
Ancestors and Zhejiang New Year: Fragments of Historical Ethnography and Cultural Semantics

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Abstract:

This article explores the cultural semantics of New Year celebrations in three places in the province of Zhejiang, southern China. It demonstrates how the complexities of the notion of ancestry and its several modal expressions are reconciled and the dead temporarily reconstructed in rituals concerning the building of social continuity. Split ancestors reappear as complete ancestors to promote human fertility in a coming year. The article ends in a wider discussion and some comparisons.

Key Words: Southern China, Ancestry, New Year, Calendar, Cultural semantics, Symbology

1. BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Ethnographic Locus

Zhejiang is the smallest of China's provinces and its northern parts fall within what is often referred to as the Hangzhou Basin.¹ It is situated south of the Yangzi delta and has historical important connections with that area as well as with the Central Basin in Jiangxi and Hunan. It is commonly viewed as part of the 'water country' of Jiangnan, the vast area south of the major River Yangzi. Lakes, canals and rivers form a network of communications and supply an infrastructure for economic activities. In this area there is an abundance of intensively cultivated valleys and basins and a few of these are in focus in the present essay, namely the Qing dynasty prefectures of Shaoxing (紹興府), Jiaxing (嘉興府) and Taizhou (台州府). The choice of these three Zhejiang places for this study is completely random.² What I wish to examine is how people in these places used to celebrate the Chinese lunar New Year, and the cultural implications of these celebrations. The sources for this investigation are the texts of the respective local chronicles, *fang zhi* 方志, as they are provided by the Imperial Encyclopaedia of 1726 — *Gujin tushu ji cheng* 古今圖書集成.³

Through the ages the main economic activities in the countryside in this area of China have been the cultivation of wet rice, the production of silk and, in mountainous areas, the planting of tea. Rice was sown in nurseries in March/April, transplanted around midsummer and harvested in late summer. The cultivation of rice is here heavily dependent on the summer's monsoon rains. Apart from tending winter crops, there was but little activities in the farms at the time for the New Year. Some pursuits were carried out though. We learn for instance that in the first moon of the year Jiaxing people turned over the earth making use of the pits of manure to spread at the plantations of mulberry trees (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2b).⁴

1.2 A Platform for Ethnographic Analysis and Synthesis: Symbology

There is no reason to assume that a cultural tradition is a homogeneous affair in the sense that customs and conventions can be expected to form one single integrated logical pattern giving structure to and governing a society. Rather, there is much to indicate that a cultural tradition embraces a number of 'modalities', each with its own given presuppositions. A culture — in the sense of a corpus of symbols — is an agglomerate of construed potential universes. Human beings live not in one homogenous society, but simultaneously in many possible worlds. Other

¹ Thanks are due to Virgil K.Y. Ho, Robert Parkin and the two anonymous reviewers of *CJCS* for advice.

² There is certainly much more material available that concerns the province of Zhejiang and which would allow an expansion of the enquiry of this article by way of further ethnographic data. Such further endeavours — with regard to both time and space — would, however, lead to a text that swells beyond the format of a journal article. Also, I believe in a step by step enquiry, the results of which might be discussed further, again and again, with the involvement of other data from different periods and places.

³ On the Encyclopaedia see further Giles 1911, and on *fang zhi*, e.g. Chang 1955: 66.

⁴ References to the GJTS follow the style of Giles 1911.

complications in this pluralistic enquiry refer to the analytical accounting for parallel and constantly shifting ontologies, depending on the human use of different codes for the treatment and use of information (see Aijmer 2001). Alterity inside plurality forms human life.

One strategy in this is the exploration of ethnographic data as belonging to a realist ontology, implying then a study of the ‘operational order’. In general terms, this is a sociological endeavour to examine practical tasks, their organizational consequences and the processes that give rise to activity-orientated social landscapes.

Examining ethnography from other ontological perspectives, I will bring phenomena of discursive and iconic origins into the present discussion. Exploration of the ‘discursive order’ concerns the intentional performative acts of men and women in a society and their on-going conversation about themselves and the world. This is a wide and multifaceted field of social pragmatics in which we attempt to understand indigenous, discursively constructed and construed worlds. Local exegesis — the indigenous stream of commentary on social morphology — is crucial in this kind of enquiry. The discursive order is a pragmatically construed universe that emerges in the communicative interaction of an array of people using language and language-like types of code.

Issues relating to ritual and visionary symbolism are essential in a discussion of ancestry. Human iconic codes and the ways in which they work form a little understood field of imagery, the expressiveness of which lies outside language and the embracement of linear causality; it therefore lacks truthful reporting and referential meaning. Language and iconology — the latter a system built on pictorial thinking — are entirely different sorts of codes, neither being instrumental for reaching into the other. Icons form universes that are essentially separated from the practical world of everyday living in that, as they become composed, they create their own realities, being grounded only in themselves and their construction – symbols are used to buttress symbols. Compositions of the iconic order make manifest possible worlds that may be very different from day-to-day existence.

The symbolic phenomena of the world speak with many and different contrapuntal voices in a polyphonic stream carrying a blend of meanings. In the construction of imagery, symbolic worlds emerge that are characteristically different not only from the everyday existences that people live for real, but also between themselves. In my approach, divergent symbolic constructs in a society are seen as varying possible worlds or cultural modalities.

2. GLIMPSES OF NEW YEAR IN ZHEJIANG: ETHNOGRAPHY FROM LATE IMPERIAL TIMES

2.1 The La Moon

The La Moon 臘月 is an ancient name for the twelfth lunation of the Chinese moon calendar. In relation to the Gregorian solar calendar it will start at some point in time between the sixteenth and twentyseventh of January. In ancient China La was a very important festive

period (Bodde 1975: 49—138), but much later, in the days of the last dynasty, the celebrations had been much reduced as a public festival. It is still mentioned as a stretch of popular festivity in our present small corpus of Zhejiang ethnography, in which it is referred to as being observed in two of our places — which of course does not exclude the possibility that also the third locality studied engaged in the same practices, nor its actually being widely celebrated in the province:

Jiaxing

During the La moon countrymen use red ink to smear their faces and they jump and dance in the markets (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2b).

Taizhou

In the La Moon, after the [time of the] full moon [people] are active sending presents of food (*kui* 餽) to one another. It is called ‘accompanying the year’ (*song nian* 送年) (GJTS VI: 968, 風俗考 2a).

