

ANCESTORS ON HIGH:
MUSINGS ON AN EAST CHINA CASE¹

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Abstract

The focus of this article is on the conventions of ancestor worship in the province of Jiangsu, directing light on certain ethnographic data that do not accord with the general, synthesized sociological picture established for southern China. Exploring Myron L. Cohen's 1990 field data, together with what is known from elsewhere in the province, the tentative discussion in this article concerns the nature of ancestry and the construction of social continuity in a local society with its roots in rice-farming. Here ancestor worship as a cultural grammar takes the form of a pragmatic variation, the search for blessings (continuity) being strongly contrasted with the avoidance of implied malevolence (discontinuity). It is further suggested that ancestry and divinity are interacting iconic forces in the stream of social life.

Key words: East China, ancestry, cult of the dead, construction of continuity, iconic expression

Introduction

The social landscape of Jiangsu Province in the east of China shows a great deal of variation, despite the fact that its ecological foundation is everywhere rather similar. Wherever you go in the area there is water. Indeed, this is a watery country crossed by canals and studded by lakes and marshlands, its main crop being wet rice in irrigated fields. In the dryer winter some cotton and crops of wheat are also grown. Furthermore, it is an area of spectacular urbanization, very many regions today having been drawn into urban economic activities. In this article I wish to attend to some of the more traditional aspects of local Jiangsu society, looking for clues to an understanding of the traditionalist factors that have kept southern Chinese society together in a more or less recognizably unified way for very long spans of time. What I will argue in what follows may not be very conclusive, and this article is written in an experimental and tentative mood. The study of the phenomenon of ancestry in China is, generally speaking, a moot point. The specific topic of ancestry, chosen here

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for its display of constant local variation in actual appearance within a frame of discursive orthodoxy, is a somewhat elusive field of enquiry, yet such studies of social symbolism may well be useful in thinking more broadly about these crucial processes of social conservation. We may learn about the systemic nature of the mechanisms of tradition through a study of their social articulation.

In this article, I will concentrate on certain aspects of what is assumed to be the Confucian scaffolding of Chinese society, in the south as in the north, namely the system of ancestor worship, which connects the past tense of social life with forecast futures. In doing so, however, I will seek to go beyond literate elite practices and their interface with state ideology. What I shall deal with is thus not the usual sinological suppositions regarding elite social engineering (e.g. Rowe 1998), but rather demotic, existential symbolism. My focus here is thus on a cultural idiom of a discursive character that draws heavily on an iconic flow of non-linguistic expressiveness. The main topos of this imagery is death. The symbological characterization of the notion of ancestry sees it as a form of cultural grammar that organizes the past in order to regulate social life in the construction of times to come. If we can understand something of how this system of the compression of time into a model of Janus-faced continuity has worked through the ages, in terms of relevant robust figures of thought and insistent clusters of iconic templates, we may be in a somewhat better position to understand the wider dynamics of southern Chinese society.²

The phenomenon of death is a focal point in all known human societies, and both figures of thought and impulses of iconic symbolism surround the topos of human physical discontinuity, everywhere and at all times throughout history, as far as one can tell. The development of death-related imagery may in essence be a truly trans-human phenomenon, and all known peoples throughout time seem to have celebrated death in some way or another. It is another question, though, to what extent societies have constructed a continuous long-term interest in distantly related individuals long since dead, whom we may call ancestors. When we talk about ancestors and cults of ancestors in a general way, we mostly mean something like the dead, despite their

² I have earlier discussed variations in the morphology and cultural semantics of ancestor cults with regard to some areas in southern China and have done so by way of a symbological analysis. The present article is thus part of a somewhat wider concern with ancestry as a conservative social factor and a supporting idiomatic symbolic construct in 'traditional' society. See Aijmer 2016a, 2016b, 2016c. Others relevant works will follow.

death and physical disappearance, having continuous involvement in social life and being regarded somehow as continuously contributing to human affairs. Even so, in the many cases when the dead are included in society in this fashion, which seems to be frequent, we will discover such differences among the discursive conceptions and iconic templates found among the world's populations that it will be hard to see the social conquest of death as a unified process of human evolution. There is little to suggest that ancestor cults form part of a lineal mental development by definition.

China is nonetheless a special case, as we are fortunate to have access to a social history of some four thousand years. This span of time exhibits a very forceful continuous tradition that stabilizes cultural semantics and thus counteracts the constant flow of change in the world. The exploration of Chinese ancestry and ancestral cults is therefore not only of interest to the 'expert', it also opens up perspectives for an improved understanding of conservative factors in social development. It has recently been suggested in a Spencerian mood that the millennia-long conduct of ancestor worship in China should be seen as an example of a universal evolutionary process (Coe and Begley 2016), but, as already mentioned, there is reason for caution against such arguments. However, I cannot engage in a debate on these matters within the space of this article. In setting out here to discuss some forms of Chinese ancestor worship, I am merely conducting a limited and experimental exercise to suggest how we may read ethnographic sources to produce an accountable and meaningful common context.

