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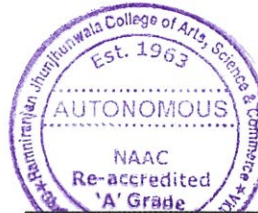


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National Conference

on

**“New Horizons in Commerce, Management, Humanities,
Science and Technology -
A Gateway of opportunities for Innovations”**

Organized by

Late Shri. Vishnu Waman Thakur Charitable Trust's

VIVA Institute of Management and Research

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**Bhaskar Waman Thakur College of Science,
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We are glad to invite you and your organization for a one day multidisciplinary conference on “New Horizons in Commerce, Management, Humanities, Science & Technology -A Gateway of opportunities for Innovations”. The conference will prove to be an effective platform for sharing knowledge and results in theory, methodology, applications impacts and challenges in technology and management. The aim is to provide forums for researchers and practitioners from both academia as well as industries to meet and compromise possibilities of applying technical and management knowledge to several areas of applications and other avenues and set up opportunities for networking with people having similar ideas.

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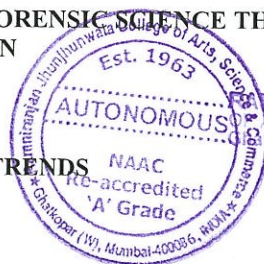
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EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS IN FORENSIC SCIENCE THROUGH THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL
LENS OF RITUAL IN TELE-FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The research paper is an exploration into the Chinese social practice of the Ghost Marriage (Minghun) through the lens of Forensic Science and Anthropology. "The Boneless Bride in the River", a T.V episode aired on the Fox Channel, delves deep into the ancient Chinese practice of Minghun which involves the marriage/burial of bones of a dead boy and girl whose match was arranged after their parents so that they live happily in the netherworld. The episode is about the missing bones giving the victim's body a shapeless appearance. The body of this woman is like a sagging leather bag as the whole skeletal structure has been removed before dumping her in a trunk which is then thrown in the river. The gruesome murder is investigated by the forensic team working in the fictional Jeffersonian laboratory. The absence of bones provides a strong anthropological evidence that indicates the bones have been pulled out for celebrating the Minghun ritual. The forensic and anthropological analysis of a small bone, the platella, found in the boneless victim's body reveals an agonizing tale of torture and brings to light the dark side of 'ritual' and its impact on human life. Hence the connection between ritual and crime is investigated with reference to the ancient cult of human sacrifice that validates murder for ritual performance. Freud's idea of the therapeutic value of ritual is suitably explored to analyse the Minghun as a relief mechanism that parents have adopted to cope up with the sorrow of their son's death. The ritual is practiced secretly/openly even today although the Chinese government has taken drastic measures to prohibit this practice but it continues as the thought that their son will be with his bride in the 'afterlife' heals their wounds. So the therapeutic value of this ritual has kept the practice alive and it is responsible for the savage killing of so many women even in present times. Another theorist, Catherine Bell, points out that invisibility of female murders for their bones is deeply rooted in a culture that treats women as the "other". Also, her perspective of "scapegoat theory" when applied to the episode brings out the bitter truth about the active participation of society in the commodification/victimization of women. Thus, the forensic episode throws light on one of the worst social crimes in history that have reduced women's bodies to mere bones. Finally, this new trend of exploration emphasises that all rituals being practiced traditionally may not be accepted as they adversely affect the growth and development of the advancing society. Such rituals need to be critically evaluated and substantiated with addition and deletion if required to make them a healthy practice to be emulated in society.

Keywords: Forensic Science, Anthropology, Ritual, Netherworld, victimization, culture, Ritual Performance.

RESEARCH PAPER

The research paper is an exploration into the Chinese social practice of the Ghost Marriage (Minghun) through the lens of Forensic Science and Anthropology. The famous episode titled "The Boneless Bride in the River" (Season 2, Episode 16) aired on the Fox Channel in its most popular American Crime T.V. series- 'Bones', is based on the fictional writings of Kathy Reichs. She is a Forensic Anthropologist and a renowned crime novelist with immense experience in solving real-life criminal cases. She performed the commendable task of identifying the remains of the dead victims of the September 11, World Trade Centre attacks at New York City. Thus, she could hook millions of viewers to her most well-known television production, "Bones", featuring Temperance Brennan (Bones) as the lead character with superb expertise of a Forensic Anthropologist. Of course, Kathy Reichs has stamped her identity on this fictional autobiographical character that resembles her completely by endowing her with great proficiency of a Forensic Anthropologist.

The setting of all the episodes is the Jeffersonian Laboratory that includes a team of professionals who use their expertise to solve FBI cases. The "Bones" laboratory is, therefore, a place where secret murder narratives buried in the skeletons and decaying bodies are decoded by the investigating team that works under the leadership of Temperance Brennan (Bones), the central character of the Crime Drama series. The confluence/ divergence in the thinking of these great minds delving into various aspects of the murder in a laboratory setting throws light on dark secrets which reveal details of the murder. However, this information may take the investigating team into dark alleys of the individual's past life which could be linked to the history of the nation. When the fate of the corpse/s is linked to the history of the nation, the forensic interpretation creates new cultural/historical narratives.