What we find here is that the local markets in Jiaxing were invaded by people from the surrounding countryside who had coloured their faces red and who were performing some sort of theatrical show, perhaps of ritual character. There are no further hints as to what this may have been. In Taizhou people engaged in a reciprocal exchange of food presents. We may speculate whether the name for these gifts, *kui*, was a discursive pun associating this food with demonic force. The word is, in written form, made up of the radical for eating 食 and the phonetically indicating graph for demon 鬼. Such puns of phonetic (and as here graphic) similarity between words are common in discursive symbolism. Who sent presents to whom also remains enigmatic, but we may, I think, assume that this happened within some network basically made up of relatives and friends, gifts making such networks obvious and manifest.

2.2 The Winter Solstice

Shaoxing

At Winter Solstice (‘Winter Utmost’ — Dong Zhi 冬至) [people] sacrifice to the deceased (*xian* 先) using a kind of fluffy, stuffed dumpling (*hun tun* 餛飩). Moreover, some drink and this is certainly not worship. [One sends] presents (GJTS VI: 990, 風俗考 2a).

At Winter Solstice, but sometimes at New Year, [people perform] the investment of the cap [ceremony] onto the head. They worship Heaven and Earth and the linear ancestors (*zu zong* 祖宗). They venerate (*zun* 尊) the elderly (*zhang* 長) [with wine?]. Nowadays this is abolished (GJTS VI: 990, 風俗考 1b).

Jiaxing

At Winter Solstice there are sacrifices (*si* 祀) to ancestors (*zu* 祖) and [people] worship (*bai* 拜) Heaven. [They] send congratulatory presents to one another. It is very similar to the ceremonies of Original Dawn (Yuan Tan 元旦) [or New Year]. Nowadays this is no more so (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2b).

Taizhou

At Winter Solstice [people] take meal of glutinous millet and rice to make *wan* 丸 — ‘small balls’. They arrange meats, sweet wine, and delicacies as offerings (*jian* 薦) to the ancestral dead (*zu xian* 祖先). Among ordinary people this is not so important (GJTS VI: 998, 風俗考 2a).

The winter solstice was observed in all three places, but the various rituals reported to be conventionally performed are noted, in the year of 1726 or before,⁵ as vanished or declining and of little importance. In one case, Taizhou, it is pointed out that the maintenance of this celebration reflects some sort of elite status — as contrasted with what ‘ordinary people’ do. It is also clear that the rituals, when performed, were similar to those which were to appear later on at the lunar New Year. In all three places there was worship of the ancestors; the ethnography could be read so that those ancestors of concern in this belonged to the domestic ancestral shrine. However, this may be somewhat complex and I shall return to this later on. In Taizhou it is specifically mentioned that the ancestors were dead agnates, but this would almost certainly be true for all places. It could be that the term *zu zong* points to rituals in extra-domestic ancestral halls, but a reading in this direction remains very uncertain. Such fragments of ethnography as we have seem to suggest a domestic event. The worship of ancestors was, at least in Shaoxing, extended into a veneration of elderly people, that is living persons approaching ancestorship.

There is another note of interest in this context. We learn from the prefecture of Jiaxing, with reference to the beginning of the tenth moon in early winter, that there were then sacrifices at the graves similar to the old practice at the Winter Solstice. The note thus suggests that in olden times there were sacrifices at the ancestral graves at the Winter Solstice. I shall discuss this case below.

The things mentioned as being offered to the dead were either dumplings, or rice-millet balls, or a more complete set of food and drink. Details are lacking but it seems that key food offerings should be composed of two different components, one of them being rice. Rice is also the main ingredient in the brewing of sweet yellow wine (famously from Shaoxing). Rice, of course, is the staple food of Zhejiang.

Like in the the custom of lunar New Year, to which we shall turn soon, there was worship of Heaven and Earth at the dawn of the day of the Winter Solstice, at least so in Shaoxing. In

⁵ The encyclopaedia of GJTS was originally published this year.

Jiaxing, only Heaven is mentioned — but perhaps the chronicler understands this word to contextually imply Earth also. Yet, the difference may have been of some significance. Why this New Year duplication occurred is not clear in the ethnography, but the resemblance between the two occasions is pointed out explicitly by one of the chroniclers and so we must understand that in terms of local discourse the similarity between the two different occasions was well understood.

Reminiscent of the practice of the La moon, the citizens of two of our three prefectures, sent one another congratulatory presents at the Winter Solstice. Probably this was a widely spread custom in the area. In all likelihood the occurrence of the Winter Solstice (fixed by the sun's movements) within the lunar La moon, is something that suggests that these two occasions for the reciprocal giving of gifts were, in fact, much the same. The networks considered for gift allocation are not characterized, but it was likely to have embraced relatives — agnatic and affinal — but also friends and neighbours.

Drinking parties were characteristic of Shaoxing and it is stressed that these events were entirely secular. More ritual in character were the acts of reverence for the elderly that were carried out in this place — as an extension of ancestral worship. The term *zun* 尊 generally implies the use of wine. Wine, as mentioned above, was (and is) a famous product of Shaoxing Prefecture and is a transform of rice. Drinking wine is to consume a version of rice.

Capping rituals are reported from Shaoxing. This is a bit opaque, but the ethnographer here explicitly points to ceremonies of the past. In another account, written in a historical mood, the capping is also mentioned and then as having involved sixteen years' old boys, who in this ceremony got their long childhood tufts of hair cut and instead were given a ceremonial cap. It is here stressed that this custom had in practice come to an end. This historical account of customs in Shaoxing contains references to *Wen gong jia li* 文公家禮 — 'Master Wen's Family Decorum' — a traditional vademecum for conventions in family circles (GJTS VI: 998: 風俗考 2a). So it might well be that the capping was not really part of demotic local practice, but more of a Confucian scholar's wishful quote from a classical text.

Turning to Sinology we learn that the capping ceremony existed in the days of the Han dynasties (BC 206- AD 220) as an imperial event, carried out when so required (Bodde 1975: 19). It seems to have been elaborated as a broader elite occasion in the centuries to follow. It is but seldom mentioned in later period local chronicles — at least in my own experience.