When death strikes in southern China, this provokes reactions with much local variation in conventions — arrays of possible social arrangements. One line of research, suggested here, would be to examine whether these variants could be brought together to interact in a wider perspective revealing a common grammar of ancestor worship, a grammar that, under the influence of varying local conditions, would generate transformations in ethnographic appearance. When we know how localized Chinese systems work, we can use this insight for further comparative endeavours —regionally, area-wise, and possibly even universally.

The starting point for the present exercise is a splendid fieldwork report on the organization of social life in eastern Jiangsu Province produced by Myron L. Cohen, based on his experiences in the village of Shenjiashang. This investigation was carried out in 1990 *in situ* in the lower Yangzi region and was designed to throw fresh light on the formation of lineages in eastern China. However, any study of kinship

organization in this country would also, of necessity, touch on the phenomenon of ancestor worship. Here I wish to recycle these field data to make them speak with somewhat different voices within a framework of symbological understanding. Anthropology is, after all, a cumulative enterprise. Although my investigations are being conducted at a distance from the actual field, with the aid of Cohen's data, I will attempt to explore the notions of ancestry in this local sphere of Jiangsu cultural symbolism.³

The village of Shenjiashang is situated not too far from the megalopolis of Shanghai (for further details, see Cohen 2005: 195-7).⁴ Prior to the communist era the village was a farming community, largely dependent on crops of rice and winter wheat. Today the great majority of its residents are involved in urban occupations for a living, but their local community is still steeped in the moulds provided by its former farming life. Much of Shenjiashang's present-day ritual and social life represents a 'revival' of former Republican and late Imperial ideas and practices, its reconstruction of traditional symbolism being in no way either complete or unproblematic. The forms that have reappeared after long periods of the state's suppression of political radicalism may not be intact or continuous, and the accompanying figures of thought not entirely authentic; some may even have been newly invented in attempts to recreate tradition.

The Shenjiashang ethnography shows some particular features which, taken, together motivate the present enquiry and discussion. For purposes of comparison and contrast, I will also introduce brief notes regarding other Jiangsu localities, mainly from Fei Xiaotong's pre-war study of the village of Kaixiangong.⁵

Kinship organization in Shenjiashang

Agnatically structured kinship clusters dominated the village scene in Shenjiashang, but these communities were not corporate lineages in the classic sense once

³ My own field experience of Jiangsu is limited to explorative travels in the 1990s.

⁴ References to the main source by Myron L. Cohen, 'Lineage Organization in East China', will from now on indicate page number(s) only. Today the village of Shengjiashan forms part of the Shanghai municipality.

⁵ Studies of larger urban agglomerations of people, like Soochow, have been neglected here. Urbanism entails a set of different presuppositions influencing cultural systems.

formulated by Meyer Fortes (1953).⁶ Corporate holdings were nowhere in evidence in the settlement. We learn, for instance, that landholdings did not provide any corporate support for lineage organization (p. 197). This lack of corporate communities was similar to the looser structures that also once characterized the village of Fengjiao (Fukutake 1967: 87) near the city of Soochow, as well as the village of Kaixiangong near Lake Tai (Fei 1962: 57). It should be remembered that large tracts of the Jiangsu countryside were devastated during the Taiping rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century and that this destruction certainly affected social conditions throughout the periods that followed. Whatever the reasons, it seems that, in many country villages in Jiangsu, corporate ideology was generally weak, even though powerful land-owning lineages existed here and there in the area (Hu 1948: 35-6, 165-6, 168-9, 181). There are at present no real clues as to how to understand these variations in social morphology in a more general way.

The absence of ancestral halls in Shenjiashang

As elsewhere in China, the people of Shenjiashang revered their forebears. One prominent but negative feature of local ancestor worship in this village was that the agnatic clusters of kin in the village did not see themselves as units in the sense of wider corporate ancestor worship. We learn that, in addition to the absence of corporate property, there were no separate ancestral halls or agnatically defined cemeteries, nor were there any rituals of collective ancestor worship organized above the family level, that is, ‘in order to dramatize lineage solidarity’ (p. 200).

If we move further south in Jiangsu province, we find other examples similar to the case of Shenjiashang. Thus, in the village of Kaixiangong in the 1930s, there were no ancestral halls, only domestic shrines (Fei 1962: 84, 105), while in the village of Fengjiao in the 1940s, near Soochow, the dominant agnatic kin clusters also had no corporate ancestral halls (Fukutake 1967: 87).

We must be cautious, however. There does not seem to have been a common or widespread pattern in the Jiangnan plains when it comes to the construction and distribution of ancestral halls (known as *shen ci*): some settlements had them, others did not. We learn, for instance, that country people around the city of Soochow had

⁶ Cohen calls these agnatic clusters ‘lineages’, apparently following a strongly rooted convention in sinological anthropology. This is a matter of definition and so of little importance here.

such houses of worship (Lou 1989: 3; *Gu jin* 1888: VI, *Fengsu* 8a), even though it is not clear whether they were always separate buildings in corporate ownership, or somehow integrated into various types of domestic residence. In some contrast, it is also reported that a large, urban-based agnatic kin cluster with the family name of Zhu, residents from the township of Hu Cao, near Shenjiashang, had no ancestral hall (p. 212).

