Oral Traditions, Ritual, Gender, and the Status of Chinese Women

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Introduction

The investigation of gender issues in China's rich oral, ritual, and performance genres at the regional level has considerable potential to add insight into little-understood aspects of China's pre-contemporary culture. This essay will address my forthcoming and earlier publications, with a focus on my new study Memory Making in Folk Epics of China: The Intimate and the Local in Chinese Regional Culture (to appear in the Cambria Sinophone Series), and my book Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China (University of Hawai’i Press, 2008). Both studies are based on the close reading and interpretation of transcripts of songs sung in the Wu 吳 languages of the Lower Yangzi Delta region, and both studies are the first Western-language monographs on these regional genres. The folk epics can be performed by both men and women; the bridal laments are restricted to the bride and female family members.

Sinologists are generally content to investigate the inexhaustible treasure trove of texts belonging to Chinese civilization. In recent years, however, scholars have paid attention to issues of orality and performance in order to better understand critical issues in textual fields. For example, scholars of China's ancient written culture have drawn on theories of oral transmission to better understand the formation of the early Chinese canon.¹ Scholars of Tang poetry have evaluated the impact of memorization and recitation on the manuscript

circulation of iconic poems. Researchers of speech genres such as gossip have observed the importance of oral circulation in the production of rumours and anecdotal material. The influence of storytelling and performance genres on the early gestation of the four great narrative works, Sanguo yanyi 三國演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms), Shuihu zhuan 水滸傳 (Water margin), Xiyou ji 西遊記 (Journey to the West), and Jin Ping Mei 金瓶梅 (The plum in the golden vase), has been debated for decades.

Nonetheless, little is known about the actual oral culture that lay beneath the textual empire. One can still largely concur with the observation of Barend ter Haar that “[T]raditional China is still largely studied as an empire of texts, as if there were no oral culture.” We generally observe the culture of illiterate populations through the opaque screen of compositions by men of letters. In his study of rural temple theatre, David Johnson claims that our knowledge of village life comes from “tainted sources,” that is, from “men who for the most part knew next to nothing about the countryside or who, if they did, felt there was nothing of value to be found there unless it had been appropriated and reinterpreted by people like themselves.” He concludes that “[T]he result is a profoundly impoverished view of Chinese history and culture.”

I will argue here that a deeper knowledge of Chinese oral traditions offers fresh perspectives on how ordinary people, particularly uneducated women, constructed their own ritual practices and emulated or resisted orthodox norms with regard to female labour and marriage customs. A focus on the local and particular can offer insight into the relationship between the culture

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5 Notable exceptions are occasional works on professional performance genres. See Vibeke Børdahl on Yangzhou storytelling (pinghua 评话), *The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996); and Mark Bender on Suzhou chantefables, *Plum and Bamboo: China’s Suzhou Chantefable Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003). While the focus of both scholars is on contemporary performance, they also offer historical perspectives.
6 Ter Haar, *Telling Stories*, 27.
of officialdom and the culture of the general population. To what extent can one speak of “cultural integration” in the land mass we know today as “China” before the modern period? In an article written over thirty years ago, David Johnson set up an influential paradigm to analyse the structures of communication and of social dominance in China during the late imperial era. Johnson and his fellow contributors to the landmark volume, *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, assumed what appears to be “a relatively high degree of cultural integration on the sub-elite level in Ming and Ch’ing times.” This claim was based largely on evidence that officials and literati made great efforts to inculcate cherished values in the populace, and on the success with which officialdom adapted regional culture to serve the needs of the state. It was also assumed that the array of different languages spoken in south China militated against the broad diffusion of local cultural forms into regional or national frameworks. The world of the illiterate, while “rich and varied” in its oral traditions was ultimately “confining” because there was limited access to the world of texts.

In more recent years, the claims of widespread “cultural integration” and “cultural standardization” have been reassessed by Donald S. Sutton and others in a special issue of *Modern China* that appeared in 2007. This volume presents various cases where the state attempted to co-opt local practices but either failed or had limited success. Sometimes local actors resisted state agendas, in other cases nominal compliance to the state covered up the ongoing resilience of local practices. The cases I have investigated turn out to belong to a different category to the above. Bridal laments and folk epics were largely ignored by the state, presumably because they were so local or so gender-specific that they posed little threat to cultural integration and good governance. It is also

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8 David Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China,” in David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 34-72, and see page 35.