2.3 24th Day of the Twelfth Moon

This festival seems to have been celebrated all over southern China, often under the designation Little New Year, but this name for the event is not used in our two examples. This was a night that brought special attention to the lord of the kitchen, the Stove God.⁶ What this figure was,

⁶ On the Stove God, see further Bodde 1975: 219; Chard 1990; 1995; Aijmer 2003: 33-8; 2005b.

or was not, varied between communities and areas, but in general he was a benign god protecting the women in the kitchen and their making of food — so watching over an important manifestation of female generative force. In iconic terms he is often a contrast to agnatic ancestors. Our Zhejiang corpus provides two examples:

Shaoxing

The twentyfourth day of the twelfth moon. [People] conventionally call it the La Moon Twenty Four (臘月念四). Among people the eldest son this night arranges [offerings] to the Stove God (Zao 竈) (GJTS VI: 990, 風俗考 2b).

Taizhou

On the twentyfourth day all families sweep clean the rooms and the outdoor parts of houses. [They] call it *sao pi* 掃壁 — ‘sweeping within the walls’. This night [people] arrange [sacrifices] for the Stove God (GJTS VI: 998, 風俗考 2a).

The offerings to the Stove God form, then, a characteristic of the event. It is likely that these gifts to the lord of the kitchen were in line with the general idea that on this night the godling prepared for his annual visit to Heaven to report to the Jade Emperor on the behaviour shown in the course of the year passed by the inhabitants of the domicile. The offerings were a sort of bribe to put the departing god in a good mood. It is worth noting that in Shaoxing it is the eldest son who provided the offerings, thus indicating a bilateral interest in the god, that of a family. This would also have meant that the son transgressed into the female realm. No other offerings are mentioned, but in Taizhou — and probably also elsewhere — there was a ritual sweeping of the domestic houses.

The Taizhou report on sweeping the residential houses should be noted as important, but as this custom occurred also in Shaoxing, but then at New Year Eve, we will return to this practice further on.

2.4 New Year Eve

The ‘proper’ New Year occurred according to the moon calendar — at a date varying between 21st January and 20th February — and in the south it announced the arrival of spring. Many of the conventions surrounding the exchange of years, reported on in our ethnography, will show a considerable amount of family resemblances with what went on elsewhere, in other southern places. The notes in our Zhejiang corpus tell us this:

Shaoxing

On Pass-away Night (Chu Xi 除夕), after noon has passed [on that day], at once [people start] sprinkling and sweeping the halls of the mansions. They hang up paper money, arranging it by the sides of the doors. Towards sunset [people] assemble to burn offerings in the [court in front of the?] main hall (*ting* 庭). Of old this is called *huo shan* (火山) — ‘mountain on fire’. The whole household assembles, the young

and the old. Joyously they drink. One says: ‘dividing the years’ (*fen sui* 分歲). The custom is that throughout the night [people] sit around the fireplace. One says: ‘protecting the year’ (*shou sui* 守歲) (GJTS VI: 990, 風俗考 2b).

Jiaxing

At Original Darkness (Yuan Xi 元夕) country people bind dry grass to trees. Finally they burn it (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 3a).

In the Pass-away Night (除夕) [people] change door spirits (易門神). [They put up] peachwood charms and written spring placards. Wells and mills are all sealed up. There are burnt offerings of meat (*fan chai* 燔柴). People arrange wine and rich food and all come together to drink. [You can hear the sounds of] gongs and drums all through the night. They call it *shou sui* 守歲 — ‘protecting the year’ (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2b).

Taizhou

On Pass-away Night [people] crackle bamboo [in fire] to drive away [demons?]. With care [one] lights lanterns. [People] come together to drink until daylight [arrives]. It is called *shou sui* 守歲 — ‘protecting the year’. One exchanges the peachwood amulets and spring placards (GJTS VI: 998, 風俗考 2a).

Synthesizing these few notes from Zhejiang we find that when noon had passed on the New Year’s Eve, people immediately started sweeping and scrubbing their houses. This is here obviously a ritual activity, rather than a spring cleaning. It is performed at a particular point in time and on a particular day. The ethnography does not provide us with any specific clues for the understanding of this cleansing activity. We have seen above that sweeping of mansions took place a little earlier on the twentyfourth day of the twelfth moon in Taizhou. Essentially the two sweeping events are the same exorcist ritual, but why they they were conducted at different points in time in the two the places is not so evident.

There were further concerns with the domestic houses. Paper money was arranged — but how is not stated — around the doorways and a further emphasis on the entrances was found in the exchange of the old, no doubt weather-beaten, posters depicting door gods for new colourful ones. Such door gods were generally found depicted on both sides of doors, but apparently they were only good for one year, after which time they had to be exchanged for new efficacy. There is also mention of peachwood amulets, or charms, and, furthermore, of posters of calligraphy for the coming year which were put up for display, while any old ones were removed. ‘Peachwood charms’ could possibly be a designation of the door decorative posters, but the amulets could also have existed in their own right as objects — twigs of peach trees. Such amulets provided at the same time both blessings for those inside and protection against demonic attacks from the outside (see e.g. Aijmer 2003: 73-4).

What is a little puzzling is the reference to the sound of drums and gongs. We cannot infer where these were being beaten, outdoors or indoors, only that the noise went on all night. These sounds seem to have created an iconic time-space — a duration of ritual intensity, marked off from the everyday flow of days. Inside the houses their inhabitants were assembled around the fireplace, waking through the night. Merry drinking, in all likelihood of rice-wine, was a significant feature of this celebration. Feasting on rich food accompanied the consuming of wine. Sacrifices to the dead ancestors, the former inhabitants of the houses, are not mentioned explicitly. ‘Burnt offerings’ of meat are mentioned — and in all likelihood these were intended for the dead — the mention of ‘burnt’ signifying that the meat presented in the sacrifices was not raw, but roasted.

Out of doors, the ethnographer notes that wells and mills were sealed. What ‘mills’ signified is hard to say, but sealing the wells would have meant that you could not draw water from the underground, water that was *yin* in itself and more so in its association with earthly forces. In Chinese cosmography *yin* is the female, negative and inactive cosmic principle that penetrates the universe. Matter of such connotations was to be avoided and not be brought inside a house on this day. Mills were often associated with water and the sealing of a mill would have meant that its being propelled by water’s force was replaced by a certain stillness. The burning of bundles of dry grass attached to tree stems is another outdoor feature of interest. The burning trees seem to have functioned as a sort of beacons, but for what is not evident. The term *shu chu* 束芻 used to designate grass bundles could also refer to ‘presents sent to a funeral for sacrifices’. Grass tied to tree stems may thus have been endowed with certain death connotations.

