

# “Soul Stealer: 1768 Chinese Sorcery Scare” in Social Crisis

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## Abstract

The “Soul Stealer: Chinese Sorcery Scare 1768” written by Alden Kuhn is a successful example to research more profound problem areas by use of legal history. In the aura of prosperity and good governance by the determination of the Qianlong Emperor, a “Soul incident” occurred and broke this harmony. All the people, from the emperor to the common plebs, were confused for a witchcraft events, with a kind of panic filled in the whole country. Emperors, officials and the plebs driven by different interests and motivations, took full advantages of the event to achieve their purpose of class. Behind the ordinary case of “soul stealer”, a huge social crisis is hidden.

## Keywords

Soul Stealer, Sorcery, Social Crisis, Legal History

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## 1. Introduction

In 1768, a hex panic known as “soul stealer” suddenly occurred in Deqing County of Zhejiang province of China. It is said in the legendary that demons can make horse of paper, gluing with human’s hair braids, or cutting off human’s hair braids directly, to steal human souls and take the opportunity to despoil other’s property. People were caught in great panic, and they seized the beggars, monks and priests and handed them to the local authorities once finding them, accusing them of applying witchcraft. After hearing a case, the local officials confirmed that the charges were nonsense, but people’s panic was not subsided at all. Panic spread from one place to another, even in a half of the whole China, and in many places it was evolved into a large-scale mass sexual violence against strange beggars, monks and priests. Emperor Qianlong determined there might be a huge plot of rebellion, and then ordered local officials made thorough investigation, but local officials were insouciant, and they were more casual, Emperor Qianlong were more anxious and angrier, to press the officials around the county to speedily catch the demon party for a clean sweep. To perform the order, local officials put a large

number of beggars, monks, priests and some ragtags into prison, and used torture for confession. Some were tortured to die and some were forced to confess, and the nationwide panic occurred. Some officials in sober arraignment found the called demon party was non-existent after hearing some suspects, and Emperor Qianlong gradually accepted their judgment and stopped questioning, and the panic had lasted for six months and gradually subsided.

Kuhn's "Soul Stealer: Chinese Sorcery Scare 1768" is to pass very rich information to the reader, so the "soul stealer" contains a wealth of historical knowledge. By means of a unique perspective, readers can learn about all aspects of China's economic background, social status, political system, legal system and people's mental awareness in the 18th century. Kuhn explained the various problems for the reader about vividly-portrayed people, bureaucrats, monarch behind "Soul stealer" event. Both real and illusory witchcraft exhibited attitudes and behaviors of the monarch and bureaucrats, the multiple relationships between local and central, locals and outlanders, politics and trickery, in deep discussions, which can be described as small incident for "a big issue". We can grasp the social reality of flourishing under perilous Soul event, and this phenomenon will also closely link to some characteristics of China's pre-modern society. Why the witchcraft called "Soul" can be like a ghost hovering in several major provinces of Empire Qing, and led utter confusion from the counties to the palaces? Professor Kuhn made constant questioning in this incident and indicated the cultural background hidden deeply behind.

