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Study on Superstitions and Their Extent in Taiwan

Abstract: This article presents a multidisciplinary analysis of the persistence and influence of superstitions, focusing on their spread and survival in Taiwan. Taiwan's unique cultural landscape, where rich Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist traditions coexist alongside cutting-edge technological advancements, plays a significant role in shaping collective beliefs distinct from those in mainland China. The extensive acceptance of several superstitions leads to minor outbreaks of collective hysteria, which generally remain in a latent state. This study employs methods including cross-cultural comparison, ethnological analysis, and findings from contrastive studies in Behavioral Psychology studies. It begins by tracing the origins and evolution of the concept of superstition within the context of folklore studies. The paper then examines this phenomenon through anthropological and psychological perspectives, incorporating analyses from scholars such as Brunvand, Frazer, Lévi-Strauss, Kirk, García Mieres, Irwin, and Skinner. The article concludes with a discussion of the specific superstitions prevalent in Taiwan, exploring their formation, dissemination, and the degree of belief among the populace. Methods employed include cross-cultural comparison or Ethnology and the conclusions extracted from a contrastive analysis of Behavioral Psychology studies.

Keywords: superstition, belief, Taiwan, cultural anthropology, behavioral psychology, locus of control

Introduction

This study is going to carry out a task of integrating disciplines to help us clarify some points on a specific topic: superstitions in Taiwan, their possible origins, roots, and their impact on contemporary society. In order to achieve this, the research will use Cultural Anthropology and Behavioral Psychology as the main disciplines for its approach. The text will offer theories and hypotheses supported by specific studies, data, and arguments. Drawing from a parallel study on urban legends in Taiwan, the author collected, among other results, a great variety of superstitions that have served as a basis for preparing the analysis of the causes, effects, and consequences of the assimilation of superstitions into the daily life. The results obtained show the unique configuration of Tai-

wanese culture, which in fundamental ways differs from Chinese culture, from sociological, anthropological, and social-psychological points of view. These factors have shaped the role of superstition in Taiwanese society, where such superstitious are widely influenced by social behavior, able to generate a state of latent collective hysteria that only rarely explodes. At this point, it is essential to note that all countries have a large number of inhabitants who believe in superstitions. However, the degree of acceptance and belief varies due to different factors, which are explained later in the study.

One of the best beginnings of this study would be the reference to Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The Scottish academic stated that the principles of magic are explained in two possible ways: either something produces something, in other words: an effect resembles its cause, OR things that were once in contact will continue to act on each other at a distance, even if there is no more physical contact (Frazer 1993, 11).

He named the first principle the Law of Similarity and the second the Law of Contact; hence, according to said Law of Similarity, the magician, sorcerer, fortune teller, or shaman infers that he can produce any effect by simply imitating it. Concerning the second Law of Contact, the principle infers that the said magician can do something about a material object. That equally affects the person who owns or owned it (Frazer 1993, 11)¹. These principles, or laws, could also be applied to the superstitions analyzed further in this study.

As will be demonstrated later, although empathy was not one of the subjects studied by Confucius, as per its influence on Taiwanese society, it does appear in certain sutra texts, particularly through the stories of the Jataka tales². Thus, as humans are inherently empathetic beings, this study considers empathy to be reflected in modes of belief and the extension of superstitions.

In another order of things, although related to the above, Confucianism and Taoism have exerted a strong influence on the Republic of China, concerning this isolated place that was previously part of the Chinese cultural world. Taiwan employs its traditional characters, a symptomatic characteristic of many other traditional cultural influences that endure. While on the continent, Maoism tried to replace Confucianism, religious Taoism, and Buddhism, although without the desired success, in Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek, a Christian, like many of his followers, tried to suppress the superstitious religions of the people of China, in

¹ It must be observed, however, that, in the 1959 edition, called *The New Golden Bough*, this empathic magic and law disappear and are blurred in the other two (Frazer 1961, 5). The editor, Theodor H. Gaster, also removes Frazer's entire tirade against magic as, he claims, false science and fallacious in Frazer's arguments. Furthermore, Gaster excludes numerous paragraphs without explaining. This inconsistency drove this study to use the 1922 edition, not the one reissued in 1959.

² For more information, see, for example, Nur Inayat Khan's 1986 collection.

his own words (Kurtz 2007, 215). However, the new dictator in Taiwan allowed free worship of the Confucian and Buddhist cults. As in China, where some people continued their traditional rites clandestinely and behind closed doors, in Taiwan, the power of the Taoist religion was never generally affected and all kinds of rituals have been shared in superstitious practices such as exorcisms, offerings to ancestors, burning of votive money, among others. Perhaps one of the most important reasons why this social behavior has continued is due to the fact that Confucianism itself had as one of its pillars the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, a compendium of divinatory practices that Confucius studied and whose commentaries were used to teach his doctrine.