Another custom noted was that towards sunset people assembled in or at the *ting* halls to ‘burn offerings’. *Ting* could also mean the courtyard in front of a hall — which is the actual meaning here we cannot say, but, given the use of open fire, we could assume that it was the court in front of the hall. The offerings mentioned are not specified, but the term *huo shan* seems to signify some sort of special arrangement, perhaps some scaffolding (if out of doors) for things made of paper which were set to fire. The term ‘fire on the mountain’ suggests something spectacular along these lines. These offerings ought to have been linked to the main hall, where ancestral tablets were kept in a shrine.

2.5 New Year Day

Chinese lunar New Years start with the coming of the light of the dawn on the first day of the first moon of the year. The notion of New Year implied a collapse and a consequent recreation of the world as propelling the passage of time. The reconstruction of the universe begins with the emergence of new light. We have some ethnographic notes on this phase in the ‘traditional’ calendar from all three prefectures, the data from which make up our Zhejiang corpus:

Shaoxing

At Original Dawn (Yuan Tan 元旦) men and women rise and worship (*bai* 拜) according to rules of precedence. Furthermore they wear abundant (festive?) clothes. They go on visits to their relatives (*qin shu* 親屬) without discrimination. [People] arrange wine and food. Reciprocally they extend [hospitality] to all and everyone for five days. And then it is finished (GJTS VI: 990, 風俗考 2a).

Jiaying

At Original Dawn [people] dress up and [put on] caps. They burn incense and worship (*bai* 拜) Heaven and sacrifice (*si* 祀) to the ancestors (*zu* 祖). Men and women worship (*bai* 拜) together. They drink wine. Relatives (*qin* 親) and friends give presents to one another and [send] cards. This is called ‘festival of congratulatory presents’ (*he jie* 賀節) (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2a).

[Country people] use [New] Year Day (*nian ri* 年日) to burn (*shao* 燒) the fields and the silkworms. In towns and markets [people] raise lanterns on poles. There is drumming and they roam around. It is talked about as ‘welcoming lanterns’ (*ying deng* 迎燈) (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 3a).

Taizhou

On the year’s first day [while still] dark, [people] open their doors and worship (*bai* 拜) Heaven and Earth. Just before daylight, the whole family, husbands and wives, assemble around and kneel in front of the ancestral dead (*zu xian* 組先) to worship (*bai* 拜). This is repeated, [now] using [a prescribed] order of worship (*bai* 拜) in an honoured progression. They [drink] goblets of pepper-[wine]. There are reciprocal exchanges of [wishes for] blessings between [the participants]. Afterwards one goes out to venerate (*bai* 拜) lineage relatives (*qin zu* 親族) in the neighbourhood. This is talked about as ‘to congratulate [on occasion of the new] year’ (*he sui* 賀歲). One raises [cups of] wine [and there is toasting] between relatives (*qin* 親) and friends. One makes feasts where people assemble. [This is going on for] ten days and then [comes] a full stop (GJTS VI: 998, 風俗考 1b).

On the first day of the new year (*li duan* 履端) the ‘gentry’ (*shi da fu* 士大夫) start sending congratulatory presents (*cheng he* 稱賀) (GJTS VI: 998, 風俗考 2b).

The first thing people in Jiaying did in the emerging New Year was to worship Heaven, and those of Taizhou to worship both Heaven and Earth. Such cosmically orientated worship is not mentioned for Shaoxing, but it is likely that this happened also there. Whether there was a real difference between Jiaying and Taizhou in that the inhabitants of the former prefecture only worshipped Heaven, is difficult to tell, but a likely reading is that ‘Earth’ was subsumed in this case. In both places it is mentioned that people had dressed up for the occasion, wearing rich clothes. This was probably a common feature.

What came next was the attention given to the domestic ancestors, the former inhabitants of the house. In Shaoxing the ethnography is not explicit, but there is no doubt that the worship mentioned concerned the domestic ancestors. The text informs us that on this occasion men and women worshipped together — something they obviously did not do on less festive occasions. It is also said that the worship was a structured event where rules of precedence applied. Almost certainly this implied that those of elder generations took the lead, members of younger age-bands following. In Jiaxing there were *si* sacrifices to the dead, thus something more elaborate than the obligatory smoke of incense implied by the term *bai*. Also here it is explicitly mentioned that men and women worshipped together on the occasion.

In Taizhou the event was somewhat more complex. A first round of worship happened before dawn, still in darkness. In an unstructured way men and women knelt before the ancestral tablets in worship. A little later this was repeated — and, it could be assumed, after the arrival of the light of the first dawn — and this time worship was a structured affair using an honoured order of progression, clearly that of generational precedence. The repetition is not explained.

The drinking of wine in the early morning was something that brought the family of a residence together into another shared activity. In Taizhou the wine was spiced with pepper. In this place this was apparently part of the wishing one another blessings for the coming year. The sharing of wine at this time certainly had the same implication of ritual togetherness everywhere this was practiced, and drinking parties characterized all events in the New Year duration.

What happened next was that an extensive social ceremonialism broke out that brought together inhabitants of many houses in a neighbourhood or even from wider circles. This was the social calling to express good wishes for the coming year. Visits embraced relatives and friends without discrimination. The expression of good wishes for luck took on the ceremonial form of raised hands, *bai*, a gesture also used in worship — the term expressing a continuum between the two forms of greeting. The visiting was thus formal and, when for some reason could not be achieved, could be replaced by the sending of a formal congratulatory card. The visits were accompanied by the giving of presents. The character of the gift-giving seems to have been one of reciprocity. What the gifts were, we do not know — perhaps items of food, or some conventional items.

Relatives are specified by the word *qin*, *qin zu* and *qin shu*. *Qin* is a general inclusive word for relatives. *Qin zu* would generally designate a relative of the same agnatic descent as the speaking Ego. *Qin shu* should signify belonging by way of kinship. We must consider that the meaning of such words may have had a considerable local variation. But taking these general indications as leads, it seems that in Shaoxing and Jiaxing the visiting of relatives was a broadly cast activity and probably also included affinal relatives — they were without discrimination. In Taizhou there seems to have been a restriction in that the visits appear to have concerned agnatically related families only.

