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Ancestors and Ancestry in Southwestern China

Transforms in Tradition

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Abstract. – This article explores some enigma of Chinese ancestor worship as they were found once in Sichuan Province of southwestern China in late traditional times. These rituals and their symbolism are subjected to an anthropological analysis resulting in some new understandings of the ethnographic data. Ancestry is shown to have been a pluralistic concept with varying semantic properties and put to use in terms of shifting cultural modalities. The outcome of the study is a tentative contribution to the explanation of the cultural grammar of Chinese ancestor worship and the wider formation of traditional Chinese society. *[China, Sichuan Province, ancestor worship, death, symbolism, cultural modalities]*

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> Die Probleme des Lebens sind an der Oberfläche unlösbar, und nur in der Tiefe zu lösen. In den Dimensionen der Oberfläche sind sie unlösbar.
>
> (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Introductory Remarks

Ancestry is a system of belonging that stretches beyond physical death into a partly unknown past, a system with the capacity to bring together living people with those long since dead.[1] It is hard to think of any society where the phenomenon of death has not given rise to some systemic figures of thought and patterns of imagery regarding social continuity and discontinuity. China is a vast country where ancestry and its manifestations in the social world have been regarded as a pillar of structural continuity. Rules of ancestry have often regulated power. Ancestors and the cult of ancestors are common enough themes in anthropological, sociological, and religious studies of China, yet, it is striking how little we know about what a Chinese ancestor actually is.[2] Of course, there is no simple answer to this. China provides no simple answers to anything, being a society of such dimensions that any proposition regarding what is Chinese is bound to fail to some extent. The social scene in China is a vast

1 Thanks are due to Robert Parkin for comments. This article forms a discussion of ethnographic details from reports about a hundred years old. To avoid constant references forwards and backwards, I have allowed some redundancies in the text to facilitate the reading of a complex material.

2 Needless to say that there are a great many studies of varying contexts and differing objectives relating to ancestry, like Ahern (1973), Arrault (2008), Lakos (2010), Nie (1995), and Seiwert (2016). It remains, however, a strong impression that the cultural semantics of the notions of death and the dead, and the accompanying cults are matters that have not been much explored so far.

ocean of family resemblances, where each village, despite appearances, will always show some variation from its neighbours or from any other habitation in the country. Even closely adjacent places show marked differences between them. If we dare to look for unities in this vastness of dissimilarities, we must develop new research strategies with which to understand variation, rather than search for similarities.

Ancestry is a sort of belonging that could be studied with advantage from several different analytical perspectives – ways of comprehending phenomena based on different ontologies. This may call for some further explanation: The aim of the article is to establish a corpus of ethnographic data, which is then to be examined in as much detail as possible. The procedure will reveal some essential elements of the cultural semantics of ancestral cults in Sichuan by way of detailed ethnographic deconstruction and subsequent anthropological reconstruction. The platform for this procedure is as follows.

The account will take its starting point in the proposition that the study of human activities can usefully employ three essentially different and yet equally valid scientific perspectives. These three concerns I shall call "orders," each requiring an approach of its own. One province to be so explored is the "discursive order." It concerns intentional performative acts of men and women in a society, and their on-going conversation about themselves and the world, including arguments, comments, explanations, exegeses, and nonsense. The discursive order is clearly a wide and multifaceted field of social pragmatics and implies an indigenous comprehension in constructing and construing worlds. "Discursive" should be understood as referring not only to a flow of communicative acts in which information is articulated verbally. Though language is vital and a dominant element of the process, social discourse also encompasses – often in combination – other forms of sensory communication.

The discourse of everyday life contains alterity. Life is a stream of modal narration, providing many alternative stories. Discursive analysis implies an accounting for human acts within an ontology which is a pragmatically construed universe emerging in the communicative interaction of an array of people using language and language-like types of codes. The discursive order is produced as an ongoing commentary to itself as well as to features of the operational and iconic orders in a society.

Another perspective would concern the use of symbolism in accordance with human iconic codes in the visionary building of possible worlds, forming an imagery understood by cultural intuitions. In this little known field we are dealing with symbolic displays of strong expressive force but little communicative value. This is a realm of symbolism working outside language and, thus, without truthful reporting and referential meaning. What we deal with is iconically encoded information, well beyond what can be retrieved introspectively by a speaker's or thinker's verbally carried thought and linguistic competence. Language and iconology are entirely different sorts of codes, neither being instrumental for reaching into the other.

Images make manifest people's intuitive cognizance as to what ultimately conditions social and personal existence: their motifs connect with the ever-present dimensions in human life of continuity/discontinuity and inside/outside. Such manifestations bring about visions of an alternate existence and their construction allows an exploration of realities otherwise unknown. Iconic images are essentially separated from the world of everyday living in that, as they become composed, they create their own realities – they are grounded only in themselves and in their construction: symbols will be used to buttress symbols.

This sphere of symbolic creation suggests studies of how textures of complex imagery are accomplished by an integration of less inclusive images into ever more comprehensive clusters. The grammar of such image-making is one of architecture rather than syntax, and it is at work in a creation largely independent of mundane facts. The study of the iconic order, then, presupposes an ontology of multiple, alternative, and iconically constituted worlds, parallel to, but different from "ordinary" existence. The grammar of language is a set of rules, the grammar of iconic creation is the normative architecture of combinative templates.[3] The third "operational order" of the anthropological vision is a realist one in which facts are detected, causality reigning, and truths linked by linear time. In our present concern this dimension will be only subsumed.

We must always keep in mind that the orders discussed here form dimensions of the indivisible person producing expressive symbolism. Needless to say, what is suggested is in the nature of research strategies. We cannot expect unfolding empirical events to be clearly tagged for easy classification in accordance with this or any other preconceived scheme. So image-making renders manifest people's intuitive insights. By their showing (temporarily or permanently), the phenomena constituting

3 On "templates," see further Harré (1993: 46).

imaginary worlds suggest meaningful "readings" which, in a sense, has neither beginning nor end, because what you see are glimpses of something more comprehensive, quotes from a narration of eternity. It is true, of course, that from the perspective of a realist universe, images occur in linear time. In terms of an iconic universe this is of little importance, its phenomena having their own time dimensions. Just as actual births and deaths are temporal instances of constantly continuing processes of generation and extinction, imagery makes known at points in time what exists forever.

I have argued that image-making works through the clustering of symbols and that its grammar is one of architecture, not syntax: the messages produced in an iconic code are dramatically suggestive rather than textually narrative. Iconic symbolism carries messages which have no truth aspect. Referring only to other images, they never depict the realist world and so do not report in a true or false way. Veracity in the world of images is established by way of repetition, it is in the lack of corruption through change that authenticity is established. Complete repetitiveness appears as permanence and what is permanent has veracity because of its very permanence.

Elaboration and complexity are achieved by merger and integration. Images connect by "tagging," movement, propinquity, or implicational association. Some images are available permanently, while other such displays must be remade intermittently. Some complex forms could be described as "episodic," each being confined to a limited span of time. Others could be described as "rhapsodic," meaning that they are spread over several separate but interrelated occurrences. Yet there is no necessary logical sequence between demarcated events, although the forming of strings is a common enough form of clustering. In a particular imaginary sequence, each episode may connect in several ways to any other episode present, apart from the order in which they appear. There is reason to expect, however, that some overarching programmed vision will be there to keep them together, although this catastasis, or "iconic tale," is likely to be structurally different from some corresponding exordium, or discursive story.