## 2. "Soul Stealer" Interpretation and Cases Recorded in the Book

"Soul Stealer" is also called "spiritualism", both of which mean "calling for the soul". Both the parents of beloved children and the evil warlocks are calling for souls, of which one is to bring back the soul to the body, the other is to take the soul out of the body. "Soul Stealer" is the masterstroke of "Soul Stealer: Chinese Sorcery Scare 1768". In the 33rd year of Qianlong reign, the large area of witchcraft panic in China refers to "stealing the soul" of evil warlocks. "Soul Stealer" in the book of "Soul Stealer: Chinese Sorcery Scare 1768", originally is the same meaning of "stealing the soul" that is to steal the human soul, rather than to move back to the soul. The author cites specific cases of Soul Stealer, which are related with current "cutting hair braid" and similar dirty acts such as theft and others. So, at that time the "Soul Stealer" based on the behavior of "cutting braided" is witchcraft. First, for all the soul cases cited by the book of "Soul Stealer", the materials are detailedly attached to the memorials and other archives in provincial governor office where incidents had occurred. For example, the first chapter of the book, "a description of the incidents occurred in Zhejiang, Hangzhou and Xiao Shan in January to April of 1768, were taken from the affidavits related to witchcraft panic in Zhejiang in the 33rd year of Qianlong reign (from the "Records on Memorials • Law • Others". Also a lot of the book referred to the "Emperor Memorials" and "Confidential Imperial Instructions in Palace" and other materials. The memorials submitted by the provincial officials are strict, in which the statement of case are based on the facts. From the cases cited in the book, the examination of provincial officials for its affiliated county officials' hearing, including reasons of incident and decision basis etc. are detailed. Also the assault and battery of soul stealing perpetrators, reporting and hunting for them all are spontaneous actions of people, without decree issued, and this "mass movement" is non-organized. Some cases quoted in the book, seems to have basis in their case filing and investigation. In other words, the witchcraft jugglery exists in fact. For example, the case about stonemason Wu who built the Deqing water gate, Case A: on January 22 stonemason Wu and his team began their heavy work for playing stakes in the river. The water level is very high, artisans struggled to work for completing the task. As of March 6, stakes were finally planted in the bottom of the river. Stonemason Wu later denied water level problem had given him any particular difficulties, but considering the charges against him, and he was forced to say so. Case B: in Februarys, a passerby brought the information about Deqing water gate project, and also gave new hope to farmer Shen. Case C: He (Warlock) could cause harm to others without the intermediary role of individual items. This is what farmer Shen Shiliang would do in the first chapter of the book, that is he wrote down his disgustful nephews' names on scrap paper and let stonemason Wu put the paper on the at the top of the bridge piles and impact it. Case D: March 25, Mu Fangzhou, an herb picker found another mason (Wu mason's deputy), and attempted to lure him to implant a paper parcel to bridge piles of the river. Case E: Beggar Ji Zhaomei heard of all sorts of rumors about the bridge project of Deqing county of Zhejiang province, e.g. when it is difficult to plant the stakes in the river, masons need borrow the names of the living persons to make their soul vitality help them get more force of sledgehammer. Case F: Yong De (a Zhejiang governor) submitted all

