituals”, yet neither Cao Cao nor the Emperor Ming was annoyed by their opposition. This does not only show that these two rulers had a broad and tolerant mind, but also indicates that Bing Yuan and Chen Qun’s opinion might represent the mainstream idea which was conforming to the traditional Confucian rituals. According to the historical records, Cao Cao had a total of 25 sons. Besides Cao Chong, there are still another 6 sons who died prematurely without any offspring left behind³⁶. But Cao Cao only arranged a netherworld marriage for Cao Chong, not for the other 6 sons. This not only shows Cao Cao’s special love for this particular son, but also indicates that at that time, netherworld marriage was not a general practice.

Even in the Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties (907-960), when netherworld marriage became popular, it is still denounced by mainstream scholars. For instance, as recorded in *The New History of the Five Dynasties*, in the Later Tang Dynasty, the Emperor Ming Zong once asked the official scholar Liu Yue 刘岳 to censor a rituals guide book, and deleted the contents concerning netherworld marriage, their reason being that this custom was originated from the grass root vulgar society and not conforming to the Confucian purpose of ritual design³⁷.

The change of naming of netherworld marriage

The Chinese name of netherworld marriage, i.e. “*ming hun* 冥婚”, appeared very late. It was first referred as “migrate the buried and marry the dead (迁葬 and 嫁殇)” in the book of *Zhou Li*, by which we can easily imagine what it actually means. The record of real cases of netherworld marriage, such as that of Cao Cao’s son and Emperor Ming’s daughter, are first mentioned in *San Guo Zhi* (三国志 *The History of Three Kingdoms*). However, the author Chen Shou 陈寿 didn’t use the term “*ming hun* 冥婚” to refer to the netherworld marriage. Instead, it was called “*he zang* 合葬”, which means “combined burial”, emphasizing the feature of this type of funeral ceremony. Inscription of tomb tablets of that time had the

characters “*he hui* 合会”, which means “join together”, or “*pin hui* 聘会”, which means “be engaged together”. Therefore, although the netherworld marriage actually existed in the Three Kingdoms Period, the term “*ming hun*” might not have been created.

A research on the evolution of the meaning of the character “*ming* 冥” also indicates that the term of “*ming hun*” could not appear earlier than the Eastern Han Dynasty. In the *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* 说文解字, a dictionary compiled by the Eastern Han Dynasty scholar Xu Shen 许慎, the character “*ming* 冥” is only defined as “dark and gloomy”, without referring to the netherworld. The idea of netherworld and its name “*ming jian* 冥间” was gradually formed after the Taoist and Buddhist religion became more popular in China.

Further textual study finds that the term of “*ming hun*” most likely emerged in the Tang Dynasty. In the book of *Tong Dian* (通典), a general dictionary of ancient laws and regulations compiled by the Tang Dynasty scholar Du You 杜祐 (735-812), after citing the record of “prohibit migrating the buried and marrying the dead” in the book of *Zhou Li*, the editor referred to the Eastern Han Dynasty scholar Zheng Zhong’s 郑众 annotation as saying: “marrying the dead person, it’s what we call ‘*qu hui* 娶会’ today.” Then Du You added: “This is what is commonly known as ‘*ming hun* 冥婚’.”³⁸ This shows that the netherworld marriage was called “*qu hui* 娶会” in the Eastern Han Dynasty, which has the similar meaning of “*he hui* 合会” and “*pin hui* 聘会”, while the term of “*ming hun* 冥婚” was commonly used in the Tang Dynasty.

A comparison between two similar records from two different historical books can also provide evidence to confirm the fact that the term of “*ming hun* 冥婚” emerged in the Tang Dynasty. Both *Wei Shu* 魏书, which is a history book of the Northern Wei Dynasty written by the Northern Qi writer Wei Shou 魏收 (507-572), and the *Northern History* 北史, which is a history book of all the Northern Dynasties written by a Tang Dynasty (618-907) historian Li Yanshou 李延寿 (year of birth and death unknown), have the records of a case of netherworld marriage which involves a princess of the Northern Wei and a young son of a minister. In *Wei Shu* this case is called “*he zang* 合葬”, which means combined burial³⁹; while in the *Northern History* it is called “*ming hun* 冥婚”, which means netherworld marriage⁴⁰. The *Wei Shu* was completed in the second year of *Tianbao* 天保 of the Northern Qi Dynasty (A. D. 554), while the *Northern History* was completed in the fourth year of *Xianqing* 显庆 of the Tang

Dynasty (A.D. 659). The changing of the terms used to describe the same case in the two books obviously indicates that the term “*ming hun*” quite likely made its first appearance in the Tang Dynasty.