Eating and drinking was the essence of these visits — together with the conveying of presents. Food and drink was in abundance and toasting for good luck the rule. This social visiting could go on for five to ten days, varying between the prefectures.

It may be noted in the context of domestic New Year conventions that the Stove God, who had been sent away on the twentyfourth day of the twelfth moon, was reinstalled on the fourth day in the New Year; people talked about welcoming the Stove God and on arrival (in Jiaxing at least) he was greeted with incense and fruit. There are many aspects of the Stove God which could be taken into consideration, but here it may be sufficient to note that the festive food for the New Year celebrations had been cooked in a kitchen which was not under the surveyance of the Stove God. This means that the kitchen and the food it generated was marked modally by a set of different presuppositions. The representation of alien female generative power was absent (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2a).

I have already commented on the ritual use of caps and capping as a sort of initiation for boys, at Winter Solstice in Shaoxing. The note from Jiaxing in the context of New Year Day tells us that in this place this capping was, as an alternative, fixed to the first day of the moon year, rather than to the first day of the solar year. To the extent it was practised, capping might well have been an elite habit, a way to enact something believed to be a Confucian way of constructing essential manhood. It seems unlikely that such habits were demotically widespread.

Our small corpus of Zhejiang ethnography also tells us about some outdoor practices which were carried out on the first day of the New Year. In Jiaxing country people burnt fields and silkworms. This statement is in need of interpretation. A possible reading is that there were sort of bonfires among the fallow fields and among the mulberry tree plantations — used for feeding silkworms in the season of silk production.

Another feature, reported on from the same place, was the hoisting of lanterns onto long poles and a rambling procession of such lanterns through (what seems to be) the built-up area, accompanied by the noise of drums. They were talked about as ‘welcoming lanterns’. This label does, unfortunately, not tell us what was actually welcomed in this manner, nor at what time the processions took place. It would make sense if lanterns were used before daybreak, lights certainly being more dramatic in darkness. Alternatively processions could have been staged in the evening, but the ‘welcoming’ seems to favour the former reading.

2.6 The Final Phases of the Lunar New Year Duration

We have seen that social feasting could be extended for some ten days after the occurrence of the first new moon of the annual calendar, the New Year Day. We have one note of interest in this connection; it concerns women and social ceremonialism.

Seventh Day in Jiaxing

On the seventh day [of the first moon] daughters go to offer veneration (*shang* 上) [with presents of] multicoloured excellence [= embroideries?] to their paternal grandfathers and grandmothers (*zu shu mu* 祖父母) (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2a).

On this day in Jiaying, the daughters of a residential community demonstrated their bilateral ascent, bifurcating two generations back, by approaching their paternal grandparents with gifts, as it seems of their own artistic making. In this situation they were not only demonstrating their essential agnatic belonging, but also, and at the same time, their bifurcating kinship connections. This little ritual remains enigmatic.

‘Original Night’ — The First Full Moon of the Lunar Year in Shaoxing

‘Original Night’ (Yuan Xiao 元宵). Every [new year at the approach of] the full moon, from the thirteenth day and night, then people in every household put together bamboos into scaffolds and hang up lanterns. All and everyone in the locality construct them, making them numerous ! The paper lanterns make abundantly manifest what is delicacy and ingenuity. From the sixteenth to the seventeenth nights [their numbers] are slightly less. On the eighteenth and nineteenth they increase again [and after that it becomes] quiet and still. Young girls go out to behold the lanterns. This is spoken of as ‘crossing over the bridge’ (*guo qiao* 過橋). [People] say ‘may we escape one year of sickness and peril’ (*ke mian yi sui chi e* 可免一歲疾厄) (GJTS VI: 990, 風俗考 2a).

The Full Moon Festival of Shang Yuan in Taizhou Fu

At Shang Yuan (上元) [people] display lanterns from the 13th day until the 18th day. All families erect racks of scaffolding with lanterns in front of their doors. [There are] shelters [tents? awnings?] in which lanterns are suspended. [The lanterns] are high up and signal a plentiful year (GJTS VI: 998, 風俗考 1b).

When the new year period entered its final phase this took place out of doors and with some emphasis on women. The main items used for the celebration were lanterns — lanterns of many colours and shapes. Their displays were most intense on the thirteenth to sixteenth nights and again on the eighteenth and nineteenth nights. The lanterns were hung up on and sheltered by a kind of bamboo constructs also, possibly, featuring some sort of awnings. It is said that the lanterns were placed high up. It is specially mentioned that ‘young girls’ wandered around watching these spectacles of light.

There were three different discursive themes referring to the exhibition of lanterns in the duration surrounding the first full moon of the year. One was ‘crossing the bridge’ — seemingly indicating that some sort of separation took place. Another such saying expressed the hope that the lanterns, when finally disappearing we may assume, should take away all sickness and peril. There was also a phrase expressing the hope that the coming year would be plentiful.

3. A DISCUSSION OF THE ZHEJIANG DATA

In this section I wish to discuss the Zhejiang fragmental ethnographic findings presented above, synthetically and together with information we have from some other parts of southern China. The south of China is different from the northern areas of that vast country in that its agricultural production for thousands of years has been geared towards the growing of rice in irrigated fields. In the anthropologist's holistic perspective there is reason to think that basic cyclic agricultural production is intertwined with the social process of building continuity, and the shaping of cultural symbolism of possible worlds, form a togetherness of great complexity. These processual phenomena tend to be correlated and interwoven, and in some sense forming a unity out of disparity. What we meet in Zhejiang ethnography are glimpses of symbolic constructs expressing a pattern of iconic thought, and its demotic exegesis. Some wider comparisons will be introduced, mainly from the Chu area around Lake Dongting — an ethnographic field which I have studied earlier in some detail (Aijmer 2003).

3.1 Demon Chasers

We have noticed that in the La moon, which occurs about the time for the winter solstice, there were in the markets congregations of dancing and jumping men who appeared with their faces smothered with red ink. Who were these and what sort of show was this?

