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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Stafford, Charles (2012) *Misfortune and what can be done about it: a Taiwanese case study*. [Social Analysis](#), 56 (2). pp. 90-102. ISSN 0155-977X

DOI: [10.3167/sa.2012.560207](https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2012.560207)

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Available in LSE Research Online: February 2014

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Misfortune and what can be done about it: a Taiwanese case study

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ABSTRACT

Drawing primarily on ethnographic material from Taiwan, this paper focuses on misfortune, and more especially on the question of whether people are felt to *deserve* what happens to them - be it bad or good. I examine the cases of several people who have suffered misfortune in life, exploring ways in which they might actively try to make good things happen – as a way of convincing others, and indeed themselves, that they are, after all, good. In considering these cases, I discuss three intersecting accounts of fate which are widely held by ordinary people in Taiwan and China: a cosmological one, a spirit-focused one, and a social one.

KEYWORDS

Agency, blame, fortune, misfortune, China, Taiwan.

In the rural Taiwanese and Chinese communities where I have carried out fieldwork over the years, many people put a great deal of effort into accumulating and redistributing fortune and auspiciousness through religious rituals and other social mechanisms. In my experience, however, they conduct these fortune-enhancing activities partly, and often primarily, in order to avoid *unfortunate* things happening to themselves and their loved ones – a good offense being the best form of defense, it seems. In this article I therefore want to focus on the question of misfortune, and more generally on issues of agency and responsibility in relation to good and bad outcomes in the life trajectories of individuals (see also Stafford 2010 and in press).

Can people be said to deserve what happens to them? In some African societies, as Sperber notes, the blame for misfortune is largely placed on external agents, such as witches, whereas in others the blame is placed squarely on the victims themselves – typically on the grounds that they have violated a taboo of some kind, thus inviting retribution (Sperber 1980). In the latter kind of society, to put it simply, people are mostly blamed for their own troubles. However they are also more likely, Sperber suggests, to be given *credit* when things go right. In other words, the flipside of the (immanent justice) view that “unfortunate things happen to bad people” is the (immanent justice) view that “fortunate things happen to good people”. A further extension of this way of understanding things may be that if a person can *make* good things happen, i.e. if he can *generate* good fortune, then it is more likely to be accepted that he is, after all, good. Here I want to focus on an empirical case study as a way of reflecting in more detail on these matters.

Near the start of a period of fieldwork in South Gate, Taiwan, in 2000-1, I met a man whose life had been marked by tragedy. Some years previously – not long after the birth of his fourth child – his wife had fallen ill and died. Local people told me she had contracted a “rare blood disease”, but I never heard any more about this and did not discuss it with him directly. All I knew was that when I arrived in South Gate this man and his mother, along with three of his four children, were living in two houses not far from the main temple square.

It soon became obvious that the man in question, Mr Zhou,¹ was something of a local character. He first approached me in front of the temple complex (where I lived) and insisted, in a very public way, that I would eat dinner with him that night. Once I arrived at his house he insisted that I would eat there *every* night and that I would not be allowed to pay for it. His plan, he said, was for me to teach his children English – but this never quite happened and I continued to eat at his house without charge. This turned out to be a mixed blessing because, as I soon learned, he was subject to strong mood swings. He was often energetic, almost comically so, shouting and joking with everyone around him. But he could also be more or less silent, even sullen. He sometimes ate away from home, but when he was there we were as likely as not to sit gloomily picking at our food, the quiet interrupted only by his monosyllabic replies to my questions.

The people I met in South Gate had varied opinions of Mr Zhou. Most everyone agreed he was a “good man”, and certainly no one ever said to me – or even hinted – that his wife’s death was in some way his fault. However his behavior was erratic, as I’ve said, and even his friends complained that he drank too much. They laughed when I mentioned his dinnertime moods, saying “If he’s not drinking he doesn’t talk and if he *is* drinking he doesn’t stop.”

South Gate being a small place, our paths often crossed in the afternoons and evenings as I walked around the village or sat with friends in the temple square. Typically, Mr Zhou would be riding past on his motorcycle and on a few occasions he stopped and shouted for me to join him – without explaining where we were going or what we were doing. In the spirit of fieldwork, I meekly accepted every invitation (from him or anybody else), but sometimes questioned my sanity in doing so. Watching me climb on the back of his motorcycle, people made comments (to his face) about the risk to my safety – e.g. drily asking if my life insurance payments were up to date. Then we would race off into the darkness of the Taiwanese countryside.