the cases he heard to Beijing, including the dossier of Wu mason and others, as well as county servant Cai Duanyi. Case G: Mason Wu Dongming and the monks in Xiaoshan were re-arrested in early September, and detained in Chengde palace in the north of the Great Wall according to the court's decree. From the above description of the case, the mason Wu Dongming likely used "stealthily cutting hair braid and skirts and other things" to "get the upper hand" in the process of "delaying to pad the bridge piles", that is he certainly juggled witchcraft. Just think, Deqing people wanted to plant bridge piles in the river for Zhejiang Watergate, but "the water level is very high", isn't it? Wu mason later denied water problem had given him any particular difficulties, this just proved the rumors heard by Ji Zhaomei, such as "when it is difficult to plan the stakes in the river, masons need borrow the name of the living person to make their soul vitality help them get more force of sledgehammer", are not fabricated? Presumably, the events, e.g. farmer Shen requested Wu mason to "steal soul", and herb picker Mu Fangzhou enticed Wu's deputy to "steal soul", etc., are not accidental: it is fact that they believed witchcraft of "soul stealer" was efficacious, and it is probably also fact that masons juggled witchcraft. So no wonder the court refused to let the matters go, masons et al. were re-arrested, and no wonder Hong Li got angrier when reviewing more dossier because he believed that "it was clear that the charges against Deqing masons were impossibly baseless". Another case: "Shandong beggar Cai Tingzhang applying hallucinogen to cut hair braid", for which the book described that Cai Tingzhang confessed on July 24 the following facts: First: met monk Tong Yuan in Beijing and knew Tong Yuan's prentices Yixing, Yide, Yi'an in Yangzhou. Second: Tong Yuan told him that there were wizards Zhang and Wang and monk Wu Yuan in Renhe County of Zhejiang province, and Wu Yuan had gathered sixteen same parties. They applied hallucinogen and then cut other's hair braids. Third: he personally applied hallucinogen to the local Zou Guotan's face in Zou County and took a knife to cut his braids, and that time he was arrested. Although Cai Tingzhang "insisted on his initial confession was forced under serious torture" when retried again before Beijing military minister in the mid of October, but the memorial submitted by military minister Liu Tongxun on October 18 truthfully recorded the confession that "I said in the Eastern Province ... cutting hair braids together with Wu Yuan separately in different places ... in Yangzhou ... all the sayings were casual lie" and so on, all of these overthrew the former confession. Although Cai Tingzhang quibbled that reasons for withdraw of the former confession was "torture forced" made him "had to accept". Anyway, for so many names of living persons and so specific and impressive "witchcraft" activities, even if under the "torture forced", to be casually fabricated, it is belike incredible. In other words, the original confession to prove Cai Tingzhang had juggled witchcraft with his associates, is really believable (Kuhn, 1999). There are also some typical cases, here not listed one by one. Many of the persons formerly judged as soul offender but latter released through reversing the verdict by officials, are listed in the "Soul stealer: Chinese Sorcery Scare 1768". It seems that only the individual cases analyzed from the above, has been able to prove that the soul-stealer witchcraft occurred in the whole country in 1768 is not a false alarm, and if soul stealer spreads in the vast of range, it will cause a very bad social influence. So, it seems that the large-scale suppression of witchcraft is not decided as a wrong case, which may be why until November 3, 1768, the court did not admit the case of sour stealer itself was untenable. No wonder Hong Li complained in his instruction to Wu Tan, a judge of Jiangsu province on September 21 that "the affidavits from all provinces are absurd, without basis". The implementation and completion of the whole even has direct relations with the event "speculation" of the social policymaker level and the decrees executors. Here, the "speculation" is a "government-run" problem, which is the core for Kuhn to write this book.

Generally speaking, all the cases involved with "Soul Stealer" events contain three elements: the so-called "criminals" are basically the local refugees who have no one to depend on and no home to return to, including wandering monks, priests, beggars, etc.; for the action of "criminals", they mostly use hallucinogen to make others faint, and then cut their hair braids and thus control the human soul; for the results of "criminals", almost all of them were escorted by ordinary demos to the local authorities for treatment. This structural similarity, expresses the author's overall grasp of this event, and also shows some of the structural elements have deep cultural significance. With the expatiation of the text, we find that "braids, refugees" and "ordinary demos" have played an important role. The display of a series of similar cases seems to be able to indicate the actual existence of "Soul Stealer" phenomenon, but the final results are surprising: scholar Fu Hen et al demonstrated that many cases are seemingly real but no one can be ascertained. Ancient "confessions doctrine" means "not guilty, without confession". In the event of "Soul stealer" incident, local officials are cautious initially, because they are doubtful of the cases, and the provisions on "Unjust Verdict" in the "Qing Laws" undoubtedly has deterrent effect.