The boneless corpse in the river also takes the Jeffersonian team on a long journey beginning from the 'body' as the focal point to an astonishing divergence into Chinese national and cultural history. The strange cultural practice of the Ghost marriage or Minghun in China comes to light with the discovery of the decomposing bone-less female body. Thus, the cadaver of the dead woman can be seen as rich source of data provide strong anthropological evidence of the nation's cultural history.

The Crime Drama begins with the finding of a female corpse with several incisions made to remove the whole skeleton. It was clear that they had boiled her to soften the flesh and then taken out the whole bony structure. Her flat body was sewn together, dumped in a trunk and then thrown away in the river. While conducting a thorough analysis of the body, they find that the cuts on her body are uneven but her wounds are deep. This observation gives them a clue of the murder weapon which could be a sharp instrument used by an untrained hand. The woman's hair gives them a clue of her Asian nationality. The victim's body has a totally flat appearance as there is no skeletal structure to hold the lean body intact. Therefore, the Forensic team fails to identify the facial features of the woman in the absence of bones. If they had discovered the bones instead of the body, then they could adopt the forensic procedure of facial reconstruction that would give them anthropological references having strong associations with the identity of the corpse. The advancement in Forensic and Anthropological Science has enabled these professionals to classify the excavated skeletons and place them across different regions and historical evolutionary eras starting with his progression from an ape-like creature to his complete transformations to the modern man of present times. Thus, the shape and size of the skull along with other details can help in re-creating the face of the dead person all over again.

However, the cadaver of the woman has no skull/bones and so a facial reconstruction is not possible. Here, the Forensic Artist plays an important role not only in the Jeffersonian laboratory of the Fox T.V. series but also in real life. The artistic reconstruction of the face of victims is done by applying clay on the contours of the skull and by working on the anthropologist's instructions with reference to the regional features and other information given by him/her. Also, a computer generated image of the skull is a wonder of modern Science.

Since the woman's body is like a sagging leather bag with no skull, Dr Jack Hodgins, the forensic entomologist, suggests that instead of using the skull to recreate the face they should reverse the process by blowing air inside the skull-less head like a balloon so that they can re-make her 'face' again. At first, the idea works as the face begins to take quick shape but since there is no skull to hold the facial form intact it just begins to bulge disproportionately, thereby forcing the team to give up the idea. This situation points towards how such teams work towards generating novel ideas which may be either successful or huge experimental failures but the search for newer and more brilliant ideas is never-ending and these experiences are also a life-long learning process.

Dr Jack Hodgins, the forensic entomologist, gets a little disappointed as his idea is rendered useless but he is a master in his field as he points out that the bacterial residue on the body in the form of the scum colony which is formed by particular insects points out to the fact that the body was submerged in water eight days ago. Hence Forensic Anthropology depends on information provided by the entomologist to find out the duration of burial and probing into other trace evidences on the body to determine the time of death. Finally, the identity of the victim could be traced because of Dr Jack's critical acumen as he tried to extract maximum information from a small bone, the patella, which remained inside her body while the other bones were taken out.

The density of the patella bone established that the victim suffered from nail-patella syndrome. The tiny kneecap bone had pointed out to disorder in the knee joint and in her nails and it had also ascertained her age. They inquired about this 20 year-old Asian girl at the immigration centre and they found out everything about her at the Homeland Security Database. Her name was Ling Chang and she had travelled all the way from China to America on Fiancée visa. The nail-patella problem had slowed her down and so her fiancée immediately called off the online commitment of marrying her.

Dr Brennan Temperance (Bones), the leading female anthropologist, associated the boneless body of the victim with an ancient Chinese ritual, 'Minghun' or the Ghost Marriage, which involves the burial of the bones of an unmarried dead son with the bones of another unmarried dead girl. The mourning at the funeral and the marriage celebrations of the spirit-couple are two important occasions celebrated one after another in Chinese culture. The folk belief that the last thing they could do for the soul of their dead son is to send him to the netherworld with a wife made it obligatory for parents to follow the custom. This cultural mandate stemmed from the fear of a disaster on the family if the son's desires remain unfulfilled. So if a woman in the neighbouring area died sometime after their son, then the boy's parents approached the dead woman's relatives to negotiate the 'bride price' for her bones so that their bones can be married off and buried together. So, the

natural death of a young girl could fetch an exorbitant amount- 'bride price' for her parents. However, the abortion of the female foetus, China's one-child policy and low death rate led to shortage of ghost- brides. So the major issue that has emerged is the trading of the female body for her bones. Female trafficking and murders are on the rise as the boy's family is ready to pay a big amount to agents who provide them with the bones of an unmarried dead female. The desperation of parents to fulfill a strange custom has made the female bone trade in China a sprawling business. In spite of restrictions from the Chinese government, the practice of burying the bones of a dead female along with the remains of their deceased son continues openly/secretly even today.