Now let me go back to the fact that Mr Zhou's life had been marked by tragedy. Presumably every community has people in it who have suffered more than their share of misfortune. While conducting fieldwork in northeast China I became friends with a man, Mr Zhang, whose mother and father both died while he was a child (Stafford 2007). Before that, during fieldwork in Angang, Taiwan, I came to know a woman, Mrs Su, whose husband drowned while on a fishing expedition. In such cases, it may be difficult to avoid taking how these people are now as a *reaction* to what they've been through in the past.

But how should one react? Mr Zhang was notably anxious, an insomniac who liked to talk about good and bad fortune, sometimes producing amateur "calculations of fate" (*suan ming*) for himself and others. Mrs Su, for her part, was a devotee of two spirit medium altars in Angang – and was, I sensed, extremely concerned about what the spiritual powers had in store for her and the rest of us. Meanwhile, as I've just been

saying, Mr Zhou exhibited mood swings and had, it seemed, a drinking problem. The latter was once explained to me as a consequence of his wife's death, but some friends told me that his drinking actually predated the tragedy. And of course it may well be that Mr Zhang and Mrs Su, for their part, would have been as they are (i.e. insomniac, very religious, etc) with or without experiencing misfortune. Moreover, while Mr Zhang and Mrs Su might be characterized as fearful in some respects – more specifically, apprehensive about a world filled with (real or imagined) risks – Mr Zhou, having experienced his wife's death, seemed at times to have a manic gusto for life, even a kind of fearlessness about it.

I do not want to suggest, then, that living through misfortune, as such, generates a predictable reaction or creates a given personality type. Elsewhere, drawing on attachment theory, I've argued that separation experiences, including those occasioned by death, may provoke important forms of learning. More specifically, temporary or permanent "abandonment" by others (however this happens, and however it is construed) may cause us to *recognise* aspects of relationships that might otherwise be taken for granted (Stafford 2000). One obvious point, however, is that losing one's parents during childhood (as happened to Mr Zhang) is not the same as losing one's wife to illness (as happened to Mr Zhou), nor is this the same as losing one's husband in a fishing accident (as happened to Mrs Su). In any case, since I was not conducting fieldwork at the time of their respective tragedies, there is a serious limit to what I can say about the direct impact of these events on Mr Zhou, Mrs Su or Mr Zhang. And yet I want to hold onto the idea that they might *know* something - not least about the fatefulness of life and the fragility of human relationships - that they wouldn't have grasped in exactly the same way had they not encountered personal tragedy. This is

the point Rosaldo (1993) makes, of course, in his famous discussion of “positionality” and the experience of losing loved ones in tragic circumstances.

Before taking this line of thought any further, I want to stop and briefly outline three ideal type accounts of (good or bad) fate, each of which is commonly encountered in different contexts in Taiwan and China, and each of which is – to some extent – relevant to the case of Mr Zhou:

- 1) What happens to us is determined in the mechanisms of the universe: it is a cosmological problem.
- 2) What happens to us is determined, or at least heavily shaped, by the interventions of gods, ancestors or other spirits.
- 3) What happens to us is something we create for ourselves, most importantly through interactions with other people.

These three accounts of fate – I will call them “cosmological”, “spirit-focused” and “social” – entail different conceptions of where the determinants of fortune are located, and of what can be *done* about the good and/or bad fortune we experience. In all three, it should be stressed, the question of personal responsibility remains open and debatable, i.e. in all three (and not only in the “social” one) there is considerable scope for people to be blamed or given credit for the outcomes they encounter in their own lives. And yet there are radical differences. In the cosmological account, dealing with fate may be treated as a kind of scientific, perhaps logico-mathematical, problem: “How can we understand and, where possible, manipulate the forces of the cosmos/universe in order to affect what happens to us?” In the spirit-focused account,

it may be treated as a problem of divination and/or piety: “How can we ascertain the intentions of gods, ancestors and ghosts and meanwhile show them that we *deserve* good fortune?”ⁱⁱ In the social account, fate may be treated as a problem of personal agency and human inter-subjectivity: “How can we shape our own destinies, and more specifically how can we cooperate with and – where necessary – manipulate the people around us in order to achieve what we want?”

