Constructing a Local Folk-belief Knowledge System: A Case Study on *Xiangtou* in Hebei Province, China^{*}

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In many areas of North China, villagers are more concerned about the specific practice like ritual, rather than ideology when dealing with the relevant belief problems. Therefore, practice is far more important in the analysis of villagers' belief problems. In everyday life, villagers produce an entire set of local knowledge based on their needs and experience to life, and form various social relationships based on the shared knowledge. Narration and practice are not only the strategies that villagers often use to construct their local knowledge but also the leading ways to produce and inherit it. So it is indispensable to pay attention to the production ways and the practice, which concerning about the local belief knowledge, thus it may be better to understand their inner logic of participating the relevant ritual activities when we analyze *xiangtou* (香头)¹ and *kanxiang* (看香)² activities widely existed in rural areas of North China.

Keywords: folk-belief knowledge, *Xiangtou*, *Kanxiang*, narration, activity

Introduction

In recent decades, the problem of folk belief³ in north China has drawn the attention from many scholars both in China and abroad. All these findings are beneficial for us to pull away the veils of folk belief in this area. Through further investigation in village society, we can easily find that in everyday life villagers consider the practice, such as ritual, far more conservative than ideology and certainly more identifiable (Paper, 1988, p.

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¹ *Xiangtou* are the practitioners who heal through the power of fox spirits or other deities (such as *Guanyin* 观音, *Pi-hsia yuan-chun* 碧霞元君), remain very much in demand. *Xiangtou* employ the power of supernatural in order to cure illnesses caused by forces, such as malevolent ghosts, that are out of the reach of modern medicine.

² *Kanxiang* is the process and practice of *xiangtou*'s diagnosis and treatment. Each *xiangtou* has his or her own method of divining whether an illness is *shi* or *xu*, or possibly a combination of both, and if it is *xu*, *xiangtou* would tell what sort of force is causing the problem. Generally speaking, three steps will be observed, take Ding Wenke from Guyi village as an example: firstly, he burns a candle (other *xiangtou* will burn three sticks of incense or a cigarette); then, he observes the candle flame very carefully and at the same time goes into a meditative state; after a few minutes, he will tell the patients the cause of the illness and the methods to heal it.

³ There are multiple keywords on folk belief in current academic community, for example, public belief, public religion, popular belief, popular religion, folk religion, folk belief and so on. Since the author have no intention to discuss these concepts in this paper, the author would like to choose folk belief. More about the difference of these words, please refer to the articles written by Peng Mu, such as "Religion" and *Zong-jiao: Analytic Categories and Domestic Concepts, the religious cultures in the world*, 2010, vol. 5.

116). Given this, an increasing number of scholars begin to focus on the practice of folk belief (DuBois, 2004; Paper, 1988; Wolf, 1974; YANG, 1991; Knapp, 1999; YUE, 2008; GUO, 2004). In *The sacred village*, Professor DuBois gives us a glimpse of the world of such practices and beliefs at local level (DuBois, 2004). And he concludes that *xiangtou*⁴ is the holder of the religious knowledge in local culture (DuBois, 2009). In North China, it is relatively common that the belief about *xiangtou* and the deities which *xiangtou* declares can heal people's *xu* sick, such as *huxian* (fox), *guanyin* (Guanyin Bodhisattva), *long wang* (The Dragon King) and so on. Chinese scholars' studies about *xiangtou* and *kanxiang* activities mainly concentrate on the following points: (1) the process in which how a villager becomes a holy man (YUE, 2008); (2) the deities, and how they are used as the basis to research psychics and Shamans in trance (Lewis, 1989); (3) spirits and ghosts, such as "*sidamen*" (four animal spirits: fox, weasel, hedgehog, snake) and so on (LIU, 2007; LI & DING, 2004).

Based on the further fieldwork, this article uses the concept of *local knowledge* (Geertz, 1973), and take the local folk-belief knowledge as the point to analyze the practice of folk-belief in recent village society in north China. The study showed, as the holder of the folk belief knowledge in local culture, *xiangtou* and their *kanxiang* activities carry a lot of symbolic sense. It may be beneficial to interpret the relations among *xiangtou*, deities and *patients*⁵, if we are clear about the ways and the process of the production of local folk belief knowledge. This paper analyzes how villagers produce a mutually agreed local belief knowledge through narration and activities in the process of *kanxiang* or daily life. The first part will introduce author's fieldwork point, Guyi village; the second part will analyze the folk-belief knowledge in narration; the third part will analyze the folk-belief in activities (especially in *kanxiang* activities); the last one is a brief conclusion.

