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In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 124 (1968), no: 1, Leiden, 91-98

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A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO CHINESE ANCESTOR WORSHIP

Students of traditional Chinese society have for ages devoted much printed space to ancestor worship. The following notes are an attempt to approach the subject matter in terms of structural models. The ideas presented are vague and tentative. I am aware that they challenge traditional sinology and history of religion, but at the same time I feel that social anthropologists interested in this part of the world may have something to say on this topic.

Indeed, social anthropologists have frequently been attracted by Chinese ancestor worship. It is not within the scope of these notes to give an account of these attempts. However, the recent discussion by Professor Maurice Freedman, the chapter 'Geomancy and Ancestor Worship' in his *Chinese Lineage and Society* (1966), is an outstanding contribution to our knowledge of ancestor ceremonialism. Freedman makes a clear distinction between the worship of the physical remains of the dead and the worship of the symbol of his person in the form of a wooden tablet.

* I wish to thank Professor Maurice Freedman, London, Mr. Robert G. Groves, Norwich, and my wife for valuable comments. The material from the central Yangzi valley is from gazetteers quoted in the encyclopaedia *Gujin tushu jicheng*. References can be found on the following loci as follows, according to the system of Giles 1911.

Anlu (Zhongxiang), Hubei. VI: 1142, *Fengsu* 2ab.
Changde (Wuling), Hunan. VI: 1259, *Fengsu* 1b, 2a.
Hanchuan, Hubei. VI: 1130, *Fengsu* 1b, 2a.
Jingmen, Hubei. VI: 1142, *Cimiao* 6a.
Jingshan, Hubei. VI: 1142, *Fengsu* 3a.
Jingzhou, Hubei. VI: 1193, *Fengsu* 2ab.
Suiyang, Hubei. VI: 1120, *Fengsu* 4ab, 5a.
Tongshan, Hubei. VI: 1120, *Fengsu* 6b.
Wuchang (*fu*) (Jiangxia), Hubei. VI: 1120, *Fengsu* 2a.
Wuchang (*xian*), Hubei. VI: 1120, *Fengsu* 2b.
Yingshan, Hubei. VI: 1166, *Fengsu* 4ab.
Youxian, Hunan. VI: 1204, *Shanchuan* 2a; 1213, *Guji* 12b.
Yuezhou (Baling), Hunan. VI: 1223, *Fengsu* 1b, 2ab.

The ancestors as they are represented in their bones are not the ancestors worshipped in their tablets. Each dead forebear appears in two separate guises. Bones and tablets form opposite and complementary parts of the cult of the ancestors. ... The ancestors as bones are *yin*: they are of the Earth, passive and retiring. The ancestors in their tablets are *yang*: they have affinities with Heaven and are active and outgoing. (p. 140 f).

Freedman is referring the two aspects of the dead to the *yin* and *yang* principles in the Chinese universe. *Yin* is the female, passive and negative cosmic force, *yang* is the male, active and positive. They are manifest in binary oppositions as earth — heaven, death — life, dark — light, and so on. The separation of the cult of ancestors, observed by Freedman, will be correlated to the two concepts of *po* and *hun*, the two *yin* and *yang* forces operating in man; somewhat clumsily we could translate them as 'form soul' and 'content soul'. In sophisticated theory they — actually two clusters of 7 *po* and 3 *hun* respectively — are transformed into *gui* and *shen* after death. It is apparent that the western label 'ancestor' covers two essential aspects of a dead person. However, it may be that the situation is even more complex.

Hugh Baker (1965) has organized data according to a model which is in contradiction to the introductory statements. Baker argues:

The soul is conceived of as being composed of two major elements. One is the completely spiritual element, as it were, which goes down to hell to await judgement, and which then enters one of the many halls of hell, is reborn or goes to heaven. The other element is that which remains concerned with this world.