Again, these are ideal types, presented here in simplified form. In real life, moreover, the three accounts get blurred together, and much could be said about this.ⁱⁱⁱ What interests me, however, is not so much this mixing of different accounts of fate but rather a more pragmatic question. If someone feels that his life has gone dramatically wrong, or might go wrong, what is to be done about it? Should he treat it *primarily* as a cosmological problem, a spirit-oriented problem, or a social problem? Is it a combination of all three, or perhaps something else altogether? Going forward, how should he live his life? And – to return to the question of blame-attribution – is it his own fault if something terrible has happened?

At this point I must complicate the rather one-dimensional picture I’ve presented so far of Mr Zhou. By highlighting his erratic behaviour I may have given the impression that he was anti-social in some respects. Against this, two things I found striking about him should be considered. First, Mr Zhou was, by any standards, a very good *citizen*. He was an enthusiastic (and, as I saw it, unlikely) supporter of the parent-teacher association for his local school, periodically serving as a member of their organizing committees. He was a member of the local voluntary fire brigade, something which took up quite a bit of his spare time. For a while he also served as a

“team head” for the local fishermen’s association. On the walls of his house there were a number of framed certificates commending him for these activities, and for his donations to communal institutions of various kinds.

Second, in spite of Mr Zhou’s sometimes rowdy public behavior, he could actually be a stickler when it came to etiquette. On several occasions when an issue of *my* behavior arose, he made it clear that he had strong views about such things. One evening we attended a banquet together and I wanted to leave early. But he told me (discreetly but firmly) that I couldn’t possibly leave before the guests of honor. And when two of my students visited South Bridge, he treated them with striking, almost formulaic, politeness. Many of the people I’ve met in rural Taiwan and China have been keen on social proprieties, but I sensed that Mr Zhou was especially interested in such things - actually very strait-laced about them - and that this somehow clashed with other aspects of his personality.

In addition to being civic-minded and scrupulously polite, Mr Zhou was moderately successful as a businessman, organizing the labour required to prepare raw seafood for sale on the market. He was famously hardworking. Like most people in the Taiwanese countryside, he also invested a good deal of time and money in keeping up good relations with those on whom his business activities relied. This involved helping others when they needed help, and participating in cycles of banquets and reciprocal visits with them to show that friendly connections remained strong.

In highlighting Mr Zhou’s civic and commercial engagements – which centered on the community of South Bridge, where he lived – I should also draw attention to an important fact about him: that he was the offspring of a uxori-local marriage. That is, after marriage his father had settled with Mr Zhou’s *mother’s* family in South Bridge,

rather than his mother moving to live with his *father's* family in another part of Taiwan. While this residence pattern is not especially unusual, men who live uxorilocally – and to some extent their male descendants after them – are, in many cases, viewed as semi-outsiders who must work especially hard if they are to “connect” themselves to the communities in which they live. Moreover, while Mr Zhou's elder brother had been given the surname of his mother's father – thus bearing a “local” name – Mr Zhou, as a younger son, was given his father's “outsider” surname, thus increasing his need to *create* local connections for himself rather than simply taking them for granted.

This takes us back to the three ideal type accounts of fate – the “cosmological”, the “spirit-oriented” and the “social”. The point I was getting at in the last section, to put it simply, is that Mr Zhou could hardly be portrayed as a passive observer of his own destiny. He was making a life for himself – creating his fortunes – through his own activity: fulfilling the duties of an upstanding citizen, including acting in accordance with the standard proprieties; working hard to support his family and succeed as a businessman; being a good (if semi-outsider) kinsman and neighbor. This much was obvious, and from it one could infer that at least implicitly, and probably explicitly, he subscribed to what I have called the “social” account of fate: the one in which what happens to us is created through our own actions, and especially through our interactions with others.