In addition to that, there are also two Tang Dynasty tomb inscriptions which may help us to further pin down the more exact date when the term “*ming hun*” had appeared. One inscription records that in the 20th year of Zhenguan 贞观 (A. D. 646), a young son of a local governor died unmarried when he was 21 years old. After he died, he was “jointly buried” (*hui zang* 会葬) with the daughter of a prince servant who died a little earlier⁴¹. The other inscription is on the tomb tablet of a boy who died in fifth year of Xianqing (A.D.655) when he was 17 years old; afterwards a “*ming hun* 冥婚” was arranged between him and a deceased lady from a Wei’s family⁴². Thus we may assume that the name used to refer to the netherworld marriage was changed from “*hui zang*”, “*qu hui*” to “*ming hun*” roughly during the period from 646 to 655.

The prevalence of netherworld marriage in the Tang Dynasty

Despite being banned in Confucian classics and censured by Confucian scholars, netherworld marriage still became prevalent among people in the Tang Dynasty. According to the statistics made by some scholars, based on the extant tomb epitaphs and the records in official historical books, there are about 13 substantial cases of netherworld marriage which can be confirmed⁴³. This number demonstrates a dramatic increase compared with previous dynasties when there were only a couple of cases recorded. Among the 13 confirmed cases, several ones involve royal family members. Such as the case of the Yide Prince Li Chongren’s 李重润 netherworld marriage recorded in volume 36 of the *Old History of Tang Dynasty*. Li Chongren was the first son of the Emperor Zhong Zong 中宗 (he was in reign for two times, the first one lasted only a couple of months in the year 684, the second one from 705 to 710). Li Chongren was involved in the political power struggle between his father and his grandmother, the famous female emperor Wu Zetian 武则天 (624-705), and was killed by Wu Zetian when he was only 18 years old. After his father Emperor Zhong Zong regained the throne, a netherworld marriage was arranged between this deceased prince and a deceased daughter of a minister⁴⁴. This case has been proved in early 1970s by the archeologists’ excavation of the tomb of Yide Prince, in which the skeletons of a male and a female have been found buried in the same coffin.

Another case involves Li Dan 李憺, the third son of the Emperor Su Zong 肃宗 (r. 711-762). During the turmoil of An Lushan Rebellion (755-763), Li Dan was slandered as planning a coup against his brother in order

to gain military power, and forced to commit suicide by his father. But the allegation finally turned out to be a rumor, and his fame was rehabilitated. After his elder brother ascended the throne, a grand netherworld marriage was arranged for him with a deceased princess⁴⁵.

Since the practice of the upper class usually has an important influence on the lower class, the recorded cases of netherworld marriage involving royal family members and noble class indicate the possibility of more such cases existing among ordinary people, whose activities are seldom recorded in official history books. Actually, some secular literary works of the Tang Dynasty did reflect the prevalence of netherworld marriage as well⁴⁶ (Zeng, 2013). Besides that, in some of the Tang Dynasty “*shu yi* 书仪”, a kind of popular guide book for private epistolary and ritual etiquettes, we can also find some evidence of netherworld marriage. For instance, the Dunhuang manuscripts No.S.1725, No.P.4036 and No.P.3637, are a type of textbook documents for how to carry on standard a netherworld marriage. These textbooks documents not only give instructions for all the procedure of a netherworld marriage including exchanging betrothal letters, sacrifice, migrating the remains and joint burial, etc., but also provide several standard address texts the parents of the dead should use during the process⁴⁷.

Scholars have concluded the reasons of the prevalence of netherworld marriage in as following: 1. the belief in the existence of ghosts and afterlife, and a netherworld marriage will comfort the unmarried dead and prevent them from haunting the living; 2. By arranging an elaborate netherworld marriage a family can demonstrate its wealth and honor, and connect itself with another wealthy and honored family; 3. The influence of Buddhist religion; 4. Through a netherworld marriage the dead can be legitimately buried in the family ancestral cemetery and thus receive the worship of the descendants. However, we think the prevalence of netherworld marriage in the Tang Dynasty may still have other two reasons:

First, it is because the decline and relaxing of the control and binding of the traditional Confucian ethics, rites and institutions in the more diversified Tang Society. As Chen Yinque 陈寅恪 (1890-1969) has pointed out, many ancient rituals and institutions of the ancient three Dynasties which are recorded in Confucian classics and advocated by Confucian scholars were only dead letters on the papers and seldom be abided by people in the Tang Dynasty. Except for few elite scholars, people rarely know about those Confucian ritual terms, systems, regulations and relevant instruments⁴⁸.