The symbological method can never lead to finally "proven" results; rather, what we gain are appropriate suggestions, a kind of simulacra of the cultural intuitions that members of a society are believed to have. The symbologist's difficult task is to translate motifs from non-verbal iconic codes into messages of linguistic accounting, from texture into text.

The strategy to be followed in this article is then to apply symbological thinking[4] to an existing ethnographic corpus of data in the hope of contributing a small step in the advancement of our knowledge of the formative processes of Chinese society. Local customs will be treated as autochthonous symbolic games, and my approach to the ethnography will be one that recognises ontological plurality, implying an exploration of the human use of several simultaneous but different cognitive strategies with which to construe the world.

This article has a further aim in that it is part of a wider comparative project concerning ancestry in southern China in late traditional times and which explores the cultural semantic cluster of rice ←→ children ←→ death. Some of these explorations are now published (Aijmer 2015; 2016a; 2016b).

Some General Ethnographic Observations

The segment of Chinese society I shall discuss in this essay is located in the southwestern province of Sichuan and is in most respects within what we may call the southern sphere of Chinese civilization. What I shall deal with is one particular limited region, encapsulated in time and space. It contains social morphs that give rise to questions, the answers to which have relevance for the wider China scene. To understand these morphs is my concern. The main bulk of the ethnography examined is the result of the comprehensive fieldwork conducted by the American missionary (of the American Baptist Mission) David Crockett Graham in the years between 1911 and 1948. He worked for twenty years at Yibin (Sui Fu) and its surroundings – but with some intermissions for brief periods of study at the University of Chicago and Harvard University. Being based in Yibin he made fourteen summer expeditions to different parts of Sichuan, and also, through his regular missionary work, he became acquainted with many smaller towns and cities in the province. His observations on Chinese social life draw also on some spells in the provincial capital of Chengdu.

Another missionary, Adam Grainger of the English Presbyterian Mission, was stationed in Chengdu and wrote up his experiences and observations from this area in a booklet published in Chengdu in 1921. A section on the Chinese New Year was authored by the American W. H. Pillow, a fellow missionary in the same city. Their data form an interesting com-

4 I have discussed the prospects for a symbological analysis in more detail elsewhere; see Aijmer (2001).

plement to those of Graham. Otherwise Grainger is better known as a lexicographer and an explorer of the Sichuan language called Western Mandarin.

In the discussion section I have also had opportunity to profit from the rich report that is the result of a comprehensive modern anthropological fieldwork carried out in the Meishan area in the River Min valley in Sichuan by Gregory A. Ruf. A wealth of interesting data in the Meishan account provides material for comparisons, both in terms of similarities and contrastive clarifications.

Graham's and Grainger's accounts of Chinese religion and religious conventions are thus based on their long-time field experience in southwestern China. They both contain typically synthesised data, but which are sprung from intimate knowledge of local habits, both rustic and urban as it seems. Graham's informants were from many sectors of Chinese life: "While many of the most important facts and theories have been received from ordinary, unsophisticated people, they have also been discussed with Chinese of all classes, including students, old-fashioned scholars, and scientists. The information received has been checked and rechecked many times" (Graham 1961: v). In the present discussion his many-stranded data will be regarded as "unified" – as he presents them. This is, of course, a source of distortion, but for a tentative account they provide an empirical basis that will remain important, even if future studies should turn up further detailed and diversified data. The same applies, by and large, to Grainger's ethnography.

Yibin is situated where River Min meets River Jinsha to form the grand River Yangzi "proper," in the heartland of the Red Basin of Sichuan Province. Chengdu is in the River Min plain. Surveying the traditional economy here we find that rice was the main crop of the flooded lands of this relatively prosperous region. Thus the area was part of the southern "rice sphere" of the Chinese world. A traditionally single cropping area, rice was sown in seedbeds during April or May, and it was transplanted into the fields after the rains had made summer flooding possible. As the rains died away, the grain ripened quickly in the drying fields, and the harvest occurred in September, after which the rice fields were prepared for the winter crop, which was commonly wheat. Mulberry trees were found throughout Sichuan, and silk and tea had long been exported to other parts of China (Roxby and Freeman 1944: 88). The areas where Graham and Grainger worked are renowned for their exuberant fertility and productiveness and for the almost incredible numbers of farms they support. This has been made possible by a marvellous feat of water engineering, based on the waters of River Min and other water courses, and of a very long history. There was one particular feature that characterised wide areas of the province's agricultural plains and hills: there were no villages. The landscape was dotted with farmsteads and small clusters of houses. Villages were small and seldom exceeded 100 people (Skinner 1951; Jin and Li 1992: 20).

Naturally, the socioeconomic situation has changed profoundly since Graham lived in Yibin and Grainger in Chengdu, but this is of no concern for our present aims. The population has been very dense throughout history. Yibin proper has today about 800,000 inhabitants and the surroundings perhaps 4.5 million people. The city of Chengdu and its surrounding plain was before the early 1950s perhaps an area of some two million people. Today Chengdu is around seven and a half million and the hinterland of the city six and a half million inhabitants. Meishan is said to harbour more than three million people today.

For reasons of economy in style, I will refer to Graham's Sichuan data as the Yibin corpus, even if this thus seems a somewhat fuzzy body of ethnography based on widely cast observations. Graham's synthesised account is in many ways rich and well worth to explore. What is of particular interest for the present article is what is reported on the worship of the dead and on the notion of "ancestor." Again, Grainger's data – the Chengdu corpus – will be read as they are, presented in a generalised way. Ruf's later data from the Meishan area are here read as "interacting with" the Chengdu corpus. A basic assumption for our present concern is that the Sichuan findings are reasonably compatible and sprung from the historically many-stranded southwestern Chinese tradition, which, in turn, formed part of the wider southern Chinese cultural sphere.

Notions of the Dead

Graham conveys that in local discourse a basic idea in filial piety, combined with ancestral veneration, gave rise to a conviction that there was a mutual dependence between the living and their dead ancestors. After death the deceased needed the same things as before and it was the duty of their living descendants to provide them. We learn that veneration and offerings were absolutely necessary for the happiness and comfort of the ancestors. They were regarded as in a very real sense still alive, and as needing food, clothing, money, and many other things that they had used before death. We learn further that since only male descendants could per-

form the ceremonies to accomplish this, it was essential that in each family sons be born to continue the family line and the worship (Graham 1961: 123, 159 f.; Grainger 1921: 16). It is clear that these presuppositions dominated the Sichuan scene. The other side of this coin was that many of life's blessings were given to the living by their deceased ancestors. These blessings included success, happiness, and prosperity of every kind. If neglected, the ancestors could inflict severe punishments upon unfilial descendants (Graham 1961: 123, 160).

In Graham's enquiries in Yibin as to the status and nature of the dead, there emerged a divide between formally educated people and "common Chinese." He found that the former replied that the ancestors after death are human beings, highly respected, but not worshipped as gods. He also found that common people thought that after death, the dead were transformed into gods. Graham notes that ancestor worship was part, and an extension of, a social ceremonialism that concerned the respectful treatment of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents while they were still alive (Graham 1961: 120).