Here the Buddhist symbolic system is introduced. Baker, then, says that *hun* goes to the Buddhist hell from which it will be reborn or pass on to heaven. He goes on to state that *po* is dwelling in the ancestral tablet and in the grave. If Baker is correct both graves and bones, and ancestral tablets are *yin*. I think that Freedman's recent analysis is more convincing. The *yang* soul *hun* takes its abode in the ancestral tablet, while the *yin* soul *po* dwells in the earth. I think that the Buddhist career of the *hun* soul is parallel to its integration in the hierarchy of generations in an ancestor hall. There is an inconsistency here in Chinese belief, and we may find expressions of this in ritual action.

We find an interesting custom in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province in southeastern China, in the area from which Freedman is drawing his empiric material.

Banquets are held in the ancestral hall ... on the days set aside to honour the ancestral dead, the most outstanding of such festivals occurring on All Soul's Day in late July or August. (Spencer & Barret 1948: 470).

What is referred to in the example is the 'Festival of the hungry ghosts',

and this is very much a Buddhist festival. It is concerned with the tortured souls in hell, who are allowed to leave the hell halls yearly on this night to visit the earth. The main rite is to present paper money, food and joss-sticks to the souls roaming in the night. These souls are anonymous and have nothing to do with descent principles. Privately carried out ceremonies in Buddhist temples may be directed towards particular dead persons; this is, however, an aspect of memorialism, as Freedman puts it, (1958: 84; 1966: 153 f.) rather than systematized social ceremonialism. The banquet in the ancestral hall is, as I see things, a ritual to span over the discrepancy between the two parallel concepts of the fate of the *hun* soul.

In central China, in the plains of Hubei and Hunan, the Buddhist connotations of this festival are explicit from early times. (*Jingchu suishi ji*, 14a) The Buddhist names of *Yulandahui* and *Yulanpenhui* are used. Buddhist, and also Daoist, monks are active; monasteries perform ceremonies and masses are chanted. People celebrate by much the same customs as in southeast China. Offerings of meat, sweet wine, paper money, millet, and soup are arranged at the doors for the benefit of ancestors. But the spirits who have come from hell are also referred to. People are concerned with all these spirits among whom some ancestral ones may occur. If the latter come to their abodes during life they are provided for, but this apparently has nothing to do with descent principles. Still, concepts of identity in terms of kinship are at hand.¹

Ancestor worship in its repetitive, regular form, with offerings presented on the 1st and 15th of each moon, is of course best described in Radcliffe-Brownian terms of social ceremonialism; ceremonies express agnatic principles of kin organization. But on some special occasions ancestors are of paramount interest. In southeast China, at New Year, people return to far-away places where their forebears once lived. They do so in order to participate in common rites for remote ancestors together with the people still inhabiting the place of origin. Similarly people travel far at the *Qingming* and *Zhongyang* festivals to make offerings on the graves of distant forefathers. Indeed, these ceremonial situations tell about unity with reference to groupings of the order of clan or maximizing lineage. (Aijmer 1967: 55; Hayes 1962: 28) I have no explicit notes from Hubei-Hunan, but it seems very

¹ Notes are from Changde, Yuezhou, Hanchuan, Anlu, Jingshan, Jingmen, Wuchang (*fu*), Wuchang (*xian*), Suiyang, Tongshan, and Yingshan.

likely that the same or similar procedure occurs here. But on the level of the localized major lineage we find, as Freedman has pointed out, one particularizing aspect focussed on individual graves, and one collectivizing aspect focussed on ancestral halls.

Freedman (1966: 141) states that geomancy (*fengshui*) handles *yin* and that ancestor worship handles *yang*.

'Geomancy (in its aspects of burial) and ancestor worship emerge, then, as two faces of a single religious phenomenon — let us call it the cult of the ancestors. Each face of the cult presents a distinct configuration of attitudes towards the dead and has different implications for behaviour between agnates. 'In worshipping their ancestors the Chinese are stressing harmony and unity instead of competition and individualism. ... In the geomancy of burial what strikes us above all is that men are constantly striving to individualize their fate and better themselves at the expense of their patrilineal kinsmen.' (p. 141). 'Patriliney linked the fortunes of agnates together; geomancy gave them the chance of individualizing their fate.' (p. 131).

