

Liaogan: A Folk Religious Practice in Northwest China

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Abstract. As the concluding activity of the Spring Festival in Northwest China, Liaogan is a distinctive local folk religious practice. This article, taking Qingyang City, Gansu Province, as a case study, employs anthropological fieldwork methods to present the entire process of the Liaogan ritual, trace its historical development and folk cultural connotations, and analysis the role of Liaogan in shaping social cohesion and the daily lives of Northwest people. The paper posits that Liaogan originates from humanity's shared belief in fire and the god of fire, representing a remnant of primitive religious beliefs. The purpose of Liaogan is to ward off evil, eliminate diseases and disasters, and fulfill people's hopes for a bountiful harvest. In this beautiful prayer process, a daily social function of purifying the soul and maintaining social relationships manifests itself in seemingly unconscious activities and continues to serve a symbolic social function in modern society.

1. Introduction

There is a folk saying in Northwest China that goes something like this: "Every year on the 23rd day of the first lunar month, each household goes to Liaogan." After the Lantern Festival, on the 23rd day, every village on Northwest China's land is brightly lit, and people are immersed in a feast of revelry, expressing their wishes to get rid of plague, epidemics and other bad things and praying for a new year of good harvests and well-being. Liaogan is currently popular in the Han ethnic group in north-central and southern Ningxia, the Qingyang region of Gansu Province, Baoji and Yan'an in Shaanxi Province, and Puzhou and Jixian counties in Shanxi Province [1]. The ritual of Liaogan, although the exact time of its creation is no longer traceable after the baptism of time, as a mysterious fire cultural practice, is a remnant of the ancient culture of sorcery and rituals deposited in the crevices of modern civilization, showing the temporal and spatial superposition of the millennium civilization process and having special symbolic significance. With the methodology and perspective of cultural anthropology, this paper reveals the social function of folk religious practices and their traditional succession significance in modern society through the study of Liaogan ritual in the Qingyang region of Gansu.

In order to present a more authentic and original picture of the cultural phenomenon of Liaogan, observation and research on Liaogan were carried out in an informal, natural and open environment, using mainly documentary methods, participant observation and in-depth interviews. The survey was conducted in Qingyang during the Spring Festival of 2022. The article is based on fieldwork in 8 villages in Qingyang but also discusses

elsewhere in Northwest China. We interviewed a total of 17 people and selected 4 representative field reporters, who were villagers, scholars specializing in the study of Northwest folk culture, and local folk culture enthusiasts.

This paper is divided as follows: First, we describe in depth the Liaogan ritual through fieldwork. In the next section, we trace the origins of Liaogan, and finally, the cultural and social value of Liaogan and its symbolic role in modern society are explored.

2. Liaogan: A Chinese Concept of Burning Away All Afflictions

In the Chinese context, the original meaning of Liao is rapid movement for baking, evolving from this literal sense to encompass the verb meaning of burning and the noun meaning of torch. In the case of Liaogan, the emphasis is on the concepts of baking and burning. Gan originally referred to Ganqi, a term in traditional Chinese medicine describing a type of abdominal pain, typically occurring in children due to conditions such as roundworm infection or bacterial infection. Over time, it has been extended to signify all calamities and ominous things derived from this original meaning.

There are three explanations for Gan in traditional Chinese medicine. One is that "Gan is caused by too much sweetness and fecundity," which refers to children overeating fatty, sweet and greasy foods, damaging the spleen and stomach and resulting in Gan disease [2]. Similarly, another study demonstrated that the symptoms of Gan and dampness are due to eating too many fatty foods in the summer and not paying attention to keeping warm during sleep [3]. Moreover, another type of Gan is induced by too much dryness and deficiency. It refers to drying up Qi, blood and fluids and losing body weight [4].

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Meanwhile, research showed that Gan is a disease called Gan in children under 20 years of age; however, it's called consumption (consumption is tuberculosis) in people over 20 years old. Furthermore, Gan and consumption were considered symptoms of Qi and blood weakness. It's worth noting that the dry blood consumption prevalent in the Northwest belongs to this category [5]. Another report indicates that worms or roundworms cause the third type of Gan. Previous studies suggested that stomach worms are the leading cause of children's Gan [6]. And further study showed that all Gan diseases are due to the weakness of Qi, blood and worms in the belly [7].

