
Witchcraft and Witch-hunting in the Later Years of Emperor Wu's Reign: A Reappraisal*

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The *wugu zhi huo* 巫蠱之禍, or Witchcraft Incident, which took place during the latter reign of Emperor Wu's (Wudi 武帝, r. 141–87 BCE), has long been interpreted as a series of political intrigues, and the fallout from these intrigues has been directly linked to the change in Wudi's governing policies afterwards. Contrary to previous scholarship, this article reexamines this event by focusing on early Western Han witchcraft thinking and practice, and argues that, compared with the political conspiracy, which is mostly based on hard-to-corroborate evidence, witchcraft was not merely the background to this incident but actually triggered and shaped the development of this notorious event. Wudi's forbidding of witchcraft practice does not mean that he no longer believed in the power or efficacy of witchcraft. He did so for the sake of his own health and personal welfare. What made the Witchcraft Incident a special event that had led to the tragic end of so many people lies in the irony of Wudi's violent attempt to stop others from practicing the very witchcraft that he trusted immensely and employed throughout his life.

Keywords: Witchcraft Incident, witchcraft, Emperor Wu of Han, Crown Prince Li (128–91 BCE), Jiang Chong (d. 91 BCE)

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“Digging into the earth for evidence of witchcraft,” or *jue gu* 掘蠱, was the method used in the later years of Emperor Wu’s reign (r. 141–87 BCE) to find evidence of black magic, especially that practiced by some of the imperial family members and their cliques. The investigation eventually led to the gruesome historical incident known as *wugu zhi hu* 巫蠱之禍 (lit. “the calamity caused by witchcraft”) or the Witchcraft Incident.¹

Notwithstanding the sketchy and scattered depictions in the *Shiji* 史記 and the *Hanshu* 漢書, this event played a significant role in the later years of Wudi’s reign. Many scholars even consider it a turning point of the Middle Western Han (202 BCE–8 CE) court policy. It cost tens of thousands of lives, including that of the Empress, the Heir Apparent, two princesses, two Chancellors, and dozens of civil officials and military officers, among hundreds of thousands of others. Because of the involvement of the many figures of political significance, the event has long time been interpreted politically, and viewed as an explosion of the tensions and conflicts among different political groups involved in Middle Western Han politics. It is not commonly considered to be related to an old emperor’s superstition as the term “witchcraft” would suggest; rather, “witchcraft” has been seen as no more than a thin veneer intended to veil a supposed political scheme either staged by Emperor Wu or by one of the other players involved in this matter. One would wonder why such a large-scale political incident would have been cloaked under the name of witchcraft, specifically, as opposed to other excuses, if it were indeed a staged political scheme. Centering on this inquiry, this paper aims to investigate the Witchcraft Incident from a perspective less political and more religious. It is an investigation that will enable this event to be seen as what it was labeled at the time, that is, an incident caused by witchcraft. To be sure, the political and religious approaches to this event are not mutually exclusive, but so far overwhelming weight has been put on the search for a political scheme to explain the course of this event, thus neglecting the role that witchcraft played in the Han people’s life. From this point of view, a discussion of the Witchcraft Incident from the perspective of witchcraft is necessary. Taking this incident as an example, the study will carefully examine

1 *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), “Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan” 蒯伍江息夫傳, 45.2179. This event is also called the Witchcraft Scandal by some scholars. I prefer the rendering of this term as the Witchcraft Incident in this article to avoid the connotation of “disgracefulness” that the word “scandal” conveys. According to the records preserved in early texts, the practice of witchcraft in the later years of Emperor Wu’s reign caused a massive slaughter, but witchcraft itself had not been considered disgraceful during the Han.

how black magic constituted an important part of the Han people's religious thinking and, consequently, how it could have affected the Han court's policy-making. It helps balance our approach to and understanding of this historical incident from a perspective different from previous studies.

This article includes six sections. Since the records pertaining to the Witchcraft Incident are rather scattered, it is necessary to first put the relevant information together to reconstruct an analyzable narrative of this event. Then, on the basis of this reconstruction, an examination of previous scholarship mainly focusing on court struggles follows. The nature of this incident leads to an examination of the practice and impact of witchcraft in early China, especially during Emperor Wu's time, in the third and fourth sections of this paper. The materials examined in these two sections reveal unambiguously the significant role that witchcraft played both in and outside of the imperial court. Based on the importance of witchcraft in early Chinese people's daily life, a reexamination of the Witchcraft Incident from the perspective of people's mentality towards witchcraft in early China constitutes the fifth section. The last section includes some conclusive remarks aiming to extend the political analysis of the Witchcraft Incident to the impact of witchcraft thinking and practice during the Han. The witchcraft perspective is a dimension we cannot simply bypass in dealing with early Chinese historical, sociopolitical, and philosophical thinking.

1. A Reconstruction of the Witchcraft Incident

The practice of witchcraft was common during the Han, but was firmly prohibited in Han imperial palaces during Wudi's reign, as seen in the records regarding court ladies struggling for the favor of the Emperor. An example of this kind occurred in the fifth year of the Yuanguang 元光 era (i.e. 130 BCE) during Emperor Wu's reign. When it was revealed that Wudi's first wife (Empress Chen 陳) had attempted to harm his then favorite concubine Wei Zifu 衛子夫 (d. 90 BCE) through witchcraft, Empress Chen was deposed and more than three hundred personnel, including the witches involved, were executed.² While this may be remotely related to the historical event under discussion, the Witchcraft Incident usually refers specifically to a series of events started in the first year of the Zhenghe 征和 era (i.e. 92 BCE). A passage from the *Hanshu* offers a clear starting point for this event, as follows:

² Idem, "Waiqi zhuan" 外戚傳, 97A.3948.

In the eleventh month of the winter [in 92 BCE], cavalries camped in the environs of the capital city were dispatched to conduct a thorough search in Shanglin Park. The gates of Chang'an city were closed. The curfew was lifted only after the search went on for eleven consecutive days. The Witchcraft Incident arose.

冬十一月，發三輔騎士大搜上林，閉長安城門，索十一日乃解。巫蠱起。³

According to the Jin 晉 (266–420) commentator Chen Zan's 臣瓚 commentary, the imperial army searched both Shanglin Park 上林苑 and the capital city for “the wicked one(s)” (*jianren* 姦人).⁴ Nevertheless, it does not clarify who the individuals in question were. Although another *Hanshu* account states that “the witchcraft incident started from Zhu Anshi and was carried out by Jiang Chong” 巫蠱之禍起自朱安世，成於江充，⁵ we cannot simply assume that Zhu Anshi 朱安世 was “the wicked one” identified in the text that the imperial army was looking for. The arrest of Zhu Anshi and the “thorough search” of Shanglin imperial park may have been separate events originally and become connected only after Zhu's arrest, a point that will be further explored later in this article.

Let us first figure out who Zhu Anshi was in any case. It is said in the *Hanshu* that Zhu was a “great knight-errant in the capital city” (*jingshi daxia* 京師大俠) who had been able to build a powerful social network among different ranks of high officials and whose influence may even have penetrated the imperial court.⁶ Shielded by his powerful network, Zhu was able to avoid being subjugated to the law even after committing several wrongdoings. Eventually he was captured and became a prisoner because the Emperor wanted him apprehended. In the midst of the manhunt, whoever satisfied Emperor Wu's request to capture Zhu Anshi would certainly have been rewarded.

3 Idem, “Wudi ji” 武帝紀, 6.208.

4 Idem, 6.208n. The *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 says that Emperor Wu saw a man at the Jiangzhang Palace 建章宮 who, carrying a sword, entered Zhonglonghua Gate 中龍華門. The Emperor ordered the arrest of the intruder, who abandoned his sword and managed to escape. Nevertheless, this passage does not specify the source of this report nor the identity of the trespasser. See Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian*, comm. Hu Sanxing 胡三省, punc. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 et al., coll. Nie Chongqi 聶崇岐 et al., 2nd ed. (of the critical edition) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 22.735.

5 *Hanshu*, “Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan” 公孫劉田王楊蔡陳鄭傳, 66.2879.

6 Idem, 66.2878.

At that moment, Gongsun Jingsheng 公孫敬聲 (d. 91 BCE), son of the Counselor-in-Chief Gongsun He's 公孫賀 (pre-143–91 BCE), was found to have embezzled a large amount of money allocated to the Northern Army (*beijun* 北軍) and was incarcerated. Jingsheng, like his father, was also a high official at court, serving as Chamberlain for the Imperial Stud (*Taipu* 太僕) before being imprisoned, with his mother being the elder sister of Empress Wei (i.e. Wei Zifu). Gongsun He then made a deal with Emperor Wu, promising to capture Zhu Anshi in order to exchange for his son's release. It can be imagined that it was no easy task to find Zhu Anshi the great knight-errant. This probably led to the combing of the capital city for the "wicked one," a campaign which lasted eleven days, as we can see in the same *Hanshu* passage. It seemed at first glance a fortunate event that Zhu Anshi was finally captured as the result of the great efforts Gongsun He had made. It soon turned out to be the beginning of a disaster, however, not only for the Gongsun family, but also for many others, including two princesses, the Empress, and the Heir Apparent.

The turning point came when Zhu Anshi vowed to revenge himself on the Gongsun family, a threat that his social network may have enabled him to carry out. The *Hanshu* passage further reveals that after learning Gongsun He had exhausted his resources to capture him in order to save Jingsheng, Zhu laughed, saying that not only would Gongsun He not reach his immediate aim of saving his son's life, but he had also put the fortune of his whole family at risk:

Learning that Gongsun He planned to redeem his son by capturing Zhu Anshi, Zhu laughed, "The calamity that the Counselor-in-Chief has invited will reach his whole lineage. The bamboos on the southern mountains are far too few to be used to record my words [of accusation] nor are the trees in the slanting valleys enough to be made into fetters and shackles for those that I will accuse." Anshi then presented a letter to the Emperor from prison, accusing Jingsheng and Princess Yangshi of committing adultery, their dispatching of witches to offer sacrifices to the spirits and cast spells on the Emperor, and, moreover, of their burial of figurines underneath the imperial path leading to Ganquan Palace to cast evil spells upon the Emperor. Emperor Wu ordered a full investigation into this matter, had Gongsun He interrogated, and punished him severely for the crimes he committed. As a result, both the father and the son died in prison and the whole family was exterminated.

聞賀欲以贖子，笑曰：「丞相禍及宗矣。南山之竹不足受我辭，斜谷之木不足為我械。」安世遂從獄中上書，告敬聲與陽石公主私通，及使人巫祭祠詛上，且上甘泉當馳道埋偶人，祝詛有惡言。下有司案驗

賀，窮治所犯，遂父子死獄中，家族。⁷

A couple of points in this passage are worth noting. One of the points is related to the letter that Zhu managed to send to the Emperor from prison. Although it would not have been completely impossible for a prisoner to write a letter in prison, Zhu's case was very unusual. This particular prisoner not only wrote a letter, but also was able to get it delivered to the Emperor. We may compare this case with that of Liu Rong 劉榮 (d. 148 BCE), the deposed Heir Apparent of Emperor Jing 景 (r. 157–141 BCE) and later king of Linjiang 臨江. When Liu Rong was imprisoned and requested writing materials to write a confessional message to his father, the officials refused his request. Had the Empress Dowager not exerted her power by asking the Prince's teacher to sneakily pass writing materials to the imprisoned Prince, he would never have had the chance to express his regret to his father Emperor Jing.⁸ To be sure, Zhu Anshi was a "great knight-errant" of the time and had some powerful connections among officials at court, but his social status could not be compared with that of Liu Rong. How could he have received the writing instruments and ensured safe delivery of the letter? Evidently, without fairly powerful support, Zhu would not have managed to get the writing materials (supposing that he was not illiterate), let alone successfully deliver the letter to the Emperor. This prompts scholars to suggest that there was a more powerful figure manipulating the whole process behind the scenes, which could either have been a political enemy of the Gongsun family or someone who really wanted to know what the Gongsuns had done.

The other point is encapsulated in the following question: How could Zhu Anshi, one of Emperor Wu's most wanted criminals, make the Emperor believe in his story and incriminate the latter's own daughter? Furthermore, what made the Emperor execute his relatives and daughters without mercy? All of Zhu Anshi's accusations against Gongsun Jingsheng and Princess Yangshi 陽石, as listed in the above passage, could have been dismissed as gossip to denigrate the imperial relatives and family members. If someone had cast spells on the Emperor, this would no doubt have remained highly confidential, since the deadly consequence was obvious once being disclosed. So it remains a question how Zhu Anshi could have known these details in the first place. To solve this puzzle, one could resort to theorizing a political conspiracy that either Zhu Anshi obtained information about the wrongdoings of Jingsheng and

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Idem, "Kuli zhuan" 酷吏傳, 90.3648.

Princess Yangshi (if they indeed committed them) through his social network or he simply made up the accusations.

Nevertheless, the political conspiracy theory is not the only answer to the questions concerning the above two points. It is also possible that Emperor Wu himself wanted to hear from Zhu Anshi and was willing to believe all those accusations against his own daughter, the high officials with imperial ties through marriage, and the Empress's brother-in-law. This question cannot be fully answered without considering witchcraft, the key element of this incident. The role that witchcraft played in this event will be elaborated later, so here it suffices to say that witchcraft was likely to be the cause of this horrendous incident based on available information.

It is also necessary to mention the high social status of those who were directly impacted by Zhu Anshi's accusations. The above-mentioned Gongsun He, then the Counselor-in-Chief, was a steward of Wudi when he was still the Heir-Apparent. Gongsun He was promoted to be Chamberlain of the Imperial Stud soon after Wudi was enthroned. After getting married to Empress Wei's elder sister, Gongsun He was appointed to various important positions and eventually became Emperor Wu's Counselor-in-Chief.⁹ His son, Gongsun Jingsheng, succeeded to his father's previous position as Chamberlain for the Imperial Stud. If Zhu Anshi's accusations were true, Jingsheng was not only a corrupted official but an adulterer as well. He had an affair with his cousin, the daughter of Emperor Wu and Empress Wei, and also used witchcraft against the Emperor. As a result, in the imperial investigation ordered by the Emperor, not only was the Gongsun family exterminated, but a few other imperial family members, including Princesses Yangshi and Zhuyi 諸邑, both of whom were daughters of Emperor Wu and Empress Wei, as well as Wei Kang 衛伉 (d. 91 BCE), son of Empress Wei's brother Wei Qing 衛青 (d. 106 BCE), were also killed in this event.¹⁰ This was considered a prelude to a much more ferocious series of events labeled as "Witchcraft Incident."

In the summer of 91 BCE, the second year of the Zhenghe era, Emperor Wu visited the Ganquan 甘泉 Palace and fell ill there. The sixty-seven-year-old ruler believed that his illness was caused by witchcraft carried out by those who were close to him. This led to another phase of the Witchcraft Incident. As in the previous round, it was again a low-born figure who played a key role this time. The man was Jiang Chong 江充 (d. 91 BCE), who gained Emperor Wu's trust by reporting the misconduct of his very brother-in-law Liu Dan 劉

9 Idem, "Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan," 66.2877-78.

10 Idem, "Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan," 45.2178 and "Wu wuzi zhuan" 武五子傳, 63.2742.

丹, appointed successor of the king of Zhao 趙 (born Liu Pengzhu 劉彭祖, d. 92 BCE). In the second phase of the bloodshed associated with witchcraft, Jiang Chong successfully sowed seeds of discord between Emperor Wu and his Heir Apparent Liu Ju 劉據 (128–91 BCE, posthumous title Crown Prince Li 戾太子) by accusing the latter of calling down a curse upon the Emperor. According to the *Hanshu*, Jiang Chong accused the Heir Apparent in order to avenge himself on the latter. Earlier when some servants of the Heir Apparent had improperly driven on the imperial “highway,” Jiang Chong had confiscated the chariots and horses and reported the transgression to Emperor Wu.¹¹ It is assumed that Jiang, fearing that he would not be tolerated by the future emperor, deliberately destroyed the reputation of Liu Ju so as to prevent him from being enthroned.

It is said that, in carrying out his plot, Jiang Chong took advantage of the Emperor’s trust in a Hu 胡 (non-Han Chinese, nomadic) witch, ordered the interrogation of tens of thousands of people and put them to death, and successfully created an atmosphere prompting the aged Emperor to believe that witchcraft had been widely used by those close to him to harm his health.¹² Jiang Chong was then able to get the Emperor’s permission to search for evidence of practicing witchcraft in his palatial compound, and eventually extended the investigation into the residence of the Heir Apparent:

At that time the Emperor reached his old age and suspected that those who were close to him all practiced witchcraft and cast spells upon him. Whether having done it or not, no one would venture to dispute the unjust accusations. Now that Jiang Chong understood the Emperor’s intention, he then asserted that there were signs of *gu*-witchcraft being practiced in the palace. He first dealt with those palace ladies rarely favored by the Emperor, then gradually expanded the investigation to the Empress, and eventually reached the palace of the Heir Apparent to dig for evidence of practicing witchcraft. They found the figurines made of paulownia there. Fearing not being able to prove his innocence, the Heir Apparent detained Jiang Chong and oversaw the latter’s execution personally. The Heir Apparent scolded Chong, “You wretched slave of Zhao! Wasn’t it enough for you to bring chaos to your king and his son?”¹³ You even want

11 Idem, “Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan,” 45.2178.

12 Ibid.

13 As mentioned above, here the Heir Apparent refers to the fact that Jiang Chong, who once lived off the king of Zhao, reported the wrongdoings of the latter’s son to Emperor Wu.

to bring chaos to my father and me!” Because of this the Heir Apparent was ruined.

是時，上春秋高，疑左右皆為蠱祝詛。有與亡，莫敢訟其冤者。充既知上意，因言宮中有蠱氣，先治後宮希幸夫人，以次及皇后，遂掘蠱於太子宮，得桐木人。太子懼不能自明，收充，自臨斬之。罵曰：「趙虜！亂乃國王父子不足邪！乃復亂吾父子也！」太子繇是遂敗。¹⁴

Elsewhere the *Hanshu* provides more details about how the Heir Apparent was ruined in this incident.¹⁵ It seems that at that moment, neither the Empress nor the Heir Apparent had access to the senile Emperor to explain what was happening. When the Heir Apparent asked Shi De 石德, his tutor and advisor, for advice on how to handle the situation, the latter reminded him of the tragic end of the Qin 秦 (221–206 BCE) prince Fusu 扶蘇 (d. 210 BCE), who had followed a forged imperial order and committed suicide, and suggested that the Heir Apparent immediately take military action.¹⁶ The Heir Apparent then sent his retainers, claiming that they were executing a command from the Emperor, to arrest members of the investigation group, including Jiang Chong, Han Yue 韓說 (Marquis of Andao 案道, d. 91 BCE), Secretary to the Imperial Counsellor (*Yushi* 御史) Zhang Gan 章贛, eunuch Su Wen 蘇文 (d. 90 BCE), and the Hu witches.¹⁷ Jiang Chong was arrested and was put to death shortly thereafter; the Hu witches were burned to death in Shanglin Park; and Han Yue was killed while resisting arrest. Zhang Gan was hurt by a retainer of the Heir Apparent but managed to escape and report to the Emperor what had happened.

Anticipating an unavoidable fight with the Emperor, the Heir Apparent obtained Empress Wei's support and mobilized the palace guards, prisoners, and some of the residents living in the capital city for the coming battle. The Emperor's army was led by the new Chancellor of the Left Liu Quli 劉屈氂 (d. 90 BCE), who had taken Gongsun He's position after the latter was executed.¹⁸ Thinking that the Emperor might change his mind about fighting his son at the last minute, Liu did not rush to engage the Heir Apparent and his

14 *Hanshu*, “Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan,” 45.2179; a similar passage also appears in idem, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2742–43.

15 Idem, 63.2741–48.

16 Idem, 63.2743. In the “Wuxing zhi” 五行志 chapter of the *Hanshu*, it is mentioned that the Heir Apparent Liu Ju discussed his situation with his mother, Empress Wei, before he took action to arrest and kill the investigation group, see idem, 27A.1334.

17 Idem, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2743.

18 Ibid.

adherents. But the enraged Emperor now viewed the Heir Apparent as a rebel. He commanded the Chancellor of the Left to close the city gates and to either capture or kill everyone who had participated in this uprising. In the meantime, the Emperor wasted no time moving from Ganquan Palace to Jianzhang Palace 建章宮, assuming personal command of the army stationed in the environs of the capital city.¹⁹ After five days of bloodshed that cost tens of thousands of lives, the Emperor won the battle, but the Heir Apparent managed to escape from the capital city. What immediately followed was a wave of purges of the Crown Prince's allies as well as the promotion of those who had shown their allegiance to the Emperor in this incident, including those who killed the fugitive Heir Apparent in his rural hiding place a few months later.²⁰

The death of the Heir Apparent and the Empress, however, did not mark the end of the whole incident as traditionally defined. It continued in two directions thereafter. One direction centered on the vacancy in the imperial succession left by the death of the Heir Apparent. At this moment, Liu Bo 劉博, king of Changyi 昌邑 (r. 97–87 BCE) and a son of Emperor Wu and Consort Li 李夫人 (who had died earlier), became a possible candidate to be Emperor Wu's successor at least in the eyes of two prominent political figures of the time. One of them was Liu Bo's uncle Li Guangli 李廣利 (d. 88 BCE), famous for his military merits in conquering Da Yuan 大宛 and expanding Western Han influence further into the Central Asian regions; the other was the aforementioned Chancellor of the Left Liu Quli, member of the imperial family and Li Guangli's relative by marriage. Nevertheless, Li Guangli's and Liu Quli's families were both wiped out by the Emperor in 90 BCE, a year after the defeat of the former Heir Apparent. The details are recorded in Liu Quli's biographical account:

The next year [i.e., 90 BCE], Li Guangli, or General Ershi, was appointed to lead the army to attack the Xiongnu. The Chancellor hosted a banquet for Guangli during the departing sacrificial ceremony, and then walked him to Wei Bridge, bidding his farewell. Guangli said, "I hope that you, our ruler's marquis, will soon ask the Emperor to make the king of Changyi the [new] Heir Apparent. If he were made emperor, what else do you, the leader of our ruler's marquises, need to worry about?" Quli promised to do so. The king of Changyi was the son of Consort Li,

19 Idem, "Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan," 66.2880–81.

20 Idem, "Wu wuzi zhuan," 63.2744–47 and "Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan," 66.2881–82.

younger sister of General Ershi, and Ershi's daughter was the wife of Quli's son, therefore they both desired to make king of Changyi emperor. At the time the case regarding the Witchcraft Incident was being handled urgently. Guo Xiang, Director of Palace Servants, reported that because the Emperor often blamed the Chancellor, his wife sent witchcraft practitioners to present sacrifices on the altar, casting spells upon the Emperor with evil words. Guo also reported that the Chancellor prayed and presented sacrifices to the spirits together with General Ershi in an attempt to make the king of Changyi emperor. The official in charge of this case made a request to the imperial court to investigate it, and convicted several concerned individuals of high treason. An imperial edict was issued, ordering Quli to be put in a foodstuff cart to be pilloried before being severed at the waist at the Eastern Market and that his wife and children beheaded at Huayang Street. The wife and children of General Ershi were also incarcerated. Hearing the news, General Ershi surrendered to the Xiongnu. As a result, his whole lineage was extinct.