11 There was a period when the state tried to ban imprints based on mountain songs circulating in Jiangsu province. This occurred during the restoration of order after the Taiping Rebellion, a civil war that convulsed south China in the mid-nineteenth century. One could conclude that when popular culture entered the world of print it suddenly became visible and hence more likely to be censored. However, bans on song booklets were largely ineffective. See the discussion in McLaren, *Memory Making in Folk Epics of China: The Intimate and the Local in Chinese Regional Culture* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, forthcoming), Chapter 2.
quite possible that literati and officials were largely unknowing of the full range of popular practices of the people they governed. We can assume that bridal laments and folk epics were transmitted during the later imperial era (Ming and Qing dynasties 1368-1911) if not earlier. They belong to what must have been a very large range of oral and ritual practices that escaped state or gentry co-option in imperial times. Intriguingly, the expression of female grievances, a strong characteristic of bridal laments, was co-opted by the communist revolution in their promotion of “speaking bitterness,” that is, public denunciation of the governing class. I have explored the links between these two genres in an earlier study.12

**New Discoveries in Chinese Oral Traditions**

Here I will briefly outline my research itinerary before proceeding to discuss some of my findings in more detail. As someone trained in the sinological tradition, my earlier research interest focused on the influence of Ming-era performance genres and the rise of Chinese vernacular fiction.13 It was only in the early reform period (post 1978) that Chinese oral culture increasingly came to my attention. This was a time when many seemingly “traditional” performance and ritual genres re-emerged in rural China. The most startling discovery was of nüshu 女書 (women's script), a type of script used by (and probably created by) village women in Jiangyong 江永 County, Hunan, in the late imperial era. Jiangyong women learned to compose poetic narratives, letters, and autobiographies in a phonetic script that could record their own speech forms. At that time this was considered to be an amazing aberration from the commonly held view that a Han Chinese language could only be written in Chinese character script.14 Scholars rapidly provided anthologies of texts with nüshu script side

14 The Women's Script of Jiangyong does not use Chinese characters but appears to derive from calligraphic forms of characters in popular use. Decades later it is now apparent that many communities in Chinese space and beyond deployed Chinese character script in “aberrant” (or more accurately, creative) ways to record their own speech genres. Some characters are created from common elements found in regular characters. Others are regular characters used in irregular ways, for examples, to record speech not meaning. Some scholars term these adapted scripts “sinoxenic” scripts. Examples include the scripts
by side with translations into Chinese characters. It now became possible for those outside Jiangyong to read and interpret the content of the texts, although only a few scholars embarked on a deeper investigation into the social context in which these remarkable texts were created and exchanged.15

The discovery that a community of Chinese village women had created a performance culture in their own language and deployed it for communication between women was most intriguing. Did this phenomenon only occur at Jiangyong? Across the vast expanse of China, with its hundreds of different linguistic communities, were there other cultural forms created and deployed by women? In the early 1990s, on a trip to Shanghai, I put this question to Chen Qinjian 陳勤建, a scholar of folk performance and popular customs at East China Normal University (hereafter, ECNU). This led to my first visit to Nanhui 南匯, at that time a rural and backward county separated from Shanghai by the Huangpu River, with a view to investigating Chinese bridal laments, in Chinese known as kujia 哭嫁 or “weeping on being married off.” I was thrilled to be given publications of Nanhui bridal and funeral laments but my heart sank when I tried to read them. The songs were transcribed in Chinese characters but not in a form that I could recognize.16 The first lesson I learnt here was that the Chinese written vernacular was not singular but multiple. Beyond

of the Bai 白, Zhuang 壮, and Yao 瑶. For studies of these groups, see Fu Jingqi and Zhao Min with Xu Lin and Duan Ling, Chinese Ethnic Minority Oral Traditions: A Recovered Text of Bai Folk Songs in a Sino-Xenic Script, (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015); David Holm, Mapping the Old Zhuang Character Script: A Vernacular Writing System from Southern China (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2013); and Jacob Cawthorne, Letters Without Capitals: Text and Practice in Kim Mun (Yao) Culture (Leiden: Brill, 2021). Peter Kornicki has completed a major study on the use of Chinese script to inscribe the non-Chinese vernacular languages of East Asia. He observes that “the Chinese scriptworld was actually one of multilingual orality”; see Kornicki, Languages, Scripts, and Chinese Texts in East Asia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 17. Performance texts used by Han Chinese populations commonly incorporate local idioms. In the imperial era, speech communities in the Lower Yangzi Delta, and in modern day Fujian and Guangdong provinces, adapted Chinese script to record local speech. For a general survey of historic texts deploying written Wu see Don Snow, Zhou Xiayun and Shen Senya, “A Short History of Written Wu, Part 1: Written Suzhounese,” Global Chinese 41 (2018): 143-66. For literature based on Cantonese see Don Snow, Cantonese as Written language: The Growth of a Written Chinese Vernacular (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).