The Fieldwork Point: Guyi Village

Guyi Village is located 30 kilometers in southwest of Wu'an city, Hebei province, China. And the village is in the border of Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi, and Henan areas. According to the village temple inscriptions records, villagers lived here since the Tang Dynasty. In the history of thousands of years, the village's name changed several times, and the present name was put into use after the founding of New China. Relies on relatively flat terrain, this village has more arable land, and is more convenient in irrigation, so it has been much affluent in agriculture in the past. Currently, the population in the villagers has been more than 2,000. There are various belief rituals in the village, and there are many temples prepared for multitudinous divinities⁶. What makes Guyi village famous is a collective ritual named *Catching the Yellow Ghost*⁷.

⁴ *Xiangtou* are the practitioners who heal through the power of fox spirits or other deities (such as *Guanyin* 观音, *Pi-hsia yuan-chun* 碧霞元君), remain very much in demand. *Xiangtou* employ the power of supernatural in order to cure illnesses caused by forces, such as malevolent ghosts, that are out of the reach of modern medicine.

⁵ Patients in this paper is people who fall ill with *xu* sickness (虚病). According to different demands, patients could be divided into the following five types: (1) Praying for peace and safety without concrete wishes; (2) Suffering incurable physical pains aroused by *sidamen* (四大门); (3) Being under mental pressure as life is not well-off; (4) Sometimes falling into mental disorder; and (5) Others coming to be diagnosed.

⁶ Some people told me, there are nearly 30 temples in Guyi village. The most important temples include *Guanyintang* (which prepared for *Guanyin* Buddha), *Yuhuang Miao* (which prepared for Jade Emperor), *Baimei Sanlang Miao* (which prepared for *baimeisanlang* who is the village guard divinity).

⁷ This ritual activity is to commemorate the village guard divinity *Baimeisanlang*, and there are nearly half of the villagers will be attend this ritual. Every year, this activity attracts about 30,000-50,000 people to watch. More about this ritual please refer to Du, 2010.

During the 2012 Spring Festival to Lantern Festival, there is a survey in this village about half a month, mainly focused on the grand community ritual—*Catching the Yellow Ghost*. The author heard one of the organizers in this activity who was a well-known *xiangtou*. With curiosity, the author found him and observed the process of *kanxiang*. Once again, the author came to watch dozens of *kanxiang* activities in April in the same year. At the beginning of the author's survey, the author was not popular and some *xiangtou* even drove me away when they engaged in *kanxiang*, but as they were slowly familiar with me, they did not care about the author's existence, and even began to tell some strategies of *kanxiang* or answer the author's questions. Previously, the author have ever made relevant surveys at Anguo (an area in the central of Hebei), Shijiazhuang, Handan (in the south of Hebei), Hengshui (in the southeast of Hebei), Cangzhou and so on. In the fieldwork, the author found villagers would express local folk-belief knowledge system by diverse manners to the outsiders of this knowledge system, even if sometimes it is difficult to express it in words. When expressing folk-belief knowledge, the most common ways villagers used are narration and activities, which outsiders will easily comprehend the meaning of the folk-belief knowledge.

Narration: Folk-belief Knowledge in Narrativition

The narrators include villagers (patients and some non-patients villagers), *xiangtou* and the other just like me. On different occasions, these narrators produce and diffuse whole local folk belief knowledge in different ways and strategies. How the belief knowledge is produced through their narration will be explained in the following section.

Villagers

In G village, the narration about *xiangtou* was mainly focused on their three identities: a simple country folk, an able *xiangtou*, and an organizer of village collective activity like "*catching the yellow ghost*".

A few years ago, *xiangtou* Ding's wife ran away from home due to her mental problems. About this, some villagers explained, "It is an ordeal from deities that his wife was missing". So being a *xiangtou* is not as easy as we imagine. These villagers consider such misfortune a normal process of gaining miraculous power as a *xiangtou*. It is just the incident that makes villagers more convinced that *xiangtou* is magic and unusual. Thus the authoritativeness of *xiangtou* is confirmed and strengthened.