Graham says in a general way that the Chinese believed that there were three main souls and seven lesser souls. Of these main souls one remained in the coffin, one in an ancestral tablet, and the third went on to a Heaven, Hell, or "Hades," or was reborn in a transmigration of souls. It was thought, he adds, that the soul of the deceased actually dwelled in an ancestral tablet, and the tablet was thought of and treated as if it were the ancestor himself. We learn that before this could be so, an official or scholar must perform an inauguration ceremony in which he used a "red pen" and red ink to write in the final strokes of the words *shen zhu*[5] (spiritual lord) on the ancestral tablet (Graham 1961: 122; Grainger 1921: 17).

At a case of death there was immediately made a temporary spirit tablet of paper, which together with a streamer was placed on a table in front of the coffin. A few days after death there was an elaborate ceremony at which the soul of the deceased was enticed into the spirit tablet, which was thereafter its permanent home (Graham 1961: 39 f.). But then, permanence was only for a limited time, but the ethnography on this point seems to imply local variance. According to one description (from Chengdu), the spirit tablet was worshipped during the three years long mourning period and was burnt at the end of this – not to be replaced – after which people resumed ordinary, everyday habits (Grainger 1921: 14). It seems thus that in some areas the worship within the domestic sphere of the individual dead would only last for three years.

There is a note on the "lesser souls," the seven of them being reckoned as "evil animal souls." Somehow they seem to have formed a unit and it is reported that at a person's death "this soul" descended into the earth some ten or twelve feet, and returned at the rate of one foot per day, till it burst forth again at the place where the person died. On its arrival it worshipped the spirit tablet and mourned, it worshipped its ancestors and the family gods, and also visited the kitchen and worshipped the Kitchen God (Grainger 1921: 13). In a sense, this returning multiple zooid soul of the dead person worshipped itself and its own ancestors, together with revering the gods in the hall and in the kitchen.

The individual ancestral tablet is described in some detail. It was composed of a base, an upright board, and a rounded top. The base was made of wood of the sour jujube tree, and the upright of chestnut. The discursive explanation for the choice of woods, based on a pun of near homophony between different words, was that they combined in a wish that sons and grandsons might be raised up in quick succession. The tablet was of plain wood, and the inscription was written in plain black ink. In honorific terms the name of the dead was written at the centre, while, on the left side, the names of the sons who erected the tablet were recorded. The tablet was double, a slot in the base and another in the rounded top, holding the two boards together. An inscription on the back of the front board was a copy of the outer inscription, with the addition of notes at either side, one stating the birthplace and date of birth, and the other the place and time of death. When the boards were placed together, these inner inscriptions were invisible. The whole tablet was enclosed in a small shrine. The tablet, without inscription, and the shrine could be bought ready-made (Grainger 1921: 17). When a childless married woman died, she was not supplied with an ancestral tablet (Grainger 1921: 20).

We learn that poor people could not carry out the expensive ceremonies surrounding a new ancestral tablet. Many only worshipped the first paper spirit tablet written by a priest. At the end of three years, this was burned, and the name recorded on a paper inscription devoted to "Heaven, Earth, Prince, Parents, and Teacher," apparently a representation of cosmos with added names of the dead (Grainger 1921: 17).

5 Romanisation follows *pinyin* conventions and the language is Standard Chinese.

Ancestral Worship: Collective Halls

Every "large family" or "clan" had its own "ancestral temple." In such collective halls in the Yibin area there was one large tablet representing the family, and one individual tablet for each deceased ancestor of the agnatic kinship group, the time span of the collection going back at least for three generations. Generally, each such ancestral hall in Yibin had a caretaker who daily burnt incense and worshipped the ancestors before their tablets on behalf of the family (Graham 1961: 122). Worshipping by proxy indicates a rather mechanical view of the transfer of wealth by rituals.

Twice a year, a family went to the ancestral hall to stage very special ceremonies of ancestral worship. They killed a pig or a sheep, and chickens and ducks, which were first offered uncooked to the ancestors. The hair was cleaned off the bodies of the pig and the sheep. Holes were made in their backs, and three sticks of incense and two candles were stuck into the holes and lighted. Then there was worship and prostrations. It was the eldest son who was the officiant (Graham 1961: 122). We learn that these special ceremonies were conducted at the time just after the rice was planted, and again after the rice harvest. However, others performed them at the solar calendar period of Qing Ming, or "Clear and Bright," and at Dong Zhi, or "Winter Solstice" (corresponding to 5th to 20th of April, and about 21st December, respectively – Grainger 1921: 22).

A description from the Chengdu area tells that on the main ritual occasion in the ancestral hall – falling on the day of the winter solstice – the oldest man of the family or "clan" acted as officiant together with another elected man. The men of the family usually assembled on the day before the festival and stayed the night in the rooms surrounding the hall yard. The service commenced about midnight. The worshippers knelt in rows, according to their generations, the eldest taking the lead. In this case, it is said that the abundant offerings, along lines mentioned above, were placed before the ancestral tablets – mentioned in the plural! The elaborate rituals lasted for two or three hours (Grainger 1921: 22). These offerings were followed by a commensality when the animals and the fowls that had been offered in the ancestral hall were cooked and eaten at a family meal, thus shared by the deceased ancestors and their living progeny. The ancestors were regarded as actually present and partaking of the food. It was common to have a grandson of a deceased person to impersonate him at the feast (Graham 1961: 122). It is also said that there were similar offerings in many homes at New Year and at Qing Ming (Graham 1961: 122).

At the middle of the seventh moon, Grainger (1921: 22) reports from the Chengdu area, the festival of the Earth Ruler, the Forgiver of Sins, occurred. The ancestral tablet in the hall was worshipped and a feast spread before it. "Cash paper," that is ritually used mock money, in large quantities was burned. Interestingly it is reported that the spirits "pass the New Year at this season," indicating that the spirit world had an annual calendar different from that of living beings. The singular form used in the ethnography indicates that these offerings concerned one single and collective tablet – and no individual ones, should they have existed – in these houses of worship. Graham notes further that no women could have a part in the ancestral ceremonies (Graham 1961: 122).

Ancestral Worship: The Domestic Sphere

Families that were too poor to have an "ancestral temple" kept their ancestral tablets in their own homes. The rites carried out in collective halls, when such were available, correspondingly took place also in residential houses when people had their tablets at home. In the residential sphere, as in the ancestral halls, the tablets were worshipped daily by the burning of incense and by bowing. On the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month there was special worship. Incense and candles were burnt, and instead of merely bowing, the worshippers "kowtowed" (or knocked their heads on the ground), a more profound act of worship. Also, those more elaborated forms of worship including raw foodstuffs were, when relevant, conducted in the homes on the corresponding dates. Likewise in the domestic sphere it was the rule that offerings were carried out by the eldest son. Again, no women could have a part in the ancestral ceremonies (Graham 1961: 122, 147).

It has just been noted that the more elaborate offerings reported from the hall, implying the presentation of raw uncut meats, were made also in many residential homes at the time of lunar New Year and at the solar period of Qing Ming (Graham 1961: 122). This latter information is a little difficult to understand, but it seems that those who had access to an ancestral hall did not do this type of sacrifice in their residences at these two festivals. It may also be that those who were confined to a domestic shrine did not conduct these sacrifices in their residences at the same time as they were staged by others in the ancestral halls, at Qing Ming and in early au-

tumn after the harvest. The timing of the hall sacrifices clearly referred to the progression of the rice cycle in the fields.