Thus, the episode explores into the 3000- year- old ritual that is still alive in the fast- paced Chinese economy. Many young girls like Ling Chang who is the "Boneless Bride" of the story become victims of such ritual. The episode depicts the sad truth of the custom of bone-trade practised by the Chinese population living in America. This demonstrates that customary practices become so much a part of the individual's self that shifting abroad or even diasporic experiences cannot uproot the edifices of culture. This fictional incident of Ling Chang killed in foreign land for her bones throws light on how women cannot free themselves from cultural traps in their own land and even migration cannot help them escape such violent practices.

The rituals of human sacrifice in early periods of Chinese history have validated such unlawful practices in present times. Chinese legal authorities have noted that abduction and indiscriminate killing of women are the diverse effects of the 'Minghun' yet these crimes on women are covertly recognized as products of culture. F.C. Wallace explains this cultural behaviour in the following words:

"A ritual, in its own right, serves to explain, to rationalize, to interpret and to direct the energy of ritual performance." (Wallace, 1966)

The 'ritual performance' of Chinese society can be explained with reference to a point in the episode when the relatives had assembled at the burial spot to celebrate the marriage of the bones of the boy and girl who had never met while they were alive but would be together in death. The exhumation of the grave is seen as an act of desecration of the corpse or it is regarded as an infringement of clearly demarcated boundaries between life and death in many cultures of the world. However, in China, the corpse is disinterred to complete the ritual as they believe that the boy will leave for the netherworld with a spouse. After exhuming the grave, the bones are distributed among all the relatives who keep them in their custody for some time and then bring all the bones together for the reburial. All these aspects of Minghun are showcased perfectly in this episode as it refers to the how all the relatives are active participants in this 'ritual performance'- they have stored the bones in urns and brought them together for the marriage-burial. The leading lady, Temperance, reaches the spot of burial when the Chinese community is about to carry out the 'ritual performance' of reburying/marriage of the bones. Here, the custom may seem to be bizarre but the conversion of its strangeness to something significant is done by assigning symbolic meanings of 'after-life' and 'well-being of the spirit' so as to validate its practice. Hence the rationale of this practice is related to religious connotations of 'divine happiness', providing a kind of relief-mechanism to the living through the performance of this ritual.

Although Freud examined the "therapeutic value" of ritual performance, Robert Keesing elaborates on the act of 'religious ritual' as a mode of healing the wounded psyche: "Religions reinforce human ability to cope with the fragility of human life-with death and illness, famine and failure." (Keesing,387). He further adds that the practice of ritual which springs from religion gives security in a world which "seen in naturalistic terms, appears to be full of the unpredictable, the capricious and accidentally tragic". (Keesing,387).

The healing effects of ritual - practice, therefore, enable us to turn back to the pages of history that describe the origins of human sacrifice and these histories build powerful discourses of ritual and human culture. The custom of burying a dead king or a respectable person of high status along with a living person he loves the most gave rise to human sacrifices especially during the rule of the Shang dynasty from 1600 to 1050 B.C. Chunjun Gu and Keqian Ku, renowned academicians, in their article on "Netherworld Marriage in Ancient China" have pointed out on the existence of Ghost Marriage in different periods of Chinese history. According to them, it was "prevailing in the Tang Dynasty, declining in the Song and Yuan dynasties, and reviving again in the Ming and Qing dynasties". Of course, humanists criticized this practice and instead of burying living humans, the dead were buried together. Then the 'Minghun' was observed as a cultural practice so that bones of the dead are buried together and the living are not harmed. But if there were no female bones available coinciding with his death then these bones were obtained by killing a living female. This living female is looked at as "the other" as she is the scapegoat of the Minghun ritual that is practiced even today. Catherine Bell notes:

“The danger that looms when an “other” is identified and characterized with projected desire and violence gives rise to ritualized killing of sacrifice. The solidarity of the group is ultimately the result of this ritualization, understood in Freudian terms as the repression of desire and violence.” (Campbell, page 16)

The brutal killing of so many girls is overlooked because they are scapegoats or just “the other” for the larger community. Catherine Bell argues that these are “invisible Murders” committed for continuing a ritual that heals the wounds of parents of the dead boy by fulfilling the desire of parents and these killings are consciously/unconsciously validated because they are deeply rooted within the concept of human sacrifice in ancient Chinese culture.

Li Chang’s murder for her bones to complete the ritual of Minghun, thus, digs out old skeletons buried in Chinese history. The bones of “The Boneless Bride in the River” are forensic narratives give us a glimpse into China’s culture and the impact of such rituals on the life of the individual who becomes a victim of ‘ritual’.

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