Second, the royal family of the Tang Dynasty might have an ancestry origin of the northern barbarian tribes and they don't care so much about the ritual tradition in central China. As some researchers have pointed out, the royal Li's family of the Tang Dynasty was either originated from a

group of ethnic minority called Tuoba 拓跋, or a branch of Han nationality with Li's family name that had been living in north-western barbarian areas for many years before they came back to Central China and seized the ruling power⁴⁹. Since they have been immersed in the "barbarian" cultures for generations they brought some exotic alien customs and conventions which do not coincide with the rigid Confucian laws and rituals. As Zhu Xi 朱熹 (113-1200), the famous Song Dynasty Confucian scholar once criticized: "The Tang royal was originated from the barbarians, so they felt indifferent to some of the ritual-violating behaviors inside their family."⁵⁰ That is why in his famous article calling for the crusading war against the Empress Wu Zetian, the Tang Dynasty writer Luo Binwang 骆宾王 denounced the Empress for "setting our Emperor in the embarrassment of animal incest". Compared with those incest relations happening in the Tang Royal family, the netherworld marriage might not be considered as a serious violation of law and rituals.

However, the orthodox Confucian traditional culture of rites didn't stop its function in the comparatively open Tang society. It was still expressing a different voice and occasionally playing a role in opposing the custom of netherworld marriage. One example is a judicial verdict made by the famous Tang Dynasty poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), who had spent some time in his life as a local official and frequently dealt with civil lawsuits. In this case, a family had arranged a netherworld marriage for their deceased young daughter, and was accused by its neighbors for violating the rituals. This family rejected the allegation and the case has been presented to the official court. In his judicial verdict on this case, Bai Juyi cited the Book of *Zhou Li*, and judged that the netherworld marriage was "violating the state ban and messed up human relations"⁵¹, thus it is illegal. Although it seemed that he didn't think it as a serious violation, his attitude of opposing it is obvious. Bai Juyi's opinion on netherworld marriage may represent the attitude of the majority of intellectual elites who were still persisting on Confucian ritual tradition.

The impact of cremation on netherworld marriage

Some scholars believe that in the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1206-1368) Dynasties, netherworld marriage was still very popular. However, there is little evidence that can support this opinion.

The Song Dynasty (including the Northern Song and the Southern Song Dynasties) represents a period when traditional Chinese culture developed to its summit, especially in the aspects of philosophy, politics, history, academic research, literature and art, etc. Due to the innovation and development of printing technology, the historiography in Song Dynasty was very prosperous. Besides the formal biographical style history books compiled by official historians, literati scholars were fond of

writing free style essays and random notes which had recorded abundant contemporary social and cultural data of the Song Dynasty. According to incomplete statistics, there are about four to five hundred books of such kind preserved largely intact today. This number has surpassed the total sum of similar books appearing during the period from the Three Kingdoms to the Tang Dynasty⁵² (Zhong, 2010). The Song Dynasty's free style essays and random notes are not only abundant in quantity, but also have a strong realistic documentary feature. Most of this kind of essays and notes of Song Dynasty were written by elite literati and officials, either recorded at their leisure time in office, or compiled after their retirement. What they have written down includes their rich life experiences, their conversations with their eldership, teachers or friends, or what they had seen and heard during their officialdom, or their reports and notes from research, etc. The rich contents and vivid writing of these works truly recorded the social life, custom and ethos of the Song Dynasty and can complement the inadequacy of official historical books.

It seems incredible enough, however, that there are no records about netherworld marriages found in the official history books, and only two related records have been found in all these works of Song Dynasty essays and notes, which can barely support the opinion that the netherworld marriage existed in the Song Dynasty. One of the two records appeared in Kang Yuzhi's *康誉之 Records of Past Dreams (昨梦录)*, in which the author described the procedure and rites of how a netherworld marriage was carried on according to the "Northern custom"⁵³. Another one appeared in a collection of short notes written by Zhou Qufei 周去非, once an official who served in the remote southern province of Guangxi. In a note Zhou recorded a local custom called "escorting the thatch bride (迎茅娘)" in which a wedding was arranged for a dead young man. Zhou related this custom with the netherworld marriage arranged by Cao Cao for his deceased son and contemptuously called it a "barbarian mores (夷风)"⁵⁴.