In summary, these three bastions of ancient Chinese and modern Taiwanese society, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, largely govern the psyche and beliefs in society. The first of these religious thoughts offers a civic morality, the second specializes in the vicissitudes of everyday life, and the last is associated with rites of passage (Kurtz 2007, 79). For this reason, in Taiwan, these religions and religious beliefs coexist with Christianity since the latter offers three alternatives simultaneously: civic morality, support for daily affairs, and rituals. That is the reason why it is perceived as a complementary religion. Many inhabitants can profess Christianity but live with Confucian morality, go to Taoist deities for specific concerns and visit Buddhist temples during designated festivals. In the context that concerns us, the aura of mysticism and confusion on which Taoist thought is based offers fertile ground for blurring ideas that were not such in their origin but that have been distorted over time, causing them to survive transformed into popular knowledge, and in the collective unconscious. However, it must be noted that the teachings of Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tse have nothing to do with magicians who expel demons through dances and incantations (Maspero 1999, 71).

Terminology

The etymological origin of the word superstition can be traced back to Cicero and the Latin word SUPERSTITIO. The Arpinian wise man derives the term from SUPERSTES, which means “survivor”, or “true witness of the past”:

[Personal translation]: 72. People who spend entire days praying, and the sacrifices to ensure that their children survive them have been called “superstitions” –from “superstes”, survivor– and the word acquired a broader meaning over time. On the other hand, those who carefully reviewed and, so to speak, “reread” all the ritual knowledge were called “religious”, from “relegere”, to reread, in the same way that we say “elegant” from “eligere”, to choose, “diligent” from “diligere”, to love or take care of, and “intelligent” from “intellegere”, to under-

stand. All these words contain, in effect, the same sense of “choose” or choosing that is present in “religious”. From here, the terms “superstitious” and “religious” became terms of censure and approval, respectively. (Cicerón 1998, 93)

Some authors believe they identify the origin in the word SUPERSTARE, or “what is above”, following the inspiration of Lucretius:

[Personal translation]: Superstition is the superstition of things above us, that is, of heavenly and divine things, which stand above us, an empty and excessive fear. (Caro Baroja, 154; quoted in Martínez Gil 2016, 328)

In this text in Latin, in addition to SUPERSTITIUM RERUM and TIMOR, or fear of the gods, two superstitious qualities stand out that from now on will always be linked to this term: INANIS, or “empty”, or “vain”, and SUPERFLUUS, or “excessive”. Martínez Gil (2016, 328) details Marcus Tulio Cicero’s comments about the ignorance and inconsistency of the truth supported by superstition, and the unfounded fear of the gods in opposition to religion, in which they are piously venerated. In his work *On Divination*, he adds that the Roman sage calls for superstition to be eradicated from the human soul since it oppresses the spirits. After this, he makes a detailed review of the opinion of other authors on the matter, namely, Plutarch, Lactantius, Saint Augustine of Hippo, Saint Isidore of Seville, and Saint Thomas Aquinas, to enlightened thought, and conclude that all of them offered a very negative idea about superstitions and advocated for their extinction —although always with a religious analysis (Martínez Gil 2016, 328–340). Plutarch asserts that superstition:

[Personal translation]: It degrades man and takes away his dignity by plunging him into the “powerless and embarrassing of all fears”, because “he who fears the gods fears all things, the earth, the sea, the air, the sky, the darkness, the light, the rumor, the silence, the dream.” (Caro Baroja 162; quoted in Martínez Gil 2016, 329)

Apart from the fact that coherence and verisimilitude can be critical elements to distinguish superstition from genuine belief, Plutarch is correct in mentioning the word fear, which is none other than fear. Understood not merely as TIMOR, but also the fear of everything, so that the fear of the gods can provoke the fear of everything else. Without completely accepting Plutarch’s perspective, this fear could possibly be transferred to a more generalized fear, and protection is necessary against events that we cannot understand or control. Moreover, even to those circumstances we can even cope with.

As Kirk argued in *The Myth*, it seems wrong to associate myth, religious beliefs, and rituals (Kirk 2006, 28–30). The British demonstrated that this association is not real, although these three components can appear together (Kirk 2006, 24–51). In its strict sense, Zeus, Jesus Christ, Buddha, or Confucius could

be mythical characters. As we have mentioned before, beliefs distort, in many cases, the original beliefs themselves and their texts themselves. This situation creates confusion between the teachings of Confucius, their inspiration, and today's practices. All of this is favored by the honest ignorance of religious believers or by intentional distortion for economic, political, and other reasons. Hence, superstitions often spread without having a true origin or basis in religions and religious beliefs. Nevertheless, as Kirk states, and we reiterate, they can still appear together.

Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote a statement that, although it refers to myths, can be perfectly applied to our case and the difference between religious beliefs and superstitions. The French anthropologist said that "the meaning of a myth can never be reduced to that which could be drawn from a particular code [personal translation]." He adds that a code cannot vary from one myth to another, even though its essence can (Lévi-Strauss 1985, 245). All this reveals that the meaning of a myth does not come from a particular code, that a code does not vary between myths, and that the essence of the myth does change. That is why, in this blurry terrain, the concept of belief and superstition can be assimilated, given that, on the one hand, beliefs have their codes, and these are repeated, in essence, in all of them. Religions, on the other hand, have a tendency towards reductionism in interpreting the codes, simplifying them, and making them easily assimilated by the believer. Whether or not these interpretations are correct is understood here in their orthodox form. The same can be applied to superstitions, a type of belief, except that, in this case, its consideration as trustworthy and faithful to the religion will depend on the receiver and the sender. In fact, chapters of mutual accusations between religions for following false prophets and believing in heretical superstitions have occurred throughout history. In relation to this, Julio Caro Baroja (1981, 162) states that, "it is essential to study many types of societies, their viewpoints about themselves, and the arguments they use against others, enemies, or rivals [personal translation]."

If we leave concepts aside and focus on superstition as such in folklore studies, it has been defined in many forms; however, the one offered by Brunvand seems to be the most accurate: "innocent popular thoughts, which normally are related to chance, magic or the supernatural, and are logically and scientifically untenable" (Brunvand 1998, 371). It coincides with its irrational and unsustainable character from empirical experience but avoids mention of religions.

For its part, psychology has studied these phenomena since practically its birth, and after the approaches of Freud and Jung, there is a branch that focuses on these psychosocial phenomena from a behavioral point of view. For this branch, superstitions are a set of beliefs and behavioral practices that have existed since human beings origins and are often mistakenly associated with

primitive societies. The only thing that changes between cultures and eras, as stated before, inspired by Lévi-Strauss and myths, is its form of representation. However, behavioral psychology maintains that its nature or content is also modified (Tobacyk et al. 1988, 241–246). Superstitious behavior or conduct—understood as any activity carried out by the organism, whether cognitions or beliefs, or unobservable behaviors—originate when an accidental reinforcement of said behaviors occurs at a given moment, this being sufficient for the person creates a stable relationship between their behavior and the consequence, even if it happened punctually, and probably will not be repeated in the future (Skinner 1948, 169–172). Thus, not only are rituals carried out by a specific subject created, but also external events can be associated with the phenomenon simply because they occurred at the same time, reasoning that social psychology calls illusory correlation bias (Ovejero Bernal; quoted in García Mieres et al. 2012, 7). García Mieres, García González, and Fernández González carried out a fascinating behavioral study published in 2012, in which they define superstitious behavior as follows:

[Personal translation]: Belief in a causal relationship between phenomena such as an action, object, or ritual and an unrelated result is not being empirically demonstrated. These beliefs are conceived as contrary to logical reasoning and scientific thinking in general. That may be due to ignorance, fear of the unknown, or confidence in the existence of supernormal forces. It encompasses the entire set of paranormal phenomena, such as spiritualism and occultism, as all the so-called pseudosciences, such as astrology, divination, or tarot. Also included is the belief in predestination, magical rites, as well as all types of self-created rituals (known as private superstition). (García Mieres et al. 2012, 9)

There are points in common with what has been previously discussed in this article: superstition is a type of belief that contradicts logical thinking and is scientifically unprovable, yet it includes a sense of causal operability. It encompasses aspects foreign to most religions but points out in its first lines that one of the reasons for the erratic association is confidence in the existence of supernormal forces, which once again involves religion. It seems that superstitious behavior is detached from religious motivations, but in the end, they are an inseparable part of the phenomenon.

After some brief conceptualizations, this study could define *superstition* as a base for the rest of the study presented here. A definition that seems heterogeneous to us but conciliatory of these different perspectives that the same phenomenon can offer. Thus, a superstition would be a naive belief or thought, religious or not, that wrongly relates one or more supernormal phenomena with other feasible ones and that is not sustainable from logical thinking nor empirically demonstrable.