I include an example of bridal laments in Wu language script in my book Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008), 119-20. New
the guanhua 官話 (officials’ language) that was the lingua franca of China in pre-contemporary times, and that formed the basis of what we term “Chinese vernacular literature,” there existed other texts which used variant forms of Chinese characters to record non-Mandarin languages. In the case of Wu language, for example, texts deploying Wu idiom were published as early as the seventeenth century. Wu language forms continued to be recorded in changben 唱本 (song booklets), tanci 彈詞 (lute ballads), tanhuang 滩簧 (folk opera) and novels that circulated in manuscript and print in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Serendipity was important in the next stage of my research. Every year for a decade I would visit Shanghai as part of my duties to help Australian students to settle into their term of study in China. This gave me numerous opportunities to venture out to visit the rural hinterland of Shanghai and to seek assistance from Chen Qinjian and his colleagues with the translation of Nanhui bridal laments, first into Mandarin, and then into English. After several years I was in a position to understand why this genre was so important to rural women in general, not only in the Lower Yangzi Delta, but also across vast swathes of China, as far north as Shandong, as far west as Sichuan, and as far south as Guangdong, not to mention its prevalence among ethnic minorities such as the Mongols, the Miao 藁, Tujia 土家, Kazakhs, Yao 瑶, and Zhuang 壮.

On deeper investigation, it appeared that historical bridal laments were a little-known aspect of women’s “ritual work” and played a role in rendering safe the perceived perilous transition from the natal home to the home of the groom. Fulsome and moving laments were also regarded as a sign of female talent and of the bride’s filial piety.

On an expedition to the water towns of the Delta in 2004, I was introduced for the first time to what the Chinese call changpian xushi ge 長篇敘事歌 (long narrative songs) sung by the farming population in the region of Lake

17 This is the well-known anthology, Shan’ge 山歌, compiled by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646). On Wu idiom in the Shan’ge see Kathryn A. Lowry, The Tapestry of Popular Songs in 16th- and 17th-Century China: Reading, Imitation, and Desire (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), Chapter 5.
19 See McLaren, Performing Grief, 93.
20 For discussion see Chapter 6 in Performing Grief.
Tai in southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang provinces. The amateur singers, mostly illiterate farmers, called their songs *shan'ge* 山歌 (mountain songs). Once again, I was gifted with numerous studies and transcripts by members of the relevant Culture Bureau and folklorists. The material was so voluminous that it took many years to work out the significance of the material in my possession. As before, I sought help from Chen Qinjian and his team at ECNU to assist with reading and interpreting these lengthy song narratives which were originally sung in northern Wu language and recorded in an adapted form of Chinese script. Many years later I completed a scholarly monograph, *Memory Making in Folk Epics of China*, which deals with some of the most typical and popular song narratives of the region.

Songs of epic length in China are generally associated with borderland people such as the Mongols, Kazakhs, Miao and Zhuang. The Lake Tai “folk epics” (a term I adopted in line with comparative studies of epic forms) are a rare example of a long song tradition belonging to a population regarded as Han Chinese. The epics of minority groups in China are generally performed by males and often have a ritual purpose. The Lake Tai folk epics, however, were sung equally by men and women and were associated with agricultural work, particularly work in the rice paddy. Even illiterate women of Lake Tai could master a repertoire of inherited song material that allowed them to compose gripping stories in song over many days. As with the bridal laments, the newly discovered folk epics reflect the concerns, values and beliefs of illiterate populations living in rural China. Matters of key interest in folk epics include notions of face, of family honour, of women’s sexuality, of marriage, and the ever present world of the spirits.