In a broader sense, the term Gan encompasses a scope wider than the medical definition and is not limited solely to the concept of Ganqi associated with diseases. Instead, it extends to encompass all malevolent energies and entities adverse to human well-being. Consequently, Gan is not confined solely to the human body but extends its presence to inanimate objects. During our research in Northwest China, when questioning local residents about the nature of Gan, they explained that it refers to anything unfavorable or undesirable, including various supernatural beings and entities found in folk beliefs. These entities, characterized by enigmatic manifestations and substantial detrimental impacts, represent elements actively avoided by individuals. When asked about the meaning of Gan and its associated connotations, the field reporter told us, "I believe Gan encompasses everything negative, whether visible or invisible, concrete or imaginary. It not only refers to diseases but also includes ghosts and spirits. If Gan touches a person's nose, they lose their nose; if it touches their mouth, they lose their tongue; if it enters their eyes, they go blind. I vividly remember encountering a person with no nose (without a bridge and tip, only two nostrils) on the street when I was a child. I asked my mother and grandmother, 'Why doesn't he have a nose?' They told me, 'Gan ate his nose.' Subsequently, I inquired further about how Gan could consume a nose, but they couldn't provide an explanation. However, they did emphasize that Gan is extremely afraid of fire, and only by burning Gan can one avoid various peculiar illnesses. The impression left on me by this event is profound. Since then, I have understood the necessity of conducting the Liaogan ritual annually. The belief is that if the ritual is not performed, Gan will consume one's nose."

From the description of the harmful effects of Gan provided by the field reporter, it can be perceived as an embodiment of various diseases, akin to malevolent spirits and demons expelled through shamanic practices in other ethnic traditions. Its origin is obscure, but its impact is substantial, and its cure remains elusive. Consequently, in the context of the severely underdeveloped medical conditions of the past, people developed a mysterious fire-burning practice resembling shamanic rituals to resist and prevent this inexplicable ailment. This practice gradually solidified into a fundamental paradigm, observed annually on the 23rd day of the first lunar month, known as the Liaogan custom. In the eyes of the populace, only through the ritual of Liaogan can they dispel evil, ward off diseases, and ensure a healthy and smooth year.

3. Liaogan Ritual: A Folk Religious Festivity During the Spring Festival

The Liaogan ritual is an integral part of the Spring Festival activities in Northwest China. However, it stands out as a distinct belief practice, differing significantly from the general festivities and sacrificial ceremonies associated with the Spring Festival. Its unique form symbolizes both the formal conclusion of the past year and the auspicious beginning of the new year. Official Liaogan activities typically commence in the evening after the onset of the 23rd day of the first lunar month, with preparations beginning a day in advance. The Liaogan ritual begins with the crafting of paper dolls (Figure 1). These paper dolls are specifically made for the purpose of the Liaogan ritual in the Northwest region. Typically, they are cut from rectangular pieces of yellow paper, either sixteen-fold in a rectangular shape or twelve-fold in a square shape, following a composition of continuous squares or rectangles. The creation of paper dolls is usually undertaken by skilled women in the household, and the number of dolls produced depends on the size of the family.

On the morning of the 22nd day of the first lunar month, the paper dolls are cut and then affixed to sorghum stalks or bamboo poles. They are placed in various rooms throughout the house, initiating the collection of Gan. After an entire day, all the household Gan are transferred to the paper dolls. Early in the morning of the next day, family members with weaker health use a lit incense stick to burn small holes on the paper dolls at corresponding positions to their own illnesses. During the Liaogan ritual, the paper dolls are thrown into the bonfire, and as it burns, the Gan are believed to be carried away with the flames. After lunch, men carry woven baskets on their backs, bring sickles, and take their children to remote wilderness areas to gather firewood for the Liaogan ritual. Once the firewood is gathered, a small stack is arranged in an open space outside the house, with the paper dolls (Figure 2) placed on top. At this point, the men have completed their tasks, and all that remains is to await the arrival of nightfall.

As night falls, the exhilarating Liaogan ritual is finally set to begin. Once all family members are assembled, the male head of the household ignites the stack of grass. The roaring flames instantly consumed the paper dolls laid out on the straw stack. Simultaneously, people set off all the fireworks and firecrackers leftover from the Spring Festival. Couplets and door paintings displayed during the New Year are also taken down and burned on the Artemisia stack during the Liaogan ritual, symbolizing the completion of all New Year festivities for the year.