Superstition in Psychology and Anthropology

Regarding more contemporary concepts and methods, what was discussed in the previous point presents a direct relationship with the personality traits that Psychology has associated with superstitious people. For Irwin (1993), personality traits associated with different gradations are the external locus of control³, low self-esteem, high suggestibility, tendency to fantasy, neuroticism, emotional instability, psychological maladjustment, and sex. Other academics have criticized these characteristics; however, there is still no consensus in Psychology except about the external locus of control. In fact, according to Irwin, the perceived need to control paranormal thoughts⁴ causes subjects to form superstitious beliefs (Irwin 1993, 28–30). In an experiment carried out by Matute, the members of the escape group from an uncontrolled situation were relatively consistent. However, the Coupled group presented a high degree of illusion of control and controllability during the treatment, accompanied, in many cases, by superstitious behavior (Irwin 1993, 425). In conclusion, this need for a feeling of control can originate from a tendency to fantasize excessively (Irwin 1993, 28–29), which in turn can have many causes, although Irwin reduces them to two: stimulating fantasy in childhood or childhood trauma. Another possible compatible origin would be the feeling of helplessness in the face of uncontrollable events, but Matute (1993, 421–422, 425–426) finds contradictions among researchers. A third could be fear, which both some classics and Cultural Anthropology defend. Alternatively, even a combination of two or three factors should be considered, depending on the person⁵.

The first studies in Psychology on superstition date back to the work of Burrhus Frederic Skinner and his pigeons in 1948. Since then, several measurement scales have been created while pursuing subsequent research, among which the following scales could be highlighted: the E. J. scale. Phares, in 1957, with thirteen items; the so-called James-Phares, with twenty-six items; and that of Shephard Liverant, Julian B. Rotter, and Melvin Seeman, who configured one

³ According to Rotter (1966, 1), the perception of the external locus of control occurs when a subject perceives that a reinforcement follows some of his action but is not entirely dependent on his action, so it is generally perceived as the result of luck, chance, destiny as if it were under the control of other elements, or as if it were unpredictable due to the incredible complexity of the forces that surround it. If, on the contrary, the person perceives that the event depends, relatively, on his behavior or his permanent characteristics, he calls it the perception of the internal locus of control.

⁴ Some paranormal thoughts that García Mieres et al. (2012, 8) insert into superstitious beliefs or treat as synonyms.

⁵ The analysis of fear, religious beliefs, urban legends, and TIMOR is left for a study for future publication.

of sixty items with sub-scales (Rotter 1966, 9). Based on the Tobacyk scale, or Revised Paranormal Beliefs Scale, researchers Díaz Vilela and Álvarez-García developed a Spanish adaptation, and this scale is the basis for the work of García Mieres et al. (2012, 8). A study, the latter, very relevant to this case and that will shed light on a specific situation, that of the construction of a scale for measuring superstitious behavior validated in the Spanish population.

It is important to note that the work carried out by García Mieres et al. cannot be evaluated due to three reasons: the first is that the control group is not detailed in the published article in question since in recent years the journals have reduced the extension of the articles that may cover all the data. Therefore, we must grant blind faith to the results, which, on the other hand, do not seem far-fetched. Second, because there is no significant number of subjects –one hundred and seventy-three– as they claim themselves (García Mieres et al. 2012, 13). Furthermore, it would be necessary to review a large number of works and experiments to offer a 100% well-founded opinion, which is difficult to do. However, after reading many works, it seems that the works selected here are the most representative to date within Psychology.

The work of developing said scale included aspects such as astrology, predestination, tarot, divination, magical rites, and other rituals of the exact nature (García Mieres et al. 2012, 13). The conclusions they reached were that superstitious behavior was a unidimensional factor, contrary to the results obtained in other previous studies –the vast majority in Anglo-Saxon contexts– which conceived said behavior as a multidimensional construct, “being the criterion of dimensions the type of superstition [:] such as belief in bad luck, astrology, or destiny...[, and] each of these assuming a single factor (García Mieres et al. 2012, 11) [personal translation].” For this reason, García Mieres et al.’s research must receive as much credibility as that of others. Since cultural contexts vary from one culture to another, it is expected that the results will probe that as well. In the specific case of Taiwan, as in Spain, and, ultimately, in other cultures, it is not possible to differentiate between several factors since we consider that it is a one-dimensional behavior: the person who believes in superstition most likely will believe in others, no matter what type it is. Other data that supports the results and that can be applied, to other non-Anglo-Saxon cultures are that:

- There are no differences between the sexes⁶, as is the case with the experiments carried out in the US. Here, we should point out the time these studies were

⁶ There are specific psychological studies that prove that the female sex is more prone to superstition, such as that of Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch from 2000, and others that deny it, such as Stanke from 2004 and García Mieres et al., dated 2012. It can be assumed that the groups of cases differ with culture, a pattern that some analyzes

carried out in the American country, and the most recent study in Spain, in 2012, at that time, an officially egalitarian society that even carries out positive discrimination against women in civil, criminal, and labor law areas.