The most representative Lake Tai narrative songs are known as *siqing ge* 私情歌 (songs of illicit passion) and contain titillating erotic content. For this reason, the literati class in the pre-contemporary period scorned Delta mountain songs and imperial authorities sought to ban printed booklets based on these tales. The stories also reflect unorthodox marriage forms that were prevalent amongst the ordinary people of the Delta such as *qiangqin* 搶親 (abduction in marriage), *banniu qin* 扳鈕親 (bolted-door marriage), *jie ayi* 接阿姨 (seeking to abduct the younger sister of one’s wife), and *yinqin* 隱親 (marriage with a deceased betrothed).

My excursions into Chinese village life and translations of song material into English have introduced to a Western readership some little known masterpieces of popular culture at grassroots level. In addition, these investigations provide a potential springboard for further research into the gendered nature of Chinese ritual culture, the gendered division of agricultural labour, and unorthodox marriage customs as reflected in performance genres. I will discuss each in turn below.
The Gendered Nature of China’s Ritual Culture

Lake Tai folk epics, particularly the songs of illicit passion, appear to be very much about secular matters. It was with surprise that I gradually came to realize that there was a system of popular beliefs embedded in the mountain songs. This underlying system could be characterized as a wish to propitiate the spirits in order to bring about a good harvest and to exorcize demonic powers that could inflict suffering and hunger on the population. A prominent aspect was belief in the rice plant as a female spirit who should be venerated. The cultivation of the rice plant was regarded as parallel to the raising of a young girl to adulthood. The rice seed was planted in a nursery bed just as the young girl was raised in her natal home. The growing rice seedling was then “married off”, that is, transplanted into an irrigated paddy field where she was weeded, harvested, winnowed, and ground to produce zi 子/籽 (son/seeds). This is a significant new finding. Chinese agricultural manuals and historical sources typically say nothing about popular beliefs in a rice spirit. A leading Western scholar on Chinese agriculture, Francesca Bray, claims:

While in other regions of Asia rice and its associated images figure prominently in folklore, in religion, in poetry, and in the symbolism of fertility and well-being, in China popular rice imagery, verbal and visual, is conspicuous by its near-total absence. There is no goddess of rice, no shrine, no spirit of rice residing in the seed grain.21

Bray is well aware of the limitations of her sources:

a unified history of China was composed from a northern perspective, much valuable information about southern traditions was lost. In the absence of any historical documents, the splendid carvings and paintings of religious figures, for example, remain mysterious, and if rice deities or spirits were a central part of the culture, they have yet to be identified.22

These statements need revision in the light of new findings. Evidence for ritual practices involving veneration of a feminized rice spirit comes from two sources – recent ethnographic studies and the mountain songs themselves. Chinese folklore scholars first reported on rice paddy rituals involving a Rice

22 Bray, “Images of Rice in Imperial Chinese Culture,” 425.
Goddess or Rice Mother in the late twentieth century. The key work in this regard is Jiang Bin's 姜彬 Daozuo wenhua yu Jiangnan minsu 稻作文化與江南民俗 (Rice culture and Jiangnan folk customs), which appeared in 1996. It consists of a synthesis of the work of scores of scholars on the rituals and customs of the Lower Yangzi Delta region in the immediate pre-contemporary period.

When I began my translation of song transcripts from the Lake Tai region, I found that the so-called laodong ge 勞動歌 (work songs) included ritual songs relating to veneration of the rice spirit. In addition, the songs of secret passion were replete with images drawn from the language of rice cultivation and fertility. In song imagery, fertility in the rice crop was equated with fertility in the human population. In this way, the song material offered deep insight into the interaction between the rice paddy environment and the inner world of the singer farmers, including their belief in a feminized rice spirit.

In my investigation of Nanhui bridal laments, I found that images drawn from cotton growing and spinning provided the basic template for an assessment of female toil and inner worth. The Nanhui bride speaks of herself as useless, “a cotton spool, hollow inside.” In the case of the folk epics of Lake Tai, it was rice cultivation that provided the model for human toil, social norms, and procreation. Sayings pertaining to rice cultivation are found throughout the Lake Tai folk epics, including the love stories. In one folk epic, a young girl meets her lover for the first time while weeding the rice crop. The singer tells the audience: “If the rice paddy is not weeded, then it will not grow long/ If grown-up girls are not wed then babies will not grow.” In another folk epic, an abandoned lover comes to realize that “If the rice seedlings are transplanted then the harvest will take care of itself.” A young rebel hero is orphaned as a child. But we are told that deprivation will lead to greater resilience: “Poor thin soil brings forth shoots with the toughest roots.”