其明年，貳師將軍李廣利將兵出擊匈奴。丞相為祖道，送至渭橋，與廣利辭決。廣利曰：「願君侯早請昌邑王為太子。如立為帝，君侯長何憂乎？」屈釐許諾。昌邑王者，貳師將軍女弟李夫人子也。貳師女為屈釐子妻，故共欲立焉。是時治巫蠱獄急。內者令郭穰告丞相夫人，以丞相數有譴，使巫祠社祝詛主上，有惡言，及與貳師共禱祠，欲令昌邑王為帝。有司奏請案驗，罪至大逆不道。有詔載屈釐廚車以徇，要斬東市，妻子梟首華陽街。貳師將軍妻子亦收。貳師聞之，降匈奴，宗族遂滅。²¹

This passage can be read from many different perspectives. Some, as further discussed in the next section of this article, emphasize Guangli's and Quli's attempt to establish the king of Changyi as the new Heir Apparent as the cause of their and their families' tragic end, speculating that they were the victims of a court struggle against other political cliques. But reading between the lines of the above passage, we find that in this phase of the Witchcraft Incident, witchcraft is still key to understanding the string of events. It states clearly that this case developed in a witchcraft environment, and the reason for the Li and Liu families' convictions for treason lay in Quli's wife sending witches to "present sacrifices on the altar, casting spells upon the Emperor with evil words" on the one hand, and Quli and Guangli "praying and presenting sacrifices to the spirits" together and wishing their close relative be established

²¹ Idem, 66.2883.

as future emperor, on the other. The connection of the first action to witchcraft is obvious. The second action angered Emperor Wu for its indication of the Emperor's early death, and these spells were considered to have caused Emperor Wu's illness according to the witchcraft mindset of the time.

Unlike the first, the second direction focuses on the reconciliation between the Emperor and the late Heir Apparent. In fact, those who had sympathy with the late Heir Apparent started to seek opportunities to persuade the Emperor to make a compromise with the Heir Apparent immediately after the latter was forced into exile, although nobody in the court ventured to openly admonish the outraged Emperor. A certain man named Mao 茂,²² one of the Three Elders (*sanlao* 三老) in the Huguan Pass 壺關 area, however, managed to submit a memorial to the Emperor, in which Mao tactfully expressed his criticism of the Emperor's being taken advantage of by Jiang Chong and his being too harsh with the Heir Apparent. Mao's memorial strongly condemns Jiang Chong's evildoing, stressing that it was Jiang Chong's slander that blinded the aged Emperor's judgment on the Heir Apparent and forced "the son to usurp his father's weapon to save himself from trouble so as to avoid being killed" 子盜父兵以救難自免.²³ Emperor Wu's response to this memorial, according to the *Hanshu*, was positive. It says that he "was moved and awakened" (*ganwu* 感寤).²⁴ But the Emperor did not immediately rescind his order to hunt for the fleeing Heir Apparent. After the Heir Apparent was forced to kill himself in his hiding place, another admonitor, Ju Qianqiu 車千秋 (born Tian Qianqiu 田千秋, d. 77 BCE), approached Emperor Wu with the same argument, urging him to forgive the late Heir Apparent. Ju says:

The penalty for a son to play with his father's weapons is whipping; if the son of the Son of Heaven kills others by mistake, what penalty should he receive? I once had a dream about a white-haired elder who taught me to say this.

子弄父兵，罪當笞；天子之子過誤殺人，當何罪哉！臣嘗夢見一白頭

22 According to Yan Shigu's 顏師古 commentary in the *Hanshu*, Mao's name was rendered as Linghu Mao 令狐茂 in Xun Yue's 荀悅 (148–209) *Hanji* 漢紀, yet we cannot find this name in the reconstructed edition of *Hanji*. See idem, "Wu wuzi zhuan," 63.2745n2; Xun Yue, *Hanji*, in *Liang Han ji* 兩漢紀, punc. and coll. Zhang Lie 張烈 (Beijing: Zhanghua shuju, 2017), 15.263, 272n26.

23 *Hanshu*, "Wu wuzi zhuan," 63.2744–45.

24 Idem, 63.2745.

翁教臣言。²⁵

Ju's approach, which proved effective in the end, is worth noting here. By passing off his words as those of a white-haired elder who allegedly appeared to him in a dream and by presenting his words then as a message from heaven as it were, Ju successfully evoked the Emperor's sympathy. Whether he intentionally took advantage of Emperor Wu's reverence for supernatural power or not is hard to tell, but the persuasive efficacy of his admonition is clear. In response to Ju's admonition, the Emperor soon met with Ju and promoted him first to Chamberlain for Dependencies (*Da honglu* 大鴻臚), and then to Counselor-in-Chief a few months later, although Ju had neither the talent nor the experience required for these positions.²⁶ That the Emperor made a connection between the "white-haired elder" and "the spirit of the Ancestral Temple" (*gaomiao shenling* 高廟神靈) and employed Ju Qianqiu as his "assistant" (*fuzuo* 輔佐) unmistakably revealed his intention to imitate the ancient sage rulers.²⁷

The Emperor's forgiveness of the late Heir Apparent inevitably led to punishment for the slanderers who caused the conflict between the father and son. This group of "slanderers" had originally been hailed as heroes at the time the Heir Apparent was defeated. As a result, Jiang Chong, who initiated the investigation of the practice of witchcraft in Emperor Wu's palace compound, received the most severe punishment. Apart from Jiang Chong himself being killed earlier, his whole family was executed. Su Wen the eunuch was burned to death. Those who were rewarded for their efforts in hunting for the Heir Apparent earlier also suffered from the change in the Emperor's attitude towards this case.²⁸ Moreover, in order to show his regret for the loss of the Heir Apparent, Emperor Wu ordered the building of a new palace named Sizi 思子 (missing my son) and a terrace known as Guilai Wang Si 歸來望思 ([wishing for my son] to return in my gazing and pining for him). The

25 Idem, "Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan," 66.2883.

26 Wudi's promotion of Ju to the position of Counselor-in-Chief even puzzled the contemporary Xiongnu ruler, according to an anecdote recorded in the *Hanshu*, see idem, 66.2884. It was well known that Counselor-in-Chief was one of the most important positions and could only be granted to those who had either governing talent or military achievements.

27 Ibid. For an example of how ancient sage kings found their assistants, see the story on how the Shang king Gaozong 高宗 found Fu Yue 傅說 in the *Shangshu* 尚書: *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義, comm. Kong Anguo 孔安國, subcomm. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 et al. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 12.292.

28 *Hanshu*, "Wu wuzi zhuan," 63.2747.

Emperor's action moved his people deeply, convincing them of his sincerity and evoking their sympathy for a repentant, lonely, and aged Emperor.²⁹ Despite all that he did, however, the Emperor never said that the late Heir Apparent was innocent in this incident. The damage caused by witchcraft more than anything else defined the last few years of Emperor Wu's reign.

These are the main features of the historical incident called the *wugu zhi huo*, which is mentioned in the *Hanshu* and other historical accounts. It consisted of a series of events that mostly occurred in the period from 92 BCE to 90 BCE. Those involved in these events include: the Gongsun family, two princesses, and many others reported to the Emperor by the knight-errant Zhu Anshi in 92 BCE; the Heir Apparent, Empress Wei, and tens of thousands of others identified by Jiang Chong in 91 BCE; and finally a number of imperial family members, the Chancellor of the Left Liu Quli, General Ershi Li Guangli and their families in 90 BCE. Whether these were separate events or connected to a single political conspiracy depends on how we interpret them, but a constant factor appearing in all these events is the practice of witchcraft. Nevertheless, this incident has long been viewed as a deliberately planned political scheme carefully carried out over two years. Such an approach defines a framework into which all the events need to fit as parts of a huge political conspiracy. To be sure, each of the above events saw the downfall of some of the most powerful figures of the time, the scale and severity of the killings were unprecedented, and the killings can be discussed from the perspective of a political purge, but it would require a really masterful explanation to convince the reader that all the above-mentioned events were pieces of a single political scheme masterminded by Emperor Wu or another individual. What follows is a review of the pro-conspiracy arguments focusing on a political approach of this kind, which shows how theories surrounding these events and the involved parties mentioned above have developed.

2. As a Political Conspiracy

The debate over how to interpret the Witchcraft Incident evidently started in the early Eastern Han (25–220 CE), and has raged on to the present day. Scholars tend to believe that this incident was pre-meditated to fulfill certain individual ambitions and carefully executed for political purposes, though unexpected developments intervened to complicate matters. Nevertheless,

²⁹ Ibid.

when coming down to the identification of a mastermind, different opinions presuppose different levels of complexity of this incident, due to the large number of involved individuals and the nature of the sources related to the events.

As the earliest text that mentions the Witchcraft Incident,³⁰ the *Shiji* does not contain any detailed description of this incident nor any relevant comments, although some scholars suspect that Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE) might have witnessed these events in person.³¹ In comparison, the information in the *Hanshu*, despite being scattered, does provide some clues as to what happened in the Witchcraft Incident during the later years of Emperor Wu's reign. Moreover, the comments of the *Hanshu* author Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) indicate that the search for a driving force behind this incident started very early on. As quoted in the above, he seems to suggest that Jiang Chong was the evildoer directing the whole drama in an attempt to bring down the Heir Apparent.³² Nevertheless, elsewhere the author downplays Jiang Chong's role and attributes the downfall of the Heir Apparent to Heaven's will revealed through inauspicious omens:

How could the calamity caused by witchcraft not be mournful? It was not merely caused by the wrongdoing of one Jiang Chong alone; Heavenly timing, not resulting from human effort, also played a role in this incident. In the sixth year of the Jianyuan era (i.e. 135 BCE), a comet known to be Chiyou's Flag became visible. It extended so far that it crossed the whole night sky. Then the Emperor ordered his generals to launch military

30 The term *wugu* appears multiple times in the “Xiongnu liezhuan” 匈奴列傳 chapter of the *Shiji*. Li Guangli's surrender is mentioned in that chapter; see *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 110.2918. Gongsun He's death, the adultery committed by Gongsun Jingsheng and Prince Yangshi, and their involvement in witchcraft are mentioned in Wei Qing's and Huo Qubing's 霍去病 (ca. 140–117 BCE) biographical accounts; see idem, “Wei jiangjun Biaoji liezhuan” 衛將軍驃騎列傳, 111.2941–42. In the same chapter, two generals, Gongsun Ao 公孫敖 (d. ca. 91 BCE, alt. 96 BCE) and Zhao Ponu 趙破奴 (d. ca. 91 BCE), are recorded to have died of *wugu*, indicating that they were also associated with the Witchcraft Incident; see idem, 111.2942–43, 2945–46.

31 For example, Wang Guowei's 王國維 (1877–1927) observation that Sima Qian died around the time of Emperor Wu's death (87 BCE) (and by extension must have witnessed the Witchcraft Incident) is widely accepted. See Wang Guowei, “Taishigong xingnian kao” 太史公行年考, in idem, *Wang Guowei xiansheng quanji (chubian [2])* 王國維先生全集 (初編二) (Taipei: Taiwan datong shuju, 1976), 504.

32 *Hanshu*, “Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan,” 66.2879.

campaigns afterwards, seizing lands to the south of the Yellow River and establishing an administration in the northern areas. It was in that spring that the Heir Apparent Li was born. From then on, the imperial army had marched for thirty years; those who were killed by soldiers were countless. When the Witchcraft Incident began to unfold, blood flowed in the capital city, the corpses amounted to tens of thousands, and both the Heir Apparent and his sons were ruined. Thus, the Heir Apparent was born and grew up in a time of war and also ended his life in warfare. How could one single favored subject have caused such calamity?

巫蠱之禍豈不哀哉！此不唯一江充之辜，亦有天時，非人力所致焉。建元六年，蚩尤之旗見，其長竟天。後遂命將出征，略取河南，建置朔方。其春，戾太子生。自是之後，師行三十年，兵所誅屠夷滅，死者不可勝數。及巫蠱事起，京師流血，僵尸數萬，太子子父皆敗。故太子生長於兵，與之終始，何獨一嬖臣哉！³³

Two points in the above passage deserve further explanation. First, it seems that the *wugu zhi hu* mentioned here refers mainly to the second “phase” of the Witchcraft Incident that involved the death of the Heir Apparent, although elsewhere in the *Hanshu* it is clearly pointed out that this incident started a year earlier in 92 BCE. Such inconsistency suggests that the three major events that constitute the Witchcraft Incident, as we understand it nowadays, may have been understood as separate incidents, a point that weakens the argument that there was a mastermind manipulating the entire process, as deliberated in the first section of this article. The other interesting point reflected in the above passage is that the author ascribes the Witchcraft Incident to Heaven’s will, evidently thinking of the *zaiyi* 災異 (lit. “disasters and anomalies”) theory. According to this theory, the death of the Heir Apparent had a causal relationship with his birth, which was tied with and symbolized by an abnormal, inauspicious celestial phenomenon, namely the unusual visibility and size of the comet known as Chiyou’s Flag, an unmistakable omen of violence and warfare according to the record. A violent beginning was doomed to meet its violent end. In this sense, Jiang Chong’s framing of the Heir Apparent and the consequent loss of life of tens of thousands of others was merely part of a causal chain stretching back to the moment when the Heir Apparent was born. According to this theory, Jiang Chong is blamed for causing the bloodshed no more than an instrument of Heaven’s will.

The conspiracy theory continued in the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279 CE),

³³ Idem, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2770–71.

but the explanation of the cause of this Incident differed from the *Hanshu* and the identification of the initiator changed. Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) contends that Emperor Wu played a far more central role than Jiang Chong in this Incident. According to his theory, it was Emperor Wu who initiated the whole event, aiming to replace the Heir Apparent with the new-born son he favored. Sima Guang considers three reasons for Emperor Wu's change of mind. First, by the time the Witchcraft Incident happened, Empress Wei, mother of the original Heir Apparent, was no longer favored by the Emperor.³⁴ Secondly, Emperor Wu considered the original Heir Apparent an impotent figure who “lacked talent and did not resemble him” 材能少，不類己， and he became more and more reluctant to pass power to him at the end of his reign.³⁵ In this situation, the position of the Heir Apparent was understandably in jeopardy once the Emperor found a son whom was thought to be more worthy. Finally, it was unfortunate for the Heir Apparent that Emperor Wu later indeed had a son that he thought would be an ideal successor. His youngest son Liu Fuling 劉弗陵 (94–74 BCE, later Emperor Zhao 昭, r. 87–74 BCE), nicknamed Gouyizi 鉤弋子， was born to the Emperor's newly favored lady Consort Zhao (Zhao Jieyu 趙婕妤, a.k.a. Lady Gouyi 鉤弋夫人, 113–88 BCE) and considered “strong, big, and highly intelligent” 壯大多知 from an early age. The Emperor often said to others that Gouyizi resembled him (*shang changyan lei wo* 上常言類我).³⁶ That is to say, at that moment, it seems that the Emperor was ready to replace the then Heir Apparent with his favorite son, though when and how to make this happen depended on the old Emperor's will and determination.

Allegedly, the Emperor's newly favored son was born after a fourteen months pregnancy, alluding to the birth myth of the sage king Yao 堯 in high antiquity. For this reason, the Emperor named the gate of Gouyi Palace 鉤弋宮 where the baby was born “Gate of Yao's Mother” (*Yao mu men* 堯母門). Intentionally or not, it seems that Emperor Wu sent a message to the world that this youngest one could potentially be the successor to the throne by alluding

34 The *Hanshu* indicates that Jiang Chong dared to search the Empress' and the Heir Apparent's palaces only because “the favor that Empress Wei received from the Emperor had declined in the latter years of Emperor Wu's reign” 武帝末，衛後寵衰。See idem, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2742. The *Zizhi tongjian* also mentions that “the favor that the Empress and the Heir Apparent received from the Emperor gradually declined” 皇后太子寵浸衰。See Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 22.736.

35 Ibid.

36 *Hanshu*, “Waiqi zhuan,” 97A.3956; Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 22.755.

his birth to the mythical one of Yao. This action was viewed by Sima Guang as a hint of which was soon taken advantage by Jiang Chong and eventually led to the tragic outcome of the Witchcraft Incident. The historian comments:

A ruler cannot be incautious about his every single move. What rises from inside will inevitably have a form outside, and every one under heaven will come to realize that. At the very moment, both the Empress and the Heir Apparent were in good health, but the Emperor named the gate of Gouyi Palace “Gate of Yao’s Mother.” Such naming is inappropriate. Because of this, some treacherous subjects were able to figure out the Emperor’s intentions and realize that he immensely doted on his youngest and wanted him to succeed the throne. As a result, they hatched the plot of harming the Empress and the Heir Apparent and caused the Witchcraft Incident at the end. How sad!

為人君者動靜舉措不可不慎。發於中必形於外，天下無不知之。當是時也，皇后太子皆無恙而命鉤弋之門曰堯母，非名也。是以姦人逆探上意，知其奇愛少子，欲以為嗣，遂有危皇后太子之心，卒成巫蠱之禍。悲夫！³⁷

Here Sima Guang observes that the cause of the Witchcraft Incident could have been Emperor Wu’s intention to change the Heir Apparent. Thus, Jiang Chong merely played the role of adroitly helping the Emperor to carry out his will through fabricating evidence to meet the Emperor’s need.³⁸ Although it is not clearly specified whether the Emperor himself participated in the conspiracy, it seems undeniable that Jiang Chong’s action was approved by the Emperor. Nevertheless, Sima Guang carefully avoids labeling Emperor Wu as the mastermind behind the scenes. His standpoint, after all, remains consistent with the overall theme of his work, that is, to draw lessons from the past for rulers so as to help the Song emperors achieve better governance. The Witchcraft Incident, according to Sima Guang, serves as a good example to warn the ruler of the possible disastrous consequences of the latter’s careless words or actions.

Sima Guang’s argument has remained fairly influential in academic circles till today. A consensus has been reached among many scholars that Emperor

³⁷ Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 22.733.

³⁸ According to Yan Shigu’s 顏師古 commentary, the *Sanfu jiushi* 三輔舊事 holds that the wooden manikins found in the Heir Apparent’s palace were made and buried by the Hu witches beforehand. See *Hanshu*, “Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan,” 45.2179n1.

Wu directed this whole incident, although the focus of their arguments may vary. For example, based mainly on the *Zizhi tongjian* accounts related to this incident, Tian Yuqing 田餘慶 suggests that the drastically different personalities of Emperor Wu and the Heir Apparent and their disagreements on governance constituted the main causes of this Incident. All these differences and disagreements led to the formation of two political camps centering on the Emperor and the Heir Apparent respectively. The Emperor's camp adopted aggressive domestic and interregional policies, emphasizing territorial expansion, economic reforms, and a rigorous legal system. On the contrary, the camp centered on the Heir Apparent seemed more conservative and did not agree with Emperor Wu on various issues, including the principles of governance. These disagreements inevitably created conflicts between the two camps, and the notorious Witchcraft Incident can be viewed as the eruption of the increasing tension and accumulated conflicts between the father and son. In this interpretative framework, Jiang Chong represents the Emperor's camp which was characterized by its strict adherence to laws and regulations. Relying on the Emperor's powerful support, the Emperor's camp was finally able to defeat the Heir Apparent and his supporters. In this sense, witchcraft was merely a veneer on the actual power struggle in mid-Western Han court politics.³⁹

Tian's theory that there were two different lines of thinking on governance was foreshadowed by Michael Loewe in his 1974 monograph *Crisis and Conflict in Han China*. Loewe considers the views of the so-

39 Tian Yuqing, "Lun Luntai zhao" 論輪臺詔. *Lishi yanjiu* 1984.2, 5–7. For examples of similar argument, see Zhang Xiaofeng 張小鋒, "Weitaizi yuanyu zhaoxue yu Xi Han Wu, Zhao, Xuan shiqi zhengzhi" 衛太子冤獄昭雪與西漢武、昭、宣時期政治, *Nandu xuetao* 2006.3: 12–17; Yan Buke 閻步克, "Han Wudi shi 'kuanhou zhangzhe jie fu taizi' kao" 漢武帝時「寬厚長者皆附太子」考, *Beijing Daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 1993.3: 120–23; Li Feng 李峰, "Wugu zhi huo shiyu xia Han Wudi yu Li Taizi fuzi jiuge tanxi: Yu Xin Deyong xiansheng shangque" 巫蠱之禍視闕下漢武帝與戾太子父子糾葛探析——與辛德勇先生商榷, *Qinghua Daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 2020.2: 60–75. Xin Deyong 辛德勇 challenges Tian's rather influential argument by problematizing the sources upon which Tian's argument relies; see Xin Deyong, "Han Wudi Taizi Ju shixing wugu shi shushuo" 漢武帝太子據施行巫蠱事述說, *Huazhong Shifan Daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexue ban)* 2016.3: 114–26 (this paper is also reprinted in the expanded version of *Zhizao Han Wudi*, 128–67, see the following entry), and idem, *Zhizao Han Wudi: You Han Wudi wannian zhengzhi xingxiang de suzao kan Zizhi tongjian de lishi goujian* 製造漢武帝——由漢武帝晚年政治形象的塑造看《資治通鑑》的歷史構建, expanded and rev. ed. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2018), passim.

called “Modernists” and “Reformists” as “two attitudes or convictions” that dominated the governance of the Western Han dynasty in turn; the Witchcraft Incident in his view was a reflection of the power struggle between these two different ways of thinking about governance. According to Loewe’s definition, the “Modernist” view of governing, derived from the Qin unification of China and emphasizing contemporary social and political issues, exalted the administrative power of the state in both domestic economic development and foreign policy. By contrast, the “Reformist” view, which was derived from the much earlier Zhou tradition and aiming to solve contemporary problems by returning to antiquity, paid more attention to omens that were supposedly embodiments of Heaven’s will, downplayed the role of government in economic growth, and pursued a far less aggressive foreign policy.⁴⁰ In this Modernist-Reformist framework, the Witchcraft Incident is interpreted as the consequence of mid-Western-Han political struggles among different power groups at a moment when domestic unrest had arisen following an expansion of territory that cost tens of thousands of lives and depleted the Han’s resources. This argument holds that the Witchcraft Incident comprised a series of destructive events that mainly focused on the choice of the successor to the throne, and its influence lasted for decades, deeply affecting the state policy-making. Moreover, Loewe argues that in these events personal decisions often overruled the formal processes of the Han institutions, as ambition, jealousy, and fear were always behind the unfolding of these events.⁴¹

Following similar lines of argumentation, Poo Mu-chou 蒲慕州 also holds that the Witchcraft Incident reflected longstanding conflicts between the above-mentioned two political camps.⁴² Like Tian Yuqing, Poo in his analysis also relies on the *Zizhi tongjian* accounts, stressing the tension between Emperor Wu and the Heir Apparent as well as the one between their supporters. Likewise, Jiang Chong, one of the most important figures in the Witchcraft Incident, is considered by Poo as a representative figure of the political hard line of Emperor Wu.⁴³ This seems to suggest that Jiang Chong’s tough handling of the witchcraft case had little to do with his personal disagreement with the

40 Michael Loewe, “The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BC,” in his *Crisis and Conflicts in Han China, 104 BC to AD 9* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), 11–13.