- The degree of religiosity or its absence in the subjects does not offer any significant distinction. According to the authors, the conception of religion in the US and Spain varies. Alternatively, perhaps it is also because the degree of influence of said degree of religiosity on the daily life of the majority of the population is much lower in a secular country like Spain, where, for example, the government, judges, and other positions of authority public administration should not be sworn before the *Bible*.
- Unlike the previous studies, the research by García Mieres et al. shows that the educational level is relevant to the degree of superstitious behavior, with the most educated people being the least likely to believe in superstitions. Perhaps here, it would be convenient to subdivide the last step between undergraduate, masters, and doctoral studies, and it would be significantly positive to verify whether university students have developed a certain degree of critical thinking. In societies that abandoned critical thinking in their educational systems, the probability that superstitions have spread more is greater, or, at least, that the factor of studies is not relevant. In the absence of data, since no one has carried out such an uncomfortable task, this must be only an opinion based on what it is observed in countries like Taiwan or China, where belief in superstitions is very high and in whose educational systems, critical thinking is conspicuous by its absence⁷. As for the USA, perhaps the results should be classified by State and counties, since, in some States, Creationism is taught in some schools, while others prefer Evolutionism.
- Finally, the locus of control and superstitious behavior is closely linked to the results in this study and all the previous ones since the greater the degree of external locus of control, the greater the degree of this type of behavior. In comparison, subjects who present a greater degree of internal locus of control “tend to have lower scores on the scale [personal translation].” (García Mieres et al. 2012, 11–12). The relationship between superstitious behavior and the locus of control seems repeated in different societies and cultures. For this reason, it is the only factor that does not vary. It should possibly be the only factor to consider from an individual psychological point of view, but not if it is combined with different disciplines such as Anthropology and Sociology.

For all this, an approach to specific topics, superstition in our case, from an interdisciplinary point of view, can offer much broader results than stagnating on just one. Of course, without underestimating the works mentioned here and others without review, which significantly improve the configuration of multi-cultural patterns.

of Psychology tend to forget. In this way, it cannot be inferred that these are exclusively religious beliefs.

⁷ Blanco Pena (2017) offers an example in his work on critical thinking with Taiwanese students, in which he also includes a bibliography on China. See Blanco Pena.

In relation to this statement, anthropological and sociological studies have shown that a genre—or subgenre—of contemporary oral literature, rumor, can help us contemplate mathematically the extent of superstitions and the degree of diffusion of these. Furthermore, since the development of the Internet, this network has favored the spread of rumors and superstitions in an alarming way (Arroyo Redondo 2006, 12–13; Bordia 1996; Bordia and Rosnow 1998; Brunvand 1998, 26), the less cautious would say. It has even been an incentive for the evolution of “technopaganism” and “technoshamanism” (Arroyo Redondo 2006, 12–13).

Without moving away from the science of Freud and Jung, Allport and Postman, inspired by a formula by McGregor and his 1936 study on illusory thinking in creating predictions about whether Hitler would hold power in 1938⁸, created the following formula:

$$R \sim i \times a$$

Where “R” is the amount of rumor in circulation, or the degree of circulation of the rumor, “i” the importance of the topic for individuals, and “a” the ambiguity of the evidence that concerns the topic in question, thus, the degree of rumor circulation is the result of the multiplication of importance by ambiguity (Allport and Postman 1965, 33–35, 43–45). In the same way, we can propose a version of this formula by replacing the R of rumor with an S of superstition:

$$S \sim i \times a$$

Therefore, the greater the importance granted, or the greater the ambiguity, the greater the degree of circulation. Since superstitions are beliefs in which a subject perceives that the result of an action depends only partially on himself—and mainly on luck, chance, destiny, or some divinity or foreign element so in general, they are unpredictable—the degree of ambiguity is very high. The relative importance of the topic is also very high. Especially if they are cultures where religions are not strictly separated from the three powers, or if these cultures possess static and ancient traditions that greatly influence everyday life. For all these reasons, there is no surprise when a country like Taiwan—where tradition coexists with the present and where Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek condemned several religions as superstitious⁹—primary, secondary, and high

⁸ In his experiment in the United Kingdom, McGregor asked respondents in 1936 if they thought Hitler would remain chancellor in 1938. He also asked about their inclination or rejection of this figure. The results showed that 95% of those surveyed declared themselves not in favor of Hitler but thought that he would remain in power. These results showed that tastes and desires could not influence individuals’ predictions (Allport and Postman 1965, 43).

⁹ For example, school trips before the national examinations to the temples of the god who grants good fortune—Wen Chang Di Jun—are expected to be found everywhere.

school education is not prominent on critical thinking and focus on memorization. Superstitions manage to spread without any obstacles, achieve a high degree of social diffusion, and become part of the collective unconscious.