The key importance of the rice spirit in the minds of these singer-farmers is epitomised in one of the most (locally) famous of the folk epics, the story of Shen Qige 沈七哥 (Shen seventh brother) formerly sung in the Wuxi Dongting region by farmers during rice cultivation. This folk epic relates a lengthy tale about a female immortal who embodies the spirit of the rice plant. The younger daughter of the Celestial Master of Sacred Grotto, she falls in love

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23 Jiang Bin 姜彬, Daozuo wenhua yu Jiangnan minsu 稻作文化與江南民俗 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1996).
24 McLaren, Performing Grief, 53.
25 See McLaren, Memory Making, 118.
26 McLaren, Memory Making, 164.
27 McLaren, Memory Making, 198.
with a mortal man, teaches him the art of rice cultivation, and then flees her Daoist paradise. Together they introduce rice cultivation to the forager community. The Celestial Master, under the sway of his jealous older daughter and her evil lover, decides to punish his younger daughter by destroying the rice crop. After many trials, the harvest is saved by the intervention of Old Mother, the wife of the Celestial Master, who acts as a wise judge in persuading her husband to show mercy to the young couple. In this way the folk epic serves as exegesis and commentary on one of the most central beliefs of the rice cultivators, the transformation of the young girl rice-shoot into a rice mother bearing life-giving grains.

Worship of a feminized rice crop is broadly prevalent throughout monsoonal Asia in countries such as Japan, the Philippines, India, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam. It may have derived from a tradition that began in regions along the Yangzi River in ancient times and then travelled with migrating rice-communities throughout monsoonal Asia. The broader significance of these new findings lies in the insight it provides into the spirit world of the indigenous populations of the south before the large-scale migration of Hua Xia people from the north. Hugh R. Clark has written about what he calls “the Sinitic encounter,” that is, the gradual process of incorporation and adaptation by northern migrant people of the belief systems and cults of non-Chinese indigenous populations. Many southern religious practices involve belief in female deities, such as Meizhou shennü (Divine woman of Meizhou) who was later canonised as Mazu (Maternal ancestor). Recent studies of the Pearl River Delta have also uncovered a range of practices that are best understood within the matrix of original indigenous culture. Liu Zhiwei has investigated an ancestral cult by a wealthy lineage that focused on two female ancestors in contravention of the usual Confucian norms based around patrilineage.

28 See McLaren, Memory Making, Chapter 3.
29 The main source here is Roy Hamilton, ed., The Art of Rice; Spirit and Sustenance in Asia (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003). For further discussion see McLaren, Memory Making, 21.
30 See discussion in Memory Making, Chapter 1.
region appear to deviate considerably from Confucian ideals, possibly due to adaptation of pre-Sinitic norms.34

Another finding was that the folk epics of secret passion mostly have tragic endings. In a typical story, the lovers are subject to horrible punishment by their own family members. For example, a young girl who has an affair could be ordered by the seniors of her family to commit suicide. One song even reports that her family nailed the offending daughter to a board until she died. Happy endings are not unknown but are certainly few and far between.

This could be because the singers always proclaim that the story is about a real person. Evidence from local records does indeed point to cruel punishment by family seniors.35 In other words, the songs of secret passion reflect the singers’ understanding that offenders of social norms could expect severe punishment or death. This situation could readily be interpreted as evidence for the prevalence of Confucian patriarchal norms at village level.36

At a deeper level, however, one can say that village norms of correct behaviour were shaped by the same norms that pertained to the growing of rice. In other words, rice paddy farmers were expected to follow the same rules governing selection and transfer that applied to the logic and discipline of rice cultivation. The bride was raised in the natal home then selected through the matchmaking process to be transferred to the home of the groom, following the model of exogamous marriage. Removal of the transgressor was the only way to restore the “correct” order, just as the singer-farmer exorcised the “demon weeds” in the rice crop. The air of lament that one finds in the second half of the tales of illicit affairs now made sense. One could even claim that the whole point of these folk epics was to commemorate deceased community members whose violations of social norms led to punishment and death.