People gathered around the bonfire, joyfully singing and dancing. Even octogenarian ladies would descend from their beds and shakily circumnavigate the bonfire, making several rounds. Infants, who couldn't yet walk, were held in the arms of adults, hopping around on the edge of the bonfire. After the fire had slightly subsided, the bonfire jumping ritual would commence (Figure 3). Adults and children alike eagerly took turns leaping over the flames to burn away their afflictions and pray for a peaceful and healthy new year. Subsequently, women from each household would bring out all the kitchenware, while

men would brandish agricultural tools over the fire, seeking good fortune.

The fire gradually dwindled, leaving only ashes, marking the culmination of the final stage of the Liaogan ritual. Experienced elders used wooden sticks to strike the bonfire, causing sparks to fly, or they used shovels to scatter the ashes. Based on the shapes of the sparks, whether they rose or fell, they predicted the types of crops that would have a bountiful harvest in the coming year. This ritual was known as scattering the five-grain flowers (Figure 4).

At this point, the entire Liaogan ritual was concluded. The fire, which ignited in the evening of the 23rd day of the first lunar month, was believed to burn away the misfortunes of the previous year. It was thought that all illnesses, disasters, and pains, among other undesirable things, were carried away by the flames. Jumping over the bonfire signified that in the new year, people would be free from sickness and calamities, enjoying good health and safety.



Figure 1. Paper dolls



Figure 2. Before the Liaogan ritual, a child placed paper dolls on the firewood pile.



Figure 3. Jumping over the fire



Figure 4. scattering the five-grain flowers

4. An Exploration of the Origins of Liaogan Practices

Liaogan is not a well-known folk religious practice, and as such, it has not received significant scholarly attention for an extended period. Nevertheless, this practice is not only prevalent in the Northwest region of China but also has historical records dating back over four centuries. In many local chronicles of Northwest China, there are clear records of the practice of Liaogan from the Qing Dynasty to modern times. For instance, in the 47th year of the Qianlong reign of the Qing Dynasty, the Pucheng County Chronicle documented: "On the 23rd day, women would visit the city. In advance, homestay women would paste papers on the doors to ward off the epidemic [8]." In 1965, the Longde County Chronicle recorded: "On the evening of the 23rd day, people would burn firewood and add onion skins and paper fireworks to it in front of their doors. Both men and women would dance around the fire, and this event was known as Liaogan. Afterwards, they would scatter the ashes, calling it Five-Grain Flowers, to symbolize a bountiful harvest [9]."

During our research in Qingyang, the field reporter explained that the exact origin of Liaogan cannot be definitively traced, "The origin of Liaogan is quite complex, and there is no concrete evidence regarding its historical timeline. However, it is a tradition passed down through generations. It may have originated as a form of folk religion in the Northwest, representing the reverence of fire in folk religions, as fire was believed to have the power to eliminate negative influences." It is evident from the above literature that Liaogan existed in ancient China during the waning years of the Qing Dynasty, but it is not sufficient to reveal the true historical origins and formation of the Liaogan. Scholars have also been unable to pinpoint the specific period when Liaogan originated. Nonetheless, we contend that the Liaogan is, in fact, a historical remnant of the ancient worship of fire gods. This is because fire god worship is widespread in human societies [10], and historical cultural traditions regarding the importance of fire or fire god worship can be found among various ethnic groups in the Northwest of China, including the Qiang and Han peoples [11].

The Qiang ethnic group, believed to share common origins with the Han (a widely accepted academic notion known as the Qiang-Han common ancestry theory), has

preserved a deep-rooted tradition of fire god worship to this day [12]. During the pre-Qin period, the Northern regions of the Loess Plateau in China were inhabited by numerous Qiang and Rong tribal groups. Among them, the most famous and influential was the Yiqu Rong State, located in the Northwest of the Qin state, which covered large portions of present-day Gansu Province in Qingyang and Pingliang cities, as well as most of the areas in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, including Guyuan and Wuzhong cities [13].

After the Qin and Han dynasties (BC 221- AD 220), the Qiang and Rong tribes in the Qinlong region gradually assimilated with the Han ethnic group. The Qiang people are known for their reverence for fire, which is manifested in various aspects of their daily lives. Most notably, their funeral customs primarily involve cremation.

