

2006

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Willmott, Cory, "*White Snake, Black Snake* Folk Narrative Meets Master Narrative in Qing Dynasty Sichuanese Cross-stitch Medallions" (2006). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 353.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/353>

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White Snake, Black Snake
**Folk Narrative Meets Master Narrative
in Qing Dynasty Sichuanese Cross-stitch Medallions**

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The cross-stitch medallion in figure 1 was collected by my grandmother, Katherine Willmott, in the early 1920s when she was a missionary in Renshow, Sichuan Province, West China. Many years after I inherited it, I learned that it depicts a folk narrative called “White Snake; Black Snake” that was traditionally performed both on stage in the legitimate theaters and in Chinese shadow puppet dramas (Highbaugh n/d:6).



Figure 1. Collected by Katherine Willmott; currently in the author's collection. Photographed by Don Willmott.

The story may be summarized as follows: There were two female snakes, White Snake and Black Snake, who were inseparable friends. They both changed into beautiful young women. White Snake got married and bore a son who by and by passed his examinations and obtained a post as a government official. This was the dream and ambition of every Chinese wife and mother. Out of jealousy, Black Snake told White Snake's husband that his wife was a changling from a snake. She also explained how he could prove her words.

Accordingly, he beat his wife with a whip. She then changed back into a snake and crawled into a nearby pagoda. Upon his triumphant return as a government official, the son learned of his mother's fate and offered prayers of “heart-broken respect” to her at the altar before the pagoda. The pagoda in question actually exists “beside the West Lake, near Hangchow” (Highbaugh n/d:6-7).

The medallion depicts three scenes in the story: 1) the procession of the son's return, in which he is accompanied by two officials and wears the hat of his new office; and 2) the mother turning into a snake and entering the pagoda (these two scenes are occurring simultaneously at different locations); and 3) the conclusion of the story in which the son honors his mother with incense and candles.

There are at least two more examples of medallions with the same motif. Carl Schuster collected one in the same general region as my grandmother's in 1936 (Hensman 1988:6). It is now in the Field Museum of Natural History. A missionary colleague of my grandmother's, Irma Highbaugh, collected one in Renshow around the same time as my grandmother did hers. Highbaugh also recorded the story of "White Snake; Black Snake." I haven't yet located this example, but Highbaugh's (n/d:6) unpublished manuscript includes a poor quality photocopy.

The elements and their arrangement within the central circular design field are the same in all three medallions, except that the Schuster example is reversed right to left. The embellishments within the elements, however, and throughout the background and borders, are subject to diverse individual variations. Since this form of folk embroidery was always copied exactly (stitch by stitch) from an existing model (Baker and Lunt 1977:54), and all of the examples are from the same region, we may speculate that these variations reflect different family traditions, as opposed to regional ones or individual artistic license (Hensman 1988:3).

These medallions are among the motifs employed on a form of bed valances that are part of the folk traditions of the Han peoples of West China (Bennet Bronson in Baker and Lunt 1977: ix). These bed valances have five medallions set in a row, the whole measuring about 1 foot to 1 ½ feet wide (the width of the loom) by 5 to 6 feet long (the length of the bed) (Baker and Lunt 1977:7; Schuster 1937:26). Most typically, these are embroidered with indigo dyed home-spun cotton or silk thread on home-spun and woven cotton or linen fabric (Hensman 1988:2; Highbaugh n/d:1; Schuster 1937:26). The bed valances are one form among several that are collectively referred to as "blue and white cross-stitch," although occasionally other colors are incorporated or substituted.¹

Most examples of blue and white cross-stitch in museum collections come from the mid-nineteenth century, but the motifs date back to very ancient times, and some specifically from the Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE) (Baker and Lunt 1977:8; Hensman 1988:7; Schuster 1937:29). During the 1920s and 1930s, missionaries were concerned that they were no longer being produced. Older women were embarrassed to admit that they knew or liked the style (Schuster 1937:26,29) and few people were able to explain the significance of the motifs (Schuster 1936:25). Moreover, due in part to poverty, the majority of pieces encountered had been cut up and remade into children's clothing intended for hard wear (*ibid.*).

During a trip to Renshow in fall of 2005 I found one old woman who remembered sewing blue and white embroidery for the missionaries. I showed many people the photographs in Baker and Lunt (1977) but no-one explicitly recognized the traditional motifs or forms. Alternatively,

¹ I have examined numerous examples of both traditional and missionary-inspired blue and white cross-stitch embroideries in the private collections of Jack and Lou Mullett, David and Rosalie Spooner, and Don and Liz Willmott. I have now inherited many of the latter. Additionally, I've examined the Schuster Collection at the Field Museum of Natural History and some choice pieces from the Mullett Collection at the Textile Museum of Canada. This experience has given me a fair idea of the cross-section of work being collected and/or produced in the first half of the twentieth century.

they introduced me to multi-colored cross-stitch sewn on shoe inserts that women make to give to their “sweethearts.” A systematic ethnographic study of cross-stitch embroidery in the region, and a survey of Chinese museum collections, would provide a valuable case study of culture change in the processes of political upheaval and economic modernization, as well as the particular history of these textiles. Such a study, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