On the birth and death anniversaries of both parents worship was performed, food was offered, and "cash paper" burned before their tablets in the parlour of the residence (Grainger1921: 22 f.). The likely reading is that the worship concerned a dead's personal tablet. In the Chengdu area, if this went on for more than three years is doubtful, as we have already learnt that individual tablets were burnt after this period of time – without any replacement.

Graves

Graves were located in the terrain, they were dug out pits but rather shallow. The hole was dug only about one-half or one-third the depth of the coffin; the coffin was then placed in the hole and covered with a large mound of dirt. The graves were sought out and worshipped on certain days and in some particular periods of the year, circumstances to which we will return below (Graham 1961: 43).

Of very great importance was the location of the ancestral graves. If the *feng shui* or geomantic positions of the graves were good, and the coffins and the corpses were pointed in the right direction, the descendants would prosper, increasing in numbers and wealth, and becoming scholars and officials. If the *feng shui* of the graves was bad, calamities would ensue among the descendants, and they would not prosper (Graham 1961: 112 f.; Grainger 1921: 14).

In special cases, when a wealthy man or a great scholar had died, a short biography was engraved on stone and, together with a second stone to cover as a protection, placed in the grave at the coffin foot (Grainger 1921: 17). Thus, it was hidden for the living world. The arrangement is reminiscent of that of the ancestral tablet.

Calendric Festivals

On New Year's day in the lunar calendar, or a day and two later, people visited the graves of their ancestors, set off some firecrackers, lighted candles and incense, and offered some food and wine to their forebears. They put "cash paper" all over the mounds of the graves, each piece held in place by a clod of dirt, as an offering to their ancestors and as evidence that the family had been filial and had not neglected the dead. The food was eaten and most of the wine drunk up near the tombs (Graham 1961: 146). In addition, we learn that during the first five days of the New Year, the tablets of the ancestors in the homes were worshipped twice a day, morning and evening. Incense and candles were lighted, and there were bows and prostrations. Many also worshipped their ancestors in the same way in the ancestral halls if they had access to such (Graham 1961: 147).

On the morning of the 15th day of the first lunar month, many firecrackers were set off. People worshipped the ancestral tablets in the homes and in the ancestral halls, lighting candles and incense, burning spirit money, and generally offering food and wine. Shopkeepers opened up again after the New Year festivities on this day, and the opening and first transaction was celebrated with, among other things, worshipping the ancestors with candles and incense (Graham 1961: 148).

On the Qing Ming day, celebrated 106 days after the winter solstice and introducing a solar calendar period of the same name, people of all ages walked to the graves of their ancestors. There they repaired the graves, lighted incense and candles, burnt spirit money, and offered food and wine to the spirits of the dead. Some of the wine was poured out on the ground. The living kowtowed very reverently before the tombs, then they ate a cold meal and drank wine. As an alternative date for celebration, the third day of the third moon (in the lunar calendar) is mentioned (Graham 1961: 149; Grainger 1921: 20, 22, also in Pillow's account, p. 27).

Another occasion for observing the dead was in the seventh moon, when there was the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, on the 13th to 15th of the moon. A celebration of Buddhist origins, this was staged in many ways. Pillow mentions that on this day "cash paper" was burned in honour of the ancestors, usually on the street in front of the house (cited in Grainger 1921: 28). It was noted that in some townships, including Ya'an, widows wept loudly for their deceased husbands, but widowers did not weep for their deceased wives. Grainger (1921: 22) reports that they did the same at the spring visits to the graves, also at the "midsummer mourning" – this is not clear – or on anniversaries of births and deaths. On the 15th of the seventh moon, there was a family meal at which the deceased ancestors were believed to be present. Food and wine were placed on the table with bowls, chopsticks, and spoons at their places, and left for an hour. Then the living descendants ate the food (Graham 1961: 150).

We have already mentioned the festival of the Earth Ruler in the seventh moon when there was worship in the ancestral hall. On the first day of the 10th moon was a festival called Song Han Yi, or

"Give Winter Clothing." Paper clothing was made and burned as a means of giving it to the deceased; otherwise they would suffer from cold during the coming winter. The ancestors were worshipped, incense and candles lighted, and spirit money was burned (Graham 1961: 151).

We learn that the graves were visited again in the twelfth moon, and repaired if necessary. Incense and candles were burned, and a paper banner erected to show that the graves had not been neglected (Grainger 1921: 20). Graham informs us that during the entire year there was no festival in which there was a feast during which the ancestors were not regarded as present and worshipped with incense, candles, and spirit money, and offerings of food and wine. The deceased were an important part of the family and, therefore, were expected to be present and to partake in these family meals (Graham 1961: 152).

Ancestors at Weddings

Marriages were virilocal for women. The ethnography from the Chengdu area tells us that at the point of leaving her natal home, a bride was brought into the family parlour and her hair was combed. Facing the outer door, she threw a pair of chopsticks over her shoulder to signify that she would no longer eat the food of her parents. She was leaving her commensality and stove group. Then, kneeling, she worshipped her ancestors and the gods, after that did obeisance to her parents (Grainger 1921: 8). On the arrival to her husband's home, she was led to the groom who was waiting for her and together they proceeded to "greet the hall." First, they faced the front door and worshipped Heaven and Earth, then turning they worshipped the ancestors of the bridegroom, and thereafter bowed to each other (Grainger 1921: 8). After withdrawing and dressing in new wedding clothes, the bride came forth together with the groom. They worshipped the ancestors together and paid respect to the bridegroom's parents (Grainger 1921: 9). Thus, the bride bid her own ancestors farewell by worshipping them and, again, introduced herself to her husband's (and forthwith her own new) ancestors by worshipping twice. This piece of ethnography contradicts Graham's proposition that women were never allowed to worship the deceased.

Somewhat surprising we find that on the "first even day" after the wedding, bride and bridegroom visited the parents of the bride. Among the things that happened on this occasion was that the newly-wedded pair worshipped the gods and the ancestors, and paid their respects to the parents. So, on this occasion, the bride once again worshipped her own "native" ancestors whom she had earlier bidden farewell, while the groom introduced himself by worshipping the to him foreign dead relatives of his wife.

An interesting feature is that if a widow remarried, this took place with very little ceremony. On arrival to the house, she worshipped the gods alone. Obviously, having once worshipped a foreign set of ancestors in nuptial rituals, this could not be repeated in a new marriage. It was a similar simplified ritual that accompanied the introduction of a "concubine" in a family (Grainger 1921: 11).

Discussion: Juxtapositions and Patterns of Cultural Meanings

The Ancestral Hall

In Yibin there were two social spheres in the pragmatics of ancestral worship. Those who belonged to a "large family" or "clan" with resources kept their ancestral tablets in a special hall. Those without such connections had the tablets of their deceased relatives at home. Graham does not provide an account of the architecture of the ancestral halls, but from the area further up along River Min we find a later description of such houses of worship telling us that these were patterned on the large residential mansions built around an open space, each with a "dragon's gate" entry-portal leading to an open-air inner courtyard. We learn that such four-cornered compounds symbolised the identity and prestige of local "descent groups" as extended families writ large (Ruf 1998: 16).