Some scholars use these two records as the evidence to prove the prevalence of netherworld marriage in the Song Dynasty, which is obviously questionable. As we have mentioned earlier, both the official and private historiography in the Song Dynasty are very prosperous, and the Song scholars show a strong curiosity in recording a variety of strange and weird phenomena of culture and customs. Yet only two pieces of data related to the custom of netherworld marriage have been found. Therefore, we can hardly be satisfied with the thesis that the netherworld marriage was still prevalent in the Song Dynasty. Contrarily, since in the two records mentioned above, the netherworld marriage was referred in one as only a kind of weird "northern custom", and in the other, a "barbarian mores". We may suggest that actually in the Song Dynasty, the netherworld marriage almost vanished in central China. If there was still any, it might only occur in some remote areas as old remains from history.

As for the reason behind the vanishing of netherworld marriage in the Song Dynasty, we suggest that the changing of the funeral system, especially the appearing of cremation influenced by Buddhist religion was one important factor.

Xu Jijun 徐吉军 has pointed out that the Song Dynasty is a time when cremation was prevailing in China. Due to the development of social productivity, the prosperity of the commercial economy, as well as the secularization of Buddhism, many changes happened in the social daily life of the Song people, which in turn has influenced their ideology and customs. One of these impacts was reflected in the changing of burial and funeral and the prevailing of cremation⁵⁵.

At first, the Song rulers intended to ban cremation. For instance, in the second year of Jianlong 建隆 (A.D.962), Zhao Kuangyin 赵匡胤 (927-976), the founder and the first Emperor of Song Dynasty, issued an imperial edict, in which the Emperor referred cremation as a “barbarian way” and ordered that it should be banned⁵⁶. But it seems that the ban was not effective, cremation kept prevailing and the government was not able to stop it. Finally, even some royal family members also accepted cremation. For instance, in the eighth year of Jiayou 嘉祐 (1063), a grandnephew of the Emperor died. His corpse was then burned, and the ash was sent to a Buddhist temple for storage⁵⁷. To the Southern Song Dynasty (1127 - 1279), cremation had become a widely accepted practice.

In the 27th year of Shaoxing 绍兴 (A.D.1157), Fan Tong 范同, a minister of the Division of Complaints and Appeal, submitted a memorial to the emperor discussing the current situation, saying that the miserable and horrible cremation was now becoming increasingly popular, and some people even throw the ashes into the river. He also analyzed that the reason behind the prevailing of cremation was the increasing scarcity of farming land due to the increasing of population, since many people conducting cremation were poor and had no land to bury the dead. But he sighed that how could we only care so much about the livelihood of the living people and treat so humbly our deceased. He also praised a local official for using some government money to buy some pieces of land and giving them to people for burial. He suggested that the government should plan some idle wasteland as public cemetery, enable the poor people’s burial in the ground⁵⁸.

Nevertheless, many records of cremation appeared in both official history books and literati’s notes. It indicated that the government couldn’t reverse the trend of the prevailing of cremation. According to Xu Jijun, there were usually three ways of disposing the ashes after a cremation at that time: 1. put the ashes in a wood box or a pottery jar, and then bury it; 2. store the cinerary casket collectively in a Buddhist temple,

or in a public cemetery called Lou Ze Yuan 漏泽园, or just keep it at home; 3. discard the ashes to the wild or the rivers⁵⁹. Obviously, the changing of the funeral system, especially the change in the way of disposing the ashes, had made netherworld marriages impossible, since a netherworld marriage usually involves migrating the remains of the two dead people and arranging a re-burial ritual for them. This might be the reason why netherworld marriage was fading away during the Song Dynasty in central China.

Similarly, in the following Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the funeral custom of the ruling Mongolian class, which was quite different from that of the Han people, was also not applicable for netherworld marriage. A Ming Dynasty scholar has recorded the Mongolian funeral rites in an essay as following: the Mongolian Yuan officials use two pieces of big logs and carve a hole the size of the dead person, and put the corpse in, then close the logs, paint it and hoop it with golden rings. After that, they bury it in depth, and run thousands of horses on the land till it becomes as flat as before. When the spring comes and grass grows, no one can recognize where the dead was buried any more⁶⁰. The similar records can also be found in the official history books and some notes by foreign envoys⁶¹. This way of burying probably was intended to keep the dead in peace from any possible disturbance of ghouls, but it also made netherworld marriage impossible since it's much more difficult to find the buried dead in order to re-bury it with another one.