41 Ibid., Ch. 2, “The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BC,” 37–90.

42 Poo Mu-chou 蒲慕州, “Wugu zhi huo de zhengzhi yiyi” 巫蠱之禍的政治意義, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 57, pt. 3 (1986): 533–35.

43 For a description of Jiang Chong as an official sticking to his duties, see Wang Zijin 王子今, “Lun Jiang Chong” 論江充, *Handan Xueyuan xuebao* 2015.1: 18–23.

Heir Apparent, as indicated in the *Hanshu*, but was a reflection of his political rivalry with the latter. In Poo's view, Emperor Wu was no doubt the key to all questions in this case, and the longstanding tension between the Emperor and the Heir Apparent dominated this whole incident. He believes that the two did not have a smooth channel of communication to clarify those disagreements and possible misunderstandings which in the end estranged them from each other. When these two tendencies — the different political views on governance, on the one hand, and the lack of communication between the Emperor and his Heir Apparent, on the other — reached the explosion point, even a seemingly insignificant factor, such as the practice of witchcraft, could lead to an appalling political purge.⁴⁴

The above-mentioned tension between Emperor Wu and his Heir Apparent, however, was not the major issue that triggered this political chaos, according to Chen Zhi's 陳志 study. On the contrary, Chen argues, the evidence shows that the Emperor still trusted his Heir Apparent even at the moment when he heard the report about his son's rebellion.⁴⁵ The cause of the Witchcraft Incident, contends Chen Zhi, was Emperor Wu's attempt to get rid of Empress Wei and the Wei family's influence on the Heir Apparent. The Heir Apparent was a victim rather than the target of the wrestling between the political factions in the imperial family and among the Emperor's in-laws.⁴⁶

According to another article by Wu Gang 吳剛, it seems that Chen Zhi's argument ignores the bond between the Heir Apparent and Empress Wei. Wu Gang argues that some of the *Hanshu* accounts unmistakably indicate a strong

44 Poo Mu-chou, "Wugu zhi huo de zhengzhi yiyi," 533, 536. In an article responding to Poo's argument, Lao Kan 勞幹 seems to doubt that the Witchcraft Incident was essentially a political purge. He argues that in Chinese history, political purges usually happened following a political crisis. In Wudi's case, his government was actually fairly stable around the time the Witchcraft Incident occurred. He suggests that Wudi's prolonged use of an "elixir" may have played a role in the incident. See Lao Kan, "Duiyu 'Wugu zhi huo de zhengzhi yiyi' de kanfa" 對於〈巫蠱之禍的政治意義〉的看法, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 57, pt. 3 (1986): 539–46.

45 Shang Wei 商煒 also holds a similar opinion and maintains that the relationship between the Emperor and the Heir Apparent remained relatively stable before a battle took place in the capital city. See Shang Wei, "Han Wudi yu 'wugu zhi huo'" 漢武帝與「巫蠱之禍」, *Hebei Guangbo Dianshi Daxue xuebao* 2000.3: 34–35.

46 Chen Zhi, "Lun wugu zhi huo" 論巫蠱之禍, *Fujian luntan* 1988.3, 32–38.

connection between the mother and son.⁴⁷ Also, according to a folk song recorded in the *Shiji*, the tremendous amount of power that the Wei family obtained through Wei Zifu's matrimonial tie with the Emperor was no secret to the Han people.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Heir Apparent had a different governing philosophy from that of his father. The Emperor probably thought that once the Heir Apparent succeeded to the throne, not only would his legacy not continue, the foundation of the imperial family might also be shaken by the political group centered on the Wei family. Thus, Wu Gang infers that the Witchcraft Incident must have resulted from Emperor Wu's deliberate political calculations.⁴⁹

Another representative argument expands on Chen Zhi's idea and contextualizes the Witchcraft Incident in mid-Western-Han court politics, arguing that the incident reflected Emperor Wu's handling of his wives as well as his in-law families. For example, Qin Xueqi 秦學頌 contends that the Witchcraft Incident was the result of Emperor Wu's intentional manipulation of the relationship between the imperial power and the political cliques of his in-laws. As an emperor who had succeeded to power mostly through his mother's political calculations, Emperor Wu was acutely aware of the influence his wives and in-law groups could exert on court politics through their connection with the Heir Apparent, the future emperor. This is why his in-laws' strong influence at court and in the military worried Emperor Wu. At the same time, however, he often relied on his in-laws to balance court politics and strengthen his own power base. This formed a very interesting political landscape in Emperor Wu's reign. On the one hand, he supported the in-law cliques in their

47 For example, Su Wen the eunuch accused the Heir Apparent of immorality after staying in Empress Wei's palace overnight. In a conversation between Emperor Wu and Wei Qing, the Emperor revealed that he placed great trust in the Heir Apparent and explicitly asked Wei Qing to inform both the Empress and the Heir Apparent that they need not worry. As aforementioned, before arresting Jiang Chong as a last resort of self-defense, the Heir Apparent discussed his next move with his mother, fearing that his father would not listen to his clarification. See Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 22.736–37; *Hanshu*, “Wuxing zhi” 五行志, 27A.1334. Following this line of argumentation and considering Emperor Wu the mastermind of the Witchcraft Incident, a recent work associates this incident with the rise of “the first Confucian empire.” See Cai Liang, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2014), esp. 113–51.

48 The folk song goes, “Don't be happy when you have a son and don't be angry when you got a daughter. Don't you see all-under-Heaven is dominated by one woman Wei Zifu” 生男無喜，生女無怒，獨不見衛子夫霸天下。See *Shiji*, “Waiqi shijia” 外戚世家, 49.1983.

49 Wu Gang, “Wugu zhi huo' xintan” 「巫蠱之禍」新探, *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 1993.2: 81–90.

control of military and administrative power; on the other hand, he used newly favored in-law groups to attack the ones no longer received his favor. The aim of the Witchcraft Incident, according to this view, was to eliminate the threat of Empress Wei's family to the imperial power with the end game of putting Emperor Wu's youngest son on the throne when the latter's maternal relatives were yet to form their own clique.⁵⁰

Although also seeing the Witchcraft Incident as a political scandal, another view tends to downplay Emperor Wu's role as the mastermind of this incident. For example, Fang Shiming 方詩銘 argues that this incident resulted from the struggle for power between the two families of Emperor Wu's in-laws: the Li's and the Wei's. Fang holds that Jiang Chong belonged to the Li family and hence to the Li political group. In the first phase of the Witchcraft Incident, the Li political group was winning. But once the Emperor realized their scheme, he immediately punished them for scheming behind him, including some of the imperial family members tied with the Li's through marriage.⁵¹

Based on the narratives regarding the relationship between Emperor Wu and his Heir Apparent, Shang Wei 商煒 disagrees with the argument that Emperor Wu planned the whole incident. He contends that the extant literature shows that Emperor Wu did not have any plan to change his Heir Apparent at all. Viewed from this perspective, all the suggestions that Emperor Wu planned and initiated the Witchcraft Incident in order to put his youngest son on the throne become groundless. Instead, Shang argues, it was a conspiracy by Jiang Chong's group (which consisted of civil officials, generals, eunuchs, and Hu witches) that caused this tragedy. The superstitious Emperor Wu was at first fooled by Jiang Chong, but when he eventually realized his error, he

50 Qin Xueqi, "Hanwudi yu waiqi zhengzhi" 漢武帝與外戚政治, *Xi'nan Shifan Daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 1993.3: 97–102. Cai Liang 蔡亮 holds a similar argument with an emphasis on Emperor Wu's political consideration about the influence of the powerful figures and families upon the imperial court. She argues that that the Witchcraft Incident directed by Emperor Wu led to the change of the social status of the high officials from noble families to Confucian scholars from humble origins. See Cai Liang, "Chongsu tongzhi jituan: Xi Han wugu an de zai jiedu" 重塑統治集團：西漢巫蠱案的再解讀, *Hunan sheng bowuguan guankan* 7 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2010), 535–59; idem, *Witchcraft and the Rise of the First Confucian Empire*, ch. 4 "A Reshuffle of Power: Witchcraft Scandal and the Birth of a New Class," 113–51.

51 Fang Shiming 方詩銘, "Xi Han Wudi wanqi de 'wugu zhi huo' ji qi qianhou: Jianlun Yumen Hanjian 'Han Wudi yizhao'" 西漢武帝晚期的「巫蠱之禍」及其前後——兼論玉門漢簡《漢武帝遺詔》, *Shanghai Bowuguan jikan* 4 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 357–69.

took revenge for the death of his Heir Apparent by executing those who had participated in this conspiracy.⁵²

Within this framework, some scholars aim to explore the possibility of other participants being the mastermind of this incident. For example, Sun Jingtian 孫景壇 believes that eunuch Su Wen rather than Emperor Wu, Jiang Chong, or other participants in this incident, was most likely the man who directed the whole witchcraft drama. Sun suspects that Su Wen, taking advantage of Emperor Wu's belief in superstitious phenomena, not only made up strange stories to make Lady Gouyi appear a mysterious figure, but also, with Lady Gouyi's cooperation, fabricated the mythical birth story regarding her son to indicate this boy's mythical connection with the sage ruler Yao.⁵³ According to Sun Jingtian, as a eunuch-official working closely with the Emperor for so many years, Su Wen would have been familiar with the Han court politics, the Emperor's belief in witchcraft, and the power struggle involving Emperor Wu's in-law cliques. Thus, he would have been able to plan the scheme carefully and indeed almost succeeded in pulling it off. The purpose of this political adventure was, according to Sun Jingtian, to put Lady Gouyi's son on the throne so that he, as the young Emperor's loyal servant and assistant, would have easy access to or even have direct control over the imperial power. Sun's argument seems to have been inspired by the story of Zhao Gao 趙高 (d. 207 BCE), the famous Qin schemer, also a eunuch, who managed to kill the First Emperor's Heir Apparent (i.e. Fusu), put the First Emperor's younger son on the throne after his father's death, and eventually control the imperial court by manipulating the boy he put on the throne.⁵⁴ Su Wen almost succeeded, had he not gone too far in attempting to kill the newborn grandson of the already victimized Heir Apparent, according to Sun.⁵⁵

To summarize, as shown above, the recent scholarship agrees that, no matter who was the mastermind of this notorious Witchcraft Incident, it was not something that happened accidentally. It was a well-planned political scheme aiming to bring down the Heir Apparent or some of the Emperor's in-law political cliques for the purpose of either enthroning the Emperor's newborn son or promoting Emperor Wu's own aggressive governing policy, although the sequence of events in this Incident seems, to some extent,

52 Shang Wei, "Han Wudi yu 'wugu zhi huo,'" 34–36.

53 For the source Sun's argument based on, see *Hanshu*, "Waiqi zhuan," 97A.3956.

54 *Shiji*, "Qin Shihuang benji" 秦始皇本紀, 6.264–76.

55 Sun Jingtian, "Su Wen ying shi Han Wudi wannian 'wugu zhi huo' de yuanxiong" 蘇文應是漢武帝晚年「巫蠱之禍」的元兇, *Nanjing shehui kexu* 2008.10: 49–54.

accidental. From this perspective, the nature of the Witchcraft Incident is strictly political. More specifically, it centered on the imperial power transition and on the choice of Heir Apparent. The main difference between these arguments is who is considered the mastermind or initiator of this scheme to bring down the chosen Heir Apparent or the targeted powerful families. As for the overall theme of this Witchcraft Incident, all of these arguments presuppose that there was a political conspiracy behind that set off a chain of events leading to the incident.

What is missing in the above analyses is an in-depth exploration of the role played by witchcraft in this incident. After all, this incident was labeled the “Calamity Caused by Witchcraft” by the contemporaries of those who were involved, and has remained so from then on. Reading between the lines, the role that witchcraft played in this Incident cannot be simply reduced to a background factor. Rather, I would argue that witchcraft not only helped form the environment in which all these events unfolded but also served as a driving factor of the whole Witchcraft Incident: its abrupt initiation, dramatic development, and reconciliatory ending. The following sections of this article are devoted to an examination of this incident with a focus on the role that witchcraft and witchcraft practitioners played in it, beginning with a discussion of the two key words *wu* 巫 and *gu* 蠱.

3. Redefining *Gu* and *Wu*

So far the incident of *wugu zhi hu* has been translated as the Calamity Caused by Witchcraft or the Witchcraft Incident as the term *wugu* can be loosely translated as “witchcraft.” Nevertheless, *wu* and *gu* have each acquired different connotations in their rich exegetical tradition and both deserve an in-depth examination so as to see how these two terms were used together to name this incident.

Let us consider the term *gu* first. The Chinese character *gu*, graphically traced to the Shang oracle bone inscriptions, can be understood as a depiction of insects living in grain, maggots breeding in a pot, objects harmful to man, a human body containing poisonous vermin, the casting of spells upon others, or emanations of an evil spirit,⁵⁶ but the brief records of divination seen in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions are insufficient to specify the meaning of this character. What we can extract from these records is that *gu* is a term

⁵⁶ Loewe, “The Case of Witchcraft in 91 BC,” 82–83.

symbolizing a sort of unhealthy influence causing a number of illnesses, for instance, toothache or bone issues. Compared with the later understanding that *gu* is the venom collected from various poisonous worms, *gu* in the oracle bone inscriptions is rather vaguely conceptualized as a mixture of evil spirit, venom, and virus.⁵⁷ So far as the extant literature is concerned, the earliest detailed description of *gu* appears in an account about the illness of Lord Ping of Jin 晉平公 (r. 557–532 BCE) in the Zuo Commentary (*Zuozhuan* 左傳) to the *Chunqiu* 春秋:

Zhao Meng asked: “What is *gu*?” [Doctor He] replied: “It is what arises from excess, indulgence, delusion, or disorder. As indicated by the graph, *min*, ‘a vessel,’ and *chong*, ‘pests,’ make up the graph of *gu*. Flying grains are also *gu*. In the *Zhouyi*, that a woman deceives a man or the wind falls under a mountain is indicated by the hexagram *gu*—all of the above mean the same thing.”

趙孟曰：「何謂蠱？」對曰：「淫溺惑亂之所生也。於文：皿蟲為蠱。穀之飛亦為蠱。在《周易》：女惑男、風落山謂之蠱☱☶。皆同物也。」⁵⁸

Using three different symbols to visualize its layered meanings, Doctor He 和 describes *gu* from three perspectives in the above passage. First, he tries to approach the term through its graphic form, that is, a combination of the graphs *min* 皿 (lower part) and *chong* 蟲 (upper part) signifying a container with pests in it. This meaning remains consistent with the later understanding of *gu* as black magic: to raise pests in a vessel and collect their venom to poison the targeted individuals. Nevertheless, in this *Zuozhuan* passage the term “container” is actually a metaphor for the body of the Jin prince while “pests” represents his illness. This becomes even more obvious if we look at the second symbol.

The eggs of cereal moths are mostly invisible to the naked eye before they hatch. Once the eggs hatch, however, the larvae will destroy grains and finally turn into flying moths. Seeing moths flying out of a cereal container and leaving only the outer hulls behind, one would think that the grains had mysteriously become flying moths. That is why in the old days people thought grains could fly and they used the term *gu* to denote these “flying seeds” (*feishi*

57 Wang Jianxin 王建新, “Lun gudai wenxian zhong de ‘gu’” 論古代文獻中的「蠱」, *Zhongyi wenxian zazhi* 2004.4: 13–14.

58 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注, annot. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), “Duke Zhao 1 [541 BCE],” 1223.

飛實).⁵⁹ The hull of grain is another concrete metaphor for the human body.

The last symbol, i.e., the image of the hexagram *gu*, shows that *gu* also symbolizes female enchantment. The phrase “wind falling under a mountain” describes the image of the hexagram *gu*, which consists of the trigram *gen* 艮 𠄎 (symbol for mountain) above and the trigram *xun* 巽 𠄎 (symbol for wind) below. The trigram *gen* is also the symbol for male and *xun* for female. The *Zhouyi* 周易 “Tuan 彖 Commentary” even says that “the firm (i.e., male) is on top and the soft (i.e., female) is below (*gang shang er rou xia* 剛上而柔下),” which may evoke an image of sexual intercourse, and Doctor He suggests that from this perspective *gu* means “a woman deceiving a man.”⁶⁰ Elsewhere the doctor also mentions the cause of Lord Ping’s *gu* illness, indicating that it is related to an excessive sexual life. In his discussion of “six kinds of breath” (*liuqi* 六氣) and “six kinds of disease” (*liuji* 六疾), Doctor He says that “when darkness rules, the illness of confusion arises” (*hui yin huoji* 晦淫惑疾), and “if [the influence of] a woman, categorized as a *yang* force and identified as darkness of time, becomes excessive, then an illness of internal fever, confusion, and bewitchment will occur [to a man]” 女，陽物而晦時，淫則生內熱惑蠱之疾。⁶¹

The main point of Doctor He’s explanation of the concept of *gu* here is to link the Jin ruler’s illness to his excessive sexual life. Doctor He does not make this connection directly, rather, he does it through the description of the mysterious aspects of *gu*, one of which extends to women’s sexual bewitchment of men. Based on Doctor He’s description, *gu* is a disease, as indicated by its graphic form; it can also “fly,” as seen in moth-eaten grains. As a disease, it is characterized by a high fever caused by excessive *yang* from women. What is especially relevant to this paper is its connection with wind, as shown in the *gu* hexagram, with its ability to spread disease like “flying seeds,” and on top of that the symptom of high fever of the *gu* disease.

These features of *gu* are evidently associated with the custom of stopping the spread of *gu* by killing dogs in the Qin state. The dog-killing ritual, as recorded in the *Shiji*, started to be performed at least from the second year of

59 For the *feishi*, see *Guoyu* 國語, punc. and coll. Shanghai Shifan Daxue guji zhenglizu 上海師範大學古籍整理組 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), “Jin yu (8)” 晉語八, 14.473–74.

60 For the “Tuan Commentary,” see *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, comm. Wang Bi 王弼, subcomm. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 et al. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 3.108. A similar passage recorded in the *Guoyu* makes this point explicit. See *Guoyu*, 14.474.

61 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, “Zhao 1,” 1222.

Lord De of Qin 秦德公 (r. 677–676 BCE). The brief records preserved in the *Shiji*, when put together, can provide us an approximation of what this ritual could have been like. It is said that in the beginning of the hot summer season (*chufu* 初伏) in 676 BCE, the Hot Summer Temple (*fuci* 伏祠) was built in the hope of relieving the people from extreme hot weather. In order to “fend off the *gu*” (*yugu* 禦蟲), the Qin people “split open dog bodies at the four gates of the cities” 磔狗邑四門.⁶² Here the connection of *gu* with hot weather, disease, and exorcism is obvious, as explicated by the Tang 唐 (618–907 CE) commentator Zhang Shoujie 張守節 (8th century):

The sixth month marks the beginning of the period of the three *fu* [days of greatest heat], a custom initiated by Lord De of Qin. Thus, it is called the First *fu*. The term *fu* denotes hiding in order to avoid the excessive heat. 六月，三伏之節起，秦德公為之，故云初伏。伏者，隱伏避盛暑也。⁶³

Gu denotes the hot, poisonous, and evil air that does harm to people. Thus, people split open dog bodies to fend it off. 蟲者，熱毒惡氣為傷害人。故磔狗以禦之。⁶⁴

To split open [dog bodies] means to drive off. Dogs are *yang* animals. To spread and split open dogs at the four gates of the outer city walls is to drive off the hot, poisonous air.