By contrast, during the time I spent in Mr Zhou's company, he never explicitly talked to me (or to the others around us) about “cosmological” accounts of fate. Of course, this does not mean that such accounts were irrelevant to him. It is enough a part of

Taiwanese popular culture and everyday life to talk, for instance, about *fengshui* – and specifically about the positioning of houses and graves with respect to cosmological principles – that it would be remarkable if he were not influenced, to some extent, by such ideas. People in South Bridge also routinely engage in fortune-telling activities of various kinds (such as *suan bihua*, “calculating the brush strokes” in personal names), and all of these relate back, mostly very explicitly, to cosmology-focused accounts of human destiny. All I am saying is that I never saw or heard of Mr Zhou participating in these activities and, again, he never discussed them directly with me.

This differentiates him from the man from northeast China I’ve mentioned above, Mr Zhang. As I have explained in another publication, Mr Zhang *did* openly seek to “calculate fate” (*suan ming*) for himself and others, using the lunar calendar and basing his reckonings on cosmological principles (Stafford 2007). But if Mr Zhang was, at least superficially, more interested in “cosmology” than Mr Zhou, it can also certainly be said that Mr Zhou was more interested than Mr Zhang in the “spirit-oriented” account of fate. This is so partly for an obvious reason: that religion pervades life in South Bridge, Taiwan, in a way that it does not in the northern Chinese village of Dragonhead, where Mr Zhang lives. Public religious events are very common in South Bridge and the surrounding countryside, and during my stay Mr Zhou was an active participant in them. Near the end of my fieldwork, for instance, he was heavily involved in a large-scale, multi-day religious ritual (the “sending off” of a local god on a spiritual voyage taken by ship), participating in at least three distinct ways.^{iv}

In considering Mr Zhou’s involvement in activities of these kinds, however, it is important to stress that Chinese/Taiwanese popular religion can be simultaneously “private” and “social/collective” in orientation. That is, one can participate in order to

nurture *personal* connections with gods, sometimes in the hope of changing (through divine intervention) the fortunes of oneself or one's family in positive ways. But one can also participate in order to be a good citizen and in order to advance collective interests. As has often been noted, Chinese popular religion is strikingly "social" (even Durkheimian) in orientation (Stafford 2008), e.g. as seen in the notion that the strength of the gods is a direct manifestation of the strength and resolve of the communities that (collectively) worship them. Indeed, this is the main reason that the "social" and the "spirit-oriented" accounts of fate have a tendency, in the real world, to merge with each other: because divine power *is*, and is seen to be, intrinsically social.

But let us look again at the particularities of Mr Zhou's situation. As noted, at the time of my fieldwork he was living with his family in two houses near the temple square. One of these was the "old family house", and when I first went there I could see that it was a place where religion was taken seriously.^v Based on my previous experience of Taiwanese religion, my first guess was that Mr Zhou or someone in his family might be a spirit medium. After a while, I asked if this was the case and was told that, in fact, the altar was "busy" because it was the top (i.e. oldest) shrine for his family's ancestors – and periodic rites, involving an extended network of kin, were held there. After his father's death, Mr Zhou continued to organize this worship in spite of the expense and bother it entailed for him personally. It took me a while to register that what Mr Zhou was organizing was *not* primarily worship for his patrilineal ancestors because his father – as I've already explained – married uxorilocally. He was instead fulfilling the social obligation sometimes entailed in that form of marriage: to remember and worship the ancestors of the family you have

married into. The religious and, one might say, “spirit-oriented” actions that follow from this are, again, intrinsically social. That is, they are as much about the making and re-making of a connection to other humans that survives across generations, as they are about seeking the assistance and protection of ancestors in dealing with life.

Now it is hardly surprising to observe that “religion is social” or to point out that people, in general, care about sustaining relations with those around them as part of a general life strategy. As I’ve explained elsewhere, Mr Zhang (in addition to his special interest in cosmology and fortune-telling) was also keen on sustaining attachments to others, e.g. through participation in the rituals of “separation and reunion” which structure social life in the north China countryside. One possible reason for this desire to make connections through social activities is that Mr Zhang (like Mr Zhou’s father) had married uxorilocally, and could therefore not take his position in the local community for granted (Stafford 2007). Meanwhile, Mrs Su (the woman whose husband died in a fishing accident) was, in addition to her religious activities, a good neighbor and friend to other villagers, so one could hardly say she was *purely* committed to the spirit-oriented account of fortune: she knew that social ties also matter a great deal.

