Conclusion

Boatmen’s culture developed at a time when late imperial society was undergoing a period of profound crisis. This crisis did not result in the outright collapse of existing structures, but rather a gradual undermining of the traditional agrarian economy, with its social, cultural, and political codes. In Eastern Sichuan, if not all along the Yangzi region, the emerging role of the cities and of trade as the main producers of wealth and power brought forward new social groups that questioned and pushed against the previous order. The river workers were hardly among the “gainers” in these novel conditions. Although the very existence of the profession of boatman and the fact that so many people flocked to the river towns in order to take up this work attests to its relative appeal, it is beyond question that to be a junkman meant being dangerously close to the bottom of the social ladder. It is in this context of growing prosperity, social disruption, and increased inequality that we should see junkmen’s culture.

_Haozi_, the main channels of boatmen’s expression, give us an insight into a number of important notions about junkmen’s social experience. First, through their claims to an aesthetic sensibility and their endorsement of their own interpretations of morality and history, Sichuan workers sought to appropriate their physical and social space. They voiced loudly their preferences, whether for food, sex, or objects denoting status. They marked the physical space of Sichuan’s towns and docks, enabling them to seemingly belong to that environment and to bend it to their needs. In fact, what they lauded were very often the only things they knew—the type of reality that Pierre Bourdieu described as springing from necessity and not from a need for status or a particular inborn proclivity. We can conclude that while voicing their independence, they underlined their sense of belonging to the broader society and its values.

Second, there was a tension between this sense of belonging and their self-representation as outsiders. Boatmen affiliated themselves with images of outcasts that were common among secret-society members and popular in the oral arts. Playing on the image of the outsider was a consequence of their perceived inadequacies as a professional group. One of the main issues here was whether they could be filial and caring toward their wives, children, and elders. Boatmen thought that they could not cater to the needs of their families by providing food and money, nor were they in a position to perform appropriate rituals for the happiness of their ancestors. Picturing themselves as people without family and friends or as macho-like heroes, they often felt isolated from or even outside of the broader community. The result of this condition
was a prevalent sense of loss of humanity and thus of being reduced to beasts. Lack of humanity meant that one was outside the ritual, moral, and emotional structures that were conducive to the community’s existence. This is not to say that boatmen were really like beasts (as many Chinese and Western observers thought as they watched them work), but that they expressed the feeling of being no more than beasts.

Third, what distinguished boatmen from most of mainstream Chinese society was an acute consciousness of being exploited. The apparently inhuman conditions of their work and the brutality of the bosses constantly led them to voice their discontent or to represent themselves as the most destitute people in China. This image is especially interesting when placed within the context of the revolutionary tradition in Chinese historiography. Although clearly a form of resistance and a reminder to themselves and to the world of their conditions, boatmen’s laments did not have any broader political meaning. They did not call for struggle, rebellion, or revolution. Rather, their words of protest served the function of easing their adjustment to difficult work and a low social position and making life relatively tolerable through free expression, which provided an outlet for feelings of resentment. This explanation seems valid if we see *haozi* not as literal descriptions of the realities of the Eastern Sichuan labor market, but as products of culture that were both embedded in a discourse of poverty and productive within this discourse. Boatmen shaped their own vision partly on the image of other lower-class groups, but they also managed to create a valid picture of their own professional group and perhaps one of the few surviving images of preindustrial workers in Qing China.

Fourth, we should view the history of Eastern Sichuan boat people in a broader scope than simply that of their immediate locality. River workers such as trackers, rowers, and sailors were widespread in late Qing and Republican China; given the sluggish development of road and railway networks, rivers and coastal waters were still the most reliable routes for transportation. Obviously there were large differences between regions when it came to the types of junks used, the organization of work, the formation of shipping companies, the available capital, and the types of goods shipped. Boatmen from such disparate regions as the Pearl River Delta, the Grand Canal, the Lower and Middle Yangzi, the Yellow River, and the Fujian-Zhejiang Coast also spoke different languages, ate different foods, and believed in different local gods. Nevertheless, looking at Sichuan boat people, whose oral traditions are either the most developed or simply the most accessible, we can see strong analogies with the groups mentioned above. All of them were considered to be on the margins of society, brutalized and locked in poverty, bound by clandestine modes of social organization and existing within the realm of oral culture. Yet