During the investigation, the author found the investigator's identity affected villagers' narrating strategy to some extent. In the face of outsiders, they need to maintain and strengthen the authoritativeness of belief knowledge. Therefore, when talking about *xiangtou* they greatly exaggerated his miraculous and efficacious power. To be exact, they do not want their commonly agreed knowledge being challenged.

Besides the narration of *xiangtou* himself, the villagers also confirmed *xiangtou*'s divinity by telling efficacious stories that happened to them. Such narration was often given in the process of *kanxiang* activity. What's more, villagers might tell these stories to others, which would enhance the credibility of *xiangtou* and his miraculous power. This model of narration was the most common one during the author's survey. It was often started with the beginning of "It is said that..." and then a successful story of seeing the "doctor" (*xiangtou*). In order to enhance the authenticity of the story, the person who retold the story tended to change the identity of the patient from a stranger to an acquaintance, such as his relatives or some local officials.

Villagers may not be aware of their participation in the production of local folk-belief knowledge system when they narrate these stories. Perhaps, for different reasons, they emphasize *xiangtou*'s miraculous power and efficacious stories. Firstly, maybe on account of their real experiences and feelings in life, they consider these stories to be authentic. Next, perhaps it is just one of the narrating strategies they choose to express their commonly agreed local knowledge when facing the outsiders. Moreover, through narrating or retelling such stories, villagers can enhance their faith in *xiangtou* and his deities so as to get some kind of psychological comfort.

Xiangtou

When the villagers produce the religious knowledge on *xiangtou* by narrating, *xiangtou* can also get more involved in perfecting the construction and production of local folk-belief system by narrating by himself.

As an ordinary villager, Ding was more likely to know that it was because of mental disorder that his wife ran away from home. However, as a *xiangtou*, he realized that it would be a great risk if he acknowledged it. He knew it well that admitting the truth would undoubtedly reveal his lack of divine power and then lose trust from villagers. So he chose the discourse strategy of *the call of god* to reduce the harm of the risk.

Xiangtou's narration also includes the process of his mastery in deities and the achievement he has gained. In addition, in the process of *kanxiang* activity, *xiangtou* often tells about Buddhist stories and talks reasons to persuade people to be kind.

Others

Villagers and others will internalize the stories they narrate into a set of knowledge and store it unconsciously. And the one who had once learned such knowledge may come to *kanxiang* when they encounter the problem which can not be solved or explained through scientific methods. For instance, the author once suggested one of my friends go to Mr. Ding for help after the author's investigation when author heard that his child always cried for unknown reason. Even without thinking, the author told him that it was said to be quite helpful. This reveals that the author has already integrated unconsciously the new knowledge the author heard from the villagers into the author's previous cognition and experience, and participated in the continuous process of producing and spreading such knowledge by narration.

Activities: Folk-belief Knowledge in Activities

The attendees of *kanxiang* mainly include *xiangtou*, patient, deities, and other onlookers, with the first three as the core participants.

Xiangtou's Activities

When a patient comes to him for help, Mr. Ding first lighted a bunch of or three sticks of incense in the censer in front of the Buddha statue. Then he asked the patient some basic information, including his name, age, direction of his house, etc., and the problem to be solved. After he understood the patient's intention, Mr. Ding would take out a slip of yellow paper, which was about one or two inches long and one inch wide, and asked the patient to write down his own name, age, address and the items to be consulted. Then he had the note pressed on the table and let the comer sit on the chair next to the table. After that, Ding took out the three sticks of incense from the burner, lighted them and prayed in front of the *Guanyin*, and then put them in the burner again.

Next he lighted a white candle, whispered to the flame, and then read the yellow paper three times. With eyes closed, he immersed himself in meditation motionlessly, after about two or three minutes, he sighed deeply, shook his body opened his eyes suddenly. And then began his special treatment for the patients. Mr. Ding claimed that he just represented *Guanyin* to cure patients. According to him, he was obtaining *Guanyin's* wisdom when he closed his eyes. And the reflection of candle flame in his mind helped him diagnose the cause of *xu* sickness. Finally, he gave different prescriptions for different illnesses.