But if I had to sum things up, I would say that Mr Zhang, for his part, was semi fatalistic about life, and seriously committed to the “cosmological” explanation of why what happens happens. Mrs Su, for her part, was devoutly religious, and her religious activities were, so far as I could tell, built around a genuine belief in the gods and their powers – rather than being a manifestation of a presumed commitment to generating social connections. When it comes to accounts of fate, she clearly falls, at least in my view, on the “spirit-oriented” side. Mr Zhou, as I’ve explained, was not obviously concerned with “cosmological” accounts of fate (unlike other people I’ve

met in rural Taiwan and China). By contrast, he was very actively engaged in creating fortune for himself on the “social” front: through good citizenship, politeness, the making of business connections etc. He was moreover actively involved in local popular religion, including ancestor worship, in South Bridge. But this, as I’ve said, can focus as much on the production and manipulation of relatedness amongst the living, as on the production and manipulation of relatedness with the (divine/ancestral) dead. Mr Zhou, in short, seemed more interested in the “social” aspects of religion, whereas Mrs Su was more interested in the “spirit-oriented” side of it. In any case, it is very clear to me that Mr Zhou, far from seeing himself as a passive victim of a fate handed to him by the cosmos or by the gods and/or ancestors, believed he was capable of intervening decisively to make things happen in his own life – again, to make his own destiny.

The fact that Mr Zhou, one Taiwanese man, was not “fatalistic” is hardly an earth-shattering conclusion. Indeed, a consistent ethnographic finding over the years has been that Taiwanese and Chinese people – in spite of appearing to be very interested in, if not even obsessed by, questions of fate and fortune (cf. DeBernardi 2006) – are not in general very fatalistic. Drawing on a systematic study of north Chinese peasant sayings, Arkush concludes that most of these sayings express “just the opposite of fatalistic resignation”. Interestingly, he points out that “The most striking thing about Chinese peasant proverbs is the sheer quantity and detail of lore about farming techniques” – the implication being that with a combination of practical knowledge and hard work a person can overcome just about any odds (Arkush 1984:469). Harrell, for his part, links Chinese ideas about fate (including those discussed by Arkush) specifically to a widely held work/entrepreneurial ethic in which, again,

fatalism is strikingly absent for most people, most of the time (Harrell 1987; cf. the commentary by Sangren, this volume). Similarly, Ellen Oxfeld suggests that while the Hakka Chinese tanners she studied had very interesting ideas about “luck” (some of them elaborated via gambling), they nevertheless believed that fortune is made to a great extent by hard work and entrepreneurial skill, and especially through the skilful manipulation of human relationships (Oxfeld 1993, especially pages 93-120).

An early contribution to this ongoing discussion of Chinese non-fatalism came from Wolfram Eberhard. In one study (1963) he examined the (seemingly near universal) belief in China that the likely fate of marriage partnerships is determined, to a great extent, by the horoscopes of the prospective husbands and wives – which means that unlucky matchups can and should be avoided through careful fortune telling. What he found, however, was that “the combination of astrological signs of marriage partners” played no statistically significant role in determining who married whom in his very large sample of actual marriages in Taiwan. His more general conclusion was that “There seem to have been in [traditional] China few people who believed fully and blindly in fate, but fatalism in its “as if” form [i.e. in which people sometimes talk and act “as if” ideas about pre-determination might, after all, be true] certainly had a function in the social life of the common man” (1966:159-60).

Similar findings are reported in the literature from South Asia, where one might perhaps expect to find stronger versions of fatalism – e.g. linked to ideas of karma (which are of course also found in China). In one study, Sharma concludes that “... in times of stress and trouble, a [Hindu] villager is more likely to act on the assumption that his suffering is *not* inevitable and that it can be dealt with by applying whichever of the other [i.e. non-karmic] kinds of explanations seems appropriate, or even more than one theory simultaneously” (Sharma 1973:358, emphasis added; cf. Kolenda

1964). Meanwhile, coming at this from another angle, Guenzi (this volume) reports that her informants in Banaras – especially middle and upper class people – go to astrologers not so much to deal with questions of karmic determinisms and misfortune as to deal with *fortune*, i.e. to try to improve their luck, which again suggests that they are not very fatalistic.