During the Qing Dynasty, the five-medallion bed valances were made by women for their own or their daughters’ dowries. They were also passed down from mothers to daughters and from grandmothers to granddaughters (Schuster 1936:24-25). Historically, when Chinese women were married, they moved from their natal home to that of their new husband and his family. This change of residence was the central episode in the ritual of marriage, taking the form of an elaborate procession of the bride with her dowry (Ebrey 1993:88-92; Freedman 1967:16-17). The blue and white embroidered bed valances were displayed in the wedding procession and were installed in the couple’s nuptial bedchamber upon the bride’s arrival at her husband’s home (Hensman 1988:3; Schuster 1937:26). The dowry, in general, and the valances in particular, represent one of very few ties that linked women with their natal families. In the case of very poor families, it was often the only component of the bride’s dowry (Fei 1939:68).

In order to interpret the narrative represented on the “White Snake; Black Snake” medallion, I turn to Edward Bruner (1986), one of the anthropological theorists who drew our attention to the ways in which individuals enact roles in real life that are modeled after those represented in plots that are pervasive within the art, literary, ritual and folk traditions of cultures. Such plots, termed “master narratives,” not only function as models for “real life” roles, but also reflect changes in “real life” roles when society is in a state of flux. Although Bruner was discussing the particular stories that pervade anthropologists’ relations with Native North American peoples, his central insight that “there is a dialectic between story and experience” is universally applicable to all sets of social relations within and among groups of people (*ibid.*:146).

In my work on the roles of clothing and textiles in historic relations between First Nations and British peoples, I showed how oral traditions comprised what I call “cultural scripts,” which are themes and variations within the more general plot of the master narratives (Silverstein 2000:23-24;187-251). These cultural scripts often mediate tensions in the social order. For example, Schneider (1989) demonstrated that the fairy tale “Rumpelstiltskin” mediated tensions in marriage and property relations in the changing socio-economic environment of early modern Europe. Similarly, in an entirely different context, Victor Turner (1969:44-93) showed that ritual dramas mediated kinship relations in West African Ndembu society. Likewise, I suggest that the folk narrative of “White Snake; Black Snake” is a “cultural script” derived from the master narrative of the traditional Chinese woman’s ideal life story. The folk narrative functioned to mediate the fact that most women enacted a less-than-ideal life-story.

In the traditional Chinese woman’s “cultural script,” the daughter will become the bride of an outstanding young man. She will then bear many sons who successfully rise in social status by passing the scholarly examinations and being awarded positions in the civil or military service. Motifs on the bed valances functioned as charms to realize the hopes of the bride and her family. Hence, common motifs include mythological creatures, fertility symbols, symbols of protection for mother, baby and child, narrative renditions of sons’ successes, the wedding procession itself, and a variety of related folk narratives (Baker and Lunt 1977:8-19; Hensman 1988:7-39; Highbaugh n/d *passim*).

In order to fully understand the tensions that the story of “White Snake; Black Snake” mediates, it is necessary to know a few facts about traditional Chinese kinship. First, Chinese kinship was patrilineal, meaning that kinship was reckoned only through the male line from father to son. At birth, females belonged to the kin group of their fathers. Upon marriage, their kin group membership changed to that of their husbands. An ideal traditional Chinese household consisted of parents, their married sons and their wives and children. The eldest male was the head of the household. At the time of marriage, women left their natal family residence and moved to that of their husbands (Ebrey 1993:7, 48-49). This practice is called “patrilocality.”

Inside the extended family household, women’s status was ranked in relation to their female affinal relations (i.e. their in-laws). The wife of the head of the household had highest rank based on the principle of respect for elder generations. In younger generations, the first or “official” wives of the head’s sons held the next highest rank, and then the wives of their brothers in descending birth order. The unmarried daughters of the heads of household were also ranked according to birth order, but were generally structurally lower than their sister-in-laws due to their younger ages, unmarried status, lack of children and the fact that their own social identity was ultimately dependent upon bearing children in their husbands’ families. Finally, concubines filled in the lowest ranks in relation to their husbands’ birth order. Bearing of sons, and subsequently, the prosperity of the sons, however, trumped the birth order of the husbands but could not raise the status of a concubine to that of wife. Failure to bear sons doomed women, wives or concubines, to the lowest ranks within the household (Ebrey 1993:227, 230-31; Fei 1939:47; Yang 1945:55-69,105-06).

The head of the household, the eldest male in the patriline, had sole control over the household’s communal property – most importantly their agricultural land holdings. When he passed on, or sometimes before, the property was divided among the sons and they became heads of their respective households (Freedman 1967:6; Fei 1939:65-69). Unlike the European system of primogeniture, in which only the oldest son inherited, Chinese family land holdings were continually diminishing as a result of this system of subdivision.

One way this inherent problem of the kinship system was addressed was by allowing land holdings to be included in women’s dowries, thereby enabling the patrilineal households to maintain or increase their land through strategically arranged marriages (Ebrey 1993:102; Freedman 1967:7).

