

**EXCERPTS FROM THE CASEBOOK OF THE COUNTY MAGISTRATE
LAN DINGYUAN: "DEPRAVED RELIGIOUS SECTS DECEIVE
PEOPLE"**

Introduction

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the county magistrate was the lowest level of government official and the only government official with whom the common person might have any contact whatsoever (and even that was rare). County magistrates were generally middle-aged men who had passed a series of rigorous state examinations in order to qualify for appointment to office. In an effort to prevent corruption, magistrates were not appointed to counties in their home provinces. In the early eighteenth century, China had 1,528 county-level administrative units, and the average population of a county was 150,000. By the late eighteenth century, there were 1,502 county-level administrative units, with an average population of 200,000.

The county magistrate was the single government official in charge of a county. He lived and did his business in a walled office-residence compound called a yamen, in the county seat. He was assisted by a small staff of clerks and runners on the regular payroll — a larger number of clerks and runners whose income needed to be generated by informal fees, gifts, and bribes — and by private secretaries paid for from his own purse.

The magistrate was in effect a surrogate emperor: He was responsible for everything from tax collection to roads, bridges, and public buildings, from improving the moral tenor of the people and mediating disputes to investigating crimes, capturing offenders, trying the guilty, and either administering low-level punishments or sending the case on to the provincial level, with a complete report and recommendation for punishment.

The following passages are excerpts from the casebook of a Qing dynasty county magistrate, Lan Dingyuan (1680-1733). Lan was a scholar who served as county magistrate in two counties in Guangdong Province.

Selected Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 295-296. © 1993 The Free Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

***Excerpts from The Casebook of the County Magistrate Lan Dingyuan:
"Depraved Religious Sects Deceive People"***

...

The origin of the Latter Heaven sect is unknown. Zhan Yucan and Zhou Awu first preached it in our area, claiming to have received the teaching from a white-bearded Immortal.

...

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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Zhan Yucan’s wife, Lin, was thought to be the “Miraculous Divine Lady.” She claimed to have the ability to summon wind and rain and to give orders to gods and spirits. She was the leader of the Latter Heaven sect and was assisted by her paramour, Hu Aqiu, who called himself the “Ben Peak Divine Gentleman.” These two cast spells and used magic charms and waters to cure illness and to help pray for heirs. They even claimed to be able to help widows to meet their deceased husbands at night.

... I dispatched runners to apprehend the sect leaders, but the runners were afraid to offend the gods lest the soldiers of hell punish them. ...

I, therefore, went to the place myself, pushed my way into the front room, and arrested the Divine Lady. ...

In fact, these charlatans had no special powers whatsoever but used incense and costumes to bewilder people. The foolish people ... were impressed when they saw that the Divine Lady had no fear of gods and goddesses. Hu Aqiu, who accompanied her, wore rouge, female clothing, and a wig. People believed Hu was the genuine Empress Lady of the Moon and never suspected he was a man. ...

I had Lin, the “Divine Lady” and Hu Aqiu beaten and put in the collar¹, placing them outside the court so that people could scorn them, beat them, and finally kill them. As to Zhan Yucan, the man who had allowed his wife to commit such a crime, and his accomplices ... they were all beaten and put in the collar as punishment.

Questions:

1. What can you conclude about gender roles in this heterodox religious sect?

¹ The “collar” here refers to a cangue. Père du Halde, writing in 1680, described the cangue as follows: “Another punishment, less painful, but more infamous, is the wooden collar which the Portuguese have called cangue. This cangue is composed of two pieces of wood, hollowed in the middle to place the neck of the criminal in. When he has been condemned by the mandarin, they take these two pieces of wood, lay them on his shoulders, and join them together in such a manner that there is room only for the neck. By this means, the person can neither see his feet nor put his hand to his mouth, but is obliged to be fed by some other person. He carries night and day this disagreeable load, which is heavier or lighter according to the nature of the fault. Some cangues weigh two hundred pounds, and are so troublesome to criminals that out of shame, confusion, pain, want of nourishment and sleep, they die under them. Some are three feet square and five or six inches thick; the common sort weigh fifty or sixty pounds.” (From *The World’s Story: A History of the World in Story, Song, and Art*, Volume I: *China, Japan, and the Islands of the Pacific*, edited by Eva March Tappan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 181-186, as reproduced online by the Internet Modern History Sourcebook: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1680halde3.html>)

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2. What does Zhan Yucan’s punishment indicate about gender roles in the Qing empire?
3. Why might ordinary people have been willing to follow the “Miraculous Divine Lady”?
4. Why should the county magistrate have been so concerned about this sect as to administer such harsh punishment to the leaders?
5. Are there parallels to this sort of heterodox sect and the treatment that it receives from the government in other civilizations?