An important point that emerges from Guenzi's account is the historical specificity of fate-related practices, and more generally of the extent to which any group of people could be said, at a given moment in time, to hold a particular view of why what happens happens. With this in mind, it is worth noting that a Taiwanese song – hugely popular when I first went to Taiwan in the 1980s, especially among rural and working class people, and still popular today – has it that success in life is determined “30% by heaven (*tian*), 70% by effort (*da pin*)”. I suspect that many, if not most, of the Taiwanese people I've met over the years would agree that this 30:70 ratio sounds about right – partly because of the ongoing influence of the song. Meanwhile, the anthropologist Liu Xin suggests that his informants in western mainland China, where he lived during the 1990s, tended to ascribe good fortune neither to “fate” nor to hard work and effort, as such, but rather to having (or making) good social connections (Liu 2000, especially pp. 157-179). This echoes, in some respects, the research of Mayfair Yang on the *guanxi* (“social connections”) craze that has swept post-Mao, reform-era China (Yang 1994, see also Yan 1996) - in which the elaboration of social connections (e.g. with potentially helpful local officials, but in fact with almost anybody) has become *the* dominant strategy in China for dealing with life's eventualities. The frenetic activity that goes along with this is surely clear evidence against any simple kind of fatalistic resignation about one's place and/or prospects in life.

So where does this leave us? Chinese ways of construing fate/fortune have changed over time, and one would expect attitudes to such things to vary considerably by class, age, gender and other variables. Nevertheless, a good deal of ethnographic evidence suggests that Chinese people are not generally fatalistic in any simple sense. They actively seek, in the terms of this collection, to gather and propagate fortune – via religious and social rituals, and through sheer effort and hard work. But what about those amongst them who have suffered *misfortune*? It seems right, as I have said, that such people should have a heightened awareness of the fatefulness, the radical contingency, of life. This knowledge is something that arguably comes to all of us – with age (cf. Gell 1992:217-220) – and yet some of us surely encounter it in starker form, and earlier. What is the effect of this? Consider again the death of Mr Zhou's wife. In modern rural Taiwan a tragic event of this kind would typically be discussed, in my experience, with reference to both bio-medical and religious/cosmological explanations. It might be said to be "nobody's fault", in the sense that it was purely a playing out of medical realities, and/or it might be said to be the fault of some problem in the spirit world, e.g. the existence of a troubled ghost in the vicinity who took revenge on the world of the living in this particular way. But of course responsibility is a matter of judgment and opinion so that, for example, medical problems that are "nobody's fault" could equally be blamed on doctors who fail to give proper treatment and on relatives who fail to ensure that proper treatment is sought and given (or who fail to have enough money to pay for proper treatment). Similarly, eventualities such as illness and death may be blamed on troubled spirits, but they may also be blamed on mediums or other religious figures who fail to diagnose and treat problems with troubled spirit and/or on relatives of the victim who

fail to get adequate help and advice with regard to spiritual matters (or to properly respond to what specialists such as spirit mediums tell them to do). Moreover, attributions of blame may, of course, vary between people, and even one person – such as Mr Zhou – may change his mind over time about who, if anyone, was really at fault.

As I've said, I was not in South Bridge when Mr Zhou's wife died, and I do not know what explanations of what happened were given at the time. I would be surprised if he were blamed very openly and directly for any role he might have played in her death, but there are, nevertheless, certain problems with being even the most faultless victim of tragic circumstances. Certainly in the traditional Chinese view, any death is seen as unfortunate, and funerals and more generally the business of dealing with the dead – an obligation that falls on survivors – is felt to generate risks (and anxieties about risk) for all those who are directly and indirectly involved, including one's neighbors in a small community. Close survivors are inevitably polluted with inauspiciousness, no matter how faultless they technically are, and this attribution of pollutedness can be construed as a form of blame.

As I've discussed elsewhere (Stafford 2010), this blame complex is captured well in "The New Year's Sacrifice", a famous short story by the reformist/radical author Lu Xun.^{vi} The story is framed around the case of a woman known as "Xiang Lin's wife", who worked as a domestic helper in the countryside and whose first husband, second husband, and only son all died under tragic circumstances – for which she bore no responsibility whatever. Her employer, however, remarks that "While such people may be pitiful they exert a bad moral influence", and he eventually bans her (to her dismay) from any involvement in preparing his own family's ancestral sacrifices. In brief, she is unclean by association with the tragic deaths of her loved ones, and this

ultimately leads to her losing her job. When she herself then dies (in effect, from poverty) during the New Year festivities, her former employer points out that this remarkably bad timing is “a sure sign of bad character”.