Superstition in Taiwan

Facts may create the narrative, and narrative can become facts (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983, 5). Actual events can give rise to urban legends or superstitions, such as the famous Taiwanese legend titled “The Girl in the Red Raincoat”, or “The Girl in Red” according to which:

An elder woman, often called Peng Wu Yun Shui, was lost on Lin Tian Mountain. During that time, she did not eat anything. After four or five days, according to reports, her rescue services found her exhausted but in good health. People rumored that the girl had taken her in the red raincoat, a spirit condemned to wander the mountains and who took the form of a girl in red from time to time and scared hikers. In many cases, informants say that she could be the spirit Tudi-gong. After the rescue, the woman told what had happened to her and denied that she had encountered that spirit. However, she did remember that she had seen several people pass by and that they had not helped her despite asking them for help as if the woman were in another dimension and she could observe them, but they could not see the woman. (González Grueso 2020, 100)

The actual events on this matter, which occurred in 2014, were collected by a multitude of newspapers and news programs throughout the country, and they told a story similar to the one offered here, with the only variant of the type of garment he was wearing. The evil spirit. Leaving aside the possible Chinese roots of the legend (González Grueso 2020, 99–102), there are several elements to take into account that can fuel the belief in this legend, and that, in turn, feed each other: on the one hand we have the mountain Lin Tian, located in Hualien, a place that has generated constant superstitions and rumors because many hikers got lost there; and on the other, the traditional Taiwanese legend of Mosin, or Mosiná, of Shichu Mountain, in New Taipei, an entity that means ‘malevolent spirit’ in the Taiwanese language and that deceives people, separates them from the others. He plays with them and makes them get lost for a few days, eat excrement, dirt and grass, and tries to ensure that they are found with a blank memory. This urban legend is widely disseminated and filmed in a duology¹⁰, has fueled the belief that the mountains are dangerous because there is that evil being called Mosin, or Mosiná. Thus, events become a contemporary legend, which develops a superstition that derives from another very old one, almost forgotten, and that goes back to another legend, but in this case, traditional.

¹⁰ *The Tag Along*, 2015 and *The Tag Along 2*, 2017, directed by Cheng Wei-hao.

There is the opposite route of development in a superstition, one titled “Do not pick up red envelopes from the ground.” Its origin can be traced in a rumor that has become superstition: in China, the tradition of burying the wife in the tomb of the husband’s family was widespread, so when a woman died unmarried, some families resorted to the trick of leaving red envelopes on the floor with money, the deceased’s hair and, sometimes, even nail clippings, so that the unsuspecting person who found the decoy would have to marry the ghost of the young woman. If he did not want to, the specter would disturb him for the rest of his life. In this manner, families ensured that their daughters were buried in a tomb and that their souls could rest in peace.

This relationship between rumor and superstition, already commented on, also seems to be linked to urban legends. All of this offers new perspectives for studying these interrelated subgenres. According to Difonzo and Bordia (2007, 20), rumors arise from situational contexts that are ambiguous, threatening, or potentially threatening and in which people feel the psychological need for security or to be understood. They state that the threat can be more physical or psychological, in which case it is due to a threat to oneself, one’s identity, or anything one holds dear. Regarding security, they indicate that the person feels insecure and needs to raise the Ego (Difonzo and Bordia 2007, 20). Although this seems like it could be more precise concerning the case of superstitions, the value of self-esteem should be considered when believing in them. They continue in their study, saying that rumors can pose a threat both to the individual and to a group associated with that individual—which is usually called social identity—and they offer a series of functions of rumors that we do not consider relevant to detail here (Difonzo and Bordia 2007, 20–23). In their last chapter, the authors point out the differences between urban legends and rumors, defining them as follows:

Rumors and urban legends differ. Rumors are unverified and potentially helpful information statements in circulation that arise in ambiguous, threatening, and potentially threatening contexts and help people make sense of and manage threats. Urban Legends are narratives about funny, horrible, or unusual events related to the modern world that arise in storytelling contexts and function to convey meaning, mores, and values (Difonzo and Bordia 2007, 30)

All of this leads us to think that superstitions play an intermediate role between these two forms of folklore. On the one hand, they offer information that is not empirically verified, and potentially useful, and a priori threatening context determines them, but their narrative is horrible, and supernatural. We must add that in the case of Taiwan, they also have moral values¹¹. Consequently, as

¹¹ For more information on this, see also the relevant studies by Boyes and Tangherlini (1984).

previously shown, it is not rare to find these three subgenres intertwined in their relationships, and some generate others.