From the Chu area of Central China (Hubei and Hunan) it has been reported that in this tract something similar occurred at the 'Little New Year' on the twentyfourth day of the twelfth moon. There, that day saw 'sorcerers' who performed exorcisms in dancing rituals. Such performers were to expel demons and hungry ghosts (Aijmer 2003: 29, 42, 120). The red-faced dancers jumping at the market places in Zhejiang ought to have been a phenomenon similar to that we have gleaned from the Chu area. The performers were surely some sort of demon chasers, expelling evil and hungry spirits. In Zhejiang the sorcerers appeared in the La moon, in Chu on the specific day of the Little New Year (which, however, fell within this same lunation). The timing supports the congruence. The appearance of bands of dancers in the local markets tells us that their purificatory endeavours were general and embraced the whole of the wider community, not only the spheres of particular kinship constellations — and this seems different from Central China.

3.2 The Circulation of Gifts

Presents distributed among relatives and friends was a characteristic trait at this time of cosmic change. This activity started with the coming of the La period when it was done as part of the closing down of the last moon of the year. These late year presents were described as *kui* which possibly implied presents of food. The sending of social gifts occurred also at the Winter Solstice and New Year Day.

The presentation and counter-presentation of gifts was a New Year feature also in the Chu area, and was there a feature parallel to the activity of social calls carried out in the same period of

time. In Zhejiang it is thus likely that some of these presents were food, in the Chu area rice noodles and dumplings were distributed and very widely so. At New Year affinal relationships were often stressed and expressed with gifts of fruit and wine. There were also presents of variegated silk to mark relationships of marriage (Aijmer 2003: 56-60, 97, 100, 132). In Zhejiang something reminiscent represented the relationship of unmarried daughters with the bilateral kernel of the domestic kinship constellation. It could be that these handicraft gifts were of silk, which would have emphasized a female sphere. It could be that the daughters by their gifts stressed the bilateral founding of the domestic community. A general impression for both areas at, and after, New Year is that gifts and presents, good wishes and visits were tokens of an ongoing, first, deconstruction and, then, a later reconstruction of the social world, necessary after that the old year had collapsed. The social world was being dissolved and was then iconically and discursively recreated by making all potential relations manifest and real again.

3.3 Ancestors and their Worship

Ancestor worship is mentioned from all three Zhejiang prefectures in connection with the Winter Solstice. However, it is mentioned that at the time for the authoring of our three local chronicles in late imperial China that it was a vanishing and less important feature. It was upheld by the gentry. The impression is that at one time this had been a significant and characteristic feature of the introduction of a new solar cycle, but that, towards the end of the 1600s, emphasis had moved towards the lunar New Year celebration — also containing ancestor worship. The ritual practice of the Winter Solstice was explicitly referred to as a parallel to the latter. The last point is of interest. Why was this particular celebration of the dead taking place twice, in the same houses in much the same way? Sacrificial gifts included dumplings — two kinds are mentioned in the records. These seem to have been extra additions for the occasion and more ordinary and conventional items formed as usual the basis. Sweet wine and delicacies are indicated as special elaborations of drink and food for the dead. We may assume that these offerings were accompanied by the usual veneration with incense sticks.

There is no explicit mention of ancestral worship in the lunar New Year's Eve. However, a note tells us that there were 'burnt offerings' in, or outside, the main halls of the residential compounds. It seems likely that these offerings were directed to the deceased former members of these residences, whose tablets were kept there — but they may possibly also have concerned idols of gods kept in the same room. It seems most probable that the burning took place in the courts outside the halls as it appears more precautionary to manage flames out of doors. *Ting* could mean both 'main hall' and 'court outside a main hall'. This is the only indication we have that the ancestors were somehow engaged on this day. To have a display of offerings and flames outside the hall and its tablets may be interpreted as an arrangement that indicated the courts and halls as ritual arenas for the coming days. The spectacular offerings seemed to show the way to the hall for some sort of transcendental visitors, in all likelihood deceased family members. The offerings directed the dead to the hall behind and was an invitation for them to take possession of their tablets. We shall return to this later.

In the ‘proper’ lunar New Year it was common to attend the domestic ancestors first thing in the morning, after the worship of Heaven and Earth at the main door of the house. It is mentioned that women and men on this occasion worshipped together. In one place the ritual was once repeated; first an informal congregation addressed the dead in togetherness, and then a highly structured event took place, implying worship following a strict liturgical order. The double implementation of the ritual event raises questions.

We do recognize a similar duplication of ancestral worship from the Chu area, but there the first occasion for veneration was on the 23rd day of the twelfth moon, and the latter at daybreak of the first day of the first moon. In the Chu area Winter Solstice was of very minor consequence. It seems then that the sort of duplication that took place in the Chu area also happened in Zhejiang, but with a shift of dates. We have also seen that another replication of worship took place, but condensed to the New Year morning in one Zhejiang place. If women attended the second more formal occasion of this double is not known, but the circumstance that the presence of women is mentioned in the first case points to a clear possibility that they were not so on the second occasion.

Perhaps, in this latter place, the double on the morning of the New Year Day was the result of an earlier drift in time of one of the occasions for worship, a calendric drift from the day of the Winter Solstice into the ritual complex of the New Year Day itself. The twofold of ancestral rituals were so conducted, from then on, in a more economical and simplified format.

One way of understanding repetitiveness in rituals is to consider the performance in a cultural modal perspective. I have touched on the significance of this already, in the introduction. The Zhejiang twofold of ancestral rites at the time for calendric renewal ought to have had two incongruent references, each valid only in terms of its own imaginary possible world —with cultural presuppositions of its own. The ancestors must have appeared at this time of the year in two modal versions, each within a cultural modality requiring its own ancestral manifestation and its own attendance of worshippers.

Using the mentioned historical-anthropological analysis of the Chu ethnography as a prototypical set of propositions we could project onto the Zhejiang ethnography the suggestion that one formation of ancestors would constitute a category of deceased who as dead were integrated with Nature, being associated with their graves, but also with some sort of celestial abode. The relationship the living had with these their deceased forefathers (incorporating somehow their foremothers) was calendric and one of unconditional reciprocity. The living provided the dead with necessary gifts and the deceased responded with blessings, especially in the two realms of rice and children. Both these social realms were essential in the process of constructing social continuity. The graves with the dead in the earth were attended at the Qing Ming festival in the spring — at about the time for the sowing of rice — when people had picnics on the graves in a commensality with the dead and so also inviting the latter to visit their former villages later on in the summer (see Aijmer 1979). This revisit took place at the Duan Wu festival around midsummer — at the time for the transplantation of rice (see Aijmer

1964). Rice was the countergift of the dead. After harvest, with fields fallow, the ancestors were invited anew to visit their former habitats, this time at the Chong Yang festival, on the top of mountains and other heights, in the vicinity of Heaven. High-up picnics and drinking parties sought communion with the dead in their celestial guise (Aijmer 1991). This time the deceased returned at the New Year and the blessings they brought were in the form of human fertility, this being the season for marriages and betrothals. The birth of children was their business on the occasion (Aijmer 2003).