磔，禳也。狗，陽畜也。以狗張磔於郭四門，禳卻熱毒氣也。⁶⁵

Why it was dogs rather than other animals that were used to fend off *gu* is not clear. Nevertheless, the reason that dogs were used to drive off the “hot, poisonous air” can be connected with the ritual of dismembering dogs to stop the wind. *Gu* is defined as vermin brought by the wind.⁶⁶ The connection between *gu* and wind may have served as the basis for the dog-dismembering ritual, which may have been an exorcism aiming to stop the winds that could carry *gu*-vermin. This interpretation has its exegetical support. For example,

62 *Shiji*, “Shi’er zhuhou nianbiao” 十二諸侯年表, 14.573, “Qin benji” 秦本紀, 5.184, and “Fengshan shu” 封禪書, 28.1360.

63 *Idem*, 5.184n5.

64 *Idem*, 5.184n6.

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Shuowen jiezi gulin* 說文解字詁林, comp. Ding Fubao 丁福保 (Shanghai: Yixue shuju, 1930), 6050b, esp. the comment by Qing scholar Gui Fu 桂馥 (1736–1805).

Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 CE) mentions in his commentary on one of the *Zhouli*'s 周禮 (Rites of Zhou) passages that the ritual of dismembering dogs was still performed to stop the winds in his time.⁶⁷ Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324 CE) also refers to the same practice being performed in his time, describing how people “split open dog bodies in the middle of the main road, saying that this could stop the winds” 當大道中磔狗，云以止風。⁶⁸ In fact, killing dogs to stop the winds seems to be a very old custom. Scholars have noticed that there is some connection between this custom and the one described in the oracle bone inscriptions. For instance, one entry in the oracle bone inscriptions suggests that dogs were sacrificed by *wu*-shamans to pacify the winds.⁶⁹ It seems that the concept of *gu* described in the *Zuozhuan* remains very relevant to this dog-dismembering ritual: *gu* is viewed as a sort of vermin (the first symbol), can fly (the second symbol), and is closely associated with the wind (the third symbol).

The ritual of driving off *gu* was not limited to the practice of dismembering dogs to stop the winds. Some transmitted texts suggest that it had developed into a kind of regularly held exorcist activity with broad appeal in the Han and pre-Han societies, as we can see in a passage from the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋：

People living in the cities perform an exorcist ritual, splitting open animal bodies to drive off the evil influence at the nine gates of the city walls in order to stop the spring air.

國人讎，九門磔攘，以畢春氣。⁷⁰

67 *Zhouli zhengyi* 周禮正義, annot. Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 33.1314n.

68 *Erya zhushu* 爾雅注疏, comm. Guo Pu 郭璞, subcomm. Xing Bing 邢昺 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 6.202n.

69 Chen Mengjia 陳夢家, *Yinxu buci zongshu* 殷虛卜辭綜述 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 575–76; Li Ling 李零, “Xian Qin liang Han wenzi shiliao zhong de ‘wu’” 先秦兩漢文字史料中的「巫」, in his *Zhongguo fangshu xukao* 中國方術續考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 40.

70 *Lüshi chunqiu xin jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋新校釋, coll. and annot. Chen Qiyu 陳奇猷 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 3.124; see also 3.135–36n35–36 for the annotations. Here, “to stop the spring air” seems to suggest that the exorcist performance occurred in the late spring, which is consistent with the period the dog-killing ritual was held in the Qin state. An almost identical passage also appears in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子: “Order the people living in the cities to perform an exorcist ritual, splitting open animal bodies to drive off the evil influence at the nine gates of the city walls in order to stop the spring air” 令國讎，九門磔攘，以畢春氣; see *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋, ed. and annot. He Ning 何寧 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 5.393–94.

The term *nuo* 𪛗, according to Zheng Xuan’s commentary to an almost identical passage in the “Yueling” 月令 chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 (Records of rites),⁷¹ is an exorcist ritual performance aiming to get rid of evil spirits:

In the middle of this month [i.e. last month of spring], the sun runs across the constellation Mao [“Hairy Head,” equivalent to the European constellations Taurus and Pleiades]. Mao is close to the asterism Daling [“Mausoleum,” belonging to the Perseus constellation], where the air of corpses accumulates. Once the air of corpses overflows, harmful spirits that induce plagues follow it and come out. The Fangxiangshi exorcist is commanded to lead hundreds of servitors to conduct a room by room search with the aim of driving off the plague-inducing demons. Moreover, animals are to be split open and sacrificed to the gods of the four quarters. This is the means used to stop the calamity [that the harmful spirits may cause].

此月之中日行歷昴。昴有大陵積尸之氣，氣佚則厲鬼隨而出行。命方相氏帥百隸索室毆役以逐之。又磔牲以攘於四方之神，所以畢止其災也。⁷²

In this passage, Zheng Xuan provides an astrological, shamanistic explanation of the rise of the detrimental late spring air. The “harmful spirits” that come out to harm people following the overflow of the breath of corpses remind us of the evil *gu* influence referred by Zhang Shoujie. The animal-dismembering ritual used to exorcise these harmful spirits coming from the celestial sphere is comparable with the dog-dismembering ritual which aimed at stopping the winds. What is new in comparison with the old ritual in this exorcism is the exorcist Fangxiangshi’s command to his subordinates to search people’s rooms for these “harmful spirits” in order to drive them off. According to another Eastern Han commentator, Gao You 高誘 (ca. 168–212), this ritual was usually performed after dark, when the performers “beat drums and yelled in order to

71 The “Yueling” said that at the end of spring the sovereign “orders the people living in cities to perform exorcist rituals, dismembering animals to drive off the evil influence at the nine gates of the city walls in order to end the spring air” 命國難，九門磔攘，以畢春氣。See *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, comm. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, subcomm. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 et al. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 15.571. The varying character *nan* 難 [Later Han Chinese (hereafter LH) nan] here should read *nuo* 𪛗 [LH na]; Axel Schuessler suggests that these two characters may be etymologically related. See Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 396, 406.

72 *Liji zhengyi*, 15.571n.

chase and drive off the inauspicious air, resembling the present-day ritual of fending off the demons of plague” 擊鼓大呼，以逐不詳之氣，如今之驅疫逐除是也。⁷³ Even in the rather new development in this kind of exorcism, we can see the influence of the old dog-killing ritual. For example, Eastern Han scholar Ying Shao 應劭 (d. ca. 204) observed that in his time, people daubed the doors and windows of their houses with the blood of white dogs to exorcise evil spirits, a practice evidently related to the aforementioned dog-killing custom.⁷⁴

Now it is necessary to see how *gu* is defined in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 by Eastern Han lexicographer Xu Shen 許慎 (ca. 58–ca. 147), also known as the earliest Chinese etymological dictionary. It says,

Gu denotes the vermin in one's belly. The Commentary on the *Chunqiu* says that *min*, “a vessel,” and *chong*, “pests,” make up the graph of *gu*. It is caused by an excess of darkness. Spirits killed by arrows or exorcised through [the ritual of] dismembering animals are also called *gu*.⁷⁵ The character comprises of two components, *chong* and *min*. *Min* denotes the usage of a vessel.

腹中蟲也。《春秋傳》曰：皿蟲為蠱，晦淫之所生也。臬桀死之鬼亦為蠱。从蟲从皿。皿，物之用也。⁷⁶

This entry includes two definitions of *gu*. The first, as clearly stated by Xu Shen, is based on Doctor He's explanation of the concept of *gu* in the Zuo Commentary discussed above, indicating that excess of female influence can cause disease.⁷⁷ The second definition, however, is far from clear because of the semantic obscurity of the characters *nie* 臬 and *jie* 桀. Qing philologist

73 *Huainanzi jishi*, 5.393n.

74 Ying Shao, *Fengsu tongyi jiaoshi* 風俗通義校釋, coll. and annot. Wu Shuping 吳樹平 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1980), 8.314.

75 Could an evil spirit or ghost be “killed”? The newly discovered almanac (*rishu* 日書) texts tell us that it could be. For the discussion of this matter, see Poo Mu-chou, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998), 79–83. To kill, swallow, or capture demons and spirits is the means by which people bring them under control. This constitutes an important theme in Han exorcist and religious literature, as seen in both transmitted and newly excavated texts. See Liu Lexian 劉樂賢, *Jianbo shushu wenxian tanlun* 簡帛數術文獻探論, expanded and rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2012), 203–6.

76 *Shuowen jiezi gulin*, 13B.6048b–6049a.

77 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, “Zhao 1,” 1222.

and phonologist Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815 CE) considers *nie* and *jie* equivalent to *xiao* 梟 and *zhe* 磔, respectively. This view has exegetical support: in an almost identical syntax that is believed to be a citation from the above *Shuowen jiezi* entry appearing in the Tang scholar Sima Zhen's 司馬貞 (8th century) commentary on the *Shiji*, the characters *nie* and *jie* are replaced by *xiao* and *zhe*.⁷⁸ The connotations of both *xiao* and *zhe*, according to Duan, are related to killing and death. He further explains why the spirits resulting from people's violent deaths are also called *gu*:

For the spirits of those who had a violent death, their *hun* and *po* souls may become overpowering, harmful spirits by attaching themselves to human beings. This means harming a man by using his body as a vessel. 強死之鬼，其冤魄能馮依於人以為淫厲，是亦以人為皿而害之也。⁷⁹

Though widely accepted, this interpretation does not have sufficient exegetical support in the Han and pre-Han literature. Duan Yucai attempts to use the first definition of *gu* to explain the second. The only difference between the two is that in the second definition those who do harm to human bodies are violent spirits instead of vermin. Nevertheless, the fact that *gu* is related to evil spirits that harm people has already been seen above in the oracle bone inscriptions. That aspect of *gu* as a concept has also been expressed in the Zuo Commentary. The addition of another definition of *gu* alongside the one offered by the Zuo Commentary, I suspect, most probably reflects Xu Shen's attempt to include a later development of its meaning, very possibly an indication of how the term was used in his time.

Here I argue that the second definition of *gu* in the *Shuowen jiezi* entry, instead of being related to violent death as suggested by Duan Yucai, conveys information on the Eastern Han practice of exorcism, including, for example, the dog-dismembering custom. In reexamining the characters *nie* and *jie*, we find that the sounds of *jie* 桀 [LH gɿat] and *zhe* 磔 [LH ʈak] are interchangeable, as suggested in the *Shuowen jiezi*.⁸⁰ Connected with the exorcism of the *gu* influence, the term *zhe* reminds us of the dog-dismembering ritual that aimed at stopping the wind and driving off *gu*. According to Zheng

78 The line reads, “xiao zhe zhi gui yiwei gu” 梟磔之鬼亦為蠱, which is almost identical to its *Shuowen jiezi* counterpart. See *Shiji*, “Fengshan shu,” 28.1360n3.

79 *Shuowen jiezi gulin*, 13B.6049b.

80 Idem, 5B.2362a/b. For the reconstruction of the Late Han pronunciations of the two characters, see Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*, 313, 609.

Xuan's explanation of the *nuo* 儺, evil spirits were precisely the targets of that exorcist ritual. To fend off those evil spirits, dismembering animals and then presenting them as sacrifices to the gods of the four quarters is part of the exorcism.

The term *nie* is also evidently associated with the *nuo* exorcism. In the “Rhapsody on the Eastern Capital” (*Dongjing fu* 東京賦), Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139 CE) describes how Fangxiangshi commanded his team of exorcists to drive off the demons of the plague and other evil spirits in a *nuo* exorcism. It says that the Fangxiangshi exorcists used “bows made of peach tree wood and arrows made of thorns to shoot at the demons; none of the arrows missed the target” 桃弧棘矢，所發無臬。⁸¹ The sentence that follows expresses the power and efficacy of the exorcism held in the imperial palatial compound: “As the gravel flies and the hail falls, the spirits, whether strong or weak, will surely be killed” 飛礫雨散，剛瘴必斃。⁸² In this context, the character *nie*, glossed as an archery target, becomes a reference to the Eastern Han exorcism that aimed at warding off evil spirits by symbolically shooting them with special weapons.⁸³

After examining how *gu* was used in different contexts up to the Han dynasty, we see it symbolized in two ways — as vermin and as spirits — that were repeatedly emphasized in the historical context of this character, as reflected in the *Shuowen jiezi* entry. Both aspects of *gu* portray it as the cause of diseases that harm people's health. The dog-dismembering ritual and the *nuo* exorcism reflect how people responded to the influence of *gu*: however powerful, *gu* could still be kept at bay by human beings. This is why I translate *nie jie si zhi gui* 臬桀死之鬼 as “spirits killed by arrows or exorcised though [the ritual of] dismembering animals.” Nevertheless, not everyone had the ability to subdue the evil influence of *gu*. This was a task reserved for a specific

81 Zhang Heng 張衡, “Dongjing fu” 東京賦, in *Wen xuan* 文選, comp. Xiao Tong 蕭統, comm. Li Shan 李善, coll. Hu Kejia 胡克家 et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 3.123. For information about the *nuo* exorcism, Fangxiangshi, and the peach tree wood bows and thorn-made arrows used in the exorcism, see *Zhouli Zhengyi*, 59.2493–95, esp. Sun Yirang's detailed comment.

82 Xue Zong 薛綜 (d. 243 CE) interprets *gangdan* 剛瘴 as tough spirits that are hard to deal with, see *Wenxuan*, 3.123n. But the *Shuowen jiezi* glosses the character *dan* 瘴 as illness (*Shuowen jiezi gulin*, 7B.3344b), which does not support Xue's interpretation. It seems that, in this context, *gangdan* denotes all spirits, both tough and weak.

83 *Nie* 臬 [LH ŋiat] and *nuo* 儺 [LH na] may also be phonologically connected. See Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*, 401, 406.

group of people called *wu* 巫 (witch).⁸⁴

Compared with *gu*, *wu* seems to have had an even broader range of connotations in early Chinese sources. For example, in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions, this graph can be interpreted in various ways: it is sometimes synonymous with *shi* 筮, meaning “to divine,” or interpreted as a sort of sacrifice, the name of a local polity, a specific place, a certain god, or an expert group with specific skills.⁸⁵ If we consider *wu* as a specific social group, *wu* is clearly listed as an official position in the *Zhouli* and other transmitted texts as well as newly discovered materials.⁸⁶ Textual evidence shows that the word *wu*, besides being defined as witches who were part of the officialdom, also denotes non-official witches working for both the government and commoners.⁸⁷ In this sense, *wu* generally referred to those who have a special ability to communicate with the spirits, as shown in Guan Yifu’s 觀射父 (a senior minister of the State of Chu) speech on the identity of *wu* practitioners in the *Guoyu*.⁸⁸ In short, *wu* practitioners as a specific social group appear in pre-Han sources, either acting in official or non-official capacity but both being able to communicate with spirits.⁸⁹ The Han *wu* witches should be understood in the same light, and extant textual information suggests the existence of these three types of *wu* during the Han. Many of the Han people strongly believed that *wu* witches were those who had an unusual ability enabling them to communicate

84 The Chinese terms *wu* and *xi* 覡 semantically denote female and male witchcraft practitioners, respectively. Nevertheless, both male and female witchcraft practitioners were referred to as *wu*-witches from the pre-Qin period. In this article, I do not differentiate a male *wu* (wizard or sorcerer) from a female *wu* (witch); instead, I use the term witch to refer to witchcraft practitioners of both sexes.

85 Tang Lan 唐蘭, *Guwenzixue daolun* 古文字學導論, expanded and rev. ed. (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1981), 166–67; Jao Tsung-i (Rao Zongyi) 饒宗頤, *Yindai zhenbu renwu tongkao* 殷代貞卜人物通考 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1959), 40–41; Cheng Mengjia, *Yinxu buci zongshu*, 578–79; Hayashi Minao 林巳奈夫, “Chūgoku kodai no ichiko” 中國古代の神巫, *Tōhō gakuho* 38 (1967): 211–18; Lin Fushi 林富士, *Handai de wuzhe* 漢代的巫者 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 1988), 14; Li Ling, “Xian Qin liang Han wenzi shiliao zhong de ‘wu,’” 38–41.

86 Li Ling, “Xian Qin liang Han wenzi shiliao zhong de ‘wu,’” 41–47.

87 *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏, comm. Zhao Qi 趙岐, subcomm. Sun Shi 孫奭 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 3B.115; *Lüshi chungqiu xin jiaoshi*, 3.139–40. The *wu* mentioned in both passages indicates that *wu* was a profession like that of an artisan or a doctor.

88 *Guoyu*, “Chu yu (2)” 楚語下, 18.559–64.

89 Lin Fushi, *Handai de wuzhe*, 15–20.

with the spiritual world, protect them from harm, and bring them blessings.⁹⁰

According to some scholars, *wu* witches may have enjoyed a high social and political status during and before the Shang dynasty.⁹¹ Unlike their predecessors, if they indeed had, the Han *wu*-witches as a whole were evidently underprivileged, although some of them were acquainted with the Han emperors and palace ladies. In fact, throughout the Han, even the official *wu*-witches did not occupy significant official positions. Emperor Gaozu 高祖 Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 202–195 BCE), founding father of the Han dynasty, set up the *zhu* 祝 (invocation) and *wu* sacrificial system in early Western Han, which included seven kinds of *wu* practitioners.⁹² In the second year of the Yuanfeng 元封 era (i.e. 109 BCE) in Wudi's reign, the Yue *wu* 越巫 joined the other seven types of *wu* to form the “Eight *Wu*” system, which was institutionally affiliated with *Taichang* 太常 (Chamberlain for Ceremonials).⁹³ This system, though abolished for a short period during Chengdi's 成帝 reign (r. 33–7 BCE), had been in use throughout the Western Han and was even passed on to the Eastern Han.⁹⁴ The number of Han official *wu* appointments, however, was rather limited. As a matter of fact, a large majority of *wu* practitioners were excluded from the Han official system. It is also worth noting that these practitioners were often criticized and sometimes punished by some Confucian scholar-officials despite the pervasiveness of the witchcraft mentality and

90 *Idem*, 21–22.

91 For example, see Chen Mengjia, “Shangdai de shenhua yu wushu” 商代的神話與巫術. *Yanjing xuebao* 20 (1936): 485–576; K.C. Chang (Zhang Guangzhi) 張光直, “Shangdai de wu yu wushu” 商代的巫與巫術, in his *Zhongguo Qingtong shidai. Er ji* 中國青銅時代·二集 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1990), 39–66.

92 The seven kinds of witches were defined on the basis of their regions, including Liang *wu* 梁巫, Jin *wu* 晉巫, Qin *wu* 秦巫, Jing *wu* 荆巫, Jiutian *wu* 九天巫, He *wu* 河巫, and Nanshan *wu* 南山巫. See *Shiji*, “Fengshan shu,” 28.1378–79.

93 *Idem*, 28.1399–1400. For the identity of Yue witches, see Wang Zijin 王子今, “Liang Han de ‘yuewu’” 兩漢的「越巫」, *Nandu xuetan* 2005.1: 1–5.

94 For Chengdi's abolition of the *wu* system established by Gaozu, see *Hanshu*, “Jiaoshi zhi” 郊祀志, 25B.1257–59. For the continuation of the system in the Eastern Han, see the *Han guan* 漢官 entry cited by Liu Zhao's 劉昭 (fl. 502–520) commentary: *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), “Baiguan zhi (3)” 百官志三, 26.3595n.

practice.⁹⁵ Some of the *wu* witches were even killed as scapegoats for being responsible of the decline of local customs, as recorded in transmitted literature.⁹⁶ In short, although some of them were employed and their power was recognized by the imperial court, the Han *wu* practitioners in general belonged to a disadvantaged social group with a bad reputation.

Despite their low social status, the Han *wu* witches had their own way of exerting influence over other social groups and making them believe that witchcraft could help protect them from harm and bring forth blessings. *Wu* witches were frequently consulted and their services were usually indispensable when natural disasters or other calamities occurred. Their service covered almost all aspects of peoples' lives, both the commoners' and the élite's. For example, they had the authority to guide people in choosing "auspicious" dates and locations to bury their deceased relatives so that the dead would bless instead of harm the living.⁹⁷ They had knowledge about the spiritual world and knew how to perform rituals to avoid conflicts between the human world and the afterworld or how to pacify the spirits if they appeared. The performance of the *jietu* 解土 or *jiezhai* 解宅 ritual (both meaning to appease or dispel [the curse of] the earth god by means of offering sacrifices), healing rituals, spell casting, and so forth serves to illustrate this point.⁹⁸ In addition, every aspect of life, from marriage, child birth, raising children, doing business to travelling, constructing, farming, and lawsuits of ordinary Han people almost always took place under the guidance of witchcraft practitioners.⁹⁹ The following example

95 Take, for example, Sima Qian's attitude towards the *wu* in his opinions about the six situations that illness cannot be cured, the last of which is "To trust the *wu* instead of doctors." See *Shiji*, "Bianque, Cangong liezhuan" 扁鵲倉公列傳, 105.2794. A *Hanshu* account also indicates that trusting witches could even result in one's being sentenced to death. See *Hanshu*, "Du Zhou zhuan" 杜周傳, 60.2679–80. For a summary, see Lin Fushi, *Handai de wuzhe*, 28–36.

96 For example, see the stories of Song Jun 宋均 (a.k.a. Zong Jun 宗均, d. 76 CE) and Diwu Lun 第五倫 in Ying Shao, *Fengsu tongyi jiaoshi*, 9.338–39. The story of Diwu Lun will be discussed below.

97 For an example, see Wu Xiong's 吳雄 story. *Hou Hanshu*, "Guo, Chen liezhuan" 郭陳列傳, 46.1546.

98 For the ritual of *jietu* or *jiezhai*, see *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋, coll. and annot. Huang Hui 黃暉 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), "Jiechu" 解除, 25.1044–45. For examples on the shamanist way of healing, see *Shiji*, "Lütaihou benji," 9.405 and "Wei Qi Wu'anhou liezhuan," 107.2854; *Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin mu* 雲夢睡虎地秦墓, comp. *Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin mu bianxiezu* 《雲夢睡虎地秦墓》編寫組 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1981), plates 121–22, 133–34.