The folk epics of Lake Tai were shaped by both men and women. One of the most iconic of the tales of secret passion (the tale of Fifth Daughter) was sung by a woman called Lu Amei 陸阿妹 of Luxu 蘆墟. Bridal laments were of course the preserve of women, including the bride’s mother and her girlfriends

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35 One example is a historical woman from the Wuxi region known as Chen Third Daughter. She was accused of having a love affair and her father had her drowned in a river. Her ghost returned to haunt travellers and a shrine was erected in her honor, see McLaren, Memory Making, 113.
36 Most studies to date have focused on suicide by women from genteel families, that is, women who did not work in the fields. This analysis of mountain songs allows for insight into how farming women dealt with the social pressures of face and family honour. For an overview of women and suicide, see Susan L. Mann, Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 121-27.
in the village, although men sometimes joined the audience. Another Jiangnan folk genre where women were the chief agents is the cultic practice known as *Keng San guniang* 坑三姑娘 (Maiden of the lavatory). This too relates to female toil. One of the chief everyday tasks of village women was to take buckets of human waste from inside the home to the manure pit in the family outhouse. Human waste was still used to fertilize paddy fields well into the 1990s, as I found out when visiting Shuyuan 革院, Nanhuí. According to Chen Qinjian, veneration of *Keng San guniang* was still practiced in rural Songjiang 松江 (in the hinterland of Shanghai) into the 1950s. Essentially this was a divination cult involving spirit writing. Young girls would meet on the fifteenth day of New Year. They would carry an empty bamboo basket into the lavatory pit, chant a prayer, and call on the Maiden of the Lavatory to descend into the basket. When they felt the basket become “heavy”, that is, when the Maiden descended, they would carry the basket back to their living room which was then used as a planchette. A chopstick was inserted into the inverted basket and participants ask questions about their future prospects, particularly their future husband and whether they will have a happy married life. After some time, those watching observed the chopstick “move” over the scattered rice bran on the table, leaving scrawls that were then interpreted by one of their numbers.

The Maiden of the Lavatory ritual derives from an ancient Chinese cult to the goddess Zigu 紫姑, which was practised by both men and women in the imperial era. When educated men used the planchette, the goddess could write “elegant compositions”; sometimes she could even paint. However, in the latter day manifestation of this cult, women appear to be more prominent (at least in the former Jiangnan region). Divination practices to reveal life outcomes must speak to something very deep within the female psyche. In recent years anthropologist Ray Qu has reported on the phenomenon of Chinese women seeking advice from a “seer” about their marriage and life prospects. The practice is known as “incense seeing” and involves a seer interpreting the flames of incense sticks.

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Women's Labor in Chinese Oral Traditions

In the later imperial era, the conventional view held that “men ploughed and women weaved” (nangeng nüzhi 男耕女織). While there was much divergence in actual practices, this idea was promoted as the ideal division of labour in images known as gengzhi tu 耕織圖 (pictures of tilling and weaving) that were widely disseminated in albums, on porcelain and in prints. As Francesca Bray has argued, these images provided “a setting in which humans acted out in microcosm the essential interflow of yin 陰 (female) and yang 陽 (male) energies that sustained cosmic harmony and social order.” While there is no doubt that this notion dominated the minds of officialdom and literati, one finds little trace of it in the Lake Tai songs of agricultural labour. Quite the opposite, in these songs it is men and women working together that provides the essential labour required to ensure a good harvest. The underlying paradigm is not one of yin and yang, that is, of opposites engaged in different types of work, but of men and women engaged in a common enterprise. The dominant imagery is sexual. For example, the field girl plucking up the rice seedlings from the nursery bed is analogous to the rice seedling ready to be plucked and married off to another field (as in transplantation). The singer describes this in stock material that is deeply eroticised.

In the fifth month, it’s time to plant the rice shoots,
The field-girl goes out to pluck the seedlings.
She casts off her embroidered slippers on the bank of the polder.
Wonderful!
A pair of white arms descend into the muddy pool,
Wafting the scent of fragrant flowers.

