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The Story of Qu Yuan Revisited

Understanding an Anecdotal Myth in China

Göran Aijmer

Göran Aijmer is Professor Emeritus and former Chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and currently associated with the Gothenburg Research Institute of the University. His research focuses on symbolic expression and articulation. His regional projects have concerned southern China, Southeast Asia, and Melanesia.

Abstract

This essay describes the composition of myth in southern China as an iconic narration dressed up in verbal disguise, often as a discursive historical account. The southern myth of Qu Yuan is chosen to demonstrate how a mythical story line is part and parcel of a complex process of continuance building that involves agriculture, kinship and marriage. The suggested analysis is contrasted with an empiricist historical reading of the data, and 'speculation' is defended as a necessary methodological device.

Keywords

Southern China, myth, continuance, historicism, symbology, speculation

重探屈原的故事：認識一個中國的神話傳說

艾堯仁

艾堯仁是瑞典哥德堡大學社會人類學的榮休教授及前講座教授，現與大學的哥德堡研究所保持合夥關係。他的研究聚焦於象徵性表述及表達的形式。其區域性項目則涉及南中國、東南亞及美拉尼西亞等地。

摘要

本文描述南中國神話的結構，指出它乃是托辭文字來粉飾一個標誌性的敘述，而且往往被呈現成一個東拉西扯的歷史記錄。文中選用了南方有關屈原的神話來展示神話故事的情節如何是一個複雜的持續建構過程的必要部分，當中牽涉了農業、親屬關係和婚姻的元素。本文提出的分析

有別於經驗主義者歷史性解讀相關材料的方式，並為「猜測」作為方法論的必需手法作出辯解。

關鍵詞
南中國、神話、持續、歷史主義、象徵學、猜測

History and social anthropology have often found it difficult to correspond.[1] This is not a matter of necessity, but rather due to the circumstance that, speaking generally, the two disciplines do their work in terms of differing ontologies and therefore fall back on differing analytical strategies. When it comes to China's historical ethnography, the dividing lines are often sharp and difficult to bridge.[2] Historians have viewed the anthropological invasion of their territory with great scepticism, and yet the contributions of the latter to the study of social morphology in China's past have taken many paths and have in some respects been crucial.

In the historical study of 'traditional' Chinese society, mythology has seldom played a prominent role, often being reduced to something instrumental in various fields and ways, as a set of Confucian tools to boost local morals and make people conform to the ideology of the state. This way of treating demotic myth as a regulatory device may at times be entirely justified, but those so inclined also run the risks of missing the essence of the myth in question and of neglecting the texture of the significances that emerge when differently contextualised. A long time ago I offered an interpretation of a prominent southern Chinese myth in light of its contextual embeddings: it was told at a festival to provide a historical reason for the performance of that very festival (Aijmer 1964).[3] In the present essay I wish to revisit this myth and elaborate a little further on my earlier understanding in order to bring about a somewhat more complex reading of the iconic story line that nests in its discursive tale. My general point is that, if successful, such new insights into Chinese mythology will have a bearing on our wider understanding of Chinese social constructs of symbolic worlds.

What I have to say in the present essay also carries an implicit counter-argument to the reductionist empiricist's view of Chinese mythology as a corpus of tales of false or doubtful history; this latter line of thought is, of course, in some ways defensible, but at times it will be deceptive. I will look for what is 'hidden' in the historical account. My approach in what follows

will depend on a holistic view of cultural processes and will rely on human-scientific exploratory reasoning in seeking to advance our understanding of old Chinese ethnography.

What Is a Myth?

In an essay that probes the nature of the formation of a Chinese myth, we may well start by asking: What is 'myth', generally speaking? A myth is usually regarded as some sort of tale, the importance of which does not lie in its truthfulness from the perspective of a realist world view. And yet, there does not seem to be a simple common answer to this question: 'What is myth?', as the word 'myth' is put to use in many very different contexts by numerous very dissimilar authors and seemingly without even a common denominator. As this vagueness is also true of the specialised insiders' use of the word in various academic disciplines, there is little point in trying to create some sort of unified all-purpose meta-concept to serve the human and social sciences in their concerns with expressive societal articulation. Within social anthropology much of the debate over this matter, seen retrospectively, has circled around the relationship between myth and 'ritual'—another word in search of a clear concept.

Within the framework of 'classical' anthropology it may be suggested that, in the general parlance of the discipline (e.g. Goody 1961; Lewis 1980), ritual has been regarded as a set of expressive acts which, in no clear and overt way, relate to rational, strategic human thinking as carried and expressed in language. Although I will leave aside the definitional problem here, as I wish to promote an anthropological approach to the relationship between myth and ritual in this essay, there are some basic perspectives that could be mentioned to introduce its topic.