99 *Lunheng jiaoshi*, "Bian sui" 辨崇, 24.1008.

tells us how a Han official-scholar managed to change the local custom heavily influenced by witchcraft, but it also reflects how deeply *wu* culture had been embedded in ordinary people's daily lives:

The common people in Kuaiji Commandery offered excessive sacrifices and were fond of divination. They often presented oxen as sacrifices to the gods and, because of this, they exhausted their wealth. Those who ate beef without presenting it as a sacrifice to the temple would be stricken by illness and, before dying, would bellow like an ox. None of the previous Commandery Governors had dared to prohibit such practices. When Diwu Lun took up the position, he issued an order to the affiliated districts, and made it clear to the public that witches and invokers who dared to rely on spirits and gods to deceive and scare the blockheads would be legally charged; and that anyone who slaughtered oxen for no good reason would immediately be punished by the officials. In the beginning people living in Kuaiji were very afraid. Some witches cast spells, cursed, and spread false words [about the prohibition]. Lun investigated those cases even more urgently. After some time, the witchcraft activities were stopped and the common people living in Kuaiji Commandery lived in peace.

會稽俗多淫祀，好卜筮。民常以牛祭神，百姓財產以之困匱。其自食牛肉而不以薦祠者，發病且死，先為牛鳴。前後郡將莫敢禁。倫到官，移書屬縣，曉告百姓：其巫祝有依託鬼神詐怖愚民，皆案論之；有妄屠牛者，吏輒行罰。民初頗恐懼。或祝詛妄言，倫案之愈急，後遂斷絕。百姓以安。¹⁰⁰

Diwu Lun 第五倫 (fl. early 20's–75 CE) was appointed Governor of Kuaiji Commandery at the beginning of the Eastern Han. The custom of sacrificing oxen to gods could not have formed overnight and was probably a practice rooted in a local culture which witnessed excessive sacrifices and worship for a long time. The strong influence of witchcraft on local people is proved by both the common peoples' fear of punishment and the witches' disobedience. Although in this story we see the victory of a daredevil, the stern governor Diwu Lun, over a deeply rooted witchcraft tradition, it does not necessarily reflect an overall success in reforming local customs heavily influenced by witchcraft. In fact, the inclusion of Diwu Lun's story in Ying Shao's *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 (Meaning of popular traditions and customs) as an inspiring

100 *Hou Hanshu*, "Diwu, Zhongli, Song, Han liezhuan" 第五鍾離宋寒列傳, 41.1397. As noted above, a similar story is also recorded in Ying Shao, *Fengsu tongyi jiaoshi*, 9.339.

example for other officials to follow probably demonstrates how difficult it was to stop witchcraft practices at the local level. The reality may have been exactly like the way this tale is told: not only the common people, but also the previous governors dared not to prohibit the local witchcraft tradition.

The *wu* exerted even more powerful impact, compared with their influence upon local customs, in the uprisings occurred in the Han dynasty. For example, under Wang Mang's 王莽 reign (r. 9–23 CE), the Qi 齊 witches exerted tremendous influence on the leadership and decision-making during the Red-eyebrow Army Rebellion.¹⁰¹ In early Eastern Han, the leaders of two rebellions that broke out in 41 CE and 43 CE, namely Li Guang 李廣 (d. 41 CE) and Shan Chen 單臣 (d. 43 CE), were labeled as *yaowu* 妖巫 (evil witches) and disciples of another “evil witch” Wei Si 維汜 (d. pre-41 CE).¹⁰² To be sure, natural disasters and social chaos are considered two essential causes of the above uprisings, but witchcraft, by taking advantage of ordinary people's dire need for life, health, and safety in social turmoil, played a significant role in mobilizing and organizing the mobs during the rebellions. This also demonstrates the strong power and influence that witchcraft exerted on different communities.¹⁰³ The leaders and disciples of the *Wudoumi dao* 五斗米道 (Way of the five bushels of rice), better known as part of the late Eastern Han movement of folk Daoism, were also labeled as *miwu* 米巫 (rice-witches), *yaowu*, or *wuren* 巫人 (witches) by their contemporaries, as shown in the inscription on a stele erected for a Ba 巴 Commandery governor in 205 CE and other sources.¹⁰⁴ Both the *Wudaomi dao* and the *Taiping dao* 太平道 (Way of the Great Peace), another major branch of the late Eastern Han Daoist movement, became famous for their healing power by means of witchcraft, such as incantations.¹⁰⁵ By practicing healing exorcisms, which could be called “white” magic, they were able to attract hundreds of thousands of disciples during a time of social turmoil to fulfill their political ambitions.

The influence exerted by Han witches was by no means limited to

101 *Hou Hanshu*, “Liu Xuan, Liu Penzi liezhuan” 劉玄劉盆子列傳, 11.479–80.

102 Idem, “Guangwudi ji” 光武帝紀, 1B.68, 70, “Wu, Gai, Chen, Zang liezhuan” 吳蓋陳臧列傳, 18.694–95, and “Ma Yuan liezhuan” 馬援列傳, 24.838.

103 Ibid.

104 Hong Kuo 洪适, *Lishi* 隸釋, in *Yingyin Wenyuange Sikuquanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan), 681: 575; *Hou Hanshu*, “Xiao Lingdi ji” 孝靈帝紀, 8.349, esp. Liu Ai's 劉艾 note; *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), “Er Gongsun, Tao, si Zhang zhuan” 二公孫陶四張傳, 8.264.

105 *Sanguo zhi*, 8.264n1; *Hou Hanshu*, “Huangfu Song, Zhu Jun liezhuan” 皇甫嵩朱儁列傳, 71.2299.

ordinary people. It also extended to the upper echelons of society, including nobles, senior officials, and the imperial families (of the emperors and their wives and concubines). Both official and non-official *wu* were summoned to serve Han emperors, empresses, and concubines. Emperor Wu even invited witches from different regions to live in his palaces to cater his daily needs.¹⁰⁶ It was no secret, either, that during Emperor Wu's reign, "witches frequently visited the palaces, teaching palace ladies how to overcome misfortune" 女巫往來宮中教美人度厄。¹⁰⁷ As for the officials, although no doubt there were those who, like Diwu Lun, considered witchcraft practices a threat to people's lives that had to be eradicated, the officials in general had to cope with such practices when carrying out their official duties, since witchcraft fulfilled essential needs of various social groups of the time.¹⁰⁸

To be sure, the alleged power of witchcraft enabled its practitioners to help people live through calamities, cure illnesses, and ward off evil, but this kind of power was a double-edged sword, which could be employed to harm instead of helping both the witches and the people they served. The most famous example of this sort is none other than the Witchcraft Incident under discussion. Those who were punished in this incident were accused of applying witchcraft, such as casting spells and burying wooden figurines, to harm Emperor Wu.¹⁰⁹ It is in this sense that the terms *wu* and *gu* were used together to stress the negative aspect of witchcraft as well as its disastrous impact. In the Han social and religious context, the compound *wugu* by definition represented a mysterious, wicked way to harm and control others by casting spells, burying wooden figurines, or using other techniques, very often carried out with the aid of witches. The Witchcraft Incident could not have occurred without the popularity of such a *wugu* culture. The following section further explores the Han *wugu* culture in an attempt to explain how this notorious incident could have happened during the later years of Emperor Wu's reign.

4. The Witchcraft Mentality in Emperor Wu's Reign

The way in which witchcraft worked in the Han dynasty was rather

106 *Shiji*, "Fengshan shu," 28.1384, 1388, 1400.

107 Sima Guang, *Zizhi tongjian*, 22.738.

108 For example, see Chao Cuo's 鼂錯 (d. 154 BCE) case in *Hanshu*, "Yuan Ang, Chao Cuo zhuan" 爰盎鼂錯傳, 49.2288. This aspect will be further elaborated on later in this article when we reinterpret the Witchcraft Incident.

109 *Hanshu*, "Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan," 66.2883.

simple. Underlying it were several assumptions that, at the time, few would have challenged: (a) spiritual beings and human beings coexist and intermingle with each other; (b) spiritual beings interfere in human affairs and can affect peoples' lives, bringing them good or bad fortune; (c) spiritual beings can be approached through or even controlled by intermediaries; and (d) with their supernatural ability to communicate with spiritual beings, witches belong to such intermediaries.

Although evidence shows that the concept of the afterworld in Chinese culture may have developed at the latest from the Spring and Autumn period, it seems that in the Han culture the afterworld was an extension or a reduplication of the imperial system. Nevertheless, answers to questions like where exactly the afterworld is located and what it is like remain vague. The boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead was not always clear-cut and the two worlds were intertwined in various aspects, as we see, for example, in the concept of immortality and the notion that familial or individual misfortune can be caused by an improper burial date, location, or ritual for a deceased family member.¹¹⁰ In this sense, we may define the spiritual world as a gray zone at least partly overlapping with the human domain, which may even be seen as the latter's extension. In this gray zone, spiritual beings live with human beings and demand respect and sacrifices in exchange for their benevolence and blessings. In a witchcraft mindset, the spirits remind the living of their existence through minor mishaps or serious disasters, depending on whether their demands are satisfied or not. Once this occurs, those who under the influence of such a mindset resort to witchcraft to diagnose the cause and, when necessary, invite witches to either pacify or subdue the spirits.

This, however, also means that the witches were believed to have a lot of power to manipulate the spirits, to be specific, for their own benefit or that of their clients. The nature of this witchcraft thinking, as mentioned above, made witchcraft in practice a double-edged sword, a point that those who believed in witchcraft were apparently aware of. That is to say, those who believed that witches could help them avoid calamities and bring them good fortune also understood that witches could command the spirits to harm others to fulfill their own needs. What follows are examples assembled from various sources to demonstrate how witchcraft worked in a society permeated by such a culture.

110 Poo Mu-chou, *In Search of Personal Welfare*, 157–77, 210–12; Wang Zijin 王子今, *Shuihudi Qinjian Rishu jiazhong shuzheng* 睡虎地秦簡《日書》甲種疏證 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), 131–33, 491.

First, various sources reveal that the Han people indeed believed in the existence of spiritual beings. According to the *Fengsu tongyi*, the Han imperial court's practice of sacrificing to the gods and spirits in exchange for their blessings started from the founding emperor. The practice reached its peak during Emperor Wu's reign because he "particularly revered gods and spirits" (*you jing guishen* 尤敬鬼神).¹¹¹ During the reign of Emperor Ping 平 (r. 1–5 CE), toward the end of the Western Han, the number of gods and spirits receiving sacrifices sponsored by the government amounted to one thousand and seven hundred.¹¹² Most of these gods and spirits were separately housed in temples or put on altars dotting the Han religious landscape.¹¹³ The Han rulers' belief in supernatural beings was by no means formed overnight. In fact, they inherited and expanded on the sacrificial system synthesized by the Qin dynasty after its unification of China, which included the Four Spiritual Guardians (*si di* 四帝) as well as numerous other gods and spirits in charge of mountains, watercourses, and constellations.¹¹⁴ As far as Emperor Wu's time is concerned, information in such major sources as the *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, and *Fengsu tongyi* suggests that his reign witnessed the flourishing of witchcraft practices.¹¹⁵ Sima Qian's critical review of such practices, for example, convincingly demonstrates how prevalent the practice of witchcraft was during Emperor Wu's reign:

Among the sacrifices instituted by the present Son of Heaven, those to the Great Unity and the Earth Lord are performed by the Son of Heaven himself at the suburb of the capital city every three years. The present Son of Heaven established the *feng* and *shan* sacrificial ceremonies for the Han dynasty, stipulating to revisit every five years the spots where the *feng* and *shan* rituals were performed.¹¹⁶ As for the sacrifices to the Great Unity recommended by [Miu] Ji of Bo, the Three Unities, the Dark Ram,

111 Ying Shao, *Fengsu tongyi jiaoshi*, 8.291.

112 Ibid.

113 For a detailed examination of the distribution of these temples and altars in Han territory, see Lin Fushi, *Handai de wuzhe*, 184–99.

114 *Hanshu*, "Jiaoshi zhi," 25A.1206–11.

115 *Shiji*, "Fengshan shu," 28.1384–1404; *Hanshu*, "Jiaoshi zhi," 25A/B.1215–48; Ying Shao, *Fengsu tongyi jiaoshi*, "Si dian" 祀典, 8.291–94.

116 In fact, Emperor Wu performed the *feng* and *shan* rituals and then revisited those spots multiple times within twenty-one years (110, 109, 106, 104, 102, 98, 93, and 89 BCE), averaging once every three years or less.

the Horse Traveler, the Red Star [i.e. Spica], and the Five Emperors,¹¹⁷ the officials in charge of the sacrifices, led by Kuan Shu, act according to ritual propriety at the proper times every year. All these six sacrifices are led by the Great Supplicators. As for the sacrifices to the various spirits, such as the Eight Spirits as well as Bright Year, Mount Fan, and others, the Son of Heaven offers them when he visits those places but stops offering them after he leaves. The sacrifices established by local occultists are all managed by them and are not continued after they die; the officials of sacrifice are not in charge of them. Other types of sacrifices are presented according to convention. From the time the present Emperor performed the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices until his return to Mount Tai twelve years later,¹¹⁸ reverence has been paid to the Five Peaks and Four Watercourses. Nevertheless, those occultists who have been attending and offering sacrifices to spiritual beings and those who set sail to search for Penglai, the island of the immortals, in the end have failed to bring back any verifiable evidence. Those who have been attending to the spirits, like Gongsun Qing, still take giant human footprints as proof that the spirits visited, yet these claims do not have any credibility. The Emperor is also becoming increasingly impatient with the occultists' strange, circuitous words, yet he has been ensnared by their stories, cannot help listening, and still expects to see some results. Thereafter even more occultists talked about attending to the spirits. Nevertheless, their efficacy is easy to judge.

今天子所興祠，太一、后土，三年親郊祠；建漢家封禪，五年一脩封；薄忌太一及三一、冥羊、馬行、赤星、五，寬舒之祠官以歲時致禮，凡六祠，皆太祝領之。至如八神諸神、明年、凡山他名祠，行過則祠，行去則已。方士所興祠各自主，其人終則已，祠官不主。他祠皆如其故。今上封禪，其後十二歲而還，徧於五岳四瀆矣。而方士之

117 In the *Hanshu*, *wu* 五 in the same context is rendered as *wuchuang* 五牀, referring to one of Mount Zhongnan 終南山 ranges, located to the south of the Han capital city Chang'an. See *Hanshu*, "Jiaoshi zhi," 25B.1248. But in this passage, it seems that all gods being mentioned here should be better understood as celestial deities. Since Miu Ji 繆忌 (fl. 133–113) noted that "the assistants of the Great Unity are called the Five Emperors" 泰一佐曰五帝 (idem, 25A.1218), for this reason, I consider there is a lacuna in this line that *wu* is a corruption of *wudi* 五帝 and further purpose that the Five Emperors and other four celestial deities are all assistants (*zuo* 佐) of the Great Unity.

118 Emperor Wu performed *feng* and *shan* sacrifices on Mt. Tai and its adjacent area in 110 BCE. From then on he traveled to that area periodically, altogether eight times in twenty years. His later visit to Mt. Tai, as mentioned here, took place twelve years after 110 BCE and thus would have been in 98 BCE, an event that may date the completion of this piece of writing.

候祠神人，入海求蓬萊，終無有驗；而公孫卿之候神者，猶以大人之跡為解，無其效。天子益怠厭方士之怪迂語矣。然羈縻不絕，冀遇其真。自此之後，方士言神祠者彌眾，然其效可睹矣。¹¹⁹

The negative undertone against the occultists (*fangshi* 方士) in this passage, although subtle, is unmistakable. The reason that the Emperor either presented the sacrifices to the various gods himself or ordered his Great Supplicators and ritual experts to attend to the spirits was closely associated with his aim of achieving immortality. Yet after a lifetime devotion to innumerable gods and spirits both within the Han domains and abroad, Emperor Wu could not obtain what he had been promised. The failure to find immortals so as to achieve immortality made the Emperor tired of the magicians' strange sayings, but this did not stop him from worshipping gods and spirits and he continued to sponsor occultists to look for immortals, for he believed that someday someone trustworthy might indeed help him get what he wanted. It seems that, in his mind, all the failures he had encountered so far only spoke of his bad luck in the past, and if he was lucky enough, at long last his wish to achieve immortality would be fulfilled. What we see here is the typical sort of witchcraft mentality.

What is not specified in the above passage is that Emperor Wu not only frequently left his palace to worship spirits and deities all over the "Five Peaks and Four Watercourses," but he also housed in his palace compound the spirits and deities that local witches served. For instance, he housed a spirit named *Shenjun* 神君 (Spiritual wife), the spirit of a woman who used to live near the Han imperial mausoleums near the capital city and later died in child birth.¹²⁰ He also accepted the suggestion of occultist Li Shaojun 李少君 to offer sacrifices to the god of the hearth.¹²¹ Emperor Wu's fondness of witchcraft understandably attracted a considerable number of witches who hoped to someday find the Emperor's favor. In the fifth year of the Yuanshou 元狩 era (i.e. 118 BCE) when Emperor Wu fell ill in the Lake Ding 鼎湖 area, witch-doctors (*wuyi* 巫醫) from all over the Han domain flocked to there to offer their prescriptions. A man known as Youshui Fagen 游水發根 recommended a witch from the Shangjun 上郡 area (south of today's Yulin 榆林 city, Shaanxi province) to Emperor Wu. The witch was said to be able to speak on behalf of the spirits to the living and provided a secret treatment. Emperor Wu deeply

119 *Shiji*, "Fengshan shu," 28.1403–4.

120 *Hanshu*, "Jiaoshi zhi," 25A.1216.

121 *Idem*, 25A.1216–17.

trusted the Shangjun witch and felt that his health condition had greatly improved after following the instructions provided by the spirits through this witch. Emperor Wu then housed the witch in his Ganquan 甘泉 Palace so that he could receive spiritual help more readily.¹²²

If Emperor Wu's stories tell us about the rich and powerful sought to obtain immortality through witchcraft, we should also be aware that people also used witchcraft to avoid harm. Such practices underline people's belief that spirits could both benefit and harm human beings, as Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BCE) points out:

[...] In their mind, people believe that spirits and gods are able to affect their well-being and bring them misfortune. For this reason, they prepare sacrificial animals, sacrificial utensils, and sacrificial grains, and present sacrifices to the spirits and gods after fasting in order to obtain blessings with their help. Thus, it is said that people present sacrifices to spirits and gods for their own blessings.

……人心以為鬼神能與於利害，是故具犧牲、俎豆、粢盛，齋戒而祭鬼神，欲以佐成福。故曰：祭祀鬼神為此福者也。¹²³

The Han literature also provides examples showing how witchcraft was used in order to avoid harm. One such example is the *jiechu* 解除 (evil-dispelling) ritual described in Wang Chong's 王充 (27–97 CE) work, as seen here:

According to common custom, people believe that misfortunes are caused by evil spirits, holding that illness, death, as well as misfortune, punishment, execution, humiliation, or disaster are all caused by their previous transgressions. If one builds, moves house, performs a sacrifice, holds a funeral, travels and works, holds office, or marries without choosing an auspicious date or avoiding inauspicious years or months, he will offend the ghosts, confront the spirits, and suffer from his violation of the tabooed dates. Thus, the illnesses and misfortune one suffers from, the penalty one receives for violating the laws as well as one's death and even the perishing of one's whole family are all caused by one's carelessness and violation of the taboos.

122 Idem, 25A.1220.

123 *Xinshu jiaozhu* 新書校注, coll. and annot. Yan Zhenyi 閻振益 and Zhong Xia 鍾夏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), "Daode shuo" 道德說, 8.328. Ying Shao's *Fengsu tongyi* provides an example illuminating such beliefs, see *Fengsu tongyi jiaoshi*, 8.302.

世俗信禍崇，以為人之疾病、死亡及更患、被罪、戮辱、權笑¹²⁴皆有所犯。起功、移徙、祭祀、喪葬、行作、入官、嫁娶，不擇吉日，不避歲月，觸鬼逢神，忌時相害。故發病生禍、絀法入罪，至于死亡、殫家滅門，皆不重慎、犯觸忌諱之所致也。¹²⁵

Although the above citation belongs to a piece of early Eastern Han literature, what it describe as the “common custom” could in fact have been a longstanding pattern of thinking. The formation of a customary way of thinking and behaving in a society usually requires a long period of time. In fact, avoiding harm and praying for blessings through sacrifices are two sides of the same coin. So it should not be surprising if what is described in Wang Chong’s work was practiced during or even before Emperor Wu’s reign.¹²⁶ Here I would like to give a few examples on both sides to sketch a picture of witchcraft during Emperor Wu’s reign with both transmitted and newly discovered materials.

Let us first take, for example, the aforementioned Shenjun the Spiritual Wife that Emperor Wu housed in his palatial compound. Shenjun was a woman who had previously died in child birth. It is said that after her spirit possessed two other women, they worshiped her as a deity in a chamber. Her power was recognized soon after her predictions about people’s illnesses, fortune, and misfortune proved to be true. As her fame spread, Emperor Wu’s grandmother also went to present sacrifices to her. People believed that Shenjun repaid Emperor Wu’s grandmother by bringing good fortune to her children and grandchildren. The enthronement of Emperor Wu was the most convincing proof of Shenjun’s power and probably also the reason that Emperor Wu housed her in his palace.¹²⁷

Another example is that Emperor Wu believed illnesses were caused by evil spirits. But he was convinced that the spirit summoned by the Shangjun witch had cured his illness. Similar examples were abundant in Emperor Wu’s time. For instance, in the fourth year of the Yuanguang 元光 era (i.e. 131 BCE), former Counselor-in-Chief Tian Fen 田蚡 (d. 131 BCE) was seriously ill and about to die. What was strange is that while on his deathbed he constantly

¹²⁴ The character *xiao* 笑 here is interchangeable with *yao* 夭 for their shared compound vowel *-iog, and, like the character *huan* 權, means disaster.

¹²⁵ *Lunheng jiaoshi*, “Bian sui,” 24.1008.