Having access to an ancestral hall meant having access to an overarching symbolic arrangement within which there were no domestic ancestral shrines to compete, but all tablets were collected and exposed in the common hall. This hall arrangement is not described in detail, but we know it contained an altar where there was one collective tablet representing all the dead of the ascending line implied. There was also a collection of individual tablets, each representing one particular dead person, the number of these reflecting at least three generations' depth in genealogical time. It is not clear how women were represented, but dead wives would have found a place on the same altar as their husbands.

As a comparison, it is reported from the Meishan area in the River Min valley that there none of the ancestral halls had individual tablets for specific

ancestors but only one single tablet, about a meter high. These were in the main room of the hall on a ceremonial altar, on which this single large ancestral tablet was set in a plaster base. Some such tablets were made of wood, others of stone. Inscribed on each were the indexical generational names (the *pai hang*) of their respective agnatic cluster but not the names of individual ancestors (Ruf 1998: 16, 173). This is in support of the early Chengdu ethnography, indicating only one tablet. In the light of this comparison, it seems that the Yibin arrangements (within the circles of relative wealth) were of a hybrid kind, the domestic shrines having been moved into the common hall and combined with the collective anonymous representation of the agnatic line there. This should have strengthened the overarching togetherness of the families involved. Why this fusion happened is not known.

We also learn that ancestral halls upstream River Min were the repositories for handwritten genealogical lineage histories as well as storehouses for grain harvested from land held corporately in ancestral trust (Ruf 1998: 16). Written genealogies are not mentioned by Graham nor by Grainger, but the latter mentions a paper inscription where the name of the deceased was recorded on a memorial sheet, apparently a way to remember the wider span of dead among poor people without ancestral halls. Only important kin groups kept ancestral halls. So it was in Yibin and also in the Meishan area, where in one district only three out of thirty surname groups had ancestral halls. In the latter place an impressive hall had no less than eighteen rooms. It was covered with a tiled roof and had been built with more than ten thick wooden pillars. Two somewhat smaller ancestral halls described were adjacent to ancestral cemeteries (Ruf 1998: 16).

In Yibin, the number of individual tablets kept in the ancestral hall was limited by a fixed generational span for inclusion. This meant, that they must have been removed at some stage when the ancestor became irrelevant to those living by being no more remembered, or by a rule stipulating an ultimate limit in generational time, beyond which individual representations would not be allowed. As mentioned, the ethnography states that the individual tablets were kept for "at least three generations," so perhaps there were some cases featuring up to, say, five generations of tablets – we cannot know. But the norm was to revere the dead relatives for three generations (Graham 1961: 27). What the fate of the discarded tablets was is not known, perhaps they were burnt or buried as in many other areas of China. In the Chengdu material, we find that the individual domestic tablet was burnt.

Thus, some systematic continuity between domestic sphere and ancestral hall seems to have been granted in that the Yibin hall altar not only displayed individual tablets (of the domestic kind) but also kept a collective tablet for all the dead of the cognominal cluster of relatives. It seems then, that after some three generations, the dead stopped existing as individual beings but were drawn up into the anonymous "clan" tablet. We do not know how the latter was inscribed, but there may have been indicated a first founder, or at least have been marked with the surname that defined the wider social descent group. Perhaps they provided a generational index, as in the Meishan case. How this transfer from individual tablet to collective tablet was achieved ritually is not known. What could be proposed, however, is that the dominance of one main tablet discouraged segmentation in the supporting kinship cluster.

One point could be made here, that is of a historical nature. In the riverine areas of Sichuan Province, the bulk of the population is made up of descendants of Hakka immigrants (Skinner 1951: 91). I am here not in pursuance of historical explanations, but history is certainly a dimension of the ethnography. Hakka-speaking populations elsewhere in China, in the southeast, commonly keep single collective ancestral tablets in their halls. Variation occurs, but the persistent pattern, as we intuit it, is the single tablet arrangement.[6] There is nothing self-evident about this. Speaking Hakka Chinese does not necessarily imply a common cultural grammar to accompany linguistic competence. Today, the inhabitants of the riverine areas in Sichuan generally speak a version of Western Mandarin. Still, the circumstance that the single tablet forms part of one discernible pattern is a thing that is helpful in our overall understanding of the Sichuan varieties of ancestral cults. Even so, historical explanation is not part of my present argument.

What were then these "large families" or "clans"? We learn that large families often built their houses with four wings joining to make a square, with an open space in the centre from which doors opened into all surrounding rooms. During the lifetime of a male parent, all his descendants, excepting married daughters and their families, lived in the same house, and the incomes of all the inhabitants were pooled. The ideal for a family was to remain together in the same home for several generations – sometimes as many as five. However, poverty and the lack of property often made it necessary for a family to divide and form new families in new homes

6 Aijmer (1967); Cohen (1976), Johnson (1996); Pasternak (1972); Blake (1981).

(Graham 1961: 25, 28). For our present purposes this description is only partly helpful and does not indicate the possible location of neither the domestic ancestral shrine nor, when existing, the external "clan" hall of worship.

The "clans" are only hinted at. Sichuan is known for strong kinship organisations (Hu 1948: *passim*, 151–156). We know, for instance, that there was in Yibin a "clan" of the surname of Lei, which was the most powerful there (Graham 1961: 41), apparently among other competitors. It is not so obvious what is meant by "large family" or "clan" in the ethnography. It is apparent that there were cognominal agnatically orientated kinship clusters that brought various primary, discursively defined groups together. Some of these Sichuan constellations seem to have been lineage-like, even lineages in the sense employed by Maurice Freedman (1958) in his discussion of belonging in southeastern China. In the Africanist's tradition (e.g., Fortes 1953) a lineage is then an organisation of a corporative character – and lineage belonging, discursively, a way to talk about property. We have seen above that in the River Min area some halls possessed land as ancestral trust and the rice harvested from this land was stored within the hall complex. There is mention from the River Min valley of a lineage which had been settled for some twenty generations and featured spread-around junior branches (Ruf 1998: 7, 16).

Other Sichuan cognominal kinship clusters were more like associations, existing entirely in terms of a discursive ontology. They did not have ancestral halls, but met in commensalities in some elder's residence (Ruf 1998: 173). They have been referred to as "ancestral associations" as there was a degree of formal organisation and collective obligations going with membership. In general, their character was expressive. Their *sine qua non* was the collective honouring of ancestors and the staging of commensalities to celebrate dead forebears. They met on such occasions as the lunar New Year, Qing Ming, and the Hungry Ghosts Festival. They were focused on some particular dead forefathers defined in terms of a scale of ascent, and so many associations were nesting in one another, in a way somewhat reminiscent of lineage segments (Ruf 1998: 53, 186). Apparently, there was some genealogical thinking involved, but there is no mention of written documents.