Domestic ancestral shrines in Shenjiashang

The focus of local ancestor worship in Shenjiashang was on the tablets (*shenzupai*) that were kept in special shrines in village residences. The shape of the ancestor tablet favoured in Shenjiashang is not described, but probably they were made of a single piece of wood and were rectangular in shape. These tablets were kept in place throughout the year. A tablet was dedicated exclusively to one particular individual, not to a husband and wife together, nor to a larger group of individually identified agnates (p. 200). Inscribed on the right-hand side of the tablet and facing it was the ancestor's year of birth. On the left was the year of death, and in the middle, the ancestor's name. Because the collected tablets kept in a residence were periodically pruned and some removed from the shrine, a tablet dedicated to the unnamed earlier ancestors, those who had been removed, would also be present (p. 200). In contrast, in Kaixiangong there were no such collective tablets, an ancestor once removed being an ancestor lost (Fei 1962: 75-9).

We do not know how a new tablet was introduced to the domestic ancestral shrine following a death. In Kaixiangong this happened in the sequence of mortuary rituals that followed the death and involved a special little pavilion, donated, interestingly, by a son-in-law from a different kin cluster (*ibid.*: 76).

In Shenjiashang, the tablets were kept in the main room or 'guest room' (*ketang*) of a residential compound, which might be the dwelling of one family, though in the case of a family division the compound might continue to be shared by several families headed by brothers, or even by third-generation agnates. Division resulted in the building of new stoves by each of the new family units and the distribution of residential quarters and other rooms among them. The *ketang* itself remained shared property and was now known as the *zongketang* (common guest room) (p. 200). We have no information on other functions of this family hall, for example, whether meals were taken there, how women were related to it traditionally, or whether it was

used as a central social arena in cases of death and mourning. These questions suggest themselves through a comparison with the Kaixiangong ethnography, from which we learn that men ate in the hall, while women took their meals in the kitchen, that women were not allowed to sleep in the hall and that, in cases of death, meals were prepared in the hall (Fei 1962: 76-7, 121). We may suspect that in Shenjiashang too the domestic hall, with its permanent presence of ancestral tablets, would have been endowed with a certain amount of sanctity.

We have no account of the part, if any, played by the Stove God in this village as the kitchen's counterpart to the ancestors located in the domestic shrine, as was the case in Kaixiangong. A lack of data means we must leave such intricacies aside here (but see Aijmer 2005b).

In this eastern part of Jiangsu Province, but perhaps also commonly in the wider area of Jiangnan, the tablets were placed on a special platform, something that seems specific to this region. Although it was called a *jiatang* (family hall), it was in fact a small platform placed high up on the wall facing the main door to the guest room and attached to a roof beam (*liang*). A ladder was needed to reach it. If a *jiatang* was kept in a shared *ketang*, it might similarly be referred to as a *zongjiatang* (pp. 200-1). A similar arrangement is mentioned in the city of Soochow (p. 202), but the general body of information on this city does not provide further indications of the existence of high-up platforms for the ancestral tablets (Aijmer 2005a).

Families would worship their ancestors independently. Apart from worshipping at New Year (p. 196) we have no specified times for these ritual acts, but in Kaixiangong a dead person's days of birth and death were observed, and they were commemorated by the women of the house (Fei 1962: 76-7). In Shenjiashang, if several closely related families shared a 'guest room' and its tablets, each on its own prepared a separate offering of food, wine and ritual paper money. In some cases, it is reported, each family would even use a separate offering table. Most families, however, simply appear to have taken turns. Ancestor worship was strictly lineal: it never emphasized the collateral ties among contemporary agnatically related families, but rather made explicit the obligations of each family unit to its own predecessor ancestors (p. 201). This kitchen-based separation of families, which ordered the conduct of ancestor worship, corresponds to what has been reported from Kaixiangong, but with the important difference that in the latter village the assembly of tablets was also worshipped collectively five times each year, on the occasion of

the great calendric festivals (Fei 1962: 76-7). With respect to the practice of the independent worship of ascending lines of ancestors, Shenjiashang seems to have gone far in its ritual fragmentation.