As just stated, social anthropologists have for a long time enquired into how ritual is related to myth. It would be an impossible task to list all attempts to form useful propositions on this, but it could be said that there are four 'archetypical' ways of approaching the matter. One is the proposition that myth is a text that forms a kind of primary libretto for ritual action. This is the well-known argument of Adolf E. Jensen (1951). A second suggestion claims that myth is secondary to ritual action and derives from it. This is the classical Durkheimian position (Durkheim 1912), which, for instance,

launched the idea that verbalised accounts of an afterlife are a secondary effect of mortuary rites. The third approach is that of classical studies and also, for instance, of Max Müller (1897) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1984): in this view, myth is disconnected from ritual. Number four in the set is the proposition that myth and ritual form a union. This is the position of Edmund Leach (1954: 13): myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, therefore they are one and the same.

In my own work down the years I have come to regard Leach's position as a starting point for some further developments. I regard myth as a hybrid form of cultural expression, a text-like weave of non-verbal symbolic clusters that appear dressed up in words and so draw simultaneously on both iconic and linguistic codes. If we wish to understand myth and what myth is about, we must pursue a double ontological perspective. As myth is ritual in verbal disguise, any analysis of it must basically proceed along the same lines as the analysis of ritual: that is, it should be subjected to an analysis based on *cultural* semantics. The meanings of myth are only superficially found in the language game that carries them—as they appear within a verbal tale, but may more essentially be recovered from the constellation of visionary information it indirectly conveys, the iconic story line. In their systemic togetherness, and thus intertwined into a double-sided identity, ritual and myth form a means for cultural explorations of possible worlds.[4]

What Is a Chinese Anecdotal Myth?

'Traditional' China was rich in mythology, a body of often colourful narratives about gods, immortals, heroes, strange animals, mystic plants and ordinary people. There are myths about the lives of the gods and their doings, as well as how the immortals became immortal. There is a further dimension to all of this. The discursive stories that partake in the creation of myths are very often seen as derived from the events of true ancient history. We may say that they are, as it were, rituals in linguistic disguise that appear in yet another discursive disguise—that of the historical account. What the stories often say is that remarkable people who have, according to the Chinese chroniclers, actually existed and who in their lives performed remarkable acts were rewarded somehow by attaining immortality, transcendental fame or some less articulated mystical omnipresence.

These stories are often employed as exegetical devices through which various customs and conditions are overtly accounted for and explained. Conventions in China were seldom systematised exegetically by way of a juxtaposition of similarly patterned features in differing domains of life in the search for some explanatory force. Instead explanations for particular customs took the form of a reiteration of originally unique events, endlessly repeated or retold through history as a way for the prototypical event and its originally participating persons to be continuously remembered. Seen in such isolation, each customary practice or celebration was explained in terms of some historical anecdote which was supposed to have given rise to it.

The mythical anecdote tells us that some actual conventional observance or habit was founded in ancient times, often as a set of actions to repair something that had gone badly wrong. These restorative acts were then incorporated into 'tradition' and so celebrated continuously through the centuries with the purpose of making good. To memorise was to repeat the beneficial restoration. As a result, many Chinese rituals have been supplied with an indigenous mythical origin in some specific distant events in ancient Chinese history.[5]

No doubt this observation implies an oversimplification of a very complex domain. The use here of the designation 'anecdotal myth' is not meant to contribute to a classification of myths. Rather, it may be seen as a characterisation of a great number of specific ritual-related texts. It is still a reasonable, if tentative proposition that, seen in discursive terms, 'traditional' Chinese expressive culture was much engaged by historiography and its multitude of famous and colourful events. Historical chronicles, national, regional and local, have been compiled from the early years of Chinese civilisation onwards, and a sense of history and historical imagery has always been an active part of both symbolically constructed dominance and political nation-building.

The Qu Yuan Story: The Exordium of the Myth

In this essay I shall draw special attention to the famous anecdotal myth of Qu Yuan (屈原) and suggest how it may best be understood. Qu Yuan is supposedly a historical figure who lived between 338 and 278 BC. He is first mentioned in a major historical source from the Western Han dynasty (ca. 94

AD), and his biography as recounted there tells us that he lived and worked in the state of Chu (楚) in the central Yangzi valley in the south.[6] Born into a prominent family, he rose to occupy a ministerial position in the court of King Huai (懷), where his responsibilities were law-making and foreign policy. The latter activity was, then as now, a tricky business and, after a series of palace intrigues and secret agent conspiracies, Qu was disgraced and exiled to a remote part of the country. Despite his misfortunes he remained loyal to his ruler and steadfast in his belief in duty. When the king of Chu was tricked into captivity by the state of Qin (秦), Qu's despair was such that he committed suicide by drowning himself in the River Miluo (汨羅) in north-eastern Hunan (湖南) Province.