But then, we must remember, there were also the ancestral tablets, which in some metaphysical way were inhabited all the time by the same dead. In this guise they had a sort of omnipresence in the social community. Furthermore such tablets appeared frequently in two versions, one to be kept in the residential house where the dead had lived in former days, and one which was placed in a special extra-residential lineage hall. The deceased were supposed to have a continuous existential presence in these objects. What we deal with when we are speaking of ancestral worship in southern China, are acts concerning four different aspects of a dead person. These rituals employ a varying symbolic articulation. Furthermore, the deceased's interaction with a living community was a multiple one through separate symbolic constructs. Generally, the domestic ancestors received regular worship according to some schedule, while those in the ancestor hall obtained such attention only occasionally at festivals.

In this article we deal with the Zhejiang festivities of New Year. The lapidarian ethnographic notes that have been conveyed to us through the local chronicles, do not say anything explicitly about an ancestral visit at this time of the year. We have some indirect evidence though in the circumstance that in an earlier period there had been a double celebration. We have also seen that there were 'welcoming' rituals held in the courtyards in front of the domestic halls and parades of lanterns to show the way for the returning souls. The doorways were decorated with ritual money for the ancestral visitors' benefit. The dead were in an earlier period revered at the Winter Solstice as well as at the lunar New Year. In one place, as we have seen, in later years this double worship took place condensed to one day on the New Year morning itself. If we deal with two sets of ancestors here we should expect — in accordance with our prototypical projection — that one of them would be made up of those deceased who had been invited in the earlier autumnal visit to their celestial realm (on heights) to return to their living progeny, there to distribute their blessings. The other batch of ancestors could have been those who habitually inhabited the domestic tablets, but there may be alternative readings of the situation. What support for these assumptions do we find in the Zhejiang ethnography? Let us examine those autumnal festive events that are reported on in our three prefectures:

3.4 Chong Yang

Shaoxing

This is a festival that occurs on the ninth day of the ninth moon of the year.

At Chong Yang 重陽 [people] ascend heights. They steam rice to make five-coloured dumplings (*gao* 糕) and wrap horn-shaped [lumps] of glutinous rice [in bamboo leaves?]. At the waist one wears a yellow cascade of chrysanthemum. In the prefectural city [people] cut flags of many colours with scissors and give these to the small boys [who have] great fun [with them] (GJTS VI: 990, 風俗考 2b).

Jiaying

At Chong Yang [people] make chestnut dumplings (*li gao* 栗糕). They insert chrysanthemum flowers [at the waist?] (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2b).

Taizhou

At Chong Yang [people] wear dogwood plants (*Cornus Officinalis*, *shu yu* 茱萸) at the waist and insert yellow flowers (*Chrysanthemum*?) [at the waist?]. They go up on heights and drink wine (GJTS VI: 998, 風俗考 2a).

Apart then from the consumption of special kinds of dumplings and the protective use of plants, the theme was that people ascended heights and once up on these held drinking parties. Even if these notes are far from conclusive I think it permissible to say that the autumnal celebration of Chong Yang in these Zhejiang prefectures conformed with our prototypical model. People sought high-up places — in a celestial direction — to achieve a communion with their dead, their dead in their *yang* guise. And this would have entailed the living inviting the dead to return home at the coming New Year. In Chinese cosmography *yang* is the male, positive, active cosmic principle that penetrates the universe.

And yet, this would not explain why there was a double reception of the returning dead in the residences at the change of years. Furthermore, on this return home, which of the two possible dates did the homecoming dead prefer? Or, did they come twice? And what then about the curious repetition itself? In search of an answer to these queries we may consult yet another piece of ethnographic information available, this time from Jiaying. This ethnographic note from the local chronicle is truly puzzling and in terms of the larger scheme culturally ungrammatical. This is what we read:

3.5 New Moon of the Tenth Lunar Month in Jiaying

At the new moon of the tenth lunation [there are] *si* 祀 sacrifices to the ancestral dead (*zu xian* 祖先). There are *ji* 祭 sacrifices at the graves — [as in the] old [practice at] Winter Solstice. One *si* sacrifices to the ancestors (祀祖) and worships (*bai* 拜) Heaven. [People] send congratulatory presents to one another. [This is] similar to Original Dawn. Nowadays [these conventions have been] abandoned (GJTS VI: 962, 風俗考 2b).

The note thus tells us that at one time there was worship of the ancestors on the first day of the tenth moon at the graves, but this was also so, it is added, in an earlier period of history, on the

day for the Winter Solstice. The two worshipping occasions would have been within the same seasonal duration, around the month of December, Gregorian reckoning. The repetition seems to relate to the employment of two different but parallel calendar systems; these two liturgical events — although the same in form and equally relevant (or irrelevant?) for the season — were each seen as belonging to a different cosmic sphere. In both cases the worship at the graves were within the same shared duration, each accompanied also by worship at the ancestral tablets. The ancestral tablets attended then were likely to be those kept in the residences as the ethnographer points to the similarity with the New Year, when residential tablets were in focus. One calendar system was based on the progress of the sun, the other on the shifting phases of the moon. The repetition of the liturgical event of grave worship may thus be understood by the sacrificers' wish to avoid neglect, whatever calendric system was at hand as situationally valid. And yet, why should grave worship Qing Ming style occur at all at this time of the year? But then, it could also be that the double calendric system offered an opportunity to separate two distinct categories of ancestry by splitting them in time .

We must now try to reconcile these many sprawling ethnographic notes with our Chu projection, our prototypical model. Here in Zhejiang the worship of Heaven seems 'oddly' coupled with the worship of graves; the grave rituals, in turn, were in a sense the worship of Earth. So, the more standard pairing of worship of Heaven and Earth, typical of the lunar New Year, was iconically accomplished also in the tenth moon, but with an emphasis on earth and the dead inhabiting the earth. The dead in the earth were in turn contrasted with the dead in Heaven and so neither of the two aspects of the dead was neglected at this time of the year. The dead in their graves would otherwise, at other times, be associated with the production of rice, but this could hardly be so in this winter celebration.

