

(South China Morning Post 23 Oct, 2004)

## Care Tactics

Frightening children into obedience with tales of the bogeyman is no longer considered sound parenting, writes Hazel Parry



**THEY WERE FIVE** words to strike terror into the heart of any young child - words every calculating parent knew would bring an instant end to juvenile obstinacy and guarantee immediate, trembling obedience: "The bogeyman will get you."

He'd get you if you stayed up later than you should. He'd get you if you went somewhere you shouldn't. He'd get you if you didn't do your homework. And he'd get you if you weren't nice to your baby brother or sister.

Shadowy and amorphous, he'd grab your feet when you stepped out of bed at night and chase you, unseen, down dark lanes - and the only way to spot him was to look quickly through a knothole in a wooden partition, when you might see the dull gleam of his eye.

The bogeyman has spread fear through generations of children around the world for four centuries, his sinister form hiding in the dark corners of millions of bedrooms.

Today, his powers are fading. In the space of a generation, the bogeyman has been transformed from a child's worst nightmare into a figure of speech and, increasingly, a remote and comical- sounding anachronism.

The bogeyman is being killed by kindness and the relatively new idea that it's bad to frighten children. "Today, parents view scaring their children as inappropriate," says anthropologist **Joseph Bosco** of the Chinese University. "There's been an attitude shift, so the idea of using fear to control children is frowned on. The very idea of controlling children is passe - parents don't even control what they eat."

The evidence, he says, is everywhere. "Go to any restaurant and you'll hear parents asking children as young as three what they want to eat. It's not only in China that kids are 'little emperors'. Cultures worldwide have shifted towards treating children as little adults."

All of this is bad news for the bogeyman, who has stalked through centuries of political incorrectness, reinforcing parental control since he was spawned in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The word for bogeyman is believed to have derived from "Bugis men", notoriously bloodthirsty pirates from Sulawesi in Indonesia who terrorised the region and became the stuff of dark legends.

Stories of their gory deeds reached English and French sailors trading in the region. They brought the tales home and began terrorizing their children with a

warning they brought with them from the other side of the world: "If you're bad, the Bugis man will get you."

"The Bugis were feared because they were pirates who particularly plundered the southern part of Malaya, which then included Singapore," says Kuala Lumpur - based folklorist and linguist Joan Marbeck.

There's a Bugis Street in Singapore, famous in the 1950s for its transvestite prostitutes. "When I visited Singapore as a child, my dad would say, 'Don't go to Bugis Street when it's dark'," says Marbeck. She never found out whether he was referring to the transvestites or to the Bugis men of popular folklore.

The menace of the bogeyman spread around the globe, transcending cultures, blending with local folklore.

In Germany, he was known as the Putz; in Denmark, the Spoge; in Sweden, the Spoka; in Hispanic cultures, they had a female figure called La Llorona; and in Russia, he was the Shurale. In Japan, he was known as the Ten-gu, while India and China had parallels with the taloned Hau and the cannibalistic zombie Kiangsi.

In Hong Kong, the nearest modern parallel is the toilet monster, used by parents to terrify children into obedience. "I remember when I was six or seven," says a 39-year-old Hong Kong mother. "My mother would tell me that if I did something bad, a monster would come out of the toilet or the shower, or any dark hole, and grab me. It terrified me. It made me scared of the dark. I'm still nervous of the dark and to this day I still think about monsters coming out of the wall or out of dark holes to get hold of me."

Now the mother of an 11-year-old girl, she says she never uses these tactics. "I'd never tell stories like that to my daughter," she says. "I play with her and jump out of the dark corners at her, but I'd never frighten her like that."

Hong Kong-based health adviser Yvonne Heavyside, who works with parents and young children, says there has been a significant shift in attitudes.

"People are more conscious that it's a frightening thing to threaten a child with the bogeyman," she says. "Before, they weren't as sensitive. We're more emotionally aware. It's similar to smacking children. We're more aware now of the damage we can cause."

The principle of control through fear used to manifest itself in other ways that would today seem unacceptable. "My mother used to say to me, 'Someone will come and take you to an orphanage'," says Heavyside. "It's rare to hear that kind of thing now.

"Today, children often worry more about things like paedophiles. One of my kids would look at strangers from quite an early age and say, 'Do you think that's a paedophile over there?'

"In Britain, especially, there's, quite a movement to get children, from the age of three upwards, to be aware of the possibility of abduction. In a way, maybe the paedophile is the new bogeyman."

Bosco recalls the scary stories of his childhood. "My father, who is now 90, grew up in an Italian town in the Abruzzi region. In his family, he was told that if you didn't behave, you'd be sent to an old witch in a place called Cuppello. Those kind of warnings make concrete what the parents are trying to express to their children. If you say, 'Don't do that because it's bad', it's too abstract. If you say, 'Don't do that or a monster will come and get you', it suddenly becomes very concrete. It's the same with ghost stories."

Horrible he may have been, but the bogeyman's role was to steer children away from danger. He may also play a positive role in helping children develop the necessary skills they need for life. Many psychologists say that a young child who creates his or her own bogeyman is playing with fear in a way that they can control. It's a rehearsal for what they might do in a scary situation and helps them develop strategies to cope.

However, the consensus is that the child should be in control of the bogeyman - not the parent. A parent who continually uses the bogeyman as a threat will eventually be shown to be telling lies.

Bosco recalls the case of a peasant family in Greece who repeatedly told the young son that his father was hiding in a storage closet, even though the boy has seen his father leave home for work.

"They kept telling the child he was there until he finally went to check, and then everyone laughed at him. That seems strikingly mean to our modern sensibilities, but it was a typical peasant lesson: Don't trust anyone: The world is a dangerous place.

"Stories about the bogeyman serve the same purpose, but we don't see them as appropriate now," he says. "We prefer a more optimistic view of the world."