This lineality in structuring the assembly of ancestors was also reflected in the disposition of tablets when a new residential compound with its own *ketang* and *jiatang* was finally built, usually after the passage of three or more generations. A person could transfer the tablets of his direct lineal ancestors to the new *jiatang*, provided they were not also the ancestors of those still living in the old compound. Thus, in the event that a man had left behind patrilineal uncles but no brothers or patrilineal nephews, he could transfer his parents' tablets, but not those of his grandparents. In the far more likely circumstance that there were also brothers or nephews, all the tablets would have to be left in place. Under such conditions the usual procedure was to make new tablets for the parents and patrilineal grandparents and a new general tablet for all the ascending ancestors. The disposition of tablets when a new *jiatang* was set up highlights the fact that collateral patrilineal ties did not figure at all in domestic ancestor worship. In the case of a family worshipping at a *jiatang* that had been shared for several generations, there might be tablets for dead people who were not their lineal ancestors.⁷ This simply reflected the fact that the dead, like the living, might have to share a *jiatang*. We learn that the worshipping of tablets certainly expressed consciousness of descent, but it did not lend ritual justification to latent, wider agnatic spans among the living (p. 201).

One interesting point in this ethnography is that, though rarely, one and the same dead person could be worshipped through two different tablets. Freedman claims that this doubling never occurred in southeastern China (Freedman 1958: 82), though since then it has been reported from a village in the New Territories of Hong Kong (Baker 1968: 63-4). Something similar is suggested in the ethnography from Anqing in Anhui Province (Shryock 1931: 37, 42). It is hard to see a common denominator between these cases of double tablets, which all seem epiphenomenal.

⁷ In a broader perspective, we know that ancestral shrines could contain the representations even of persons that were neither agnatically nor directly affinally related. There are places in southern China, like central Hunan, where domestic shrines show an array of dead persons of mixed origins, not necessarily of a common agnatic stock, but, for instance, members of the mother's father's lineage (Arrault 2010: 50-79). A mixture of lineage surnames at a single shrine has also been reported from a Taiwan village (Harrell 1982: 117-28).

The exclusive line of ancestry points to an underlying analysis of forebears in terms of ascent. Collaterals were, as we have seen, not of ritual interest. Perhaps earlier there had been some festivals which recognized unity ritually in the sense of inclusive descent. However, in such cases where there are two sorts of ancestor worship – one staged in corporate halls and the other in private residences – these two versions indicate two different but parallel cultural modalities, each with its own presuppositions that are independent of whatever determines the other. If there is a hall version, there is likely to be a strong and purist emphasis on descent and agnatic incorporation, as well as on the exclusion of in-married women from acts of worship. In southern China this sphere of ancestry would generally be connected with both lineage proliferation and the cultivation of rice, though the latter is more usually focused on the graves. In the iconic order, this ancestry favours an ideal agnatic endogamy that cannot be achieved in practice. Women who marry into such a lineage complex are slowly turned symbolically into sisters by their eating ancestrally endowed agnatic rice.

This cultural sphere contrasts with the domestic realm, which recognized the importance of affinity and bilateral influences on the children born of foreign women. The two spheres of creation must be kept apart in the iconic order. In the domestic sphere, which generally only allowed a limited span of time for the post-mortem presence of the dead, the notion of ascent will dominate and thus give rise to a single agnatic line. Temporality will blur the composite character of the generative process. The domestic modality is more inclusive when it comes to treating wives as worshippers, and the stove-orientated female sphere constitutes a complementary symbolic counterpart in the construction of human proliferation. Thus, in southern China, the generative capacity of the dead as they appeared in the purist corporate ancestral hall is focused on uncontaminated agnatic proliferation and the growth of rice. The generative capacity of ancestors venerated in domestic shrines is connected with the need for continuity in the social perspective of a particular house or set of houses.

In cases where there are only domestic shrines, as in Shenjiashang, or, in contrast, where there are only collective halls, we should expect the emergence of local transformations of the complementarity of two basic generative principles.⁸

The removal of tablets and memorialism

In Shenjiashang the focus on individual lineality was temporally restricted, for in those *jiatang* where the number of tablets continued to increase down the generations, the older ones were periodically removed and burnt after about five generations; some villagers reported that they were disposed to doing this after ‘three or more generations’ or ‘when the *jiatang* filled up’. It seems likely that a *jiatang* would contain few or no tablets of ancestors who had not been personally known to any of their living descendants. In entering oblivion, they would fade away as individuals and be socially remembered only in the abstract, as components in the unending chain of continuous links of successful reproduction represented by the nebulously collective tablet dedicated to all earlier ancestors (pp. 201-2).

In this respect we find a difference from Kaixiangong, where, likewise, there were no ancestral halls, but nor were there any collective and undefined tablets to absorb an increasing crowd of abstract, anonymous dead. The Shenjiashang collective tablet — still within the domestic sphere — allowed the deceased to continue to exist forever, while people in Kaixiangong erased their dead into complete ancestral oblivion (Aijmer 2016a).