The Domestic Ancestral Shrine

Graham does not tell us about the arrangements of the domestic shrine for ancestors, apart from the generational limitation imposed. Later observations from the Meishan area tell us – not surprisingly – that it was in the main, larger parlour of a house that a family's ancestral spirit altar was located.[7] We learn that "spirit altars" consisted of a square table, sometimes with intricately carved trim, pushed against the centre of the rear wall. Candles, food, and incense were placed there as offerings to family ancestors. Above the altar, a large red paper bearing the family's surname hung on the wall. There is mention of an ancestral scroll, which indicated the ritual identity of family as patriline. It is argued, that denoting the spiritual seat (*shen wei*) of collective ancestral spirits of a particular surname scrolls monumentalised genealogical time as a generic, almost atemporal continuity between the past, present, and future (Ruf 1998: 16). Graham does not mention red paper sheets nor ancestral scrolls being used as frozen statements on eternity.

There is a difference between the two cases because in Yibin the domestic shrine was not an obligatory feature. We have learnt that if the residents of a house belonged to a kinship cluster that owned a common hall of worship, the individual tablets were placed there. In the Meishan case individual tablets were found in the residences, whether the inhabitants had access to a hall or not. What is shared is that individual tablets did not cross over from residence to hall, not even, as in the southeastern parts of the country, in the shape of a different newly manufactured tablet. Also, in both examples, if you had a hall with a collective tablet, the dead were drawn up into its anonymity. In Yibin, in cases where there were no halls, the dead seem, at least superficially, to have evaporated after some three generations.

A rather similar situation was found in Kaixiangong, in the Jiangsu Province, where a rustic community had no halls and only conducted domestic worship embracing a few generations of forebears. It could be suggested though, that in that example there may have been some mechanism to transfer individual dead, when their tablets were removed, into a collective sphere of divinity, the latter in turn being represented by an idol of a god in a local temple (Fei 1939; Aijmer 2015). Here in Sichuan, no

7 This seems to be a predominant Chinese pattern. An exception to this has been found in the village of "Harmony Cave" in the northwestern Guangdong Province, where the ancestral tablets are kept in the kitchen (Santos 2009: 121, 128). Jean Berlie, in a personal communication, tells me that he once saw something similar in Simao, in southern Yunnan. Such cases are remarkable, as it seems that generally the Kitchen God is kept separate from the circle of family ancestors (see, e.g., Aijmer 2005b; also 2003: 33–46, 143–148).

such transformation suggests itself, but then we have seen that there was a local discursive support for a similar train of thought in the form of a clearly articulated demotic notion that after death a person was transformed into a god. If we were to look for such permutations in the iconic material, we would need a more detailed ethnography. The comparison with the Jiangsu case is only meant to be suggestive of a possible analytical path to take. Having said this, we must also caution that each case we study is filled with local implications, each demanding to be explained within its own realm of cultural meanings. Without an ancestral hall and a collective tablet the Yibin domestic ancestors, so far we know in the lack of suggestive ethnography, just disappeared. In the Chengdu case, the individual tablet was burnt after three years. In Meishan, there are no known limitations to the number of tablets that could be kept on the altar, although some restrictions are likely to have been in operation. Here an ancestor was offered an individual continuity in terms of a genealogical scroll.

Graves, Tablets and Calendar

In the Meishan area, graves were raised mounds, similar to those we find in the Yibin ethnography. They were situated in the landscape according to principles of geomancy and, thus, as a consequence of a search for luck-bringing spots that in turn affected the living descendants. Part of the spirit, or one of the souls of an individual ancestor was believed to reside in the grave with the deceased's mortal remains. In some cases, ancestral graves belonging to a particular branch of a kin group had come to be clustered together cemetery-like on a site where geomantic forces were regarded to be particularly auspicious. We learn that graves represented a key link in the conceptual continuity and unity of an agnatic kinship cluster and were periodically the foci of important ritual activities (Ruf 1998: 17). It seems likely that these features are reminiscent of what existed in Yibin.

We have seen earlier that graves were ritual foci in various calendric festivals. To bring this into profile we may seek advice from a paradigmatic model based on the events of the ritual year in the provinces of Hunan and Hubei, around Lake Dongting. In this area, the main occasion for visiting and worshipping the graves of dead relatives was the day and the period of Qing Ming in early April. An analysis of this event (Aijmer 1978; 2010) suggests that the living were visiting the physical remains of their ancestors in order to induce the latter to bless the sowing of the new crop of rice. The dead were in the ground and they were given gifts of food and wine to solicit the counter-gift of the new shoots about to emerge from the rice grains being sown into the ground at this time. It was also an invitation to the dead to reciprocate this social call with a return visit later in the summer – in the fifth moon. The spring occasion was celebrated with a commensal picnic among the graves.

This was the only time of the year when there was a general concern with the graves. In some areas here in Central China, there was a similar event later in summer that could best be explained by the introduction, and a response to this introduction, of a second crop of rice, which happened only in the eighteenth century. Otherwise the graves were left in peace.

The events in Sichuan seem to have been rather similar. Qing Ming visits to the graves point to the connection with the sowing of rice. The dead in their guise as physical remains in the earth were thought to have promoted the growth in the nurseries where the grain had been sown. This was achieved by visits and gifts.

What is more striking is that grave worship in very similar forms was a major ingredient in the celebrations of the New Year. On New Year's day, or a day or two later, people visited the graves, used firecrackers, candles, and incense, and offered some food and wine to their forebears. They put "cash paper" all over the mounds of the graves as an offering of wealth. The food was eaten and most of the wine was drunk near the tombs – again a commensality with the dead.

Generally, and so it was in Central China, New Year was a festival for the ancestors in their tablet shape and it connected with human proliferation, marriage, and the promise of future children. At New Year, the deceased made a visit to their former homes on earth and were treated with worship and festivities. Their presence was a main feature and a response to their special invitation to the celebrations of the ninth day of the ninth moon in the preceding year. That autumnal visit, taking place on heights and mountaintops, was also prominent in Sichuan, so far we can judge. In the Sichuan New Year, it will be recalled, during the first five days the tablets of the ancestors in the homes were worshipped twice a day, morning and evening. Incense and candles were lighted and there were bows and prostrations. Many also worshipped their ancestors in the same way in the ancestral halls.

We have seen that in demotic thought the ancestors would have had a constant place in the residences as inhabitants of their tablets. But what we

meet at New Year is a different iconic version in which the dead are welcomed guests coming from abroad. In the New Year cultural modality, the deceased are promoters of continuity in terms of coming children. In the everyday cultural modality, they are just dependants – and a bit of benefactors.

What we can say is that in Sichuan at New Year the ancestors were much at the forefront, being worshipped in both their guises, in graves, and as tablets, both being similarly important. This seems aberrant. The rituals suggest that on this festival there was a demand for a "complete" and unified notion of ancestor which could be accomplished in this way.[8] The sought after generative capacity of the dead was elsewhere (at least in Central China) split between two complementary spheres of life and continuity, one concerned with the cultivation of rice and embodied in the cult of the graves, the other concerned with the begetting of children, especially sons, and focussed on the worship of the ancestral tablets. In Hunan and Hubei, the two spheres must not interfere with one another, the generative capacity of women, for instance, must be kept separate from the generative capacity of the rice fields – as exemplified by the rituals of Cold Food at about the same time as Qing Ming (Aijmer 2010). But in Sichuan, at New Year, both sorts of ancestral force could mix, or at least be solicited in parallel.