At the same time, cremation seems still popular in the Yuan Dynasty, and the Mongolian rulers took a tolerant attitude towards this practice. In the *Yuan Dian Zhang* 元典章 (*Collection of Institutions and Regulations of the Yuan Dynasty*), there is a report submitted to the central court by the local government of Beijing discussing the situation of cremation in that area. The report considered that the prevailing cremation was betraying the tradition set by ancient sages and violated the rituals, thus should be banned. But the reply of the central court was that the customs are different from place to place and it's not necessary to unify them, the resolution then was permitting the soldiers, enlisted men and central Asian and European immigrants to do their funeral according to their own custom or whatever they thought as convenient without any restriction⁶². This indicates that cremation was still prevailing in Yuan Dynasty and what the government could do was quite limited. Consequently, given the situation in the Song Dynasty, the prevailing of netherworld marriage was not possible.

Some scholars have cited a data from *The Travels of Marco Polo* to prove the prevailing of netherworld marriage in the Yuan Dynasty⁶³. As recorded by Marco Polo, "When one man has had a son, and another man a daughter, although both may have been dead for some years, they have a practice of contracting a marriage between their deceased children, and

bestowing the girl upon the youth....”⁶⁴. But according to the context, what Marco Polo was talking about here is the custom of Tartar, as some people lived in the central Asia. It does not necessarily refer to a current practice in central China at that time. In our view, netherworld marriage as a folk custom with a long history cannot disappear completely during the Yuan Dynasty, but it might only happen occasionally in some remote areas and was not as popular as it was in the Tang Dynasty. However, it still preserved the “seeds” somewhere which enabled its revival afterwards in the Ming and Qing Dynasty.

The Revival of Netherworld Marriage in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

In the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1912) Dynasties, cremation was prohibited by law. Both *The Great Ming Dynasty's Codes of Law* and the *Great Qing Dynasty's Codes of Law* have severe punishment to the crime of destroying or abandoning the corpses, including burning or discarding to rivers. Under the high pressure of the government law enforcement, the once prevailing cremation was finally replaced by traditional land burial.

The funeral and burial rituals in ancient China were based on mixed ideas of Confucian ethics and ghost superstitions. The Confucian ethics emphasizes the social status, the hierarchy of patriarchal clan system and human relationship, etc., while the ghost superstition emphasizes the afterlife in the netherworld, which in a sense contradicts with the philosophy of Confucius himself. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the idea of ghost superstition and afterlife embodied in burial and funeral rituals seemed to be enhanced. One piece of evidence is the reviving of human sacrifice in royal funerals. As we have discussed earlier, human sacrifice is the origin and trigger of netherworld marriage.

It is recorded in the *History of the Ming Dynasty* that when the first Emperor of Ming Dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328-1398, r. 1368-1398) died, many maids in the palace followed him to death. Then, when Emperor Cheng Zu 成祖 (r.1402-1424), the Emperor Ren Zong 仁宗 (r.1424-1425) and Emperor Xuan Zong 宣宗 (r. 1425-1435) died, they all used some maids as sacrifice. This tradition was halted by Emperor Ying Zong 英宗 (r.1435-1449; 1457-1464), who left a will before his death to abolish human sacrifice⁶⁵. It even happened when a prince died. In 1439, when Zhu Youdun 朱有燾, a grandson of Zhu Yuanzhang died, his wife and six concubines all followed him, despite the fact that the Emperor Yingzong had an edict indicating that they did not have to do that⁶⁶.

Other resources also confirmed that human sacrifice was very common in the Ming imperial family until Emperor Ying Zong's reign.

What happened in the royal family definitely had an influence on ordinary people, so the human sacrifice also occurred among commoners, usually, when a husband died, his wife or concubine might sacrifice themselves and die together with him. At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, this ugly and horrible custom was still present. The Manchurian rulers' attitude towards it seems to be based on a principle of voluntariness. They set the regulation as follows: if a wife wants to sacrifice herself to her dead husband voluntarily, her choice should be respected, and even should be praised afterwards; but if a concubine was forced (probably by the wife) to be sacrificed, the wife should be punished to death⁶⁷. Unfortunately, the latter situation seems more common in most cases. A Ming dynasty scholar has recorded the general process of this kind of sacrifice in a local chronicle as following:

After a man has died, one concubine must be sacrificed. She has been appointed to do that before the man's death. Neither could she reject it, nor can anyone else replace her. She should not cry when the time comes, rather, she has to dress up and sit on the bed, then the housewife and others will come in and bow down to her. When it is time, she has to kill herself with a bowstring. If she changes her mind at the last moment and refuses to do it, other people will strangle her to death⁶⁸.