The burning of tablets

The burning of an ancestral tablet to end an individual’s existence is described by Cohen as if it was that person’s last rite of passage, carried out according to socially recognized procedures. The ceremony of tablet burning took place on the day of Qingming in the spring and was held in the *ketang* under the supervision of a Daoist ‘priest’ who would ‘chant scriptures’ (*nian jing*). Qingming is a day and a solar calendar period generally devoted to the care of the ancestral graves. Thus, through juxtaposition, this burning ritual is connected with the dead in the underworld. The

⁸ One ethnographic case where the lineage hall modality was locally dominant was described for a Chongshan village in Guangdong Province, a place without domestic ancestral shrines from which women were excluded, and men even slept in the ancestral hall (Spencer and Barrett 1948).

burning of a tablet represented, according to Cohen, the complete transfer of the ancestor to that domain, perhaps to await anonymous reincarnation there. However, in contradiction to this, the dead also remained in the collective, anonymous tablet in some way. We do not know what happened to the individual tablet's ashes after it had been burned (p. 202).

Genealogy

In some cases in Shenjiashang and the surrounding region, the removal of ancestors through the burning of tablets went hand in hand with the preservation of their names in written genealogies (*jiapu*). One informant told Cohen that 'the names of the ancestors, and all the other information on the tablets, would have been written into the *jiapu* before the tablets would be burnt.' Cohen analyses the two ritual practices as representing a distinction between an 'ancestor' or an 'ancestral soul' still present among the living, and an 'ancestor' as symbolizing and validating their ties of patrilineal kinship for the living. In this area of China, genealogies served as justificatory historical records and may, at least in some cases, have figured as objects in actual ancestor worship or other rituals (p. 202).

One of Cohen's informants remembered how, as a child in Soochow, he fetched a genealogy from the platform where the tablets were kept; the genealogy was ordinarily placed there, for it was worshipped together with the tablets surrounding it. As a book or a set of books, the genealogy, in Cohen's understanding, was worshipped as representing agnatic links of descent through the generations that went into making the living members of the lineal cluster a collectivity in religious terms. The cluster, though not a corporation, nor even a congregation periodically coming together for worship, at least maintained a record of shared ancestry. In contrast, then, tablets were worshipped as representing particular individual ancestors. Regarding the genealogy, the suggestion is that, in Durkheimian fashion, the cluster worshipped itself in terms of a (textual) representation. What can be said here is that, after his or her tablet had been burned, the dead person continued in existence as (1) a collective anonymous iconic tablet, (2) within a textual discourse entailing an agglomeration of names, iconically indicating a lineage template, and (3) in an underground realistic existence in a grave, to which were possibly added the ashes of the burnt tablet. Through burning, something of the tablet's essence joined its corresponding physical remains in the grave. Perhaps this imagery was achieved by the ashes of the tablet

being physically added to the grave — the choice of time for the burning the tablet seems to indicate this. This, of course, would have relied on the upkeep of the individual graves being sufficient to allow this to happen.

Apparently record-keeping varied among the lineal agnatic kin clusters. Some of the more numerous ones had a *jiapu*, while others did not keep them, or had lost what they once had (pp. 202-3). The lack in some kin clusters of genealogies corresponds to what was reported by Fukutake (1967: 87), namely that, in the village of Fengjiao in the 1940s, kinship constellations did not keep genealogical records or *tsupu*.

In Shenjiashang the inclusive *jiapu*, when it existed, was invariably passed down to the eldest son such that in an agnatic cluster there might be only one such text. The *jiapu* was open to all deceased cluster members and was thus a genealogical record of the *whole* cluster as a collectivity. Its compilation is seen as evidence of continuing solidarity (p. 203). It thus seems that, in cases where the genealogy was actually worshipped, the kin cluster being worshipped was all embracing, containing all collateral lines. Again, the comparison with Kaixiangong offers some differences. Genealogies in the latter village were kept in a foreign temple located elsewhere. These records were strictly ascending and lineal in character, the names being erased from the register after five generations (Fei 1962: 84). The ancestors therefore disappeared completely.⁹ In Shenjiashang the anonymous collective tablet saw to it that the line could be thought of as existing through history since the days of some founding father.

Graves

Cohen's field report does not contain any description of graves, but they are mentioned (p. 202) in the context of the Qingming celebrations in the spring, apparently following what is a widespread convention in China. We must understand, then, that there was some worship at the graves at this time and that the physical remains of a dead person were also ritually important. However, there were no collective graveyards (p. 202), nor do we know where graves were situated in the landscape.¹⁰

⁹ They may instead have become changed in character, being absorbed into another kind of existence — but that is a different story. See Aijmer 2016b.

¹⁰ Today disposal of the dead is by cremation; Myron Cohen, personal communication.

Perhaps the siting of graves in an earlier period had been similar to the convention in Kaixiangong, where the graves were actually small, house-like structures situated on the dykes of the rice fields and among the mulberry trees. Here the recognition and upkeep of the graves were a matter of concern only for five generations, the same period that applied to tablets and genealogy entries. After this period, what remained was taken away by some charitable organization to be reburied anonymously and unceremoniously elsewhere. There was no ownership of graves, but the circle of immediately descended siblings were jointly responsible for keeping them in order (Fei 1962: 75-6, Plate V, facing p. 108). The dead of Kaixiangong were not destined to be remembered and revered for all eternity. How this compares with traditional conventions in Shenjiashang we cannot say. However, if graves were also just temporary arrangement, as in Kaixiangong, what was said above about the transfer from tablet to grave becomes problematic.