Returning to the characteristics offered by Difonzo and Bordia, it is worth mentioning its potential usefulness of superstitions: their belief precisely due to the lack of empirical demonstration or passage through a critical judgment, in a society where religion can paralyze entire populations¹², this is possibly, what has led its dissemination to have worrying overtones about the integrity of people. In other words, the so-called collective hysteria¹³, which, although it remains in a latent state, produces, on certain occasions and under specific conditions such as special festivities, the occasional outbreak with negative consequences for various social sectors. That is the case, for example, of the official presentation of the horror feature film *The Tag Along 2*, that had to be canceled due to protests by merchants in the Taichung area where it was going to be screened for free –in gratitude for the citizen collaboration during the filming. The reason given was that the screening had been planned for Ghost Month¹⁴, on 22 August 2017, and that this would provoke the ghosts. This incident resulted in producers reporting losses of TWD500, 000 (Strong 2017). There are many examples of this type of collective hysteria caused by superstitions and urban legends; however, the most mentioned by critics is the case studied by Joel Best and Gerald T. Horiuchi about the alleged threat to children during the celebration of Halloween in the US, where they claim that the situation failed to reach a

¹² During the celebration of the Dragon Boat Festival, or Duanwu Festival, which is celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese calendar, entire towns close almost all the main roads within the municipality, fill the streets with high-intensity noise and paper, as religious processions pass by and prevent the free movement and operation of businesses and citizens.

¹³ In Psychology, collective hysteria, or mass hysteria, group hysteria, collective psychosis, or collective obsessive behavior is understood as the “psychological-social phenomenon that includes the manifestation of the same hysterical symptoms, or similar, that a person can suffer, but they occur in a group” (Bartholomew and Wessely 2002, 300).

¹⁴ The seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar marks the emergence and wander in the real world of spirits and ghosts, including those of deceased ancestors. It is relevant to mention here that it is a month in the Taoist tradition with many taboos. This tradition comes from the Southern Ming culture that spread among Chinese people of other ethnicities and cultures. It seems that the month’s name itself comes from the Ming language. In addition, this month was not loaded with superstition and taboos until the Ming dynasty. Such dynasty was precisely the dynasty that expelled the Dutch from Taiwan (in the mid-17th century). Shortly after, Koxinga, the commander who had led the Ming troops, founded Dongning on the island of Formosa, the first ethnic Chinese government in Taiwan, and the place from which he planned to regroup and counterattack the Qing.

level of mass hysteria due to the enormous scope of the case, which covered the entire country, and the relatively slow spread of superstition (Best and Horiuchi 1985, 496–497). Another study to review is that of Norman Jacobs, from 1965, and the “Taipei Stabbing Ghost”, a rumor fueled by the media and denied by the police on several occasions as unfounded rumors, nevertheless, created an urban legend, when mass hysteria passed its climax. The two factors mentioned above in Best and Horiuchi’s study could have caused, as Jacobs demonstrates, that episodes of mass hysteria to occur in Taiwan since it is a much smaller country than the US, where these legends and superstitions are national, not regional, and they also occur in a very compact and closed society. There are more verifiable facts that can lead to assume that this latent collective hysteria continues and does not disappear (Chen et ál. 2003). For example, during Ghost Month, the beaches of Taiwan are almost empty because it is believed that the spirits of evil entities take brave swimmers to the bottom of the sea. Similarly, during the same month, the vast majority of businesses burn votive money to appease the souls of wandering spirits and so that they do not interfere with the business viability. This practice occurs no matter if it is a small store or a large corporation. Perhaps the reasons for said latent collective hysteria have other additional explanations. However, all this would reaffirm the idea that there are societies more conducive to collective hysteria phenomena¹⁵ than others, inspired by rumors, superstitions, and urban legends.

Some specific patterns are the origin and cause of the spread of collective hysteria (Kerckhoff and Back 1965, 4–8), which could be summarized as:

- The group’s influence, which in Taiwan’s case would be limited to two, family and friends. Some much-closed circles, especially the first, have much power over the individuals who are part of this group because it is a society where Confucian thought governs many social acts.
- Social isolation, which in the case of Taiwan, is favored by many aspects, from the isolationism exercised by the People’s Republic of China due to the coercion of other states so that Taiwan does not become part of any international association of any kind. Political, even for not being recognized as a country, to internal causes, such as the fact that the media very rarely offer news from countries other than Taiwan, China, or the US, for example, and if they do, the information is usually superficial and takes up very little space or time.
- The response of the masses. In a highly superstitious society, as seen so far, the belief in these phenomena is very high, and the masses’ response tends to be also high.

Everything observed so far suggests that superstition in the Republic of China tends to show a high degree of belief in superstition, whether stemming from

¹⁵ For more information, see the works of Miller, published in 2014, or the most recent study by Penna, dated 2019.

a rumor, an urban legend, or a superstition itself. The incentive of the practicality of superstition as a warning, together with its lack of scientific validation, makes its belief more viable in a closed society. This, in turn, can lead to outbreaks of collective hysteria, although such occurrences are rare and generally remain in a latent state, as said before.