However, in some cases, the woman voluntarily chose to be sacrificed for the man, such as in a story recorded in the *Biography of Famous Women* in the *History of the Ming Dynasty*: A girl of a scholar's family called by the author as a "Chaste lady Xiang" was betrothed to a Mr. Zhou of a neighbor county. When she was 19 years old, she heard that her future husband was seriously ill. She asked her wet nurse: "What am I supposed to do if he died when we have not married each other?" The wet nurse replied: "Since you have not married yet, it doesn't matter if you change the marriage contract and marry another man." But the girl did not agree, she cited an ancient story in which a noble prince kept his unexpressed promise to give his sword as a gift to his friend, even when the friend was died, saying: "our ancient sage kept his promise concerning a sword, how can I break my promise concerning my body?" Finally, when the news of Mr. Zhou's death was confirmed, the "Chaste lady Xiang" dressed up in traditional mourning dress and committed suicide at midnight, leaving behind a note saying "I died for Mr. Zhou". The two families then followed her will and arranged a joint burial for the unmarried young couple⁶⁹.

This story has been cited by scholars as evidence to prove the prevalence of netherworld marriage in the Ming Dynasty. But this case in fact also involved human sacrifice; it is quite similar to those cases which happened in the Ming royal family as we have discussed above, the

difference is that, at least based on the author's record, the "Chaste lady Xiang" did indeed voluntarily sacrifice herself for that man, even though she was not his wife yet. This further confirms our hypothesis that netherworld marriage has a link with human sacrifice.

Yet we should draw a clear line between netherworld marriage and human sacrifice. In most cases, even when a woman wants to keep her promised marriage contract with a dead man, she still can marry that dead man through netherworld marriage without sacrificing her own life. A Qing Dynasty scholar Liang Shaoren 梁绍壬 (1792-?) has recorded the custom of his time: "If an engaged man or an engaged woman died before marriage, the woman may hold the memorial tablet of that dead man and marry with it, and the man may receive the coffin of that dead woman and bury it in his own family's cemetery"⁷⁰.

However, a typical netherworld marriage usually involves two dead persons. Sometimes the two dead persons had a marriage contract before their death. But in most cases, the two do not necessarily have an engagement. As recorded by a Ming Dynasty scholar: "According to the custom of Shizhou county in Shanxi province, if a man has died unmarried, his parents will wait for the death of a girl somewhere in the local area, and ask for a marriage for their dead son. Every procedure of rites such as betrothal and gifts receiving will be carried out just like that of the living. Relatives will also be invited to attend a banquet on the day of the funeral. If a daughter has died and her parents want to recruit a groom for her, they will go through the similar rites."⁷¹ (Lu, 1985, p.62)

Scholars have found many more records concerning netherworld marriage in the local chronicles and the collections of literary essays, indicating that the netherworld marriage was quite likely prevailing again in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, especially in the Shanxi and Hebei provinces of northern China⁷². Although some orthodox scholars such as Zhao Yi 赵翼 (1727-1814) still considered netherworld marriage as "extreme absurdity"⁷³, it was generally tolerated and accepted by the Ming and Qing society.

The reflection of netherworld marriage in literature

There is an interactive and complicated relationship between the netherworld marriage ritual and its representation in a variety of literary genres such as folklore, legendary stories, novels, dramas and poems. The theme of combining or reuniting loved ones after their death appeared as early as in ancient myths, such as the old legend of the love story between Niulang (牛郎) and Zhinu (织女), which can be understood as originating from a love tragedy, in which the love and marriage between the two loved ones were obstructed and could not be realized in this world. But

after death their spirits were transformed into two stars on the sky and their love continued forever.

This kind of love stories can be considered as the reflection of both the belief in an afterlife and the ordinary people's kind-hearted wish of "let all loved ones in the world eventually become couples". Although in the early stage of this kind of afterlife reunion stories the ritual of combined burial or netherworld marriage was seldom mentioned, in the *Book of Songs*, there is a poetry line saying: "separately when we're alive, we wish we could be buried together after our death"⁷⁴, indicating the possible existence of combined burial for separated lovers after their death.