It is of little importance here whether this historical anecdote is a true account of actual events or not. We may note that the figure of Qu Yuan was already being mentioned in early texts from the second century BC. In addition to his renowned court career, he has been regarded as the author of the famous long poem *Li Sao* (離騷, 'Entering Sorrow'), part of the collection called *Chu Ci* (楚辭, 'Songs of Chu'), an anthology compiled in the second century AD, but based on an earlier compilation, now lost, from the late first century BC.

Many kinds of later texts return to the fate of the loyal courtier Qu Yuan. Furthermore, there are some apparently local versions from around the Lake Dongting (洞庭湖) area which are a little more detailed. They say that Qu Yuan died on the fifth day of the fifth moon of the lunar calendar (around midsummer) and that his death in the water was mourned by local people who took boats and paddled out seeking to find the drowned minister. Another version, originating textually in the geographical section of the chronicles of the short-lived Sui dynasty (581–618), tells us a little more, and somewhat differently, that Qu Yuan drowned himself on the full moon day of the fifth moon. The people of the region searched the river for his dead body until they arrived at Lake Dongting. However, they could not find him, as the lake was vast, their boats small, and it was impossible for them to cross over. They sang the following words: 'With what can we cross the lake? Being as it is, let us, drumming and paddling, return fighting. Let us meet at the pavilion' (Aijmer 1964: 97–98).

There is also a second, concluding phase to the Qu Yuan myth describing an event that is said to have occurred in the *Jian wu* (建武) period of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–56 AD). It tells us that suddenly, in full

daylight, on the banks of River Miluo, a man called Ou Hui (歐回) caught sight of another male person who called himself San Lü Da Fu (三閭大夫), which was Qu Yuan's title as a minister. This apparition instructed Ou Hui to close the ends of the rice-filled bamboo tubes that people habitually sank into the water as offerings to him by using lian (楝) plants (***Melia japonica***) and to tie five multi-coloured threads round them. If these precautions were omitted, the sacrificial tubes would be stolen by the malevolent *jiao long* (蛟龍) dragons (Aijmer 1964: 74–75). It seems that these mythical bamboo tubes are discursively prototypical for the later period, realist, *zongzi* (粽子) tetrahedral dumplings eaten at the time of the Duan Wu festival.

In the wider Lake Dongting region there were also a great many examples of local lore referring to Qu Yuan. There were place names, street names, and the names of ponds and creeks that spoke directly of him. Somewhat contradicting the myth, a few places claimed to possess the grave of Qu Yuan, despite the circumstance that he drowned, his body never to be recovered. There were also a great many temples around the area devoted to him. All these ethnographic fragments are symbolically indexical in many ways, but here I will only focus on how to understand the myth.[7]

The structure of the Qu Yuan myth splits it into a number of different phases. In phase A, Qu figures centrally in a realm of wealth and prosperity, but is forced to leave this world of opulence to take refuge in the wilderness in poverty and isolation. Nonetheless he remains loyal. The wealthy region then collapses, and Qu dies by drowning. In this episode Qu moves from a sphere of wealth and power initially into poverty and a sort of limbo, though still alive, before passing over into the finality of death in the water.

In phase B, local river dwellers try to save Qu, but once sunk into the water he is lost and cannot be found. The locals pursue the search for him until they have to give it up. Instead they return to a certain pavilion, during which fighting starts between the boats, and the long journey back is accompanied by the sound of drumming.

Phase C, the third phase of the myth, tells us that at some later point in time the dead Qu appears from out of the waters, introduces himself to a local man by his ministerial title and instructs the latter how, from then on, sacrifices thrown into the water for him should be handled and protected. Preventative devices must be used to stop malign jiao dragons eating what was thus addressed to Qu. As Qu's grave is beneath the water, grave offerings consisting of rice inside bamboo tubes are also sunk into it. Qu Yuan's receipt

of this sacrificial rice, if successful, is somehow seen as bringing blessings to those who sacrifice.

The Real World: Contextualising the Qu Yuan Myth

The Qu Yuan myth is narrated in the context of the fifth moon of the Chinese lunar calendar. His date of death is fixed as the fifth or fifteenth day, the latter being the full moon day. The fifth day of the fifth moon is normatively a calendrical festival which in southern China features races between long, narrow boats with dragon's heads and a host of other activities mainly concerned with protection from malign influences. It is a feast on and by the water. This is a season of the year that owes its prominence to an extremely important phase in the cultivation of rice, which in turn is dependent on the arrival of the massive monsoon rains and of high temperatures. Some of the major calendrical festivals in southern China made manifest the symbolic aspect of the important agricultural phases of work connected with the production of rice, while others were concerned with social reproduction. All of them were thus, in one way or another, concerned with social continuity.