What we find in Zhejiang is this: People invited their dead in the autumn to visit them at New Year and the invitation was aimed at those dead who were to be found in the heavenly regions. The invitation took the form of a communion in which drinks were exchanged on mountain tops and heights. However, this invitation was not sufficient. The celestial ancestors were clearly of a *yang* nature and therefore not 'complete'. One had also to invite the *yin* version of the deceased who were in the graves and so offerings were made also to them, and another commensality took place, Qing Ming style, at the graves. The dead were something like Italo Calvino's *Il visconte dimezzato*, split but with a potential to become again a united whole. By separately inviting both *yang* ancestors and corresponding *yin* ancestors to return to their old common residences, a complete ancestor was somehow accomplished in the night of the New Year, the essence of bones and tissues joining the 'soul' of the departed. In this way the dead became again human-like and thus more apt to provide blessings for human fertility. How the two sides of the dead came together remains in this case very uncertain. Perhaps, this amalgamation took place in the lineage ancestral halls, like in Anqing in Anhui (see Shryock 1931 and Aijmer n.d.). However, there is nothing explicit in the ethnography to indicate this.

One problem still remains to discuss and that is the worship of the domestic ancestral tablets in the New Year duration. Again, we must also, as a contrast, consider those tablets that were kept in an ancestral hall. Actually, we cannot be sure that ancestor halls existed at all in this region of China as we know of other places in Jiangnan in which they were absent (like Kaixiangong, Shenjiashang, Hu Cao and Fengjiao (Fei 1939; Fukutake 1967: 200; Cohen 2005: 212). The presence of ancestral halls in southern China is something that varies considerably. Some places have no domestic shrines, only external halls, some have only the former. And many are those places, particularly in Guangdong and Fujian, which conform with the anthropological model launched by Maurice Freedman (1958) and have both. This essay is not the place for an argument as to this variation, but we must take into account that our lapidarian sources do not mention ancestral halls at all (so far I can understand) during the New Year period. If they existed they seem to have been of no particular concern at this season of the year.

So, let us return to the domestic tablets. They were in place and they were in focus. Actually they were there all the year round, not only at particular festivals. So in Zhejiang the domestic altars were at New Year invaded by crowds of dead who were essentially combines of their former celestial and terrestrial remains, making in their togetherness complete and extraordinary ancestors. They arrived after proper invitations. I have argued that the notions of ancestry implied four different kinds of forebear and yet all were celebrated in the manifestation of the same wooden tablet. There is nothing to indicate that the super ancestors of New Year pushed away the everyday ancestors to take their place. Rather, this duality between visitors and permanent residents may be better understood if we consider them as existing in two different cultural modalities governed by different presuppositions. The two versions of the deceased were each emphasized, but on separate occasions and without competition. They were part of between themselves distinct universes which co-existed as equal possibilities in the world of cultural imagery, but superficially, in terms of a real ontology, with no observable seams or boundaries.

Like in other places in southern China, the New Year in Zhejiang was a celebration of ancestors and ancestry, based on reciprocity between the deceased and the living in the construction of the social future. The rituals performed in Zhejiang indicate that it also involved the symbolic construction of a set of full and complete ancestors, more human-like and almost alive at the time. How does this compare with what we know about other places?

Our prototypical area, Chu, seems (in a synthesized reading) to have maintained a clear double celebration of two kinds of ancestors, each operating in a cultural modality of its own. One was centred on agnatic lineage and the purity of kinship. This crowd of deceased were further split into those occupying celestial areas and those who inhabited their graves. The former were worshipped at Chong Yang the latter revered at Qing Ming. The former, the celestials, were providers of children, especially sons, the terrestrial latter gave the gift of rice. The other main category was domestically based and had an omnipresence in their ancestral tablets in particular houses. Also this host of deceased were split into two categories — tablets that were found in

the residence and tablets in an ancestral hall. The former received daily or periodical worship, the latter only on special occasions. When the celestial ancestors were to be received at home in the new year duration, a special day or period was set aside for this so the celestials and the domestics would not have to meet and the two main and parallel cultural modalities could be kept separate. When the terrestrial ancestors returned home in the summer, they were received out of doors.

We have found then certain differences in the pattern reported on in the historical ethnography of Zhejiang. The main distinctive categories were observed also here, and so was the celestial/terrestrial separation. However, the ancestors invited, on their arrival to the domestic scene at the time for the exchange of years, appeared here not as separate entities, but as a togetherness, the split between their two natures negated and their double post-existences forming a union on the occasion.

The more grammatical worship at the graves at Qing Ming in the spring does not seem to have been combined with celestial worship in any of the three prefectures investigated here — at least it is not mentioned in the material (GCTS VI: 998, 風俗考 1b; 962, 風俗考 2a). Qing Ming practices do not seem to mirror the winter union of the two forms of worship of the dead.

A similar New Year ancestral merger has been found in ethnographic explorations of the Suzhou area in Jiangsu (Aijmer 2005a), Anqing prefecture in Anhui (Aijmer, n.d.) and in riverine Sichuan (Aijmer 2018). In other places this does not seem to have happened. The reasons for this variation are enigmatic but one possible path to explore further is that the three ‘ancestral unity’ areas uncovered were all involved in sericulture and thus these domains saw women in a much stronger economic and political position than in tracts strongly dominated by the cultivation of wet rice. This very tentative observation may lead us to interesting problems concerned with how economic facts in the operational order relate to local discursive exegeses and iconic imagery in complex interfacial processes of confrontation, contradiction and associative alteration. This will bring us into new realms of enquiry and here I must confine myself to this rather tentative exploration of some fragments of Zhejiang ethnography from late imperial times.

In the human sciences an explanation is a device which accounts in an interesting way for all the given data — leaving, ideally, no unexplained exceptions. In the present case the data examined are less than complete, the ethnographic corpus being very fragmental, and so the explanation must here be reduced to some informed suggestions. Still, and until such time that someone can present a more comprehensive and more interesting account of the data discussed and further new data, this attempt at clarification should have a bearing on our accumulating knowledge about traditional Chinese society.

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