Although the local officials in Qing Dynasty are elected by examinations, but they are lack of political practice and experience, especially in the law. Therefore, they can not “factually” talk about the fact for this legal case, instead of possible following the instruction of imperial authorities, while the emperor had recognized the “Soul stealer” had profound political implications. And only a few of them are prestigious jurists or able officials, and I suspect most of the rest have no enough unwavering judiciary sense to contend with the political pressure accompanying to their positions, so pleasing the emperor is the center to implement judiciary, 2006). Thus, in order to maintain and even enhance the emperor’s recognition of them, local officials have to abuse torture to extract confessions (Foucault, 2007). In the past, rough or empty words were used in academic circle to criticize the evils of torture, and the analysis here applies its effectiveness to affect the panic in several provinces of the Qing Empire and more sharply exposes the potential threat of torture, as said by Foucault: “In fact, power can produce the reality, the production target”. In the book, the relation between power and rule is discussed under bureaucratic monarchy system, and autocratic monarch pursues the expansion of power. On the one hand, the statute laws were used to constrain the bureaucrats in their service, on the other hand, it made the boundary for the division of responsibility of the bureaucrats, to confront the autocratic requirements of monarch. This analysis from the perspective of system, make us have a new understanding of the relations between the law and power in the traditional cultural backgrounds. The new perspective offered by Kuhn for the study of law history is: the nomology for the study of law history, is to base on the nomological issues to explain these issues from the system level through the interpretation of history.

### 3. The Fear Level of the Soul Stealer Case

The fear about the relationship between hair and the soul stealer was always there. We can see the origin of the soul stealer case where produced real case due to cut hair soul stealer and fear. The local official dealt with it as a civil case. People were furious, but there is no great agitation. But when Hong Li knew that there happened several cases about the soul stealer news in Jiangnan region, he then ordered provincial governments to suppress them, which it increased fears undoubtedly. Through understanding cases in Shandong, Henan and other places, we will find that the cases hadn’t been with the component of soul stealer but they reflected human’s moral revenge. Moreover, such a large Henan Province could only find a few cases after arrest and chase. The people’s panic psychology for the soul stealer had always been there, but there was nothing if no one reminded it; even someone reminded it, it was relatively easy to repair if someone mentioned it when there was no significant consequence, because after all, it was not on the brink of collapse of the society. But the public mood was blind and with suggestibility; the suppression around the country undoubtedly increased and spread the panic; people around the country did know about the soul stealer case in Jiangnan region, so they feared. But according to the analysis and conclusion of cases in Shandong and Henan, these cases were not caused by misunderstanding, not like case in Jiangnan region, they were out of personal interest and revenge. It is said that people panic just was out of the repressed state. Therefore, the so-called national panic was a vision among these contacts through memorials and under urge of the Emperor Hong Li.

### 4. Social Background of “Soul Stealer” Case

After good governance of two dynasties under the reign of Emperor Kangxi and Emperor Yong Zheng, in 1768, the 33rd year under the reign of Qianlong, it was the peak of his reign. “In the 18th-century China, the economy was prosperous; the government was in good governance; people were harmonious and peaceful; in this period China was known as prosperous, aggressive and self-confident Chinese empire, different with the collapsed and out-of-order Chinese Empire in the 19th-century”. Due to the development of production and gradual increase of state revenues since from the 28th year under the reign of Qianlong, China’s economic level was advanced in the world in this period. The commercial development and the rapid expansion of the population and soaring prices mean that people lives were better than before. Before the year of 178, there was monetary deflation and rising prices (mainly rice price). Following this, inflation had been extended to all commodities and also resulted in the gap between the rich and the poor.

At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the emperor established and promulgated orders that were opposed by the majority of Han people. The relations became exacerbating. In the early Qing Dynasty, the ethnic conflicts triggered in Jiangyin and Jiangnan, Suzhou and other places. Earlier hair around the head is still kept by this Manchu ruler, and with the rule of the Qing Dynasty gradually consolidated, shaving hair braid had been gradually

accepted as Han Chinese, but the braid as a symbol of the Manchu rule still sparked boundless imagination and a terrible chain reaction. “Soul stealer” case occurred in line with the long wish of the Qianlong emperor; he needed a specific event as a breakthrough to solve the problem that plagued him for a long time. He never allowed any questioning of legitimacy or ability to govern the sound of his reign there. Soul stealer case had occurred in a County of Zhejiang Province. That resistance to the world famous event occurred in the Yangtze River basin, at that time, Qianlong was still fresh, he wanted to set up immeasurable national pride in the hearts of the people through a kind of influence, but nothing was curtailed, he must use other effective means to deal with the most stubborn resistance movement. “Only by specific events, they can abreact their frustration and dissatisfaction”. Since we can not make the people surrender completely in the culture and psychology, and then it is feasible to make a nationwide wipe-out and maintain their rule, Qianlong was confident.