Rice in this formerly single-cropping area was sown in the early spring in special nurseries of watery mud in which it grew for a number of weeks. Then the new shoots had to be transplanted into the larger, irrigated fields, where they were then left to develop into ears until the coming harvest in late summer. Transplanting was demanding and sensitive work. The festivities celebrated in the fifth moon were conducted according to the moon calendar, thereby providing people free time for the feast, whereas the practical agricultural acts were calculated according to the unvarying sun calendar, the main marker of this season being the summer solstice. Work and its celebration were thus kept apart in time by the use of different calendars, while remaining a single unified process in the local imagery.

The Qu Yuan Myth as a Trope on Agricultural Work

One suggestion I make here is that there is a significant parallelism between the myth and the practical realities of the summer phase of the cultivation of wet rice. The two sets of similar progressions have, in terms of the iconic

order, a common denominator, namely the construction of social continuity by way of deriving life from death. Let us examine these similarities:

Qu Yuan lives in prosperity at the king's court	Rice is sown and grows in nurseries, forming rich green carpets of shoots
Qu Yuan is exiled and lives in the wilderness	The shoots are uprooted and kept in buckets without soil to grow in
Qu Yuan remains loyal	The shoots remain weak but alive
Kingdom collapses and Qu Yuan drowns himself	The nurseries are abandoned and the rice shoots are planted in the fields under water

These juxtapositions indicate that, in the mythical trope we are dealing with, Qu Yuan is an epitome for 'rice'. However, the later episode, the story of Ou Hui and his encounter with the apparition of the drowned minister, does not seem to be connected directly with the technical acts of agriculture, its references instead being to the rituals surrounding rice. Only indirectly does it concern transplantation. For this reason we must outline, very briefly, the main relevant ritual episodes in the Duan Wu (端午) festival.

Ritual Correspondences with the Qu Yuan Myth

There are some implicit presuppositions that condition the later episodes which complete the Qu Yuan myth. It is understood that these offerings were conducted at the Duan Wu festival, an event connected with the observation of the summer solstice, but transferred to the lunar calendar. While the summer solstice is the practical landmark for the transplantation and arrival of the monsoon rains, the Duan Wu festival features a symbolic repetition of the acts of transplantation, a reiteration of it in an expressive mode that refers to an iconically defined ontology.

The ritual acts at Duan Wu tell us the 'true story'—in a sense the 'hidden story'—of what actually happens when life is created out of death. It thus complements the 'real' agricultural version, filling out and making manifest in ritual imagery all its iconically understood events—lacunae in the real world. The rituals make visible and obvious what is otherwise only

tacitly understood, namely that Duan Wu is one of Qu Yuan's recognised death days. It seems convenient here to follow the story line of the mythical narration and so to juxtapose its various events with relevant instances of ritual events in the festival. After this exercise I will fill out the iconic significations that are 'tagged' to the various symbolic displays, significations that have been disclosed by earlier anthropological analyses. Let us then list the narrative events of this later phase and their ritual correspondences.

Unsuccessful search for deceased by boat	Dragon boats on the river
Search parties return to pavilion, drumming	Conducting a *chao hun* ritual
Official reception of dragon boats	Manifestation of power
Returning boats engage in battles	Dragon boats fighting
Sacrifices for Qu in water	Sinking of rice in containers into the water
Jiao dragons steal the sacrifices	Various rituals against demonic influences

The *Chao Hun* Ritual

The ritual of *chao hun* (招魂, 'Calling Back the Soul') has been performed in southern China for millennia. It was conducted for a dying person whose *hun* soul had abandoned the body, the aim being to bring back the fleeing *hun* and thus ensure the body's survival. The basic element of the ritual was someone climbing on to a roof from which he shouted out the name of the dying person and waved a piece of clothing belonging to him or her.[8] This act invited the escaping soul to return and so renew life in someone who was almost dead. A version of the *chao hun* ritual was performed for Qu Yuan at the Duan Wu festivities in the form of races between dragon-shaped long boats on the river.

The ritual as performed in the Wuling (武陵) Magistracy (Changde (常德) Prefecture) in northwestern Hunan around 1600 has been described in some detail. The performing dragon boats raced from the north to the south bank of the River Yuan (沅江). The ethnography indicates that the rapid progress of the boats across the river was one way of leading back a fleeing

hun (魂) soul that had travelled northwards, in the direction of yin (陰) and therefore death. Accordingly, the *hun* was led back towards the south and the *yang* (陽) regions associated with life. This ritual recall from a dragon boat was disturbed intermittently by attacks from and battles with other similar boats. Once a bout of this sort had been decided, the victorious boat was paddled backwards, stern first. The men on board held their paddles upright and danced for joy, beat gongs, and played wind instruments in the middle of the boat. The noisy process of paddling backwards was intended to renew contact with the wandering *hun*. Discursive exegesis had it that the *hun* being sought was that of Qu Yuan. Given, as already noted, that Qu Yuan should be understood as an epitome of 'rice', we can also understand the calling back of the *hun* from the boats, in terms of its iconic imagery, represented the calling back of the *hun* of rice that had left the fields when the young shoots were drowned. The boats invited and escorted the rice soul, lost at transplantation, back to the rice fields.[9]