However, during the period of later Eastern Han Dynasty to the Six Dynasties, a batch of such legendary stories specifically mentioned the ritual of a combined burial for separated lovers. For instance, in a later Han Dynasty narrative poem titled *Peacock Flying Southeast*, the hero and heroine were forced to separate and eventually both of them committed suicide due to the heavy pressure from their patriarch. But after their death, the two families arranged a joint burial for them. Then, as described in the poem, a miracle appeared: the two trees on the two sides of their tomb grew up and twined together like two embracing lovers, and a couple of Yuan Yang birds, which is a symbol of love in Chinese culture, rested on the trees and twittered day and night⁷⁵. In the collections of legendary ghost stories that appeared during this period, there are also some stories involving this plot. For instance, in *Sou Shen Ji* 搜神记 (*Records of Gods Searching*), there is a story about the tragedy of a minister named Han Ping (韩凭) whose wife was forcibly taken by the King. The couple would not surrender to the King and both of them committed suicide in resisting the King. The wife left her will on her cross strap asking the King to bury them together after their death. However, the King didn't follow her will and buried them separately. Then, the miracle happened: the tree branches from the two tombs begin growing and reaching for each other, and became intertwined together overnight⁷⁶. *Sou Shen Ji* also includes some short stories about the love affairs between a living man and a female ghost, such as the *Little Daughter of King Wu*, in which the ghost of King Wu's little daughter is able to come out from her tomb to reunite with her love Han Chong (韩重), whose propose for marriage had been rejected by King Wu when the King's little daughter was alive⁷⁷. In another story titled *Tan Sheng* (谈生), the scholar named Tan Sheng met a beautiful lady, fell in love and married her, but finally that lady turned out to be a skeleton ghost from a tomb⁷⁸.

The famous Chinese folklore love story of Liang Shanbo (梁山伯) and Zhu Yingtai (祝英台) may also originate from this period. Zhu Yingtai is a girl who disguised herself as a boy to attend a school, because in ancient

times girls were prohibited from attending schools. In the school Zhu and her classmate Liang Shanbo became very close friend. Liang, unaware of Zhu's hidden female sex, repeatedly neglected Zhu's courtship implies. Two years after they departed from the school, Liang paid a visit to Zhu's home and found out that Zhu was actually a girl. He proposed to marry her but it was too late, because she had already been betrothed by her parents to another man. Liang was so disappointed and melancholic that he died in his bed a few years later. On the day of Zhu's wedding, when her bridal boat was passing by the place where Liang's tomb was located, a thunder storm stopped the boat. Zhu came to Liang's tomb and wailed. Suddenly the land was split and Zhu jumped into Liang's tomb⁷⁹. According to later legends, the spirits of Liang and Zhu have transformed into two butterflies. The love story of Liang and Zhu has been adapted into many different forms of arts, and became one of the most famous Chinese folk literary classics.

The similar afterlife reunion stories have been told again and again in the later literary tradition of both folklore and literary creations. For instance, in the *Tai Ping Guang Ji* 太平广记, a collection of legendary and secular stories from Han to early Song dynasties, many stories about human-ghost love or afterlife romance can be found, some of them were created in Tang Dynasty⁸⁰. In the Qing dynasty, one typical example is the collection of ghost fictions entitled *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* (聊斋志异) compiled by Pu Songling (蒲松龄, 1640-1715), which is one of the most popular literary readings among ordinary people even today.

Besides those fictional stories, netherworld marriage also reflected in literary poems and prose, sometime with sympathy and admiration, especially when it involves true feelings and kind-hearted wishes for the dead. Jiang Chenying 姜宸英 (1628-1699), a famous calligrapher and historian who lived at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, has recorded and commented a case of netherworld marriage in his time. It happened in Wuxi 无锡, a city in today's Jiangsu province. A young man of the Huang family was betrothed to a girl of the Qian family. However, both the boy and the girl died before a formal wedding was held. The two families were very sad and they arranged a "joint burial" for them. The local literati and guests seemed to be touched so much by the event, that they all wrote poems to eulogize it. Jiang Chenying was also asked to write something about it⁸¹. The interesting part of Jiang's essay discussing this case is the author's attitude towards netherworld marriage. Jiang, as a famous Confucian scholar, cited the text from ancient Confucian classic in his comment to criticize netherworld marriage as "against rituals". But at the same time, he seemingly paid deep sympathy to the grief of the parents and took a tolerant attitude towards what they had done. He even cited other quotations from Confucianism, arguing that fundamentally all rituals are

rooted in human emotions, and sometimes the lost rituals might still be found in folk-customs. At the end of this essay, Jiang asks: since what the parents had done was based on their uncontrollable emotions, and netherworld marriage was once widely practiced in Tang Dynasty, wouldn't it be a lost ritual that has not been recorded in ritual books? Jiang's attitude was echoed by Liang Shaoren. After discussing the custom of netherworld marriage in his days, Liang added: "Although it is a vague folk custom, it may contain some significance of the rituals"⁸².

In general, the literary representation and reflection of netherworld marriage, including those ghost love stories, exert a subtle influence on people's ideology. These literary works not only have enhanced people's belief in afterlife and netherworld, but also endows the practice of netherworld marriage with a romantic and aesthetic color. The emotional and aesthetic function of these literary works makes them more attractive and acceptable to the public than the official Confucian realistic and rationalistic teachings, thus playing a promoting role in the development of netherworld marriage.