Of course, the questions of responsibility and of attributing blame have been widely discussed in both philosophy and psychology, and I don't intend to review these debates here. However (with Lu Xun's story in mind), it is worth returning briefly to the immanent justice perspective I mentioned at the start of this article – i.e. the perspective in which we get what we deserve, be it good or bad. The people I've known in rural China and Taiwan cannot be said to hold any simple version of such a perspective. To *some* extent they may take on board the traditional blame complex I've just mentioned (in which association with misfortune and death is never entirely blameless). And indeed there is evidence that humans in general have a psychological tendency to prefer lucky to unlucky people, and more specifically (1) to make negative moral inferences about the unlucky; (2) to conclude that people who suffer misfortune must have deserved it, on some level.^{vii} But perhaps there is too much evidence around of fate being cruel and random for most people to want to very explicitly/openly blame the victims, especially when these victims are their own neighbours and friends.

So what of Mr Zhou? One potential “lesson” of tragedies, to put it simply, is how little control we ultimately have over events in our own lives. It is a cruel irony, therefore, that these are precisely the circumstances in which people might blame us – and in which we might even blame ourselves. How should one respond to these circumstances? The editors of this collection are interested in accounts of fortune, and perhaps especially in practices which are about accumulating fortune as a way of having prestige/power but also as a way of avoiding inauspiciousness and decline.

Through his – somewhat manic – social activities, through his attempts to be a properly connected and properly admired human being, Mr Zhou was surely rejecting the status of tragic victim, with all the inauspiciousness that can imply. I admired him, and grew to like him very much. He seemed, in some ways, a troubled man, and I can imagine that he suffered terribly as a result of his wife's death. But he nevertheless seemed determined to take control of his own fate and fortune, not through cosmological tinkering but through sheer effort directed primarily at other human beings.

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ⁱ In order to protect the privacy of my informants, all place and personal names have been changed. Details relating to the story of Mr Zhou have also been changed. My fieldwork in Taiwan was supported by an ESRC grant.

ⁱⁱ A recent, wonderfully detailed, account of practices of communicating with spirits in Chinese popular religion is found in DeBernardi (2006); see especially Chapter 1, “Mending luck”.

ⁱⁱⁱ To cite an obvious example, Chinese *cosmology* is intrinsic to the practice of commemorating *ancestral spirits* (famously so in relation to the positioning of graves and ancestral halls), which in turn directly shapes – and is shaped by – *social relations* within and between families. The three accounts are also, to be sure, mixed up with yet further ideas (not least modern, scientific ones) about why things happens.

^{iv} First, he and his family contributed money to the event and brought offerings when this was required. Second, somewhat more prosaically, Mr Zhou – being a good citizen – was present at the crucial boat-burning ritual (the act that “transports” the boat into the spiritual realm) in his capacity as a member of the voluntary fire brigade. Third, during various phases of the ritual, Mr Zhou acted as a sedan chair carrier. Briefly, a large number of statues of gods, from local temples and private altars, are placed in sedan chairs during this ritual and paraded through the streets and up to the seafront, where they help “send off” the god’s ship. These sedan chairs are meant to flail around violently as the spirits of the gods descend into their respective statues, often sending the chair-carriers flying. In terms of the overall ritual, chair carrying is a relative minor role, however it *does* indicate some level of devoutness because it entails a form of indirect “possession” by a divine spirit.

^v The domestic altar was crowded with objects (ancestral tablets, carved statues of gods, spirit medium implements such as swords, the remnants of offerings); an elaborate “auspicious” banner hung over the entrance to the altar room, and inside the room the names of contributors to special rituals were listed on red sheets of paper, pasted to the walls; these walls were nearly blackened from incense smoke.

^{vi} Lu Xun (1960[1927]); see also the interesting commentaries by Hutters (1984) and Jenner (1982).

^{vii} See Olson et al (2006, 2008), and Hafer & Bègue (2005).

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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