Returning to the Pavilion

An interesting feature of the Duan Wu festival as it was conducted in northwestern Hunan Province is that at one time it had a sort of official position, imparting an important function to the representatives of power. The Wuling town officials watched the boat races from special tall buildings by the river adorned with decorations and bamboo mats. Before the racing began all the participating boats had to visit the officials to pay their respects. On its approach the 'head' of each boat knelt and bowed and, upon entering the building, kowtowed, the officials then presenting him with a gift. Should the boat be late, its 'head' was whipped.[10]

In this somewhat enigmatic way, the state presided over the ritual display as a sort of guarantor for the successful building of social continuity through the successful cultivation of rice. This is reminiscent of cases in Southeast Asian contexts where similar boat races were held in front of a charismatic king.[11] Perhaps, in ancient times, the kings of Chu fulfilled a similar tradition of being ritual pivots in the symbolic construction of the world. This similarity may stimulate us to some further, if adventurous, considerations regarding the south of China's pre-Chinese history. It should be added that, although the ceremonial functions of the Wuling officials

at Duan Wu had already been abandoned around 1600, the dilapidated buildings were still standing at that time.

It is thus possible that the mythical narration of a 'return to the pavilion' indicated the presence of representatives of the state. The mention of a pavilion in the myth could also conceivably have had something to do with the ritual of calling back the soul of a dying being.

Returning while Fighting

As we have already gleaned from the ethnography, the Dragon Boat Festival was essentially a race between long, narrow, dragon-shaped boats of different colours, but it also included a series of aquatic battles in which these boats engaged one another. Each dragon boat was owned and managed by a localised corporate agnatic lineage, so the battles between boats were essentially fights between different kinship constellations and were part of their explicit social articulation. The energy of violence released in this way may have had a double significance, being both destructive, against demonic negative influences, and generative, in the sense of the positive construction of continuity.

What is central in this is that the patrilineages that engaged in the fierceness of these dramatic encounters were exogamous and thus dependent on the importation of women from their foreign lineage counterparts. For this pure agnatic regime, even foreign women incorporated as wives remained dangerous outsiders, their unavoidable influence on agnatic reproduction within the lineage having to be neutralised. The ancestors of foreign lineages were demonic, being the alien forefathers of the bride-givers supplying one's own kinship group. Their attacks on the bride-takers took many forms and had to be warded off. The invasion of weeds in the rice fields and the attacks of pestilence on both the crops and the human members of the lineage were themes highlighted in these ceremonies.[12] A significant point in this ritual drama was that married women were sent back to their original home communities during the festival to avoid the presence of foreign agnatic lines.

In the imagery of the dragon boat rituals, the crews impersonated the dead ancestors of their own lineages. These ancestors were of the type that were associated with their graves, and they had been invited by their living progeny to be present at the Qing Ming (清明) celebrations in the spring

(Aijmer 1979; 2003: Ch. 21), returning in the summer to their former abodes. In the imagery displayed they arrived in boats, having travelled from the land of the sunset on the cosmic River Ruo (弱水). It was the dead of the lineage who, like rice, were associated with terrestrial and sub-terrestrial powers by virtue of their physical remains being in the earth, and who appeared in the ritual in order to call back the lost *hun* soul of the rice.[13]

Rice into the Water

The uprooted rice shoots were planted in the muddy fields under the water. The imagery of the Duan Wu festival suggests that although rice drowns and dies, it is resurrected by a renewal of its life force. However, this can only happen if the *yang* essence of the *hun* soul of the rice has been restored collectively to the plants. The *yin* essence, the *po* (魄) soul, of the rice has remained (as is the case for human beings) in the grave—that is, in the field where the roots have been planted. It is when the celestial *hun* is reunited with the terrestrial *po* in a union—in a full and complete Qu Yuan, as it were—that rice will start to grow anew and thrive.

In actual ritual life the mythical had been converted into various containers of rice that were sunk into the water at the festival. It seems that the sinking of ritual gifts of rice itself created an iconic imagery, a topos related to the transplantation of the rice shoots. The container made manifest female generative force in the form of a womb—that is, the earth—in the process of giving birth to rice. We may discern here something of a systemic pattern in this imagery surrounding rice: the female giving birth to new rice awaits a male animation for its completion.