In the “Soul Stealer” case, the social hierarchy of three representatives or the social forces is people, bureaucrats and emperor. From their different social roles and experiences, for different interests, driven by motives, they had interpreted the “Soul Stealer” event in their own methods. Monarchy and bureaucracy were to shape this event around the event and re-defined the event in order to obtain inner interests for their system through grasping the influence trend of the event. Ultimately, the reason why the panic on the “Soul Stealer” case evolved into a nationwide hex-eliminating political movement, mainly caused by the crisis of confidence among all levels of society. First, people had a crisis of confidence. With other place’s accent and unfamiliar faces, people feared their braid being cut, clothes being torn and feared themselves or their families being controlled by others, resulting that the unrest feeling of people developed from fear and distrust into hysteric and crazy persecution. Second: Bureaucrats had a crisis of confidence. For bureaucrats who need to protect their own vested interests from beginning to the end, they sandwiched between the supreme monarch and the foolish man and woman of lower social level and had to deal with this seemingly ordinary case. They felt themselves overwhelmed and battered. When the final collapse of the foundation of this case happened, the wise sovereign, in order not to be harmed from collapse debris, eventually found some officials as his scapegoat to end the persecution due to the “Soul Stealer” case. In Ancient China, the Chinese judicial system is not separated by the administrative system. The local officials were called their magistrate. They boasted the sky, and treated the people as ignorant man, so that people with high social level accepted people’s worship. When the “Soul Stealer” case happened, the officials in every place would implement a routine torture on suspects in the trails. Third, the emperor had a crisis of confidence. The appearance of the “Soul Stealer” case met the wish of the Accuser Qianlong Emperor of this case. He needed a specific event as a breakthrough to resolve the long-troubled problems, namely the existence of various long-standing defects in Qing Dynasty. The most prominent problems are bureaucratic conspiracy, Chinesization threat and the governance and control of the country under bureaucracy. In addition to the bloody fight on haircut, Emperor Qianlong remained fresh in his mind. The rich in Jiangnan region and Han elites nurtured by the affluent soil of the historic Han culture were so familiar and frightening to the emperor. What was more frightening to the emperor was that he found his good intentions were being perfunctorily by his officials. Confidential report, seeing Majesty, evaluation, supervision and guidance and a series of system with perfect design were easy to make officials deal with, but the emperor lacked reliable channel to get real information. However, the information in memorials was not trusted (Shuzo, 1998).

## 5. Conclusion

Kuhn’s “Soul Stealer: 1768 Chinese Sorcery Scare” is a successful example by using the legal historic resources to break into a deeper problem field. We can say the occurrence of “Soul Stealer” case and expansion were just an imagined crisis in mind caused by the comprehensive reaction of various elements. Kuhn’s work has shown externality explanation of the legal history. The law is part of social life. The value of legal history is also not limited to the interpretation of the scriptures evolution and other issues. It can sometimes be just a look at the broader perspective of the problem space. Only in this way can the legal history become the cultural network’s law of history. It can truly indicate the position of law in traditional society and its self-realization possibility. History is always the surprising similar. Through existing historical archives, Professor Kuhn reproduced the political event “Soul Stealer” case dating back two hundred years ago. We can not but recall the crazy years—the Cultural Revolution. The difference is that the main reason is the fear of emperor, but in those crazy years, the main reason for the event is the cult of personality except for the right phobia. The rising of a political movement gave people the illusion of power. The falsely accuser of the “Soul Stealer” case is so similar with the

revolutionary persons in the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, every kind of power needs to be monitored or restricted; otherwise, it will surely go mad, and this madness will be the disaster to the people and the disaster to the history.

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