¹²⁶ Discussed later in this section, the contents of “daybooks” excavated from Qin and Han tombs at Shuihudi 睡虎地 and elsewhere also support this inference.

¹²⁷ *Hanshu*, “Jiaoshi zhi,” 25A.1216.

cried for forgiveness. A witch claiming to have the ability to see spirits even in daytime was summoned to Tian Fen's room. He immediately detected the spirits of two of Tian's political enemies there and said that the spirits were causing Tian Fen pain in revenge for what he had done to them. Consequently, Tian's death was regarded as payback for what he had done to his political enemies.¹²⁸

The almanac writings (*rishu* 日書 “daybook”) discovered in the Han and pre-Han tombs also serve as good reference points for the above passages. Possibly associated with the *rizhe* 日者 (diviners of auspicious days) mentioned in the *Shiji*,¹²⁹ the almanac writings broadly speak of people's practices resulting from their belief that illness or disasters can be avoided by taking into consideration tabooed dates, or particular burial practices, residential locations, etc. The reasoning underlying the almanac writings is that a violation of the taboos inevitably causes the malevolent spirits to act against those who violated their taboos.¹³⁰

In short, with all these examples listed above, it is quite plain that Emperor Wu, like his contemporaries, lived in a witchcraft environment and had been heavily influenced by both witchcraft thinking and practice. The deep permeation of this sort of thinking in such an environment would inevitably have influenced his actions, both in his daily life and in statewide decision-making. Viewed from this perspective, witchcraft characterized Emperor Wu's

128 *Shiji*, “Wei Qi, Wu'anhou liezhuan” 魏其武安侯列傳, 107.2854.

129 *Idem*, “Rizhe liezhuan” 日者列傳, 127.3215–22.

130 For example, see *Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin mu*, plates 121–22, 133–34. The newly discovered early almanac literature shed important light on early Chinese popular culture, including the practice of witchcraft in the Qin and Han periods. A comprehensive study of the almanac writing resulting from an international collaboration is now available for us to see at least some aspects of the Qin and Han people's daily life based on their writing. See Donald Harper and Marc Kalinowski, eds., *Books of Fate and Popular Culture in Early China: The Daybook Manuscripts of the Warring States, Qin, and Han* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), esp. 57–90 (Ch. 2, “Daybooks: A Type of Popular Hemerological Manual of the Warring States, Qin, and Han” by Liu Lexian), 207–47 (Ch. 5, “Daybooks and the Spirit World” by Yan Changgui 晏昌貴), 305–35 (Ch. 8, “Daybooks in Qin and Han Religion” by Marianne Bujard). Also see Liu Lexian, *Jianbo shushu wenxian tanlun*, 40–73; Huang Ruxuan 黃儒宣, *Rishu tuxiang yanjiu* 《日書》圖像研究 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2013), passim; Cheng Shaoyuan 程少軒, *Fangmatan jian shizhan gu yishu yanjiu* 放馬灘簡式占古佚書研究 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2018), passim; Ethan Harkness, “Good Days and Bad Days: Echoes of the Third-Century BCE Qin Conquest in Early Chinese Hemerology,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 139, no. 3 (2019): 545–68.

life and governance, especially during the later years of his reign.

Secondly, to specify how belief in spiritual beings had influenced the life of the Han people, let us examine their belief that spirits participated in military affairs and could help those who worshipped them to win battles. For example, after Liu Bang and his followers stormed the district seat Pei 沛 to announce their rebellion against the Qin, the first thing they did was to present a sacrifice to the Yellow Emperor 黃帝 and Chiyou 蚩尤, gods of warfare.¹³¹ In fact, invoking help from spirits in warfare was considered a crucial skill for winning a war in the early Western Han, as we can see from this description of Emperor Wu's military expedition to the south:

That fall, in order to attack the Southern Yue, Emperor Wu presented sacrifices to the Great Unity and prayed for victory. He ordered that a flag be drawn using a bramble stick with a composition of the sun, the moon, the dipper, and a flying dragon to represent the Great Unity (i.e. Kochab) and its three adjacent stars to create what is known as the Sharp Weapon of Great Unity, naming it the Spiritual Flag. He presented sacrifices to the spirit of war and prayed for victory. Then the Grand Astrologer held the flag, pointing its tip to the state that was going to be attacked.

其秋，為伐南越，告禱太一。以牡荊畫幡，日月北斗登龍，以象太一三星，為太一鋒，名曰「靈旗」，為兵禱。則太史奉以指所伐國。¹³²

The Great Unity mentioned here was a powerful celestial spirit. Recommended to Emperor Wu by the local witches whom Emperor Wu trusted, this spirit was worshipped both in a suburb of the capital city and in the imperial palatial compound.¹³³ This spirit was also believed to have the power to protect the Han armies and lead them to victory and thus its worship was a key element of military rituals. Moreover, the Grand Astrologer who carried out this ritual belonged to the official *wu* system with a rank comparable with the imperial Suppliant (*zhu* 祝), Ancestral Temple Priest (*zong* 宗), and Diviner (*bu*

131 *Shiji*, “Gaozu benji” 高祖本紀, 8.350; cf. idem, “Lisheng, Lu Jia liezhuan” 酈生陸賈列傳, 97.2695, in which Li Yiji 酈食其 (ca. 268–203 BCE) called Liu Bang's troops “soldiers of Chiyou” 蚩尤之兵, meaning they were blessed and sanctioned by Heaven.

132 Idem, “Fengshan shu,” 28.1395. A similar method is also mentioned in the *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, see *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋, coll. and annot. Wang Ming 王明, expanded and rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 15.269–70.

133 *Hanshu*, “Jiaoshi zhi,” 25A.1218, 1220.

卜).¹³⁴ In this context, the Grand Astrologer acted as an official *wu*. The successful conquest of the Southern Yue as the result of this military ritual only strengthened people's belief in the power of witchcraft. Another related outcome of this military victory was Emperor Wu's incorporation of the Yue witches into his statewide religious system. He issued an order to build temples for Yue *wu* in the imperial capital, to present sacrifices to their spirits, and to use the rooster divinatory method in serving the imperial court.¹³⁵

Extant records also indicate that two rival powers would deploy witchcraft in order to harm each other. For example, a Xiongnu 匈奴 captive confessed that Xiongnu witches were often sent to cast spells on the Han armies by burying goats and cows under the roads (sometimes under the waterways) that the armies took. He further revealed that during the relatively peaceful intervals of the long antagonistic relationship between the two sides, witchcraft was still practiced in an attempt to harm the Han rulers. Even the horses and fur clothes that the Xiongnu leaders presented to Emperor Wu had had spells cast on them by witches.¹³⁶ The Han actually did the same to the Xiongnu. For example, in the first year of the Taichu 太初 era (i.e. 104 BCE), when the Han army launched an attack against Da Yuan, Ding Furen 丁夫人 (a Southern Yue witch) and Yu Chu 虞初 (who was *Fangshi shilang* 方士侍郎 or Attendant Gentleman of the Local Occultists, during Emperor Wu's reign) cast spells on the Xiongnu and Dayuan armies in a *wu* temple.¹³⁷

Thirdly, witchcraft was also employed in order to counter natural disasters. The available information shows that the Han people considered the spirits of mountains, watercourses, or people who had been unjustly put to death to be the cause of calamities such as floods and droughts. In order to mitigate those natural disasters, sacrifices would be presented to pacify the spirits. The practice was so common during the Han that sometimes even the emperors participated in the ritual by issuing imperial edicts that ordered sacrifices to be presented to the spirits.¹³⁸ As always, witches played an active role in such rituals. In the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 (Luxuriant dew of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*), Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) offers rather detailed accounts of how witches performed the ritual prayer for rain

134 Li Ling, "Xian Qin liang Han wenzi shiliao zhong de 'wu,'" 58–59.

135 *Shiji*, "Xiao Wu benji" 孝武本紀, 12.478.

136 *Hanshu*, "Xiyu zhuan" 西域傳, 96.3913–14.

137 *Shiji*, "Xiao Wu benji," 12.483. This account also appears in *Hanshu*, "Jiaoshi zhi," 25B.1245–46.

138 For example, see *Hou Hanshu*, "Xianzong Xiao Mingdi ji" 顯宗孝明帝紀, 2.123.

in the case of spring drought as well as the ritual to stop excessive rainfall.¹³⁹ These rituals became so important that the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Master Huainan) even considers presenting sacrifices to the spirits of mountains, seas, and rivers as part of the seasonal duties to be carried out by government officials.¹⁴⁰ As an example of how a miscarriage of justice could allegedly cause an abnormal change in the weather, the *Shuoyuan* 說苑 (Garden of stories) collects a tale of how the spirit of a filial woman caused a great drought that lasted for three years in Donghai 東海 Commandery during Emperor Wu's reign. The drought was not relieved until justice was restored and sacrifices were presented to the spirit of the filial woman.¹⁴¹ An account included in the *Hou Hanshu* reports that a long-lasting summer drought was caused by the lack of proper burial for those who had had an unnatural death outside their hometowns. In order to relieve the summer drought, a local official ordered that the remains of those who did not die in their hometowns should be buried according to ritual proprieties.¹⁴²

Fourthly, the Han people also thought that witchcraft could affect childbirth. The practice of invoking spirits during pregnancy and in childbirth can be traced to the Shang dynasty.¹⁴³ In order to have male descendants and be able to transmit the imperial power, presenting sacrifices to the spirit of the High Matchmaker (*gaomei* 高禘) was institutionalized in the Han.¹⁴⁴ According to the *Liji*, worship of the High Matchmaker was a seasonal royal sacrifice before the Han dynasty,¹⁴⁵ but it became so important during the Han that Emperor Wu made two of his favorite writers-cum-officials serve as Supplicants of the Matchmaker (*Mei zhu* 禘祝). The passage says:

139 Dong Zhongshu, *Chunqiu fanlu yizheng* 春秋繁露義證, annot. Su Yu 蘇輿 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), "Qiu yu" 求雨, 74.426–39. The fact that Dong was well-known as an expert in the ritual of praying for rain is also recorded in *Shiji*, "Rulin liezhuan" 儒林列傳, 121.3127–28.

140 *Huainanzi jishi*, 5.400, 427.

141 *Shuoyuan jiaozheng* 說苑校證, coll. and annot. Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 5.108–9. A similar story happened at a later time in Shangyu 上虞 county can be found in *Hou Hanshu*, "Xunli liezhuan" 循吏列傳, 76.2472–73.

142 Idem, "Duxing liezhuan" 獨行列傳, 81.2676.

143 Hu Houxuan 胡厚宣, "Yindai hunyin jiating zongfa shengyu zhidu kao" 殷代婚姻家庭宗法生育制度考, in his *Jiaguxue Shangshi luncong chujì* 甲骨學商史論叢初輯 (Taipei: Datong shuju, 1972), 1a–35b.

144 *Hou Hanshu*, "Liyi zhi (A)" 禮儀志上, 4.3107.

145 *Liji zhengyi*, "Yueling," 13.554–56.

Crown Prince Li, Liu Ju, was crowned in the first year of the Yuanshou era (i.e. 122 BCE) when he was seven years old. Earlier, when the Emperor had had the Heir Apparent at the age of twenty-nine, he was very happy. He established the ritual of offering sacrifices to the Matchmaker and appointed Dongfang Shuo (fl. 140–130 BCE) and Mei Gao (fl. 140 BCE) as Supplicants of the Matchmaker.

戾太子據，元狩元年立為皇太子，年七歲矣。初，上年二十九乃得太子，甚喜，為立禱，使東方朔、枚皋作禱祝。¹⁴⁶

That Emperor Wu established this sacrificial ritual for the spirit of the High Matchmaker speaks of his gratitude, indicating that he ascribed the birth of his heir to the blessings of the spirit. Indeed, the Han people considered Emperor Wu's success in having multiple sons inseparable from his worshipping of the spirits. Following the same line of thinking, people considered Emperor Cheng's case an opposite example. His grandmother, the Dowager Empress, for instance, complained that the reason his grandson could not have an heir was because he had failed to offer the necessary sacrifices to the spirits as Emperor Wu had done.¹⁴⁷

Finally, witchcraft also affected the Han burial culture. People at the time firmly believed in the correlation between the burial of the dead and the fortunes of the living. Based on such a correlation, if the dead were buried in an auspicious place at an auspicious time and proper rituals were observed, the relatives of the dead would be blessed by the spirits of the dead; otherwise, the dead would bring misfortune to the living.¹⁴⁸ It is said that the great Han general Han Xin 韓信 (d. 196 BCE) was very poor when his mother died, but he chose an auspicious place to bury his mother; this choice was recognized by Sima Qian to be associated with Han Xin's later success.¹⁴⁹ The prosperity of the Eastern Han official Yuan An 袁安 (d. 92 CE) and his offspring was also attributed to his choice of an auspicious place to bury the body of his father.¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, there are also records on “iconoclasts” who defied such taboos yet still enjoyed good fortune, complicating the Han people's attitudes

146 *Hanshu*, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2741.

147 *Idem*, “Jiaoshi zhi,” 25B.1259.

148 The importance of the burial place to the family of the dead can also be seen in the *Taipingjing* 太平經. See *Taipingjing hejiao* 太平經合校, coll. and ed. Wang Ming (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), “Zang zhai jue” 葬宅訣, 50.182.

149 *Shiji*, “Huaiyinhou liezhuan” 淮陰侯列傳, 92.2629–30.

150 *Hou Hanshu*, “Yuan, Zhang, Han, Zhou liezhuan” 袁張韓周列傳, 45.1522.

towards the spirits. For example, like Han Xin, Wu Xiong 吳雄 (Excellency over the Masses / *Situ* 司徒, 151–153 CE) was poor when he was young. He could not even afford a decent funeral for his mother when she died and buried her in an abandoned tomb without consulting anyone for the proper date to bury her. Such a hasty burial was condemned by all the witches who heard about this. They predicted that Wu's whole lineage would be eradicated because of this. Yet in the end, not only did Wu Xiong become a prominent official, but his son and grandson also occupied important positions at court.¹⁵¹

The few similar examples, however, are insufficient to deny the overwhelming influence of witchcraft culture on the Han's society as a whole. In fact, even in Wu Xiong's story the influence of witchcraft on local society is evident. The undertone of the story emphasizes that it was unusual for a man not to receive punishment when violating burial taboos. Wang Chong's writing provides a glimpse of some of the Han's burial taboos:

Burial calendars instruct that burials should avoid the nine holes and sinkholes, and should pay attention to the firm (*yang*) or soft (*yin*) days and the odd or even months. An auspicious date does no harm to people. It is called an auspicious date only when the firm and the soft benefit from each other and the odd and the even correspond with each other. A burial that is not carried out according to this calendar will turn out to be ominous.

葬歷曰：葬避九空、地，及日之剛柔，月之奇耦。日吉無害，剛柔相得，奇耦相應，乃為吉良。不合此歷，轉為凶惡。¹⁵²

In addition to the burial calendars that prescribed which kind of auspicious places and dates to bury the dead, the tomb-quelling inscriptions (*zhenmu wen* 鎮墓文) were another outlet addressing the Han people's anxiety toward the spirits of the dead. In general, such texts are fairly formulaic, giving special prominence to the medium that acted on behalf of the living and passed on their message to the dead. In these texts, the medium would tell the family of the dead or the occupant of the tomb that the tomb had been exorcized and warn the spirit of the dead that he or she no longer belonged to the world of the living and must remain in the underworld.¹⁵³ Sometimes the medium, as the

151 Idem, "Guo, chen liezhuan," 46.1546.

152 *Lunheng jiaoshi*, "Ji ri" 譏日, 24.989–90.

153 Wu Rongzeng 吳榮曾, "Zhenmuwen zhong suo jiandao de Dong Han dao wu guanxi" 鎮墓文中所見到的東漢道巫關係. *Wenwu* 1981.3: 56–63.

messenger of the gods or spirits, also expressed good wishes to all the family members of the dead in order to show the power of the medium in subduing evil spirits and promote the suggested burial ritual.

Certainly, there are further examples illuminating how witchcraft culture influenced the Han people's lives, but what has been discussed above suffices to portray the witchcraft environment in which the Han people lived and with which they had to deal daily. Such a culture defined their way of understanding the world and directly influenced their behavior.

Broadly speaking, the Han people dealt with spirits in two ways. The first one was inspired by the “disasters and anomalies” theory expounded by Dong Zhongshu in his address to the ruler, but the framework of this theory may have developed even earlier. According to this theory, Heaven and the sovereign on earth, i.e. the Son of Heaven, were correlated. The sovereign was responsible for carrying out the heavenly mandate; if he did not do so, Heaven would first of all send calamities or unusual natural phenomena to warn the ruler of his wrongdoings. He would jeopardize the legitimacy of his rule if he failed to heed the warnings. To heed the warnings and maintain his legitimacy, the ruler would act according to prescribed rituals, issuing an edict expressing his determination to rectify his behavior and pacify the anger of Heaven.¹⁵⁴ This theory inevitably put the ruler — namely Emperor Wu in Dong Zhongshu's time — in a position where he had to deal with both the world of the living and the world beyond.

In contrast to Dong Zhongshu's theory that focuses on the ruler, the second way that the Han people dealt with the spirits had a much broader cultural basis. This was the idea that spirits could be subdued and manipulated through witchcraft for the benefit of anyone who sponsored the witches. In the minds of the Han people, spirits had only limited power and, like humans, they could be killed. According to the Han literature, the snake that Liu Bang killed on the road was alleged to be Son of the White Emperor while Liu Bang himself was the Son of the Red Emperor.¹⁵⁵ More interestingly, even Heaven could die, as expressed in a prophecy during the Yellow Turban rebellion (*Huangjin zhi luan* 黃巾之亂): “Blue Heaven has already died and [the rule of] Yellow Heaven shall now be established” 蒼天已死，黃天當

154 Li Hansan 李漢三, *Xian Qin liang Han zhi yinyang wuxing shuo* 先秦兩漢之陰陽五行說, 2nd ed. (Taipei: Weixin shuju, 1981), “Yinyang zaiyi shuo yu liang Han zhengzhi” 陰陽災異說與兩漢政治, 131–61.

155 *Shiji*, “Gaozu benji,” 8.347.

立.¹⁵⁶ The almanac writings excavated in Shuihudi, Yunmeng county, Hubei province mention some of the methods to kill certain spirits.¹⁵⁷ This sort of killing was usually carried out through witchcraft and witches were considered authoritative experts to do the job. According to Gao You's commentary on the *Huainanzi*, for instance, witches had the capacity to exterminate the spirits of those who had been killed in battle.¹⁵⁸

The Han people were aware of a number of techniques of controlling spirits and these techniques may have varied geographically in different periods. However, invocation and exorcism constituted the two most commonly used methods to handle spirits. Invocation was usually accompanied with sacrifices to communicate with the spirits and obtain their aid for a specific purpose such as relieving a drought, winning a battle, having a healthy pregnancy, and so on. By contrast, exorcism was a technique for warding off harm. Exorcists would perform a ritual aiming to scare the devils away, to make them sick, or even to "kill" them.¹⁵⁹ In those rituals, the props, staged or not, included animals (dogs, for instance), birds (such as roosters), plants (e.g., peach wood or paulownia), artifacts (e.g., colorful silk), tools (e.g. chisels), weapons (e.g. swords or whips), to name a few. It was widely believed that these items, if properly used, would overcome the evil influence of the spirits.

The Han literature provides abundant information on how these two witchcraft techniques were used to serve the living. The extant *Taipingjing* 太平經 (Scripture of the Great Peace) holds that invocation was invented in Heaven and bestowed on human beings for their welfare, for example, to help heal people's illnesses through supplication and incantation.¹⁶⁰ The *Hou Hanshu* describes how Qu Shengqing 麴聖卿 used magic charms to subdue and kill spirits.¹⁶¹ This method, also referred to as "enslaving the spirits of things (*shiwu* 使物)," was used during Emperor Wu's reign, according to a story of the aforementioned Li Shaojun. Li claimed to be an immortal who had lived on earth for several hundred years, and who knew how to enslave the spirits to work for him.¹⁶² Emperor Wu was an avid believer and sponsor of Shaojun,

156 *Hou Hanshu*, "Huangfu Song, Zhu Jun liezhuan," 71.2299.

157 *Yunmeng Shuihudi Qin mu*, plate 133.

158 *Huainanzi jishi*, 17.1198–99n.

159 Abundant examples of this sort can be seen in both transmitted and newly discovered texts. For example, see Ma Jixing 馬繼興, *Mawangdui gu yishu kaoshi* 馬王堆古醫書考釋 (Changsha: Hunan kexue jishu chubanshe, 1992), 635–38.

160 *Taipingjing hejiao*, "Shenzhuwen jue" 神祝文訣, 50.181–82.

161 *Hou Hanshu*, "Fangshu liezhuan" 方術列傳, 82.2749.

162 *Shiji*, "Xiao Wu benji," 12.453–54 and "Fengshan shu," 28.1385.

believing him to be an immortal and not doubting the legend of Penglai 蓬萊, land of the immortals, that Shaojun invented. He followed Li Shaojun's advice of sending magicians overseas to search for the alleged floating islands with the elixir of immortality even after Shaojun, a self-proclaimed immortal, had ironically died of an illness.¹⁶³ Even then the Emperor was still convinced that, instead of being dead, Shaojun an immortal freed from his human body and living in Heaven.

When witchcraft was applied to advance one's own personal welfare at the cost of that of others, including someone else's wealth, health, and even life, it could be defined as black magic. The controlling power that witches possessed made both their techniques and themselves potentially dangerous to other people. Although witches were not portrayed as a politically ambitious group in early Chinese literature, their clients could be rival polities, political enemies, or rival interest groups. Viewed from this perspective, witches could sometimes unwittingly get involved in power negotiations not only between the living and the dead, but also among groups or individuals among the living with different interests. The Witchcraft Incident that occurred during the latter years of Emperor Wu's reign should be understood from this perspective.