In terms of this demotic discourse the ancestors so observed were surely permanently connected with their tablets. In one sense they remained an important part of the family and, therefore, were expected to be present and to partake in these family meals of a commensal character. This was all in accordance with the place of the ancestors within a mundane cultural modality. Interestingly, the only exception to this omnipresence of the dead was the festival on the ninth day of the ninth moon. In terms of the iconic order the implied verticality and the outdoor and "wilderness" character of this festival seem to imply a sort of negation of ordinary ancestral worship, domestic or public. The reason for the domestic absence of ancestors on this day, deduced from a juxtaposition with the Hunan-Hubei situation (Aijmer 1991), was that the day and the climbing of hills and mountains that it entailed, was a *visit to* the dead ancestors who in their tablet guise (within the New Year modality) were seen as connected with the *yang* male cosmic principle and, therefore, in turn connected with the cosmic direction upwards. In terms of the "New Year modality" they went to see the "tablet dead" in their home regions and so they were the hosts and not the guests on this very day.

Graham reports on another occasion for observing the dead, in the seventh moon, on the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, on the 13th to 15th days of that moon. It seems to have had the character of remembrance and partly it took on features that were drawn from the set of funeral customs. On the last day, there was a family meal at which the deceased ancestors were believed to be present, apparently in terms of yet another parallel cultural modality of Buddhist presuppositions in which the dead inhabited various hells or roamed the earth in search of food. The festival seems to be a trope on lasting belonging and was predominantly discursive in character.

Women

We have to assume that a married woman followed her husband in death and had her own tablet installed among those of her husband's agnatic relatives, granted that she had given birth to a son. However, without a son she was not provided with a tablet when dead, her belonging apparently being defined by her contribution to the social continuity. The forms for this inclusion are not explicit in the Sichuan corpus of ethnography I have examined for this essay. We know, however, that women were completely excluded from the worship of the dead, which is not a common southern Chinese feature. And yet, as a contradiction, when they married they first worshipped their own ancestors, bidding them farewell when leaving the native house. Similarly, they greeted their husbands' ancestors with worship on arrival to their new abode, then together with their grooms. It seems as if the women, in one iconic construct of the world, were less prominent in the building of continuity. The strength of agnatic ideological discourse and cultural imagery excluded women from participation. In the imagery of social continuance they remained instrumental outsiders. But then, at weddings, they actually worshipped two different sets of ancestors. There is no simple explanation to this paradox in symbolic games, but – what may be suggested as a tentative solution – at the wedding women were explicitly and expressively recognised as agnatic relatives too, and on arrival to their new home their original kinship affiliation was denied by the worship of the husband's ancestors. But then the groom also worshipped his new wife's ancestors. Perhaps the purpose of this (apparently) "irregular" act was to separate his wife from her agnatic background. It may also have been some

8 This may connect with a widespread Southeast Asian theme, see, for instance, Platenkamp (2005).

sort of strategic iconic linking. Thus, the contradiction in the ethnography leaves us in considerable uncertainty.

Variation in the Imagery of Tablets

The Sichuan ethnography offers some complexities. Let me sum up. We have found in the Yibin corpus that the majority of people kept their ancestral tablets at home. The latter were individual and referred to particular persons. After some three generations they were removed and abandoned. In the Meishan corpus we found a similar situation, but with the difference that in this area there was also one collective identity of the dead displayed, a red paper sheet which announced the defining surname of the cognominal kinship cluster to which the residents and their dead belonged. From Chengdu it is also mentioned that each dead person was given an individual tablet placed in a small shrine of its own, and kept in the parlour of the house. They were destroyed by burning after three years. Exception was found in Yibin, where a smaller segment of the population did not keep any tablets at all at home; they were placed in an ancestral hall. So, again, trying to form a synthetic view of this span from having no tablets (and no domestic worship) to having revered tablets – although for a limited time – in residences, we cannot rely on superficial morphology. It is rather a question of figures of cultural thought in processes of transformation.

Seen in the light of a mundane, everyday cultural modality, mainly articulated in discursive terms and where acts of worship may be seen as discursive gestures, the domestic tablets fulfilled a function as representing the dead in an environment of which they were once part. The dead in this guise were dependants – they had to rely on their living progeny for their welfare. They were given cooked food, clothes, and money. Candle flames and incense accompanied and marked these gifts. In return, the ancestors brought general blessings and a good life. If neglected, they responded with anger and inflicted disaster. The essence of the relationship worshiper-ancestor was one of continuing reciprocity. In Yibin, some inhabitants had access to an ancestral hall where they placed all their individual tablets beside the all-embracing collective tablet. This was a hybrid form of ancestral reverence, the two spheres of what is individual and what is collective being physically brought together on one altar in a special building and yet kept temporarily apart. The arrangement seems to have indicated a relatively weak domestic sphere – perhaps as a result of the dominance of forcefully developed agnatic lineages.

In the Chengdu case we found that the individual dead survived as ancestor for only three years. But then, some Chengdu people also had ancestral halls, each with one single collective ancestral tablet. In this case, the individual tablet's spiritual inhabitant was transferred into this all-embracing host tablet. There is no indication how this was achieved. Perhaps the burning of the domestic tablet constituted itself the mechanism to achieve this transfer into anonymity. Again, this short-lived individual ancestor's individuality may have suffered due to a powerful lineage ideology, expressed in one dominant single manifestation. Thus, people without ancestral halls did not opt for some alternative representation of collective endless belonging. Instead, there were "ancestral associations" forming commensal meetings in residences with the presupposition that their dead took part. The operation of these associations must have implied some sort of "mental tablets" or unwritten genealogies which could advise as to membership in the association. Leadership here would be combined with such a specialised knowledge.

Passing-away introduced a death career in which the dead passed through two stages, starting with one of social continuance conditioned by a principle of general reciprocity. The second stage was divided into two career possibilities. Continuing individuality was one, but then, here in Sichuan, agnatic connections were only discursive templates formed by sets of recollections and intermittently articulated as genealogical nodes. Ancestry was then a figure of language-carried thought. The dead were celebrated without symbolic tokens, they remained abstractions, verbally made focal in rituals in a sort of nesting system inside a recognised system of decent. The alternative second stage was the nebulous anonymity, expressed through the collective single large tablet for all dead ascendants. The choice between the two options is not clearly indicated in the ethnography, but it is implied that varying social resources were of guidance. The symbolic games played with ascending deceased were possibly the results of a translation of a common ground of iconic imagery but differently influenced by categories of social distance.

Variation between Sacrificial Events

There are some puzzling, even contradictory features in the Sichuan ethnography. On some occasions the pattern of everyday offerings to the dead is

replaced with some large-scale sacrifices, in which the tablets were highlighted and the offerings sharply different. It seems that when this happened the tablets were possessed by another sort of ancestor with other needs and other potentials. One such special sacrifice took place just after the rice was planted, the other after the rice harvest. The sacrificial gifts were raw meats, uncut and unprepared, like whole pigs and sheep, and fowls.