Conclusion

Through the above textual study and analysis, we have come to the following conclusions: Netherworld marriage might have first appeared as a substitution of human sacrifice. It quite likely emerged at the end of the Spring-Autumn period. The early batch of substantial cases of netherworld marriage that can be confirmed today are those appeared in the period beginning from the end of Eastern Han Dynasty to the Three Kingdoms time, but the term "*ming hun*" might have appeared as late as in the early Tang Dynasty.

Netherworld marriage was condemned and even "prohibited" by the mainstream Confucian ideology at the very beginning, and has never been integrated into the sophisticated and broadly covering Confucian ritual system. For the later reason, we suggest two explanations: one is because of its classification dilemma in the existing Confucian system of "five categories of rituals"; the other is due to its original and coherent relevance with human sacrifice. Nevertheless, netherworld marriage is deeply rooted in the folk religious belief of ghosts and afterlife, as well as the existence of the netherworld, and Confucianism has never absolutely excluded these beliefs in its doctrines. Some folklore and legendary literature about ghost love also enhances the folk belief in afterlife and netherworld, and endows the practice of netherworld marriage with some romantic and aesthetical colors. Therefore, netherworld marriage continues its development during the long history, albeit sometimes its practice might be obstructed by some more realistic factors such as cremation and the scarcity of farming land.

Besides its superstitious significance, netherworld marriage also functions as a way of expressing sadness and grief over the dead. Especially when parents have lost their young children, they need a way to vent their sorrow and do something as compensation for the unfulfilled love for their children. Sometimes it also has a realistic significance of building a new relationship between two families, etc. These are some socio-culture and human emotional factors which might have composed the foundation for the existence of netherworld marriage.

Notes:

* The authors wish to thank Professor Peng Liu and Mr. Aiwei Lin for their proof reading on an earlier version of this paper. We also wish to thank the revision recommendations from the anonymous reviewers. This study is funded by the Graduate Student Innovation Project of the Jiangsu Ministry of Education.

¹ Longmei Zhang, "Jian Deng Xinhua zai dongya geguo de butong jieshou (Different reception of *Jian Deng Xin Hua* in East Asian countries: take netherworld marriage as an example)." *Nihongo no Gakushu to Kenkyu*, 141(2009):65. Fan, Lijuan, "Ribei Minghun Xisu zhi Kaocha (An investigation of Ghost Marriage in Japan)." *Journal of Henan Mechanical Electrical Engineering College* 6(2012):83.

² Jianlin Tai, "Ruci Minjian Fengjian Esu Zhi Yu Heshi (When can such ugly folk custom of feudalism be stopped)." *Legal Daily*, January 25, 2007, p.8.

³ Jingchun Huang, "Cong Yipian Donghan Zhenmuwen Kan Woguo Minghun Xisu (The Custom of Ghost Marriage in China Viewed from a Gravestone Epitaph of Eastern Han Dynasty)". *Journal of Hebei University for Nationalities* 27-6(2009):41.

⁴ For instance, Shi Huang, *Huang Shi Minsuxue Lunji* 黄石民俗学论集 (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Press, 1999); Ping Yao, "Until Death Do Us Unite: Afterlife Marriages in Tang China, 618-906." *Journal of Family History*, 27-3 (2002); Jingchun Huang, "Lun Woguo Minghun de Lishi, Xianzhuang ji Genyuan (On the History, Current Situation and the Origin of Netherworld Marriage in Our Country)", *Forum of Folk Culture* 5(2005), etc.

⁵ Xuan Zheng and Gongyan Jia, *Zhou Li Zhu Shu* 周礼注疏 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), 425. All the English translations of the Chinese resources in this paper are our own, except otherwise noted.

⁶ Yirang Sun, *Zhou Li Zheng Yi* 周礼正义 (Beijing: Zhong Hua Book Company, 1987), 1050-51.

⁷ In the original text, the Chinese character used here to refer the "dead" is "shang 殇", which is specially referring those died in their adolescent.

⁸ D.C. Lau, trans., *Confucius: The Analects* (Hong Kong: the Chinese University Press, 1983),98-99.

⁹ Xiang Liu, *Shuo Yuan Jiao zheng* 说苑校正 (Beijing: Zhong Hua Book Company, 1987),474-475.

¹⁰ Michael Loewe, edited. *Early Chinese Text: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: the society for the study of early China and the institute of east Asian studies, 1993),25-26.

¹¹ Zhenhao Song, "Shangdai Hunyin de Yunzuo Ligui (The Ritual Regulations of Marriage in the Shang Dynasty)." *Historical Research* 6(1994): 41.

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