In his wartime study of a Jiangsu village, Fukutake notes that at that time there were occasional clusters of graveyards among the paddy fields, but he also reports that these were for nearby Soochow's wealthy residents. Still, some of them may have belonged to the village. Graveyards are mentioned in another context as well, but for whom they were intended is not said (Fukutake 1967: 81, 83).

Temples and shrines

In Shenjiashang there were neither village temples nor village festivals, just one small village shrine, with a resident god whose image was also quite small. One version of the story attached to this shrine was that the villagers originally wanted to build it higher, to the height reached by a rocket they had set off, but the rocket failed and did not go up very far; accordingly they made the shrine very low. Therefore the god (*pusa*) was unhappy and acted like a ghost (*gui*); if it were to attach (*fu*) itself to you, you were doomed (p. 206). Cohen thinks that the god's anger may have been a reflection of the villagers' own dissatisfaction with the standing of their community within the region (p. 206).

There was also a temple in the region's market town. This temple had a 'temple sphere' (*miaojie*), which encompassed all the villages involved in the area, and sponsorship of the accompanying temple fair rotated among the settlements on an annual basis (p. 206). These celebrations did not seem to have involved an ancestral presence and, in contrast to Kaixiangong, the town temple was not where the

genealogy of any agnatic line cluster was kept. If, for a different reason, we again compare the Shenjiashang ethnography with the information we have from Kaixiangong, we find that the latter village had no less than two temples, which were both connected symbolically with the cultivation of rice (Fei 1962: 20-1, 103-4). Conversely, at that time Shenjiashang had only a small shrine housing a diminutive godling of evil character, demon-like and unfriendly towards men. Kaixiangong people also patronized temples in nearby places. The exegesis provided by the Shenjiashang demotic discourse is in a sense of a rather typical anecdotal and superficial kind. Cohen's understanding relies on notions of relative prestige in the area. We could try a third way of thinking about this shrine, and also of its possible connection, if any, with other forms of worship. It must be confessed that there is precious little to go on, the ethnography being neither very transparent, nor rich in information.

It is hard to see why a village would at all entertain a shrine in its midst with a deity who was positively dangerous, unless we think of the god as representing some abstract principle or consequence of a structural dichotomy, the opposite term of which is connected with the bringing of blessings.

Discussion

Let us dwell on the categories of iconic thought that seem to have been prevalent in Shenjiashang in respect of the expressiveness of ancestral worship in the village. Domestic ancestral tablets (individual and collective) were *yang* in character, being manifestations of the cosmic male principle that penetrates the world and stands in an antonymous relationship with the female *yin* principle. The two principles change the terms of their mutual interdependence, but they are always inversely proportional. The local circumstantial evidence for this proposition is that the tablets were kept on a shelf or platform high up on the wall just beneath the ceiling. As *yang* entails direction upwards, the very unusual placement of the tablets high up on a wall is a strong indication of the iconic message that tablets belong to the upward sphere of heaven and maleness. This rare, and in the broader perspective perhaps unique situational marker must have come about as a stress of contrast, a distinction that must have been related to the *yin* sphere of social life. Something endowed with antagonistic force has provoked this arrangement.

The shelf of ancestral tablets partly contained individual tablets, some representing agnatic men, others the wives of these same men. Probably, agnatic spinsters were not to be found on the platform in death. We have no explicit data on this, but unmarried women without children should have been rare in life and special arrangements made for them in death. There was, however, another tablet on the shelf that represented an anonymous body of dead agnatic forebears and their wives, implying a line of ascent leading indefinitely back in time. Let us recall the differences between these two sets of representations of death.

The collective tablet absorbed those dead who had lost their individual tablet status after some five generations of personally received reverence. At some point in time they became irrelevant to their former worshippers, and so were done away with by being burnt, which again contrasts with burial. Cremation was not generally practised in traditional China; only Buddhist monks favoured this sort of disposal. Burning produces ashes, but we do not know how, or if, these were collected and handled in some special way. Fire is in itself a *yang* phenomenon; earth, a prerequisite for burial, is a manifestation of *yin*. The time chosen for tablet burning was Qingming, a date and a period closely associated with the graves, the repair of the graves and the dead in the graves. The Qingming visits to the dead in their graves and the picnics held there were connected with the sowing of rice in the seedbeds, offerings to graves and the sowing of rice grain in the earth being two parallel aspects of the propulsion of fertility in the *yin* sphere (e.g. Aijmer 1979). Based on this correlation in time, Cohen suggests that the dead of the individual tablets in the burning ceremony are brought to join their physical remains in the graves. However, on that same occasion the identical dead enter the anonymous collective tablet to share in the sphere of that object with the earlier deceased of the agnatic line of the cluster. The burning would then indicate a split, a repetition of what was prompted by the actual physical death of that person.¹¹ The presence of a Daoist officiant reading texts for the event indicates that this moment was a secondary funeral.