These events clearly related to the cultivation of rice; one was for a renewal of the vegetative energy in the transplanted rice, the other a sort of thanksgiving ritual. We have seen earlier that the first calendric link between the ancestors and the cultivation of rice was at the Qing Ming Festival, celebrated with visits to the graves combined with commensal picnics, people and deceased consuming cold food and wine. This was, it was argued, an invitation to the ancestors to return the gifts received with shoots of rice and also to return to their former abodes later in the summer as a counter-visit, and, then to endow the transplanted rice with energy. In this ritual, we also see a parallel to the double worship, tablet, and grave at New Year. Blessings were sought from a "complete ancestry," appearing in two guises. Around Chengdu there were also the alternative offerings of raw meat in the ancestral hall at Qing Ming, perhaps a sort of substitute for – or a complement to – visits to the graves, or an inversion in the reciprocity. We cannot know.

It is this return visit, provoked by the Qing Ming expeditions to the graves, which we see at the height of summer in the ancestral hall with its grand offerings of raw meats to the transcendental guests. The raw and the cooked were here used to demarcate different sorts of ancestors, only unprepared animals being compatible with the dead in their graves. What is interesting is that the transplantation of rice in Hunan-Hubei was celebrated out of doors and in combination with dragon boat races, but here in Sichuan the topos was only implicit and rituals confined to the house of worship. The dead risen from their graves occupied the collective or individual ancestral tablets, which accordingly became, in this cultural modality of the grave, differently natured ritual objects. The same train of thought should apply also to the later harvest rituals. These celebrations appropriated the generative energy of the dead agnatic relatives and directed it towards the rice fields. In Sichuan, the dead were rewarded for their assiduous participation with grand sacrifices.

According to our earlier reasoning, New Year would be a festival for the ancestors in their tablet guise in which there was an emphasis on their blessings channelled into social proliferation. That figure of symbolism applied both in ancestral halls and in the domestic sphere, as there was at this time a marked increased intensity in the rituals. The dead were worshipped twice a day and with great reverence. This certainly related to hopes for future children and the expectations that the deceased would be helpful in accomplishing this.

The New Year ancestral presence in the tablets was, again, of a different order than the everyday habitation of the same tablets. Now, at New Year, the dead were present among the living as a response to their being invited in the ninth moon when people climbed mountains and hills to visit them there in "Nature." This New Year possession was thus different from both the everyday routine omnipresence of the spirits of the deceased and from the attending dead in the nightly grand séances at the winter solstice. The rituals of the 15th day of the first moon was to see the visiting New Year ancestors off, bidding them farewell as they returned to "Nature" – mountain tops and other celestial abodes. The everyday ancestral presence could be resumed.

One should remember that on the actual New Year's Day and the next few days there was in fact also a period for visiting graves. In the light of the broader South China scene, this would seem somewhat intermittent ("ungrammatical.") Graves were generally not visited at New Year (but see Aijmer 2005a); they and their contents belonged to the agricultural sphere of production. At this time of the year the fields were fallow (or planted with wheat) and the ancestors otiose.[9] So how can we understand these ritual activities?

The nocturnal ritual session was staged somewhat earlier in the ancestral halls or at home, at the winter solstice. It was a strictly structured event in terms of generation and this indicates that such worship was associated with something social and socially existential rather than with the cultivation of rice. The best assumption here would be to see this as a special event when the spirits of the graves invaded the tablets – negating the tablet spirits that were the regular inhabitants. This took place well before the lunar New Year proper, on a special day and at night. The "ungrammatical" visit to the graves just after the exchange of years may then have been seen as a complimentary return visit, bringing New Year greetings of thanks to the graves. There was worship with candles and incense.

If the deceased of the graves invaded the domestic houses or the houses of worship at this time of the year to receive appropriate sacrifices and partake

9 The common winter crop of wheat does not seem much ritualised and is iconically ignored.

of commensalities, this would have meant that they not only benefitted the agricultural fields, but that their vegetative force was now, working as a social energy, channelled into the sphere of human proliferation. Continuity in the cluster of agnatic kinsmen was also their interest. Rice was forming society, eating ancestral rice was a ritual act creating belonging, and the birth of new sons was a necessity for future rice. Rice harvested from the corporately owned ancestral fields could be stored in the ancestral halls. In some ways this nightly celebration of grave visitors is reminiscent of the celebration of Little New Year in Hunan and Hubei, where there was also a double ancestors' appearance but with different presuppositions and implications (Aijmer 2003: 39–51, 151–153).

We may ask why Sichuan people needed the blessings of both celestial (*yang*) and terrestrial (*yin*) ancestry for their social proliferation, where elsewhere in southern China this was the celestial ancestors' task. The reversed double applied to their search for agricultural blessings. In these areas, ancestors were seen as a unified force in contrast to cultural imagery elsewhere, indicating ancestry as a split phenomenon. There is no obvious answer to this question found in the ethnography, but it may be the case that graves were the only lasting individual memoranda of the dead, whereas the tablet offered but a temporary recollection; the bulk of the "tablet dead" were a nebulous lot, part of which perhaps not even existing. At best, they were anonymous components of descent from an abstract apex. It could be suggested, that maintained individuality in death (in terms of graves) would enhance the forming of new individuals in continuous life. The impersonation of the dead by children in ritual meals as a means to create tangible and individual ancestors, may point in this direction too. Such impersonations seem to correspond to the ritual use of ancestral portraits in other areas.

One thing remains to be discussed. The "traditional" social landscape of riverine Sichuan was, apart from towns, not only full of small villages but also, and characteristically, of isolated farmsteads. Why this was so is not so clear, but perhaps the settlement pattern of Sichuan was structured in this way by the strong presence of sericulture. We know from another part of southern China, Shun De in Guangdong Province, that sericulture there was like a production line where each isolated farmstead was specialised in one single phase of the handling of the silk moths and their cocoons (Trewartha 1939). If this was the case also in areas of Sichuan is not certain. Other parts of China have had sericulture without breaking up conventional village patterns. Sericulture was an important part of the Sichuan economy, which fact may have fostered a difference in social organisation, giving rise to forms that existed in parallel to that which focused on the cultivation of rice. The presence of sericulture may have promoted "extraordinary" features of rice-based ancestral cults. The production of silk was in the hands of women. Perhaps we might relate the exclusion of women from the worship of the dead, the emphasis on "unified ancestors," and the double flows of ancestral energy from grave and tablet equally into the growth of rice and the proliferation of the agnatic lineage, as responses to strong female spheres in society and production. Intense ideological agnation could operate as a denial of female aspects of existence. Here is a set of new questions – which reach beyond what can be achieved within the space of this article.

Final Words

This exploration of Sichuan ethnographies dating from, or referring to, Republican China (also reflecting late imperial China), has added some new layers of understanding to the original accounts, by means of analytical deconstruction and a subsequent synthetic reconstruction of the symbolic rebuses involved. What has emerged in this procedure connects with what we know from other parts of rice cultivating southern China, but how these connections are formed is probably too early in the research process to say. We can trace both expected family resemblances and features that we intuit as intermittent or "ungrammatical" in the larger perspective. Variation and the generation of variance are the key concepts for future endeavours should we wish to go on learning more about the fundamental semantic structures of "traditional" Chinese culture.

In the human sciences an explanation is a device which accounts in an interesting way for all the given facts, leaving, ideally, no unexplained exceptions. In the present case, the data examined are less than complete and so the explanations offered here must be regarded as informed suggestions. Still, and until such time that someone can present a more comprehensive and more interesting account of the data discussed, this attempt at clarification of conventional Sichuan forms of ancestral cults should have a bearing on our accumulating knowledge about traditional Chinese society.

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