In addition to cremation practices, the Qiang people employed the primitive method of slash-and-burn agriculture, and every Qiang household maintained an everlasting fire pit known as the eternal flame [14]. Throughout the extensive and complex history of ethnic interactions in China, including assimilation, mutual influence, intermarriage, and shared production and life between the Qiang and Han peoples, it is natural for Qiang fire worship customs to have influenced their Han counterparts, and vice versa. Therefore, Liaogan represents a shared reflection of the fire god worship customs of multiple ethnic groups, making it a historically substantiated fact.

The Han ethnic group developed distinctive cultural concepts as early as the Western Zhou period, significantly diminishing or weakening various ancient religious beliefs and worship rituals that had been passed down, such as the worship of sun gods and moon gods [15]. The worship of the fire gods likely gradually waned during this period. However, in modern Chinese life, legends and stories related to the worship of fire gods still persist. During our research, we have come across a widely circulated folk legend about fire walking in the Northwest region of China.

The story goes as follows: "It is said that the Jade Emperor, having learned of the moral decay and disrespectful behavior of humanity, decided to issue a decree to punish humanity by burning the world on the 23rd day of the first lunar month. The deity tasked with this mission was the Fire God. Upon receiving this duty, the Fire God chose to visit the mortal realm incognito to investigate the truth. Assuming a mortal guise, he came to the human world, where he witnessed behavior contrary to what he had heard from the Jade Emperor. Nonetheless, divine orders are not easily defied. The Fire God sympathized with humanity and secretly informed them of the Jade Emperor's plan to burn the world. He advised people to prepare in advance to avoid this impending danger. As a result, people contemplated and finally devised a solution: on the 23rd day of the first lunar month, they placed firewood piles in front of their homes, lit them on fire, and leaped over them repeatedly, as if the mortal realm had already been destroyed."

This legend reflects gratitude and reverence for the Fire God, leading to the formation of the folk religion of fire-jumping, as a means of commemorating him and

preventing disasters. This folk legend further confirms that the popular Liaogan customs among the Han ethnic group are indeed a historical remnant of the shared worship of fire gods among the Han and other ethnicities.

Therefore, the Liaogan in the Northwest can be traced back to ancient fire worship. Fire worship was an integral part of the natural worship practiced by our ancestors. Natural worship refers to the development of rich concepts and beliefs in natural deities, natural forces, and natural objects, all of which were personified and revered out of a lack of understanding and awe for natural phenomena. This belief system led to various social and cultural practices, including rituals and taboos, associated with different natural deities [16,17].

Furthermore, fire worship crystallized the reverence and admiration for fire into the concept of a fire god. This laid the foundation for a series of religions, rituals, sacrifices, and myths. Early humans worshipped and believed in fire in the form of a fire god, attributing supernatural and superhuman powers to the deity.

Liaogan, as a ritual centered around fire, is a form of reverence for the fire god. Fire worship, in essence, represents the communication and interaction between humans and supernatural forces. Participants in these rituals encoded messages and transmitted them to the fire god through the medium of fire. Fire played a vital role in these ceremonies, believed to ward off evil, protect against disasters, and ensure safety and abundant harvests.

5. The Interplay of Folk Culture and Societal Values in Liaogan Ritual

Liaogan practices do not possess the theoretical and ritualistic aspects associated with major world religions. Instead, they manifest as grassroots, small-scale, and informal folk belief practices. Nevertheless, they are widely prevalent in Northwest China, with historical continuity dating back to ancient times. They have become an essential component intertwined with human activities commencing each year, signifying their crucial symbolic and behavioral value in maintaining folk customs and local social relations.

5.1 The Cultural Purification Significance of Liaogan Ritual

At first glance, Liaogan appears to be a traditional folk practice aimed at expelling diseases using fire. However, when examined at a deeper level, the core cultural symbols in Liaogan activities are fire and Gan. Through the ritual act of jumping across fire, the eradication of Gan is symbolically achieved. Frazer proposed that purification in fire rituals involves burning or eliminating harmful elements—whether physical, material, or spiritual—that could cause disease and death, threatening all living creatures, livestock, and crops [18]. Therefore, fire is an essential prerequisite for the existence of Liaogan ritual, while the fundamental purpose of these practices lies in the elimination of Gan and the seeking of blessings and safety.