Above I outlined a scheme for the better understanding of the two cultural modalities that surround ancestral worship. One was associated with the domestic sphere and women's contribution to reproduction, the other with the ancestral hall, in

¹¹ In orthodox theory, a man's *hun* 'soul' becomes a *shen* and enters the tablet, while his *po* 'soul' becomes a *guei* and goes into the grave to join the physical remains.

which the purist version of exclusive agnatic kinship was the force that gave rise to corporate lineages and propelled the cultivation of rice. The latter version also incorporated the graves and their inhabitants in the ground, active in the process of the growth of rice. In terms of social discourse, the dead were residents of their tablets – they were always there. In terms of iconic imagery, the dead resided elsewhere and were but temporary visitors on special occasions, like New Year. On being invited at the autumnal Chongyang festival, when people climbed hills (*yang* direction upwards) for commensality with the dead, the forebears returned to their former homes in life at the coming New Year. On the corresponding visit to the graves in the spring, the deceased of the kinship cluster were invited to make a return visit to their living progeny at the Duanwu, or Dragon Boat Festival, to help with the transplantation of rice. This is an outline scheme based on the mid-Yangzi ethnography available; with a more varying social scene, the ancestral catastasis is sometimes more complex, though this need not bother us here (but see Aijmer 1968; 1979, 1991, 2003). Let us use this cultural synthesis as a prototypical model for our further discussion.

If we assume that the rice peasants of Shenjiashang were eager to have good crops to build and nourish their futures, as well as being anxious to construct social continuity by way of children, we should expect that both of these cultural modalities, each in its own way handling continuity, would have been present in explicit symbolism on the village scene. But then, there were no ancestral halls there to promote agnatic purity of descent, and so we must expect some modifications to appear in the Shenjiashang symbolic universe. In a sense, the ancestral hall had moved into the domestic sphere in that, at the time for their destruction, the early individual tablets were not copied on to new tablets and then transferred to a special house of worship. Rather, their spiritual inhabitants were relocated to a collective, generalized tablet, absorbing all the dead of the agnatic line that had originally set up the shrine within that residential compound. This collective tablet was a continuation of the domestic ‘bilateral’ way of conceiving continuity. On the other hand, the text of the early tablet was copied into a written genealogy kept by the eldest member of the eldest branch of the cluster. This genealogy would then contain all the relevant information relating to the union of the wider agnatic group, including all its collateral lines. The genealogy was kept on the shelf that also served as the keeper’s domestic ancestral shrine, where it was worshipped as a sacred object. So, here we find a case where the conventional ancestral hall exhibiting the tablets of a total of agnatic

collaterals brought together by common descent from a first founder of the constellation and their wives had been transformed into a text. In this discursive transformation, it still kept its status as an all-embracing integrated icon worthy of worship. Here the tablets belonging to the ‘ancestral hall’ template had become a book, and the residential home of the structurally senior person (the eldest member of the eldest branch) keeping that book had itself become a ‘thought-of’ ancestral hall.

A collective tablet implying anonymous membership of a line of ascent, and a genealogy implying individual membership in a set of concurrent lines of descent, were both kept on the same ancestral shelf otherwise devoted to individual tablets of the recently deceased. In addition, this shelf was high above the ground, close to the ceiling, and had to be reached by a ladder. All three manifestations of the dead were thus classified as belonging to the *yang* sphere of the cosmos, but in contrast to what? Why was this a necessity here, while it does not seem to have been so in other social contexts in southern China? Is there anything in the ethnography that suggests this contrast? What was unambiguously classified as *yin*?

The first tentative answer to this question would be: the graves. We have little information regarding them. They were visited at the time of the Qingming celebrations, as was the case in most other communities in southern China. There were no collective cemeteries, which seems to imply that graves were placed individually in the terrain. What was the conventional shape is not known. However, what could be assumed is that, in their individuality, the graves were a structural parallel to the set of first ancestral tablets, one for each individual deceased person. But then the tablets were kept together in one place, while the graves were not. Nor do we know whether the graves were kept for eternity, or whether the responsibility for their upkeep faded away after some five generations of descendants or so, as in the village of Kaixiangong. As there were no graveyards, it is likely that the Qingming celebrations were individual in character, relatives visiting the graves of the forebears of their own lines as far as they could still be remembered. There may well have been a parallel here to the fate of the individual tablets in that they were abandoned after perhaps five generations, as in Kaixiangong. Even if this was not ritually marked, it may have been that old graves were forgotten, the memory of their inhabitants fading away and the now irrelevant graves falling into decay. In contrast to the fate of the temporary individual tablets, there was no collective memorial or cenotaph to absorb

the abandoned individual dead in their graves into some sort of anonymous union and keep them there for all eternity. Or was there?