5. Reinterpreting the Witchcraft Incident

As mentioned in the *Hanshu*, a "thorough search" in the Shanglin Park and the walled capital city conducted in 92 BCE ushered us into the appalling Witchcraft Incident. Nevertheless, that search was not directly linked to witchcraft. A scholarly consensus holds that the "thorough search" conducted in 92 BCE aimed at finding the "great knight-errant in the capital city" Zhu Anshi. In order to revenge his capture by the then Counselor-in-Chief Gongsun He, who attempted to exchange Zhu for his imprisoned son, Zhu accused the Gongsun family and Princess Yangshi of casting evil spells on the Emperor. Following this line of thinking, the whole Incident of Witchcraft Incident is readily interpreted as a political conspiracy and its connection with the practice of witchcraft consequently becomes secondary; in other words, witchcraft functioned as a convenient excuse for the forthcoming ruthless political purge.

The role of witchcraft cannot be easily brushed off this way, however,

163 For the story about the Penglai immortal island, see idem, "Xiao Wu benji," 12.455; for Shaoweng 少翁 (d. 119 BCE) and Luan Da's 樂大 (d. 112 BCE) stories, see idem, 12.458, 462–71, cf. idem, "Fengshan shu," 28.1387–88, 1389–95.

especially when we consider Emperor Wu's deep involvement in witchcraft. In fact, if connecting the incident with two other events also involving "thorough searches" in the capital city area, one would reconsider the above argument: the Witchcraft Incident may not have been randomly associated with the practice of witchcraft. These two events involving "thorough searches" occurred in the first and second years of the Tianhan 天漢 era (i.e. 100–99 BCE), respectively:

In the fall [of 100 BCE], the Emperor ordered the capital city gates to be closed in order to conduct a thorough search. The criminals were exiled to guard Wuyuan Commandery.

秋，閉城門大搜。發謫戍屯五原。¹⁶⁴

In the fall [of 99 BCE], the Emperor prohibited and forbade witches from presenting sacrifices to spirits on the road. A thorough search was conducted.

秋，止禁巫祠道中者。大搜。¹⁶⁵

These two terse accounts lead to a number of speculations in commentaries on what these "thorough searches" may have meant. Some argue that these searches were not related to witchcraft while others hold that they were. However, neither of these two lines of speculation has sufficient evidence to prove their case.¹⁶⁶ Until further research can shed more light on this issue, we have to admit that it is unclear what the 100 BCE search was for. However, compared with the accounts on the 100 BCE search, the description of the

164 *Hanshu*, "Wudi ji," 6.203. Wuyuan 五原 was a border Commandery established in 127 BCE by Emperor Wu, located in present-day Inner Mongolia, that included Baotou and its adjacent areas.

165 *Ibid.*

166 *Idem*, 6.203n. To summarize the arguments of the commentators, Chen Zan holds that the search happening in 100 BCE aimed to catch "extravagant members" (*yuchizhe* 踰侈者) living in the capital while the searches in 99 BCE and 92 BCE aimed at "wicked persons" (*jianren* 姦人). But according to Li Qi 李奇 (fl. ca. 200) and Jin Zhuo 晉灼 (fl. ca. 275), all the searches were related to witchcraft. Though Chen Zan fails to give a clear definition to either term, it seems, according to Yan Shigu's commentary, that the terms for "extravagant members" and "wicked persons" had specific connotations that differentiate these people from the one connected with witchcraft. Poo Mu-chou thinks that the "extravagant members" were from powerful families and members of the royal family living in the capital and its surrounding areas while the "wicked persons" were related to witchcraft. See Poo Mu-chou, "Wugu zhi huo de zhengzhi yi," 512–15.

one carried out in 99 BCE conveys a much clearer message. Short as it is, the information about the ban on performing witchcraft on the road and the juxtaposition of this information with the search indicate that these two events were connected. The 99 BCE search was obviously related to witchcraft: the targets of this search were most probably the witches who practiced witchcraft on the road as stated.

What could have caused Emperor Wu to order a ban of practicing witchcraft on road? The answer to this question was related to the contemporary practice of witchcraft and Emperor Wu's health condition. According to the *Hanshu*, the aged Emperor Wu not only often fell ill, but also suspected that those close to him were all casting spells on him.¹⁶⁷ It is with this point that I argue the “thorough searches” conducted in 99 BCE and 92 BCE were similar in nature. The “thorough search” that triggered the Witchcraft Incident in 92 BCE was, as it unfolded, most likely a search for witches as seen in 99 BCE, an event that showed clearly how Emperor Wu, about to reach his sixties, became more and more afraid of others harming him by witchcraft.

Emperor Wu's fear of the negative impact of witchcraft was closely associated with the power that witches allegedly possessed to control spirits. He was well aware of the witchcraft practices of his time as early Han rulers followed the First Emperor of Qin's practice of “transferring his misconduct to his subordinates” (*yiguo yu xia* 移過於下) through witchcraft.¹⁶⁸ According to the “disasters and anomalies” theory, calamities and unusual events conveyed a message from the above that warned the ruler of his inappropriate behavior and failure in governance. To help the ruler avoid the pending punishment from Heaven, Imperial Supplicants (*bizhu* 秘祝) would use invocations and sacrifices to shift the misconduct of the emperor onto imperial officials.¹⁶⁹ Emperor Wen 文 (r. 180–157 BCE) ordered to stop this practice in the thirteenth year of his reign (i.e. 167 BCE). He also refused to punish those who allegedly cast spells on him.¹⁷⁰ Unlike Emperor Wen, however, Emperor Wu issued an order in the third year of his reign, stating that those who dared to cast spells on him must be punished.

Emperor Wu may have also felt that he was hated by many, including his closest circle (*zuoyou* 左右). Not only had the wars against the north and

167 *Hanshu*, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2742–43.

168 *Shiji*, “Fengshan shu,” 28.1377.

169 *Hanshu*, “Wudi ji,” 6.203n, esp. Wen Ying's 文穎 comment; *Shiji*, “Fengshan shu,” 28.1377.

170 *Shiji*, “Xiao Wen benji” 孝文本紀, 10.423–24, 427; also see idem, “Fengshan shu,” 28.1380.

northwest lasted for decades, causing the loss of tens of thousands of lives and a financial depletion of the Han Empire, signs of domestic instability had also appeared towards the end of Wudi's long reign. In the fall of 99 BCE, groups of rebels rose in Mount Tai 泰山 and Langye 瑯琊 areas (both in present-day Shandong province). Almost at the same time the ban on witchcraft practice on road was imposed. Emperor Wu dispatched the imperial army to quell the rebellions. All the officials lower than the rank of Regional Inspector (*Ci shi* 刺史) and Commandery Governor (*Jun shou* 郡守) in those areas were executed for their dereliction.¹⁷¹ It is recorded in the *Shiji* that rebellions broke out in several strategic regions around the turn of the second to the first century BCE. The above-mentioned Mt. Tai and Langye areas aside, large groups of rebels also appeared in the Nanyang 南陽 (nowadays Henan province), Chu 楚 (nowadays Hunan and part of Hubei province), Yan 燕 and Zhao 趙 (together in nowadays Hebei and part of Shanxi province) regions. The rebels considerably hindered Emperor Wu's rule in these areas by attacking the seats of local government, killing governmental officials, and releasing criminals from local prisons.¹⁷² Although the rebellions were finally suppressed under the strong leadership of Emperor Wu, they already shook Emperor Wu's confidence and used-to-be unchallengeable authority. This may have resulted in the growth of his suspicion that other people were trying to hurt him through witchcraft. Such distrust gradually reached its extreme in the later years of his reign.

If the 92 BCE search in Shanglin Park and the imperial capital city targeted at the practice of witchcraft, as recorded in the histories, the arrest of Zhu Anshi must have been a separate event. It is true that the Gongsun family, two imperial princesses, and other related figures died for their alleged involvement in witchcraft against the Emperor, but the connection between their case and the 92 BCE search is far from clear. What Zhu Anshi managed to accomplish was to take advantage of the search for witches in 92 BCE to ensnare the Gongsun family. According to an imperial edict issued in the Spring of 91 BCE that lists the crimes Gongsun He allegedly committed, he was accused of forgery of an edict to allure Zhu Anshi into the trap that led to the latter's arrest. This indicates that the eleven-day search took place in 92 BCE in the capital city and its adjacent areas may not have been aimed at Zhu Anshi.¹⁷³

171 *Hanshu*, "Wudi ji," 6.204.

172 *Shiji*, "Kuli liezhuan" 酷吏列傳, 122.3151.

173 *Hanshu*, "Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan," 66.2879.

The arrest of Zhu Anshi may have had little to do with the search for witches in 92 BCE, but the revelation that Gongsun Jingsheng and Princess Yangshi employed witches to cast spells upon the Emperor confirmed the aged Emperor's suspicions. This also explains why the Emperor would listen to the words of a criminal and sentence his own daughters and relatives to death. During Emperor Wu's reign, the punishment for those who practiced witchcraft with the aim of doing harm to the Emperor was severe. Almost three decades prior to the Witchcraft Incident, Emperor Wu's first wife Empress Chen was punished for using witchcraft against Wudi's concubine Wei Zifu (later Empress Wei) to win back Emperor Wu's favor. She was accused of "treasonous felony" (*dani* 大逆) and was deprived of imperial empress status. Chu Fu 楚服, the witch that served Empress Chen, was beheaded in the marketplace. More than three hundred other individuals involved in this case were also executed.¹⁷⁴

The punishment that Empress Chen, the witch, and other related individuals received from Emperor Wu was in accordance with legal regulations of the Han. As reflected in Zheng Xuan's commentary on the *Zhouli*, the Han legal codes prescribed that those who used black magic to harm others would receive death penalty.¹⁷⁵ Although the death penalty for those who cast spells on the Emperor had been briefly suspended in Emperor Wen's time, this was no longer the case during Emperor Wu's reign. The following case that occurred before the Witchcraft Incident in Wudi's reign also confirms this point. According to the *Shiji*, after king of Hengshan 衡山, Liu Ci 劉賜 (179–122 BCE), lost his queen Chengshu 乘舒, one of his concubines Xu Lai 徐來 became his new wife. Later, when animosity aroused between Xu Lai and the king's newly favored concubine, the latter accused Xu Lai of causing the death of the former queen by means of black magic. After a trial, Xu Lai was sentenced to death for "committing the crime of murdering the former queen Chengshu with witchcraft" 坐巫蠱殺前王后乘舒.¹⁷⁶

We should understand the struggle between Emperor Wu and his Heir Apparent, the climax of the witchcraft saga, in the same vein. Most of the records on this event focus on Jiang Chong's evil intentions as the cause of this tragedy, portraying him as the mastermind of the whole plot, but a careful examination of these records indicates that witchcraft was perhaps the key to the whole tragedy. First, even if Jiang Chong indeed had aimed to hurt the

174 Idem, "Waiqi zhuan," 97A.3948.

175 *Zhouli zhengyi*, 70.2924.

176 *Shiji*, "Huainan, Hengshan liezhuan" 淮南衡山列傳, 118.3095–97.

Crown Prince, he did it in the name of investigating witchcraft malpractices to restore the Emperor's health. As mentioned above, the Witchcraft Incident began with quite literally a witch hunt. Once the downfall of the Gongsun family (Wudi's relatives by marriage as well as his close ministers), Princesses Yangshi and Zhuyi (Wudi's daughters), and Wei Kang (Empress Wei's nephew) confirmed Emperor Wu's suspicion that "those who were close to him all used witchcraft to cast spells upon him" 疑左右皆為蠱祝詛,¹⁷⁷ it was only natural that Emperor Wu extended the scale of his campaign against witchcraft and continued the investigation of witchcraft practice in his inner circle. As clearly noted in the *Hanshu*, "taking advantage of the developing Witchcraft Incident, Jiang Chong carried out his evil deeds" 會巫蠱事起，充因此為姦。¹⁷⁸ Viewed from this perspective, the Crown Prince's violent reaction to Jiang Chong's investigation of witchcraft was a result of Emperor Wu's determination to expand the investigation after being enraged by the revelation that his own daughters and relatives were accused of using witchcraft to harm him.

Second, What Jiang Chong did was no more than to strictly follow Emperor Wu's order, though he quite intentionally led the investigation to the palace of the Heir Apparent, as the extant sources point out. Nevertheless, it was Emperor Wu who ordered a "thorough investigation of the involvement [of those close to the Emperor] in witchcraft" 窮治其事。¹⁷⁹ The reason that Emperor Wu entrusted Jiang Chong with this task was not only because Jiang agreed with him that the root of his illness "laid in witchcraft" 上疾崇在巫蠱, but also for the latter's unswerving loyalty to him all these years.¹⁸⁰ To assist the Emperor in eradicating the evil influence of witchcraft, Jiang led a serious investigation into the practice of witchcraft that involved tens of thousands of people before he had the permission to search the palace of the Heir Apparent.¹⁸¹ As a courtier well-known for his acuteness in observing the Emperor's attitudes and reading his mind, Jiang was acutely "aware of the Emperor's intention" 知上意。¹⁸² What was Emperor Wu's intention at that time? The *Hanshu* states that "in the Emperor's mind there was much that he disliked" 意多所惡, which resulted in his suspicion of "those who were close

177 *Hanshu*, "Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan," 45.2179.

178 *Idem*, "Wu wuzi zhuan," 63.2742.

179 *Ibid*.

180 *Idem*, "Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan," 45.2178. For a discussion of how Jiang Chong and Emperor Wu suited each other, see Wang Zijin, "Lun Jiang Chong," 19–20.

181 *Hanshu*, "Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan," 45.2178.

182 *Idem*, 45.2179.

to him all used witchcraft to cast spells upon him” 左右皆為蠱道祝詛。¹⁸³ It is fair to say that Jiang Chong’s attempt to inflict considerable damage on the Heir Apparent could never have been implemented had Emperor Wu not launched a campaign against witchcraft and entrusted the former with the task of investigating his inner circle including his wife, concubines, and the Heir Apparent.

Finally, we need to admit that Jiang Chong’s investigation, backed by the Emperor, indeed targeted at the practice of witchcraft. The method that Jiang Chong used when searching for evidence of witchcraft was literally digging (*jue* 掘) for wooden manikins under the imperial palatial compound as proofs of putting a curse on the Emperor. Burying wooden manikins was also the crime that Gongsun Jingsheng and Princess Yangshi were accused of having committed in the 92 BCE case. A passage in the *Hanshu* describes how Jiang Chong carried out his investigation:

Chong led the Hu witches to dig into the ground for wooden figurines, arrest those who had performed *gu* witchcraft and sacrificed at night, and search for places polluted by spirits. He ordered that once such places were discovered, those who had worshipped spirits there would be arrested, tried, and forced to admit their crimes by scotching them with red-hot irons and gripping them with iron collars. People turned on each other and accused others of their involvement in witchcraft. The officials then sentenced them for treasonous felony, and those who were accused of committing the crime of practicing witchcraft and died because of that amounted to tens of thousands.

充將胡巫掘地求偶人，捕蠱及夜祠，視鬼染汙，令有處輒收捕驗治，燒鐵鉗灼強服之。民轉相誣以巫蠱，吏輒劾以大逆亡道，坐而死者前後數萬人。¹⁸⁴

It seems that using a wooden figurine as an analogue of the cursed individual is a typical reflection of James George Frazer’s (1854–1941) Law of

183 Idem, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2742.

184 Idem, “Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan,” 45.2178. The translation follows a revision of the punctuations of the passage appearing in the Zhonghua edition of the *Hanshu*, which are mainly based on the commentaries on the term *ranwu* 染汙. Read carefully, the *Hanshu* punctuations break the flow of the sentences. For the commentaries, see idem, 45.2178–79n1–4.

Similarity (the first principle of magic).¹⁸⁵ Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), instead, emphasizes that the belief in magical power and the availability of a magical milieu are more fundamental than the “Law of Similarity” in defining magic.¹⁸⁶ Burying wooden figurines as a practice of witchcraft in Emperor Wu’s time not only reflected the defining feature of the Western Han witchcraft, it also constituted a critical way of exerting magical power upon those who believed in it. Usually, the burial of wooden figurines was accompanied with a ritual cursing the targeted individual while sacrifices were presented to the spirits. The term *gu* used in this context includes all three aspects of early Western Han witchcraft: the wooden figurine, the curse, and the sacrifice. If the offerings were burned, some traces would be left. The traces resulted from the practice of witchcraft were regarded as a source of pollution, which, in Mary Douglas’s term, was a threat to the social order representing Emperor Wu’s authority.¹⁸⁷ That is to say, there were two kinds of hard evidence of witchcraft that Jiang Chong’s team was looking for: wooden figurines buried underground and places with traces of a sacrifice on the ground. It is possible that the two coexisted, and the burying of wooden figurines certainly constituted major evidence for the practice of witchcraft. This is why the term *juegu* 掘蟲 (digging for wooden figures as evidence of the practice of witchcraft) was used when describing Jiang Chong’s search for evidence of witchcraft in the palace of the Heir Apparent.¹⁸⁸

Guided by the Hu witchcraft practitioners, Jiang Chong obtained evidence of the Heir Apparent’s involvement in witchcraft: “manikins made of paulownia” 桐木人 were discovered under the Heir Apparent’s residence.¹⁸⁹ Although Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645 CE) cites an account from the *Sanfu jiushi* 三輔舊事 (Reminiscences of the Western Han Capital City) which suggests that the wooden figurines had been planted by the Hu witchcraft practitioners working for Jiang Chong before they searched the Heir Apparent’s palace, this argument is not supported by the Han literature.

185 James George Frazer, *Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 12–43.

186 Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1968). For a structuralist explanation to the way through which magic works, also consult Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962).

187 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002).

188 *Hanshu*, “Kuai, Wu, Jiang, Xifu zhuan,” 45.2179.

189 *Ibid.* According to the sub-commentary to the *Liji*, the figurines numbered six and were all pierced by needles. *Liji zhengyi*, “Wangzhi” 王制, 13.487n.

Moreover, the *Sanfu jiushi* belongs to a later source (an early reference to this text is dated to the sixth century) that may have incorporated tales invented later, portraying Jiang Chong as the ill-intended mastermind of the Witchcraft Incident when this became the common understanding.¹⁹⁰ In fact, based on the available information, we cannot completely eliminate the possibility that the Heir Apparent or members of his inner circle indeed practiced witchcraft.

One of the challenges that the *Sanfu jiushi*'s conjecture faces is the great difficulty Jiang Chong would have faced in burying the wooden figurines in the residence of the Heir Apparent before or during the search. Since the investigation was carried out jointly by Jiang Chong and three other high officials, it would not have been easy for Jiang's people to plant the wooden figurines on the scene without being noticed by others. It would have been even more difficult for his subordinates to sneak into the residence of the Heir Apparent to plant the evidence of practicing witchcraft prior to the search. Moreover, the popular belief in witchcraft in Wudi's time means that we cannot exclude the possibility that the Heir Apparent would resort to black magic to solve the problems confronting him, such as court politics. Having been Heir Apparent for more than three decades (from 122 BCE to 91 BCE), it was possible that Liu Ju felt frustrated by his father's longevity. This sort of situation may have exacerbated the relationship between the father and son, especially after the Empress, biological mother of the Heir Apparent, became estranged and the Emperor's newly favored concubine gave birth to his youngest son. To the Heir Apparent, Wudi's exaltation of the newborn prince's mother by building a gate for her palace and naming it the "Gate of Yao's Mother" served as a sign of Emperor Wu's intention to change his heir. Under these circumstances, even if the Heir Apparent had complete faith in his father, his supporters could have resorted to black magic to help the Heir Apparent. This is exactly what we see in the case of Liu Quli's wife, who employed witches to cast spells upon Emperor Wu for often criticizing her husband for incompetence.

No matter how the evidence of practicing witchcraft was found, once the Emperor received the report about the wooden figurines discovered in the

190 See *Sanfu jiushi* 三輔舊事 as reconstructed by Qing scholar Zhang Shu 張澍 (1781–1847) on the basis of texts and anthologies much later than the Han dynasty: *Sanfu jiushi*, ed. Zhang Shu, in *Longxi jingshe congshu* 龍溪精舍叢書, comp. Zheng Guoxun 鄭國勳 (Chaoyang: Chaoyang Zheng shi jiashu, 1917), 55: 10a, retrieved from Chinese Text Project, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&res=77986>. Also see Xin Deyong, "Han Wudi Taizi Ju shixing wugu shi shushuo," 117.

palace of the Heir Apparent, the latter certainly understood that he would be in deep trouble. Emperor Wu's first empress, Empress Chen, was severely punished for her involvement in witchcraft. So were the Gongsun family and the two princesses. The Heir Apparent must have been aware of these cases. In order to avoid the foreseeable dire consequences of a witch-hunt victim, the Heir Apparent, with the collaboration of his teacher and mother, ventured forth to lead a coup against his father. But the hastily mobilized fighters led by the Heir Apparent could hardly compare with the imperial army backed by the Emperor in terms of fighting capability. The defeated Heir Apparent was forced to flee the capital city after a bitter fight that lasted for several days. The Emperor did not forgive the Heir Apparent, not until the latter was forced to kill himself several months later.

Since the second phase of the Witchcraft Incident ended with the death of the Heir Apparent and consequently the vacancy of the position of Heir Apparent, it has long been thought that the Witchcraft Incident was a political scheme rather than a case of witchcraft. If we read the *Hanshu* description of Liu Quli's case carefully, however, it does suggest that witchcraft still served as a key factor in this phase of the event.¹⁹¹ First, it mentions that in 90 BCE, a year after the Heir Apparent's foiled coup attempt, an intensive investigation of the practice of witchcraft was still ongoing. It seems that the coup launched by the Heir Apparent only further confirmed the Emperor's suspicion that those close to him were using witchcraft against him. The discovery of the wooden figurines in the palace of the deceased Heir Apparent only strengthened Emperor Wu's resolve in continuing the investigation.