五月裡來菘黃秧，
田中小姐去撥秧，
一雙花鞋脫在秧田岸，
十分好，
一雙白膀下泥漿。
陣陣粉花香。

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40 For extensive discussion see Francesca Bray, *Technology, Gender and History: Great Transformations Reconsidered* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).
41 Bray, *Technology, Gender and History*, 58.
42 Singer from Baimao, Changshu, collected in 1986, Changshu shi wenhuaju 常熟市文化局 and Changshu shi wenhuaguan 常熟市文化館, *Zhongguo Baimao shan’ge ji* 中國白茆山歌集 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2002), 43.
Other songs treat the common situation of men and women working the pedal water wheels that were ubiquitous across the delta. Both sexes engaged in this activity as early as the Song era (960-1279). In Lou Shu’s 楼璹 (1090-1162) Gengzhi tu we find one entitled “Irrigation” that presents three men and a woman working the water pump together. When the day’s labor is done, they sing and laugh together.\textsuperscript{43} Lake Tai songs reflect the routine practice of women taking part in weeding, threshing, husking, and raking. Women also ferried people across the waterways. The conventional gendered division of labour, together with the notion that women work “inside” and men “outside,” appears less relevant here. In addition, the idea of gender division to preserve cosmic social order is notably absent. However, one can discern a synergy between the two sets of idea. The sexualized imagery associated with women’s labour in Lake Tai songs could be an originary or primal rendition of the ideology that we know of as yin-yang complementarity. Hill Gates has made a similar point:

In explaining the abstraction of yin/\textit{yang}, ordinary Chinese almost always begin with the unity/opposition of female/male. Although most people are far too delicate to say so, the interpenetration of the sexes in intercourse is one of the best metaphors available for the unity of yin/\textit{yang}: moon/sun, dark/light, even ghost/human (or human/god) are iconically feeble by contrast.\textsuperscript{44}

From this angle, the songs of illiterate farming populations point towards what might well be earlier notions of male-female complementarity based on human sexuality. In literati writings the same general idea appears more abstractly as \textit{yin} and \textit{yang}.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{43} For the Chinese text and translation of this work, see Roslyn Lee Hammers, \textit{Pictures of Tilling and Weaving: Art, Labor, and Technology in Song and Yuan China} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 29: 178.


\textsuperscript{45} One could also argue that the rural populations had a vulgarized understanding of deep philosophical truths as attested in the written tradition, but this then begs the question about the dissemination of literati ideas amongst the illiterate populace. The reverse process seems more likely. On the antiquity of images of copulation in the Chinese song tradition see Paul Rakita Goldin, \textit{The Culture of Sex in Ancient China} (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), Chapter 1.
Unorthodox Marriage Forms

One of the most intriguing aspects of Lake Tai folk epics is the incorporation of unusual and little-studied marriage forms. Two decades ago I published a study on “abduction in marriage” (qiangqin). This was an actual practice of the delta region. One of my interviewees in Nanhui had actually witnessed one such abduction in her youth.46 In some communities, a so-called abduction can be part of the ceremonial activities. There are also cases where a young couple fall in love, the male cannot come up with the bride price, and they decide to carry out an “abduction” to force both families to agree to their marriage. Apart from these charade abductions, there were other cases where men who could not afford to marry sought out vulnerable unmarried women or widows and carried out a real abduction followed shortly after by “consummation”. In these cases, the man concerned had the support of his male relatives and fellow villagers. Family honour dictated that a woman compromised in this way was compelled to marry her abductor. In the latter case, the community might well feel sympathy for an impoverished male who had no other way to obtain a wife.

Another form of abduction in marriage is celebrated in a folk epic known as “Going to fetch the wife’s younger sister” (jie ayi). In this story the husband comes to hear about the pretty younger sister and practices deception to bring her back by boat. Along the way she is seduced or raped. When the older sister learns of this, she feels humiliated and takes her own life. The suicide is covered up and the man marries the younger sister. This type of story appeared in song as early as the seventeenth century. Sometimes the younger sister meets with supernatural retribution from the older sister, but the male concerned goes unpunished. In a different version of the same story, the older sister dies and the husband is prevailed upon to marry the younger sister in order to take care of the infant son. Here it is the mother of the two women who decides to bolt the door on her son-in-law and the younger sister to compel them to get married. This custom of “the bolted-door marriage” (banniu qin) is claimed to have been an actual practice in the pre-contemporary era.47

Some folk epics feature marriage with a deceased husband (yinqui). In the popular folk epic of Zhao Shengguan 趙聖關, a young merchant falls in love with a girl he sees washing her clothes by the riverside. She is proactive in inviting him to her chamber, where they swear eternal love. However, his family
refuses to allow him to break his betrothal to another woman and he sickness and dies. His lover, Miss Lin, then vows to marry him in the afterlife. Clutching his spirit tablet, she carries out a solitary “wedding” ceremony and then spends the rest of her life in a convent.\textsuperscript{48}