Actually, the process of *kanxiang* was not exactly the same in the villages the author investigated. In some areas, *xiangtou* directly communicated with the patient after burning the incense, without the procedure of séance or immersing into the sacred state. Some *xiangtou* might even exchange worldly ideas with the others present. Some of them may possess a *xiangpu* (a set of printed pictures with various shapes of the lighting incense), which was used to tell the cause of illness and relevant solution according to the shape of the lighting incense.

Patients' Activities

Throughout the ritual, the patients remain to be passive and their actions are regulated by their faith to *xiangtou* and the authority of the deities. In fact, there exists a set of relevant belief knowledge in the patients' mind previously, which may be learned from others' narration or through other ways. In such knowledge, *xiangtou* may be described as the one who masters the power to relieve the confusion about *xu* sickness. Therefore, after they obtained the instruction from *xiangtou*, the patients will behave strictly according to it such as kowtow.

Besides the specific actions in ritual, patients may further strengthen the divine authority of *xiangtou* in other ways, of which redeeming the vow pledged by the cured people is the most common one. In Ding's central room, there are more than 10 plaques hanging on the wall. They were all presented by patients, with honorifics written on them such as *pu sa zai shi* (reincarnation of Buddha), *shen en yong zhu* (long live the bless of deities). Patients may also give *xiangtou* some articles for daily use as presents like mobile phone and television. These material carriers and the actions of presenting, which symbolize the divinity of *xiangtou*, become a significant part of the local belief-knowledge system.

Deities and Their Supernatural Power

In the whole activities of *kanxiang*, the deities are the indispensable attendees. The entire local belief knowledge is also produced and constructed around the deities. Different *xiangtou* in different areas make different choices on deities. Ding chooses *Buhha Guanyin*. Many *xiangtou* in Cangzhou prefer fox spirits. While in other areas, some may select other deities. Anyway, they all choose the deities with which the local people are familiar. It indicates that *xiangtou* will consider the belief foundation of the deities before he makes choices. Actually, few *xiangtou* will select the deities unknown to the native. Therefore, each *kanxiang* activity is either the reinforcement of the belief knowledge the deities carried or the process of producing the new knowledge in terms of the advent of the divinity.

Others and Their Actions

The other villagers, the author, and the investigator, seem to exist there invisibly, for the reason that the author could not affect the whole process of the ritual activity virtually. But they may further make the improvement and extension of this belief knowledge in observation and whispers. It can be predicated that these

attendees would transform what they have seen into some knowledge and spread it out in their own ways. Undoubtedly, they have become the producers and spreaders of local belief knowledge unconsciously.

Conclusion

Xiangtou have played one of the most important roles in the whole village life. The author supposes that the reason why they exist in village society is that they have been viewed as the primary master and practitioner of the local belief knowledge. As Dubois (2004) says:

Whatever the characteristics of any particular individual, such healers continue to exist in this and other areas because the beliefs upon which their arts are based are commonly held and because they address a universal need. *Xiangtou* remain an integral part of folk culture and village society. (p. 84)

Kanxiang activity can be viewed as the most leading way of the villager's belief practice. In the whole ritual, *xiangtou* obtains the sacred identity from the deities, bringing him miraculous power which wins the deep faith of the patient. There exists a temporary steady relationship among *xiangtou*, deities and patients, which is based on the shared belief knowledge system. That is to say, they can reach a commonly understanding in terms of each action and sentence.

Patients hold the same trust to both *xiangtou* and doctors essentially and subordinate to their authority. However, the difference is that *xiangtou*'s authority derives from the patients' identification of local belief knowledge while the authority of doctors is closely related to people's acceptance of modern medical science.

Kanxiang activity is the most important component of villagers individual belief practice in Guyi village. In the whole ritual, *xiangtou* gets his sacred identity from divinities, and this identity will bring mystical force to him, which is believed by patients firmly. As a result, temporary stable relations are formed among the *xiangtou*, patients, and divinity in *kanxiang* activity, which based on the consensus folk-belief knowledge by *xiangtou* and patients. In the ritual, *xiangtou* and patients can share the meanings in every action and narration. In my opinion, the shared folk-belief knowledge makes the *kanxiang* activity meaningful, which also makes the villagers' needs to be expressed

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