I will not elaborate on geomancy — I entirely agree with Freedman. But my argument is that there are also other ritual techniques of handling *yin*.

Besides these two faces we have to consider yet another aspect of ancestor ceremonialism. Visits and return visits are important acts of social ceremonialism all over China. This is especially so during the Chinese New Year. At least in some provinces of China, e.g. Hubei and Shandong,² we know that the New Year rites told about the visit of the dead ancestors to their living progeny. In Hunan and Hubei the ancestors made a similar visit during the *Duanwu* festival. (Aijmer 1964: 45 f.). Their appearance on this occasion will have had close associations with rice production, the festival being centred on the theme of the transplantation of the young shoots. I have suggested (1964: 117) that 'the visits paid by the ancestors ... to the world of the living may perhaps be regarded as return visits in response to the visits paid to the dead by the living at the *Ts'ing ming* [*Qingming*] festival'.

Freedman's recent argument has a bearing on my 1964 statements on the *Duanwu* festival. During the dragon boat ceremonies the ancestors symbolically transplanted the rice and they recalled the lost *hun* of the rice to restore vegetative power. Very tentatively I said that 'obviously one may assume that the dead had such experience as would be likely to make their recalling of the *hun* of the rice more successful than the same activity practised by the living. This expediency may perhaps be related to the

² Explicit notes from Anlu and Suiyang in Hubei, and for Shandong see Yang 1945, 93 f.

fact that they knew the regions of death personally, and were therefore fitted to find the wandering *hun* in those tracts.' (1964: 106).

This was a good brand of pseudo-explanation.

We have to consider two other main festivals during the agricultural production cycle. The first one is celebrated on the *Qingming* day, starting the *Qingming* solar period on April 5th, according to the solar calendar. It is also called *Hanshi*. Alternatively it is celebrated according to the moon calendar on the 3rd day of the 3rd moon. (Cf. Aijmer 1964: 26 f.). In central China this festival is centred on the vernal equinox as the pragmatic landmark in time for sowing rice beds. The festival, henceforth called *Qingming* — 'Clear and Bright' — for convenience sake, is the symbolic aspect of sowing rice. These notes are not the place for an elaborate study of the rites involved in the situation, but the more prominent features need to be outlined. *Qingming* is an occasion for visiting the tombs of the dead. In Hunan and Hubei people prepare food and wine and go to the graves of the ancestors. The graves are swept, cleaned and repaired, and food offerings are presented on them. Loud lamenting is recorded from some places. Picnics are held on the graves or in 'the wilderness'. People stroll in the countryside away from built-up areas. This festival seems to stress periphery as contrasted with centre, stressed at *Duanwu*.³

Rice is harvested at different times according to type. September-October will be the main harvest time in central China. The festival on the 9th day of the 9th moon is very likely to be the symbolic aspect of harvesting, and its pragmatic landmark in the solar calendar, the autumn equinox. The general name of this festival is *Zhongyang* — 'Double yang'. It is marked by picnics in the countryside. The most prominent feature in connection with this is that people are climbing mountains, or 'ascending heights' as the Chinese chroniclers put it.⁴

This festival has something in common with *Qingming*. It is a ritual gathering of people away from built-up areas in natural surroundings. There is, however, a great difference also. At *Qingming* activities are focussed on the ancestral tombs, at *Zhongyang* on mountain tops.⁵ *Qingming* has affiliation with *yin* ancestors, graves, earth, and under-

³ Notes from Changde, Yuezhou, Jingchou, Hanchuan, Anlu, Jingshan, Wuchang (*xian*), Suiyang, and Yingshan.

⁴ Notes from Changde, Youxian, Yuezhou, Jingzhou, Hanchuan, Anlu, Jingshan, Wuchang (*xian*), Suiyang, and Yingshan.