Jiao Dragons and Other Calamities from the Outside

We have discussed the parallel between the transplantation of rice and the fate of Qu Yuan. The myth ends with his apparition's appearance out of the river to instruct those who sacrifice to him how best to counteract the attacks on the offerings from malicious *jiao* dragons. The *jiao* (蛟) are evasive creatures, the dictionary meaning of the term being 'scaly dragon'. They are not mentioned so often in the ethnography of the Dongting area, but they

do occur, and mostly in a negative context (Aijmer 1964: 88). They seem to have been a sort of negative variety of *long* (龍) dragons. The latter were ambiguous but generally seen as positive forces.

My thesis is that the negative *jiao* dragons mentioned in the myth refer to those *long* dragons which are made manifest by the boats of foreign lineages, and so are negatively understood. In the myth they are warded off by the sinking of five-colour combinations of threads together with leaves from the *lian* plant. I suggest an iconic vision existed such that one's own lineage's dragon boat was a *long* dragon, while those of other lineages were *jiao* dragons. The *jiao* attack could be seen as a mythical trope relating to the realist feature of an immanent invasion of weeds in the fields caused by foreign demonic ancestry.[14]

The Duan Wu festival is filled with actions intended to ward off outside negative forces, which, from the perspective of the purely agnatic lineage, all boiled down to affinal relations and the necessity to receive foreign women as wives, given that exogamy forbade marriages between agnates. As already mentioned, at this festival it was important for in-married women to return to their original homes to celebrate together with their own true agnates. There was a marked concern with illnesses expressed in 'amulets' and driving away processions, with temple gods and spirit chasers, and with ceremonial drumming. Each dragon boat, as well as the races between them, was supposed to have a 'driving-away force' (Aijmer 1964: 46, 50–1, 57–8, 61–2, 68, 73, 78, 81, 84, 86–8, 91–3, 96).

Qu Yuan and Duan Wu: Text and Iconic Texture in Southern China

It is now time to consider what the Qu Yuan myth, in combination with such fragmentary accounts of symbolic action as we have, tells us about the complexities of southern Chinese society. Everything points to rice as being the centrepiece and pivotal focus in the social construction of realist, discursive and iconic universes. China south of the Yangzi Valley is a rice-producing landscape and was so long before the Chinese arrived on the scene. The 'dragon boat festival' is connected with an archaic form of rice ceremonialism that is widespread over rice-cultivating Southeast Asia. As history has no beginning, it is fruitless to try to establish an origin for a

ceremonial complex that so fundamentally embraces the combination of rice, death and power all over these vast areas and as far back into Southeast Asian history as we can see.

We also know that in China the dragon-shaped boat became an aesthetic idiom, set adrift in the discursively constructed and construed world. When put to use it was quite often completely alienated from the context of rice. The expression of dragon-like boats was employed in arranging water parades and entertainments of all kinds. The drift of this idiom also carried it into northern China, which lacked rice cultivation. Such spectacular aquatic events, though interesting in their own right, must not directly influence our systemic understanding of the demotic celebrations at midsummer in the south.

In the introductory section it was mentioned that Chinese exegesis of demotic rituals often takes the form of a causal link between recurrent ceremonies and particular ancient historical events. The claim is that the performance of certain rituals has taken place in this customary way ever since this remarkable person did these particular acts as recorded in a remote history. In southern China these exegetical endeavours were certainly part of the sinicisation of the country; we may guess that, although existing archaic myths may have vanished during ongoing ethnic transformations, their abstract story-lines reappeared using a new vocabulary drawn from a new context and with a distinct Chinese varnish that tallied with the new and dominant symbolism introduced from the north by the novel presence of the Han Chinese. Probably this permutation was a slow process. It is impossible to say whether purposefully invented Chinese historical features and names like the Qu Yuan story were employed to dress up an original non-Chinese myth as Chinese, thus remaking a parable in the shape of a historical anecdote. Alternatively, some such already existing episode might have been selected out of the Chinese repository of history and then applied and adjusted to suit the essential story-line of some previous myth. In both cases there was a stage in which the cultural trope was rebuilt.

These thoughts are on the margins of what it is possible to research scientifically, as the pre-Chinese history of, say, the Chu area in the Yangzi valley is utterly unknown. Nonetheless we may safely assume that what was actually there came to constitute a very important substratum in the formation of southern Chinese culture. Even without such ethno-historical knowledge, we can understand that the cultural salvaging of a lost trope in a new ethnic setting was essential as it related to a very basic and continuous

activity. Narrative parallelism between a new story and an old activity was sought, and the result was used to recover the lost parable. Selected suitable fragments taken from Chinese history were matched with the realist agricultural pragmatics of the season, and the two were brought into a unity in the form of a symbolic articulation of the understanding of the world—the super-narrative of the myth. In the present case it is a reasonable assumption that a pristine, rice-connected parable was taken out of its original universe, a primeval pre-Chinese cosmology, and was slowly transformed within a new world view by an on-going symbolic reconstruction. In being turned into a suitable constituent of a locally new Chinese world order, the old myth was made continuously acceptable through its narrative use of elements drawn from the dominant history writing of the Chinese. In this way, earlier demotic ritual practices came to be understood in a new Chinese way and thereby honoured as being Chinese. However, the basic iconic message of the mythic parable remained intact.