Furthermore, fire worship has been observed in various parts of the world. In the Western context, there were two

prevailing theories about fire. One, represented by Adalbert Kuhn, regarded fire as an object of worship linked to the sun, where fire served as a means of magic intended to protect humanity, all living beings, the Earth, and crops so they could bask in the sunlight and warmth of the sun. This was known as the Solar Theory. The other perspective, championed by Edward Westermarck, suggested that the significance of fire rituals was not constructive but preventive. Originally, fire represented pure fire, capable of purging all impurities, both material and spiritual, harmful to life. It was considered a powerful natural force with the ability to cleanse everything, known as the Purification Theory.

While fire rituals may vary across different regions, they share a strong similarity in their purpose: the purifying function of fire, which is a manifestation of the general cultural function of Liaogan practices.

5.2 The Psychological and Social Significance of Exorcism and Healing

From the context of Liaogan ritual, it can be observed that the tangible figurative representation of Gan, encapsulating its mystical essence, takes the form of paper-cut paper dolls designed for hanging and burning. These paper dolls contain elements of the Gan deity while also embodying aspects of the participants themselves, resulting in a fusion of both human and divine roles. On one hand, paper dolls embody the image of the disease-carrying Gan deity, while on the other hand, they symbolize the participants requiring healing and Gan removal. Consequently, paper dolls, despite being symbolic of divine entities, also carry the intrinsic imagery of the humanity, aligning with the mythical thought patterns of the correspondence between gods and humans.

From the perspective of the shamanistic attributes of Liaogan, paper dolls serve as a medium for engaging with shamanistic practices. During the act of burning paper dolls, practitioners hold a burning incense stick and select specific parts of the paper dolls based on their own recurring ailments. Burning these specific areas signifies the alleviation of the corresponding ailments in the coming year. Following shamanistic principles, a form of contact shamanism [18] is established between the acting subject and the object of the paper dolls. Using fire, which possesses purifying properties, to burn specific areas of the paper dolls is akin to purging bodily ailments with divine fire. This act of burning is a shamanistic purification of the malevolent Gan, and due to the structural relationship of correspondence between human and divine, burning the paper dolls signifies a transfer of crisis.

5.3 Expectations and Divination of Abundant Harvest: Social Aspirations

The Northwest is an area where agriculture and animal husbandry intersect, characterized by continuous interaction and integration between nomadic and farming communities. For millennia, generations of people have

been engaged in farming and agricultural activities, emphasizing the importance of agriculture and cultivating a culture deeply rooted in agrarian communities.

The influence of agrarian is evident in the practice of scattering the five-grain flowers, a ritualistic divination of the types of crops expected to have a bountiful harvest. As the field reporter said, "The Liaogan practice also signifies the commencement of agricultural activities for the new year, starting on the 23rd day of the first lunar month. When commencing farming activities, farmers take advantage of the still-frozen ground to spread livestock manure in the fields and fertilizing the soil. Liaogan showcases the way of life passed down for thousands of years, reflecting the rich cultural heritage of agriculture."

The fire-jumping ritual not only embodies the nature of primitive fire worship but also reflects the essential connection to the ancient ancestors' agricultural endeavors, is attuned to the seasonal rhythm of farming, and marks a cultural moment based on the agricultural cycle. In other words, the Spring Festival period represents a time of rest in agrarian societies, allowing Northwesterners to enjoy the fruits of their agricultural labor, express gratitude for nature's blessings, and offer tributes to the heavenly deities. The Liaogan ritual falls towards the end of the lunar year, aligning with the cyclical rhythm of agricultural activities, signifying the commencement of the farming season, and has endured through the ages.

Furthermore, Frazer [18] posited that magic was a futile attempt by primitive humans to control nature, rooted in two mistaken principles: the law of similarity and the law of contagion. The former holds that similar causes produce similar effects or that similar objects can generate identical outcomes. Consequently, it was believed that primitive individuals or shamans could achieve their desired results through imitation, leading to practices termed sympathetic magic or imitative magic. In this context, the act of scattering the five-grain flowers during the Liaogan ritual can be seen as an application of the law of similarity. By using similar representations, people sought to manifest similar outcomes. Their aspiration for a bountiful harvest and abundant grain production would thus find fulfillment through this act of sympathetic magic.

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