I said above that it is hard to see why a village would entertain a shrine in their midst with a deity who was positively dangerous, unless we think of the god as representing some abstract principle or consequence of a structural dichotomy, with the opposite term representing the bringing of blessings. In Kaixiangong, the dead in their graves were removed once they had become irrelevant, being taken to some other place by a charitable organization. Their ancestral tablets were similarly removed after about the same period of time, without being replaced. Instead, an agnatically structured genealogy became instrumental in giving the dead inside a foreign temple the status of a divinity. They seem to have been drawn up into one of two local gods, both being beneficial to the production of rice (see Aijmer 2016a). In Kaixiangong we find a cultural strategy in which the dead were transformed from being benign ancestors into becoming efficacious gods.

For Shenjiashang we have little to go on. Even so, and in consonance with the cultural strategy of Kaixiangong, we may tentatively posit that the dead were somehow transformed from a state of ancestry into a state of divinity. However, there is a difference between the two villages. In Kaixiangong the inhabitants of both the tablets and the tombs were transported by way of a written genealogy to a foreign temple for conversion. After this event, the dead definitely vanished as tablet ancestors, tomb ancestors and entries in the genealogy, now being part and parcel of a benign god in a village temple. In Shenjiashang the early tablet ancestors entered another tablet, where they remained for ever, their names and dates being inscribed into a collaterally encompassing genealogy (of a similar structure to a basic thought-of ancestral hall), which itself was an object of worship, but the graves remained problematic. Should they be abandoned or forgotten, their inhabitants, like those in Kaixiangong, sought a remedy in the sphere of divinity. But then, it was only the *yin* aspect of the dead — his or her physical remains and their accompanying *gui* ‘soul’ — that were of concern, so that god who absorbed them became a demonic figure. He was continuously worshipped as containing the *yin* ancestors, but no good was expected of him. We do not know anything about the ritual mechanisms, if any, that brought about this operation of transfer; in more recent history it may have remained only an iconic template.

What remains obscure, though, is in what way and, if at all, this demonic godling was related to the cultivation of rice. If we see the Shenjiashang case as a product of the prototypical cultural grammar, we should expect a link, but there is nothing to indicate this.

If this line of reasoning is reasonably accurate, we may now begin to understand why it was essential to put the ancestors' tablets on a shelf near the ceiling to demonstrate that they really were separated, even protected, from the negative influences of the transformed collective and now local (rather than kinship-orientated) dead in the godling's apparition. The *yang* had to be manifested as clearly separated from the *yin* emissions. This small shrine deity aspired to ancestral greatness, but his ambitions had been suppressed by rocket divination, architecture and sheer physical size. It was in his power to take possession of people. He was unsatisfied, which reflected his divine body being composed of unsatisfied and abandoned village grave ancestors.

It is possible, even likely and characteristic, that many villages in the Jiangnan area have similar arrangements for their dead, collecting their tablets on a shelf high up under the ceiling. It is, of course, not necessarily the case that they all have a demonic godling in a diminutive temple at hand to take care of the lost souls from abandoned graves. What I suggest is that, should the ancestors be residents of a highly placed platform, then we should look for what has produced this sort of ancestral protectionism. There may be many varying factors involved in this, but in all likelihood, graves will always be important. There is bound to be something in the conventions surrounding graves and burials that is opposed to but also matches the ancestral shelves. The comparison between Kaixiangong and Shenjiashang is revealing in this respect.

Ancestry and divinity

My understanding of the Shenjiashang case of ancestor worship is, of course, not of the same nature as a positivist conclusion in terms of a realist ontology. It can still serve as an explanation of the ethnographic data available, as long as there are no other and better explorations at hand dealing with the corpus of ethnography I have discussed in this article. Of course, emerging new data may change the argument.

The result of this discussion also has a bearing on one of the major classifications that have been employed so often in the work of anthropologists, sociologists and

sinologists analysing Chinese society (e.g. Feuchtwang 1992: 41; Schipper 1993: 38; Wang 1974: 192; Wolf 1974: 7). This is the basic and clearly articulated discrepancy between the categories of ancestry and divinity as symbolic classes in cultural expression. What we can sense through our discussion above is that this distinction in demotic cultural symbolism is not absolute but could be iconically negotiated. Ancestors and deities form part of a greater cultural meta-system that offers not only confrontations of categories, but also interfaces and transfers of objects between the spheres of the very same categories. What we see, I think, in the Shenjiashang ethnography is how intertwined these categories may be in local systems of symbolism. We might even suggest that they are to a degree integrated. The same applies to other local societies examined in some detail and in a similar perspective — the Cantonese boat population, the fruit farmers of ‘Phoenix Village’ in northern Guangdong, the rice farmers of Kaixiangong in Jiangsu. Through various ritual mechanisms, the dead are transported from one sphere of post-existence into another domain of being, thus losing all traces of their humanity and become part of something evasive and utterly different, but also lasting in eternity. Divinity reached into ancestry, and ancestors disappeared into nebulous divinity. This is an interface we must explore further as we try to understand the anatomy of Chinese traditions.

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