One example of a parallel to the Qu Yuan myth is the Jie Zitui (介子推) myth, which explains the festival of Cold Food and relates in a similar way to events in the ancient state of Jin (晉) (Aijmer 2010).

Another View

In the introductory paragraph it was also pointed out that there are alternative views on the symbolic phenomena of the Chinese past, views that differ from what has been suggested here. Many historians have tended to see reiterated symbolic clusters as historical objects, objects that throughout history have been handled by more or less prominent people for particular, often political purposes.[15] In a recent article Han Lifeng (韓立峰) that the boat-racing ritual in southern China was 'fundamentally a plague-prevention rite' (Han 2018: 317). The same author also claims 'that the custom of boat racing originated in the central Yangzi region' (p. 318) His first suggestion is not explained further, but as we have seen above, it was certainly of paramount importance to ward off pestilences and other 'outside negative influences' at the Duan Wu celebrations. So far, we are in agreement. However, as this is no more than an empirical observation, it does not in itself further our understanding of the nature of such imagined or real attacks of pestilences and other deleterious forces. In order to avoid shallow 'explanations' that only promote what is

obvious, we have to contextualise what we study in the holistic terms of a broader ethnography, including social structure, the annual cycle of festivals, and the actual ecological and productive cycles that dominated social life in pre-modern times. A holistic approach and the deconstruction of the available ethnographic data will, by means of recombinations and a new synthesis, lead us to identify a systemic pattern.

Regarding Professor Han's second statement on the festival's origins, in light of the comparative ethnography it is highly improbable that this should be the case. The beginnings of the phenomena we discuss here are prehistoric, beyond research, and belong very much to the wider Southeast Asian region.

Professor Han's main argument is that the link between the Qu Yuan myth and the ceremonial boat-racing was the idea of Confucian-minded literati, who, in writing sections on demotic practices in their local chronicles, promoted a Confucian state ideology. This type of exegesis rests exclusively on the discursive order in society. Authorship was a way, Han assures us, to sanction and also to censor local customs and bring them under some sort of imperial control. In his reasoning, the myth of Qu Yuan was not really part of the festival, but something glued on to it by Confucian scholars: '[T]he festival's presumed origin and purpose considered proper by the political orthodoxy was justified and reinforced. Its exorcistic overtones were ostensibly suppressed through the literati's efforts to codify festival ritual' (Han 2018: 317).

Throughout the long history of southern China, it is certain that, in their reporting on the communities they ruled, many local scholars, officials, prefects, magistrates and their scribes demonstrated their Confucian leanings and saw in their texts a means to bring local practices into conformity with some imperial standard. In my own, very limited experience, local chroniclers often seem to delight in ethnographic descriptions, while every so often stressing variation and non-conformity. Frequently they are quite lapidary in style, but many such ethnographers offer interesting detail. The generally dry prose of such accounts seems to exclude any moral overtones. When Confucian nostalgia occurs, as it occasionally does, it is generally quite clear and easy to spot.

One minor problem in Han's analysis is that in his reasoning he includes all kinds of boat festivals that have appeared in a great many differing contexts, but have little to do with customary demotic festivals in the southern Chinese countryside. As noted above, the shape of dragon boats

became something idiomatic and used for all sorts of purposes, forming a topos in social drift. What Han offers has little explanatory force with regard to the seasonal racing of dragon boats. Explanations for social phenomena should be sought also outside the discursive order if they are to have a bearing on our understanding of Chinese myths and rituals.

The Speculative Mind and Historical Ethnography

I take it that the characterisation of my own work as 'speculative' carries the implication that it is a flimsy text (Han 2018: 317). To my mind this is somewhat unfortunate and constitutes no argument, as we learn neither on what actual scientific grounds the text should be dismissed, nor why scientific speculation should necessarily be a bad thing. My own analysis, and subsequent synthesis, of the data that were available to me at the time I wrote my essay on the Duan Wu festival in central China certainly implies a measure of speculation, but then—and this I would argue strongly—it is informed speculation, the outcome of which should be taken seriously and considered for its possible plausibility within the relevant ethnographic universe. It may seem superfluous to explain this position further here, but as others obviously think differently, I shall explain myself briefly.

In the human sciences, 'speculation' may be characterised as a bundle of propositions where there is a sufficient explanation for why these propositions should be true. We consider whether, taken together, they make sense. Speculation entails reasoning that is sometimes contemplative, mostly detached, and hopefully convincing. Speculation is furthermore a process that begins with an educated guess or thought that is antecedent to a proposition—if phenomena A and B, then phenomenon C, C being a consequence following from the assumption A+B. If A and B are correct, then a host of phenomena may seek and find an explanation.