The unconventional liaisons and marriages related in Lake Tai folk epics add to our knowledge about how people at grassroots level dealt with the dilemmas of the normative marriage system, which required the mediation of a matchmaker and the exchange of bride price and dowry. If one could not afford the bride price, then marriage by abduction could be one answer. If the wife died, then a man could attempt to obtain by force the younger sister without need for a new bride price. Where neither could afford dowry or bride price, family seniors could arrange a “bolted-door marriage.” In cases where one’s lover dies and marriage is impossible, the ritual of \textit{yinqin} provided a solution that met with public acclamation. These informal and unorthodox marriage forms allowed those who could not afford to emulate the gentry to marry with a modicum of face and dignity.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This investigation of oral and ritual genres at the local level in the former Jiangnan region reveals a world that is at a considerable distance from that of gentry, literati, and officials. In village songs one finds little evidence of any “trickling down” of Confucian ideas from the educated to the uneducated. The one value that was clearly shared by both was the notion of \textit{xiao} (filial piety). Shen Seventh Brother, who married the rice spirit in human form, is heralded in local folk epics as an exemplar of filial piety. But village \textit{xiao} appears to be about service to one’s family and community, not service or obedience to the state. Nor do villagers require the medium of the emperor, magistrate, or ritual specialist to engage with the supernatural forces believed to control their lives. Any farmer in the paddy fields could erect a simple shrine to the Rice Goddess and sing her a prayer. The deities and spirits venerated by Lake Tai village farmers were the very same ones enacted in temple dramas on sacred occasions, worshipped on pilgrimages to mountain sites, and featured in iconic prints hung up at New Year. They do not appear to emanate from textual precedents but rather from ancestral memories passed down through the generations. In the world of Lake Tai folk epics, ritual specialists,

\textsuperscript{48} For information on the above see McLaren, \textit{Memory Making}, Chapter 5.
men of letters, and officialdom hardly appear at all.\textsuperscript{49} Wedding rituals did not rely on the kind of traditional manuals favoured by the gentry.\textsuperscript{50} The sub-elite population was very aware of canonical protocols such as the role of the matchmaker and the exchange of bride price and dowry, but this was often honoured in the breach. If one could not afford the orthodox procedure, then one could seek locally-acceptable arrangements. Transgressive love affairs were handled by seniors in the family to avoid loss of face. Senior women were often the most devious and brutal in enacting punishment on the young lovers (at least in folk epics). This makes it difficult to speak of patriarchal codes imposed by men over women. Preserving the family honor was a top priority for mothers and the wife of the eldest son.

To conclude, the folk epics reflect a microcosmic village world, ruled by family elders, that appeared to be self-sufficient in the inculcation of normative values and the punishment of transgressors. Agrarian values appear to be more prominent than Confucian values. Such issues as the “standardization of ritual” and “cultural integration” are hard to apply to this seemingly chaotic pattern of village diversity and self-governance. To this general picture I would add that women’s procreative power featured quite strongly in Lake Tai village culture. This is clear from the veneration of the feminized rice spirit and the strong female protagonists of folk epics. Gratitude for women’s nurture featured in pilgrimages to mountain sites favoured by both men and women in the Wuxi region.\textsuperscript{51} It was apparently senior women who decided family affairs, and women had their own particular ritual forms such as bridal laments and divination practices. There is now a very considerable corpus of pre-contemporary folk material such as songs, proverbs, stories, and theatre available for those interested. One would expect that further discoveries will be made as scholars venture more deeply into village life.

\textsuperscript{49} One exception is the lengthy folk epic about Hua Mountain Lifter, who led a rent resistance movement, see McLaren, \textit{Memory Making}, Chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{50} Patricia Buckley Ebrey has demonstrated the powerful influence of ritual manuals in imperial China; see her book \textit{Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writing about Rites} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). She argues that “Throughout Chinese history the performance of family rituals was taken as a marker of ethnic identity. Han Chinese wore mourning garments of undyed cloth; they made offerings to patrilineal ancestors; they sealed betrothals by the parent’s exchanged gifts; they did not marry their brothers’ widows.” Ebrey, \textit{Confucianism and Family Rituals}, 229. As discussed here, Lake Tai farming populations, developed a range of popular customs at some distance from orthodox conventions. These “deviant” conventions appear to relate to localised notions of identity rather than to “Chinese” ethnicity.

\textsuperscript{51} See discussion in McLaren, \textit{Memory Making}, Chapter 3.