Conclusion

So far, in a society where Taoism and Confucianism support beliefs in superstitions that affect daily life, with techniques such as Feng Shui, the fact that by the Law of Similarity the Taoist magician infers that he can produce any effect by simply imitating it and that according to the Law of Contact the supposed magician can influence a material object that also affects the person who owns or possessed it, produces a wide diffusion and survival of superstitions that can sometimes lead to the resurgence of critical moments born of a latent collective hysteria.

Furthermore, the fact is that although an individual's religiosity is not a determining factor in the spread of superstitions and belief in them, as shown, the influence that religions exert on society and, therefore, the psyche and the collective unconscious is crucial. In the same way, that Western Europe is the daughter of Greco-Latin culture and Christianity, today's Taiwanese nation is the daughter of its historical characteristics, Buddhism, and the Confucian and Taoist religious thoughts that determine the functioning of society at all levels.

A third issue discussed here concerns the blurred boundaries between belief and superstition, which remain unclear in both the studies of Cultural Anthropology and in those of Psychology, despite the assistance of several relevant studies on Anthropology and Behavioral Psychology. Regarding superstition, it has been observed that the boundary between these two concepts shifts depending on personal and social prejudices and interests. For this study, the problem lies in the negative implication associated with the term *superstition*. As scientists, we should advocate for using the term without interpretation coming from social imperatives, approaching it from an objective model without distinction between cultures, religious points of view, or academic ideologies. Suffice it to say that, in Taiwan, there is a high degree of belief in and dissemination of superstitions which affect daily life, whereas in other countries this degree is lower. The final question would be whether this affects the social psyche, but this is left for another multidisciplinary study beyond the scope of this one. In any case, fixed parameters cannot be applied to measure certain individual or social behaviors without considering the target culture.

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Istraživanje sujeverja i njihove postojanosti na Tajvanu

Ovaj rad predstavlja interdisciplinarnu analizu verovanja i postojanosti sujeverja sa fokusom na njihovo širenje i opstanak na Tajvanu. Jedinstveni kulturni pejzaž Tajvana, gde bogate budističke, konfucijanske i taoističke tradicije koegzistiraju zajedno sa tehnološkim napretkom, igra važnu ulogu u oblikovanju kolektivne psihologije koja se razlikuje od one u kontinentalnoj Kini. Široka rasprostranjenost nekih sujeverja dovodi do manjih izbijanja kolektivne histerije, koja obično ostaje skrivena. Korišćene metode uključuju međukulturno poređenje ili etnologiju, kao i zaključke iz uporedne analize istraživanja u bihevioralnoj psihologiji. Tekst započinje ispitivanjem porekla i evolucije koncepta sujeverja u kontekstu folkloristike. Zatim se ovaj fenomen razmatra iz antropološke i psihološke perspektive, uključujući analize naučnika kao što su Brunvand, Fraser, Levi-Strauss, Kirk, Garcia Mieres, Irvin i Skinner. Članak se završava diskusijom o određenim sujeverjima koja su rasprostranjena na Tajvanu, proučavanjem njihovog formiranja, širenja i stepena rasprostranjenosti vere među stanovništvom.

Ključne reči: sujeverje, Tajvan, kulturna antropologija, bihevioralna psihologija, lokus kontrole

Étude sur les superstitions et leur étendue au Taïwan

Cet article est une analyse interdisciplinaire des croyances et de la persistance des superstitions avec un accent sur leur expansion et leur survie au Taïwan. Le milieu culturel unique du Taïwan, où les riches traditions bouddhistes, confucéennes et taoistes coexistent avec un très grand progrès technologique, joue

un rôle important dans le façonnement de la psychologie collective différente de celle en Chine continentale. Une grande expansion de certaines superstitions mène à de petits accès d'hystérie collective, qui généralement restent occultés. Cette étude commence par l'examen de l'origine et de l'évolution du concept de superstition dans le contexte de la folkloristique. Ensuite ce phénomène est abordé d'un point de vue anthropologique et psychologique, y compris par les analyses des savants comme Brunvand, Fraser, Lévi-Strauss, Kirk, Garcia Mieres, Irvine et Skinner. L'article se termine par un débat sur les superstitions spécifiques qui prédominent au Taïwan, par l'étude de leur formation, leur propagation et le degré de l'étendue de la foi dans la population. Les méthodes utilisées englobent la comparaison interculturelle ou l'ethnologie, ainsi que les conclusions tirées de l'analyse comparée des recherches en psychologie comportementale.

Mots clés: superstitions, foi, Taïwan, anthropologie culturelle, psychologie comportementale, locus de contrôle

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