Thus, speculation has the characteristics of an experiment in thought. A more general view of a notion of an experiment is that it is a device to explore the potential consequences of the proposition in question. In experimental thinking we can, it is assumed, gain new knowledge by rearranging or reorganising already known empirical data in a new way and drawing new (*a priori*) references from them, or else by looking at these data from a different and unusual perspective. This must be seen as a sort of standard methodology

in the human sciences, at least in the scientific practice of non-empiricists.

There is some ambiguity in viewing an experiment in thought as the launching and promotion of a hypothesis. In the natural sciences, a hypothesis implies a statement that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by an empirical test. In the human sciences, what can be achieved through an experiment in thought is generally only a statement or a set of statements leading to a conviction rather than a confirmation. The historical anthropologist's empirically based mental construction of some possible society of the past out of realist, discursive and iconic empirical data may be seen as a series of proxy experiments. What the anthropologically inclined scholar can do is to extrapolate beyond—or interpolate within—the boundaries of already established 'fact'.

I am not too worried by the use of the word 'speculative' in itself. I do understand that the meaning given to it in historical contexts is a negative one and based on an idea that speculation has no place in the empiricist world. I insist, though, that my variety of speculation is *not* concerned with pure guesswork, but with the launching of educated experiments in thought.

This reasoning is, of course, linked to what we regard as explanation in the human sciences and thus also in the field of historical anthropology. In the particular case I have discussed here, symbolism is of the utmost importance. It follows that the degree of success we may expect in our attempts to comprehend the understandings of a society of the past will depend on our ability to reconstruct features of that society's discursive and iconic universes. Symbols, so far as we know, occur in clusters with systemic interrelationships. The systemic nature of iconic symbolism allows us to attribute anthropologically retrieved cultural significance to the given 'dry' data.

In this way, anthropologists will produce a vision of a *possible* society and do so by borrowing the historical realist 'fact' to dress it up in their own special knowledge of cultural processes. The explanatory force of this narrative will rest on its ability to account for all the given data, leaving aside as few inexplicable 'exceptions' as possible. What is requested (ideally) is that the explanation should not only account for all the given data but, furthermore, that its propositions must also be capable of accommodating all the possible new data that might emerge from future diligence in the historical field. The more data the explanation can accommodate, the stronger its exegetic power. My essay on the Duan Wu festival in central China is a piece of historical

anthropology which tries to use such symbological methods. The text deals with complex materials from a special region and could be characterised as a study in comparative iconic cosmography. It aims at an explanation rooted not only in synthesis, but also in contrast and variation.

What is needed to refute my anthropological speculations concerning the known features of this segment of Chinese society of the past is a more comprehensive suggestion that can account better for all the available data. The Qu Yuan myth is about the essentials of the production of rice, of social structure and of continuity over time. It remains to show that this is otherwise.

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Notes

1 I wish to thank Virgil K.Y. Ho and Robert Parkin for their aid with this text.

2 For a recent discussion, see Aijmer 2016.

3 My main source was a late Ming essay by Yang Sichang (楊嗣昌), *Wuling jing du lüe* (武陵競渡略), but I also consulted a range of local chronicles (方志) from the Dongting area. Chao 1943 presents a translation of Yang's text.

4 Further notes on my theoretical platform may be found in Aijmer 1987 and Aijmer 2001. The present proposition is not intended to deny the possible existence of mythologies that lean heavily on to the discursive side. What is important here is our awareness that a great many mythical texts cannot be understood simply in terms of a textual story line.

5 For a more general overview, see e.g. Werner 1932.

6 For full accounts of the life and work of Qu Yuan, see, for example, Schneider 1980: 18–23; Hawkes 1959: 11–19.

7 A more detailed ethnography of these events is presented in Aijmer 1964: Ch. VIII, where there is also an analysis and an attempt to provide a broad explanation using a synthetic approach. This ethnography will not be repeated here.

8 Two of the poems in the *Chu ci* anthology refer to *chao hun* rituals. For a general account of *chao hun*, see de Groot 1892: 243–62.

9 For a detailed ethnography and an analysis thereof, see Aijmer 1964: Ch. VIII.

10 The ethnography leading to this brief account is found in Aijmer 1964: Ch. VII.

11 See, for instance, Archaimbault 1972.

12 Paul Katz (1987) has interpreted the dragon boat rituals as a way to exorcise epidemics—and nothing else. In doing so he misrepresents my own earlier suggestions, but in this essay concerned with myth I leave this aside.

13 Ethnographic support for this very brief summary can be found in Aijmer 1964: Ch. VII.

14 The basic ethnography that supports this interpretation may be found in Aijmer 1964: Ch. VII.

15 I have discussed some such approaches in Chinese contexts elsewhere; see Aijmer 2016.

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