It is important to realize at this point that, unlike contemporary Western society in which romantic attraction between individuals is assumed to be the basis of a “happy” marriage, in traditional Chinese society, marriage was essentially an economic alliance between families (Potter 1988:182-87; Yang 1945:107). In this situation, women’s conjugal happiness rested not only on establishing harmonious relations with their husbands, but also with all of his relations (Fei 1939:40,45-50).

The dowry solution to the inheritance problem, however, was not a perfect “fix” for the patrilineal descent group because women’s dowries were, by law, their own private property. In contrast, with the exception of male heads-of-households, men only had access to communal property over which they had no individual control. Therefore, wealthy wives were beneficial only insofar as they were willing to contribute their wealth to their new families (Ebrey 1993:107-109). Their legal property rights actually posed a threat to the stability of the patriline because it gave them and their husbands the potential to become insubordinate within the

household. Moreover, the source of the dowry coming from the wives' families strengthened affinal ties at the expense of the patrilineal descent group, thereby threatening the entire kinship system upon which the "filial duties" of ancestor worship were based (Ebrey 2003:88). Hence, the structure of the kinship system rendered wives necessary due to their reproductive functions, and desirable adjuncts to the patrilineal descent group due to the wealth associated with their dowries, but dangerous due to the independent legal status of their wealth.

A second inherent problem with this kinship system was that women within the household were pitted against each other in fierce competition because their status depended upon their ability to bear and raise successful sons. Likewise, the status of families vis-à-vis each other depended in large part upon the success of sons. Therefore women were also in competitive relationships across households. Hence, after marriage, female friendship became highly problematic.

One of the most interesting things about the cross-stitch medallion in question is that the textile's iconography is so closely related to its role as an object in a ritual. The move from natal to marital residence was one of two defining moments in the cultural script of women's ideal lives, the other being the birth of a son. For this reason the move was ritually elaborated in the wedding procession.



Figure 2. Bridal Sedan, Sichuan University, Chengdu, PRC. Photograph by Cory Willmott.

Figure 2 shows an example of a bridal sedan chair. These were typically completely enclosed. The bride could not see out, nor could anyone see in. Her isolation in the transition of identity was complete. During the procession her identity was purely symbolic: on a spiritual level, she stood for the Empress herself (who in turn represented the Queen of Heaven on Earth) (Vollmer 1980:33), and on the socio-economic level, she represented the wealth brought to the

marital union through her natal family. This radical transformation of identity was inherently traumatic for the bride, despite the symbolic elevation of her social position.

The wedding procession was also artistically interpreted on the dowry textiles. Blue and white cross-stitch panels often depicted the wedding procession with its attendants carrying banners and chests full of her dowry wealth, as well as the bride and the few members of her bridal party in sedan chairs (Baker and Lunt 1977:54; Hensman 1988:38,50-54; Highbaugh n/d:2-3 Schuster 1937:27; Tsang 2005:58-59). The status of the bride and her family were publicly displayed in as elaborate a procession as they could afford. Such depictions strongly emphasize the role of the bride as bearer of wealth. Moreover, the bridal bed valances, of which the “White Snake; Black Snake” medallion is an example, were themselves publicly displayed during the wedding procession. The inclusion of this most intimate of household linens in the bridal procession underscores the reproductive role of the bride in the alliance between the two families.

The traditional Chinese patrilineal social structure gave rise to a cultural script that provided the ideal model for women’s lives. Both the social structure and the narrative, however, contained inherent tensions that rendered Chinese women necessary but dangerous to their affinal relations and to each other. For this reason, folk narratives emerged that reflected these tensions and also attempted to mediate them by providing prescriptive advice.

The story of “White Snake; Black Snake” reflects the danger that dowry wealth posed to men in that both women in the story are not what they appear to be, but rather supernatural creatures whose most salient characteristic is the ability to shed their skins. It mediates this tension by offering men solutions: husbands may beat their wives into submission, while sons may redeem their mothers by ritually honoring their absence. Whereas wife beating has not been reported as typical, scholars have observed that the relationship between mothers and their sons was one of the closest within Chinese society. This is one of the reasons why the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship was stereotypically hostile (Fei 1939:48-49; Yang 1945:58-61). Moreover, the specific instance of a son mourning for his mother may have ancient roots in Han culture. Miranda Brown (2003:139) found that in ancient Eastern Han texts accounts of sons mourning for mothers outnumber those of sons mourning fathers almost three to one.

Yet the story’s emphasis on the mother/son relationship serves to emphasize the danger women posed to each other within the framework of the traditional Chinese social structure. Jealousy prompts Black Snake to ruin the happiness of her previously “inseparable friend,” White Snake. The story mediates this tension by posing a warning to women not to trust one another.

The whole story is grounded in “reality” by linking it to a particular pagoda that exists in the real world (Highbaugh n/d:7). This feature underscores the factuality of the story and thereby strengthens the link between master narrative, folk narrative (i.e. cultural script) and real life.

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