When re-examining the downfall of the Liu and Li families, we find that the main cause of their tragedy was actually witchcraft. According to a report by Guo Xiang 郭纘, a eunuch trusted by Emperor Wu, the wife of the Chancellor of the Left Liu Quli had hired witches to cast spells on the Emperor. As we have already discussed, she did this for her husband because he was often criticized by the Emperor. Rather than using wooden figurines such as the ones discovered later at the palace of the Heir Apparent, Liu Quli's wife hired witches to present sacrifices at an altar, asking the spirits to bring calamity upon the Emperor. Viewed from the perspective of Liu Quli's wife, her action was not political. Rather, witchcraft served as a means of solving problems in her life.

The punishment that Liu Quli and Li Guangli received also resulted from their involvement in witchcraft. On one occasion, they "prayed and presented

191 *Hanshu*, "Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan," 66.2883.

sacrifices to the spirits together” 共禱祠, attempting to put their relative, another son of Emperor Wu, on the throne.¹⁹² Certainly, the accusation of “sneakily plotting a rebellion” 陰謀逆亂¹⁹³ made against Liu and Li was a serious political charge, but in a witchcraft society, even Li’s and Liu’s joint attempt to enthrone another prince of Emperor Wu should be understood more from a religious perspective. Like burying wooden figurines in the palace of the Heir Apparent, the attempt to place a prince first in line to the throne could be interpreted as wishing for the Emperor’s death. To Emperor Wu, a monarch who had tried everything to become an immortal so as to perpetuate his rule, Li’s and Liu’s invocations and sacrifices were so treacherous that the two deserved the most ultimate punishment.

There is another example, also involving a Han prince, that further illustrates how deeply witchcraft influenced the Han people’s decision-making. Liu Xu 劉胥, king of Guangling 廣陵 (r. 117–54 BCE), was one of the five sons fathered by Emperor Wu. When Emperor Wu’s successor, Emperor Zhao, still had no son years after ascending the throne, Liu Xu thought his time had come. He hired a witch from the Chu area to cast spells on Emperor Zhao. On one occasion the witch was thought to be possessed by Emperor Wu and, through the witch’s mouth, Emperor Wu’s spirit announced that he would make Liu Xu emperor. Liu Xu was greatly pleased and the witch was generously rewarded. The king asked the witch to continue to cast spells on the young Emperor at Mt. Wu 巫山. As Liu Xu expected, Emperor Zhao soon died. Liu Xu considered Emperor Zhao’s death to be the result of witchcraft and called the practitioner an “excellent witch” 良巫. Nevertheless, Liu Xu was not chosen as successor; instead, it was Liu He 劉賀 (92–59 BCE), king of Changyi, who succeeded Emperor Zhao. Again, Liu Xu asked the witch to cast spells on Liu He. Interestingly, Liu He was dethroned in less than thirty days after succeeding to the throne. This made Liu Xu trust the witch more than ever. Unfortunately, the opportunity to succeed the throne eluded him again. Emperor Xuan 宣 (r. 74–48 BCE) was enthroned after Liu He was deposed. Lamenting his bad luck, Liu Xu again ordered the witch to cast spells on Emperor Xuan. He only temporarily stopped putting curses after the Emperor appointed a successor to his kingdom and awarded him a considerable amount of money. Yet soon after one of Xu’s sons was sentenced to death for a crime he committed and part of Xu’s enfeoffed land was confiscated by the imperial court, he ordered the witch to resume black magic against Emperor

192 Ibid.

193 Idem, 66.2885.

Xuan. Eventually, Liu Xu's practice of witchcraft was uncovered and he was sentenced to death.¹⁹⁴

Since Liu Xu had witnessed the tragic Witchcraft Incident, including its bloody ending and horrific aftermath, there is little doubt that he understood the potential danger in casting spells on the Emperor. The reason that he still resorted to witchcraft to realize his political ambitions must be connected with how the Han people's religious mentality and the role that witchcraft played in it. Liu Xu's activities as sketched above suggest that witchcraft was not merely regarded as one possible solution to issues such as imperial power struggles and succession to power, it was also a valid one in the Han people's minds. Liu Xu's story also suggests that witchcraft continued to play a significant role in court politics after Wudi's ruthless handling of the series of events involving witchcraft. This inspires new understanding of the whole Witchcraft Incident. It consisted of a series of events that probably were not merely political calculations; rather, these events were embedded in the Western Han religious tradition and must also be understood from the perspective of witchcraft that in my mind defines the whole Incident.

Did the Witchcraft Incident change the Han people's thinking about witchcraft and affect the course of Wudi's governance in his final years and thereafter? A scholarly consensus holds that the outcome of the Witchcraft Incident awakened Emperor Wu to the untrustworthiness of witchcraft and made him eventually doubt its effectiveness. This argument is based on what Emperor Wu did after the death of the Heir Apparent, including the imperial order to punish those who had caused the death of Liu Ju, commission of constructing a couple of memorial structures for the late Heir Apparent, and expression of his disappointment with the handling of witchcraft, as recorded in the *Hanshu*:

As time passed, many things regarding the case of witchcraft turned out to be untrue. The Emperor realized that the Heir Apparent's reaction to the investigation resulted from nothing but fear. Moreover, Ju Qianqiu contended that the Heir Apparent was treated unjustly. The Emperor thus

194 Idem, "Wu wuzi zhuan," 63.2760–62.

promoted Qianqiu as Counselor-in-Chief,¹⁹⁵ executed all family members of Jiang Chong, and burned Su Wen on the Heng Bridge. As for the person who killed the Heir Apparent at Quanjili, he had been made Governor of Beidi, but later, his whole lineage was executed. The Emperor took pity on the innocent Heir Apparent and thus ordered the construction of the Missing-My-Son Palace and the Wishing-for-My-Son-to-Return Terrace in the Hu district [where the Heir Apparent died].

久之，巫蠱事多不信。上知太子惶恐無他意。而車千秋復訟太子冤，上遂擢千秋為丞相，而族滅江充家，焚蘇文於橫橋上，及泉鳩里加兵刃於太子者，初為北地太守，後族。上憐太子無辜，乃作思子宮，為歸來望思之臺於湖。¹⁹⁶

This passage is included in the biographical account of the Heir Apparent as a follow-up on the witchcraft case after his death. The message that this passage conveys is not about witchcraft in general but specifically about the 91 BCE bloodshed in the capital city in which the Heir Apparent involved. The line “many things regarding the case of witchcraft turned out to be untrue” 巫蠱事多不信 should also be understood in this context rather than a general statement to say Emperor Wu no longer considered witchcraft trustworthy for elsewhere in the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu*, it is recorded that Emperor Wu never truly stopped believing in the power of magic.¹⁹⁷ The above passage emphasizes Emperor Wu’s reconciliation with the late Crown Prince and the Emperor’s realization that accusing his son of rebellion was a mistake. Also, the Emperor killed Jiang Chong (and his whole family) and Su Wen not because the two carried out the disastrous investigation on witchcraft, but because they forced the Heir Apparent to take military action. In fact, Ju Qianqiu defended the Heir Apparent by downplaying witchcraft and merely focusing on the military action that the Heir Apparent was forced to take. Earlier Elder Mao also focused on this aspect to persuade Emperor Wu to forgive the Heir Apparent while stressing the father-son bond to “move and

195 Here the narrative seems to suggest that the death of Jiang Chong, his family, eunuch Su Wen, and the person who killed the Heir Apparent followed the promotion of Ju Qianqiu to Counselor-in-Chief, immediately after he advocated for the Heir Apparent’s innocence. In fact, Ju Qianqiu was first appointed as Chamberlain for Dependencies (*Dahonglu* 大鴻臚) when he tried to rehabilitate the Heir Apparent in 90 BCE and was promoted to Counselor-in-Chief in 89 BCE.

196 *Hanshu*, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2747.

197 *Shiji*, “Fengshan shu,” 28.1403–4; *Hanshu*, “Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan,” 66.2885.

awaken” the Emperor.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, Emperor Wu never expressed that his disbelief in witchcraft, nor did he say that the Heir Apparent’s use of witchcraft was harmless. Had the Emperor truly believed that the Heir Apparent was not doing anything wrong in this regard, he would have stopped the imperial army from hunting for the Heir Apparent on the run and would not have rewarded the individuals that killed the Heir Apparent in the first place. The Heir Apparent was still alive at the moment when Elder Mao’s words “moved and awakened” the Emperor. Viewed from this perspective, the line “many things regarding the case of witchcraft turned out to be untrue” does not mean that Emperor Wu no longer trusted the power of witchcraft. It makes more sense to understand it as a reflection of Emperor Wu’s dissatisfaction with Jiang Chong’s handling of the witchcraft case.

Moreover, the argument that Emperor Wu considered witchcraft untrustworthy after the death of his Heir Apparent contradicts the Emperor’s implementation of a new policy that aimed to investigate more thoroughly and control more tightly the practice of witchcraft in the capital area. The history records that in 89 BCE, two years after the death of the Heir Apparent, Emperor Wu set up a new official position called *Sili jiaowei* 司隸校尉 or Metropolitan Commandant, which reported directly to the Emperor and was in charge of the investigation of witchcraft and the monitoring of the “extremely wicked ones” 大姦猾.¹⁹⁹ In fact, Emperor Wu’s continuous investigations on witchcraft after the death of the Heir Apparent were so merciless that “all his subjects were frightened” 群下恐懼.²⁰⁰ But in order not to anger the Emperor and put their lives in jeopardy, Ju Qianqiu and some other high officials tactfully brought up this issue by first congratulating the Emperor on his longevity and singing highly of his virtue. Emperor Wu immediately understood the message behind their congratulations. He did not punish them for the admonition, but in a letter responding to their advice against his mercilessness in handling the witchcraft cases, Emperor Wu defended the necessity of his iron rule by emphasizing that witchcraft was still widely practiced even after all he did. After complaining the court officials for not paying enough attention to cases of witchcraft, he pointed out the resulting threats he faced and expressed his determination to continue the investigations of witchcraft:

Even now many of the remaining witches have escaped punishment and

¹⁹⁸ *Hanshu*, “Wu wuzi zhuan,” 63.2745.

¹⁹⁹ *Idem*, “Baiguan gongqing biao” 百官公卿表, 19A.737.

²⁰⁰ *Idem*, “Gongsun, Liu, Tian, Wang, Yang, Cai, Chen, Zheng zhuan,” 66.2884.

their practice of witchcraft has not been stopped. They secretly harm me and encroach upon my health; they practice witchcraft nearby and far away. I am so ashamed of this. How can this be called longevity? Excuse me for not raising the goblet you presented. I sincerely ask the Counselor-in-Chief and Two-Thousand-Bushel Officials to return to your offices. It is said in the *Documents*, “Unprejudiced, impartial, the kingly way is vast and plain.” Say no more on this subject.

至今餘巫頗脫不止，陰賊侵身，遠近為蠱，朕媿之甚，何壽之有？敬不舉君之觴！謹謝丞相、二千石各就館。《書》曰：「毋偏毋黨，王道蕩蕩。」毋有復言。²⁰¹

Besides his complaints about the officials' incompetence in dealing with witchcraft, this text again confirms Emperor Wu's concerns about his health, which was negatively affected by witchcraft to his mind. The reason leading to his unmerciful purge of those who used witchcraft against him, as pointed out in this passage, was to achieve longevity. After refusing the tactful admonition of Ju Qianqiu and other high officials, he even cited a line from the “Hongfan” 洪範 (Grand patterns) of the *Documents*, urging his high officials to strengthen the handling of witchcraft in view of the Emperor's governing principles. As the Emperor's will prevailed, his actions against the practice of witchcraft to harm him were immediately justified with moral arguments, and his ruthlessness in dealing with the Heir Apparent, his daughters, his Chancellors, and many others involved in the witchcraft scandals, were also legitimized. The Emperor's letter sent a clear message to his officials: his campaign of hunting down the witches was unstoppable and the officials' admonition in this regard, futile and unwise. His firm stance about the need to control witchcraft, revealed here in his own words more than anything else, explains the nature of and the driving force behind the series of violent events that cost the lives of tens of thousands; or in other words, witchcraft was not a thin, decorative veneer but the deep-rooted reason defining all the intertwined events that as a whole have been called the Witchcraft Incident.

6. Conclusion

The Witchcraft Incident under discussion, by definition, is a collective term for a series of intertwined events involving the practice of witchcraft

201 *Idem*, 66.2885.

during the latter part of Emperor Wu's reign. Since this period foreshadowed some big changes in the Western Han court power structure and governing principles, including the relationship with its northern and northwestern neighboring polities, scholars tend to read these events related to witchcraft in their larger socio-political context, interpreting the whole series of events as one or multiple political schemes staged by one or multiple specific individuals, for instance, by Emperor Wu, by his in-law groups, or by the officials involved in the investigations while downplaying or even ignoring the role of witchcraft in the development of these events. In reconstructing these events on the basis of the Han historical writings and with due recognition for previous scholarship, this study examines the terms *wu* and *gu*, and how witchcraft worked in the social and cultural of the Western Han context, especially during Emperor Wu's reign. It further explores how political struggles, policy changes, and decision-making were shaped by the Han people's religious beliefs and practices. The Witchcraft Incident serves as a convincing example demonstrating how witchcraft determined the course of a number of significant events during Wudi's late reign. The Han witchcraft mentality and practice, more than previously thought, were a significant factor in the development of the historical events of the time.

The recognition of the significant role that witchcraft played in the Han social and political life provides a necessary religious dimension to our understanding of the history of Han. Religious beliefs mattered a great deal both in normal people's daily lives, in imperial court struggles, and in decision-making. The Han people took witchcraft seriously in traveling, healing rituals, child birth, marriages, funerals, and so forth, and it constituted a very important part of their way of thinking and behavior. While nowadays it may sound superstitious, for the Han people, witchcraft served as an indispensable means to solve their problems, and as a practice it was widely accepted by everyone from villagers, officials to princes, princesses, empresses, and emperors. To have a full picture of Han society and history, we should take witchcraft thinking and practice into serious consideration.

Emperor Wu's extremely strong belief in the effectiveness of witchcraft and its influence upon his welfare and health explains why the Witchcraft Incident happened in a rather short period but cost so many lives. As examined above, all aspects of the Emperor's life — his personal, familial, social, and political life — were deeply embedded in the witchcraft environment of his time and evidently constituted an important factor affecting his thinking and decision-making. His strong belief in the effectiveness of witchcraft consequently led him to make the inevitable connection between the practice

of witchcraft in his inner circle and his deteriorating health condition in the final years. This way of thinking drove Emperor Wu to paranoia, which, according to Lao Kan 勞幹 (1907–2003), only worsened the more the Emperor constantly took “elixirs” (*danyou* 丹藥) made for him in order to achieve longevity. The poisonous lead and mercury included in the elixirs may have damaged the Emperor’s nervous system and made him more easily agitated and suspicious.²⁰² Although I remain cautious about Lao Kan’s emphasis on the negative influence of lead and mercury upon Wudi’s nervous system, I do agree with him on the argument that unlike his predecessor Emperor Wen, Emperor Wu could not tolerate anyone that attempted to harm his health through witchcraft, even when those being suspected were his wife, concubines, ministers, or children. The worse his health condition got, the more suspicious he became and the deeper the investigation reached. When the investigation was challenged by the Crown Prince, also a powerful figure at court, the massive slaughter occurred.

Although the series of events called the Witchcraft Incident caused a massive loss of lives, including the ones of many powerful political figures, the available evidence does not support the theory that there was a mastermind behind all these events, be it Emperor Wu, Jiang Chong, or any other figures suggested by scholars. Witchcraft is a more consistent clue than any other factor determining the course of the Witchcraft Incident. Emperor Wu indeed was, more than anyone, the central figure in the Witchcraft Incident, but he did not plan it as a purge to get rid of his political enemies. Neither was there a political camp led by the Crown Prince, whether at court or at the local level, that could have competed for political dominance against the pro-Emperor camp. Nor is it clear that any other major threat could have forced the Emperor to reshuffle the powerful groups at court. It is also difficult to interpret the Witchcraft Incident as a court struggle for succession to the throne, for the surviving records simply do not support such an inference. Other figures, such as Jiang Chong and Su Wen, were merely among the many participants in the Witchcraft Incident. They may have offered their advice to and carried out the orders of the Emperor, yet there is no convincing evidence suggesting that any of them had the power or actually did anything to manipulate the Emperor. Moreover, those who argue that the Witchcraft Incident was a sort of political manipulation need to answer the question of why the whole task was fulfilled by means of witchcraft, an almost ubiquitous practice during the Han, more than anything else. It appears to be an overinterpretation to attribute the political changes in mid- and late Western

202 Lao Kan, “Duiyu ‘Wugu zhi huo de zhengzhi yiyi’ de kanfa,” 542–44.

Han to an arguably well-planned political strategy carried out through the investigation of witchcraft during Emperor Wu's later reign.

It is also worth noting the recent debate on the credibility and reliability of the sources regarding the Witchcraft Incident. Arguing against Tian Yuqing's influential study of the Witchcraft Incident that heavily relies on the *Zizhi tongjian* records, Xin Deyong 辛德勇 forcefully shows how Sima Guang intentionally employed much later narratives to reconstruct the Witchcraft Incident to serve his own purposes and, as a result, we cannot consider the records included in the *Zizhi tongjian* to be reliable.²⁰³ Instead, Xin suggests that we should trust and depend on the much earlier records preserved in the *Hanshu* and other contemporaneous works to understand the Witchcraft Incident.²⁰⁴ I would argue that we should not unconditionally trust those earlier materials either because, like what Sima Guang did in the *Zizhi tongjian*, the *Hanshu* author(s) and the authors of other works dated to the Han also selected materials to write history from their own perspectives to fulfill their own purposes. This is especially so when we consider that most of the earlier records related to the Witchcraft Incident available to us are piecemeal passages scattered in a handful of biographical accounts of various individuals.

Finally, I would emphasize that without a clear definition of the Witchcraft Incident, we lack the minimal agreement required for an effective discussion of this historical incident. This is why a reconstruction of the Witchcraft Incident based on various records constituted the first part of this article. The reconstruction sets up a framework in which the series of events are connected with one another and, thus, can be meaningfully examined. In this framework, the records preserved in the *Hanshu* or other early sources do not contain more authority than the *Zizhi tongjian* or even the *Hanwu gushi* 漢武故事 (Tales of Emperor Wu of Han) narratives, and vice versa. What truly matters is how these events were presented in their due contexts and how they were connected to one another in terms of the practice of witchcraft. Without this framework, the records are merely scattered, miscellaneous materials and cannot turn into valid textual evidence. This article examines the Witchcraft Incident through the practice of witchcraft, focusing especially on Wudi's time for, in this framework, the practice of witchcraft is the most consistent clue that helps piece together all the events of the Witchcraft Incident. What made the Witchcraft Incident unique, besides Emperor Wu's paranoia caused by his strong belief in a causal relation between witchcraft practice and his

203 Xin Deyong, *Zhizao Han Wudi*, 25–95.

204 Idem, “Han Wudi Taizi Ju shixing wugu shi shushuo,” *passim*.

deteriorating health, as emphasized by Lao Kan, was Emperor Wu's extreme efforts to stop the operation of witchcraft commonly practiced in his time for his own health and personal welfare. Those efforts not only turned out to be deadly when the Emperor's position of unchallengeable supremacy was challenged by his own crown prince, but also proved ironic, for even the Emperor himself deeply believed in the efficacy of witchcraft that he practiced every day while in the meantime trying to prevent others from doing it. The beginning and unfolding of the Witchcraft Incident obviously reflected such efforts accompanying with such irony whereas it ended with the Emperor's realization of his failure in this regard after several rounds of heavy bloodshed. In this sense, we may conclude that this notorious historical event also exposes the limit of total and unchecked imperial power as expressed in a saying that "one man may steal a horse while another may not look over a hedge."²⁰⁵

205 Its equivalent Chinese proverb reads: *zhixu zhouguan fanghuo, buxubaixing diandeng* 只許州官放火，不許百姓點燈，literally rendered as "while a Prefect is allowed to 'set fire to the city,' common people are forbidden to light their lanterns." Notwithstanding a reflection of an understanding that does not exactly match what this proverb originally conveys, this rendering is now widely acceptable. The source of this proverb is connected with a local governor named Tian Deng 田登，who forced his subordinates to strictly observe his name taboo and not to use any character pronounced the same as *deng* 登. For this reason, people living in the whole prefecture used the term *huo* 火 (fire), to replace *deng* 燈 (lamp or lantern). Accordingly, the official notice rephrased the activity of celebration *fangdeng* 放燈 (lantern-lighting) as *fanghuo* 放火，literally meaning to set afire, in the seat of the prefecture during the Lantern Festival. Although the literal understanding of this proverb somewhat disaccords with its original, both emphasize the irony of the sort of official privilege that would not last forever. For the source of this proverb, see Lu You 陸游, *Laoxuean biji* 老學庵筆記, punc. and coll. Li Jianxiong 李劍雄 and Liu Dequan 劉德權 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 5.61.

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漢武帝晚年的巫蠱與獵巫—— 重新評估巫蠱之禍

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發生在漢武帝晚年的巫蠱之禍，很長時間以來一直被解釋成是一系列政治陰謀的結果，而這一事件的後果，也與武帝晚年以及武帝之後的漢代政壇、政策以及政治權力結構的一系列變化有直接的聯繫。與以往的研究不同，本文從西漢巫術思維和巫術實踐的角度，對巫蠱之禍這一歷史事件重新進行了考察，並認為，與大多數屬於無法證實的政治陰謀的說法相比，巫術不但為巫蠱之禍的發生提供了宗教背景，而且是導致該事件發生和發展的主要原因。本文進而認為，漢武帝對巫術行為的嚴厲禁止並非意味著他不再相信巫術的力量和效用，武帝這樣做完全是出於他個人身體健康和益處的考慮。在一個巫術成風的社會中，造成巫蠱之禍這一不同尋常的悲劇發生的最直接的原因在於這樣一個悖論，即漢武帝自己雖然終生相信巫術的力量，依靠巫術的能力行事，然而晚年卻不惜一切代價試圖阻止他人施行巫術，認為他人行巫蠱之術是導致他本人健康狀況惡化的根本原因。

關鍵詞：巫蠱之禍 巫蠱 漢武帝 戾太子 江充