⁵ Actually, in some instances it is mentioned that people ascend mountains even at *Qingming*. This is certainly a fusion of the custom of *Zhongyang*, which further stresses the connection between the two festivals.

ground. *Zhongyang*, as I see things, is striving upwards, ascending, obtaining affiliation with heaven and *yang*. Like *Qingming* it is a visit to the dead, but to the *yang* ancestors.⁶ I find it difficult to correlate the main ritual action of *Zhongyang* with pragmatism, technical acts at harvesting. Rather, by way of symbolic separation from earth, it stresses that production is over. *Zhongyang* is a visit to the regions of the *yang* ancestors; it is thereby an invitation to the latter to visit their living progeny, which is effected at the New Year.

But at *Qingming* we certainly find correlations between ceremonial acts and technical acts. In central China this festival will be the symbolic aspect of sowing. The graves are cleaned and presents are offered on them. Also the fields are cleaned and seeds sown. *Yin* ancestors and earth are one and the same. Seeds are offerings to the ancestors as much as the grave dishes. The return presents of the ancestors are the shoots. At the interruption of the growing implied by transplantation, the *yin* ancestors are active in the drama of the escape and recalling of the *hun* of the rice; they are concerned with their own property.

We may sum up as follows:

During these festivals, *Qingming*, *Duanwu*, and *Zhongyang*, there appears to be no particular concern about the ancestor tablets. New Year seems to be the big event for them. Thus *Qingming* implies a visit to the *yin* ancestors and *Duanwu* a return visit from the latter. *Zhongyang* implies a visit to the *yang* ancestors and New Year a return visit from them. The present argument could be summed up in terms of binary oppositions:

⁶ One finds *Qingming* custom at *Zhongyang* as well as the reverse. A note tells us of visits to tombs at the latter festival. An item of information tells that in Yuezhou there is a custom called *Ge chang* — 'Singing on the threshing-floor', at harvest time. People gather in the *ci* or ancestor hall for *dao* prayers, beating drums, men and women 'stamping'. And also in the 6th moon on the 6th day one finds offerings in the fields and on the graves (Suiyang), in the 8th moon at the graves (Yingshan). All these events seem to be concerned with the ripening of the rice. In the 'Singing on the threshing-floor', *yang* ancestors are worshipped, in the other cases people are concerned with *yin* ancestors.

<i>yin</i>	<i>yang</i>
grave	tablet
<i>pó</i>	<i>hún</i>
<i>Qingming</i>	<i>Zhongyang</i>
<i>Duanwu</i>	New Year
individual	collective
periphery	centre
production	lineage
death	life

I have so far been arguing on the basis of material from central China.⁷ The ecology of southeastern China is different from that of the central parts of the country. In Hong Kong's New Territories two rice crops are taken. The first transplantation occurs at the *Qingming* festival. *Duanwu* precedes the harvest of the first crop and the sowing of the second crop. *Zhongyang* precedes the harvest of the second crop. My model, generated from the situation in the Yangzi valley, requires a new justification in this different setting. In this context it does not seem out of place to consider that the solar calendar, so intimately associated with agricultural production for which it gives the landmarks in time, is grossly irrelevant in southeastern China, where cyclical names such as 'Establishment of Winter' and 'Slight Snow' do not make much sense. Still these terms are in general use in the area. In the same way, the calendar of feasts may be regarded as an ideal model. Although double cropping may complicate the ritual matrix, it seems essentially alike in both areas.⁸ The content will need a reinterpretation according to local factors. However, I think we will find a similar basic message in both areas. This assumption justifies the posing of new questions on ecology, social structure and contents of social relations. The actions from the side of the living towards the dead in their *yin* aspect are particularizing and individualizing. The response actions of the ancestors are collective and total. This will, I think, throw some light on the connection between large-scale, deep lineages and rice-producing areas in China.

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⁷ It should be pointed out that I have not considered the complementary and secondary crops of wheat, cotton, tea, and so on, in this context. Rice is the main, value-vested product and the staple food of the middle Yangzi valley.

⁸ In the southeastern provinces, visits to the tombs occur frequently on both *Qingming* and *Zhongyang*, as already been mentioned. In this area of traditional China, however, the latter festival still is marked by the striving upwards in the form of ceremonial kite-flying.

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