

Erasing the Dead in Kaixiangong ----Ancestry and Cultural Transforms in Southern China

Göran AIJMER

Gothenburg Research Institute, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
Box 600, SE 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden
E-mail: goran.aijmer@gmail.com

Abstract:

This article is based on a re-reading of the classical field monograph on Jiangsu Province, written by Fei Xiaotong in the 1930s. It highlights the forms of ancestral worship that prevailed there, forms that from a comparative perspective seem at odds with more general views on the topic. The ethnography is weak but suggestive, indicating a cultural strategy in which the dead were transformed from being benign ancestors into being efficacious gods.

Key words: Jiangsu, Death, Ancestry, Iconic grammar

1. ANCESTRY AND SYMBOLISM

Ancestry is a system of belonging that stretches beyond physical death into a partly unknown past, a system with the capacity to bring together living people with those long since dead.* It is hard to think of any society in which the phenomenon of death has not given rise to some systemic figures of thought and patterns of imagery regarding social continuity and discontinuity. China is a vast country where ancestry and its manifestations in the social world have been regarded as a pillar of structural continuity. Ancestors and the cult of ancestors are common enough themes in anthropological, sociological and religious studies of China, yet it is striking how little we know about what a Chinese ancestor actually is. We often meet authoritative claims that in China the cult of the ancestors is inseparable from Confucianism in the sense that the family and its perennial life were the very foundation of society. This social philosophy has integrated popular beliefs in survival after death into the cult of the ancestors, a cult that has become sacred, independently of individual mentalities (e.g. Pimpaneau 1988, 191). There is space for some doubt.

Of course, there is no simple answer to a question that may well be based on loose assumptions. China provides no simple answers to anything, being a society of such dimensions that any proposition regarding what is Chinese is bound to fail to some extent. The social scene in China is a vast ocean of family resemblances, where, despite appearances, each village will always show some variation from its neighbours or from any other habitation in the country. Even closely adjacent places show marked differences between them. If we wish to look for some common ground in this vastness of dissimilarities, we must develop new research strategies with which to comprehend variation, rather than search for similarities.

Ancestry is a form of belonging that could be studied with advantage from several different analytical perspectives — ways of comprehending phenomena based on different ontologies. The strategy to be followed in this article is to apply symbolological thinking¹ to an existing ethnographic corpus of data in the hope of contributing a small step in progress in our knowledge of the formative processes of Chinese society. Local customs will be treated as autochthonous symbolic games, and my approach to the ethnography will be one that recognizes ontological plurality, implying an exploration of the human use of several simultaneous, but different, cognitive strategies with which to construe the world.

One aspect of this approach is to explore data as part of a realist ontology, implying a study of the 'operational order'. In general terms, this is a sociological endeavour to examine practical tasks, their consequences and the processes that give rise to activity-orientated social

* I wish to thank Eugene N. Anderson and Robert Parkin for valuable comments.

¹ I have discussed the prospects for a symbolological analysis elsewhere; see Aijmer 2001.

landscapes. Many of the existing reports on kinship and ancestry in China, based as they are on causality and linear time as key concepts, are of this sort.

Looking at 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 the 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 linear causality; it therefore lacks truthful reporting and referential meaning. Language and iconology are entirely different sorts of codes, neither being instrumental for reaching into the other. Icons form universes that are essentially separated from the 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 are different from day-to-day existence.

The symbolic phenomena of the world speak with many and different contrapuntal voices in a polyphonic stream carrying 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, differing symbolic constructs are seen as varying possible worlds or cultural modalities.

2. SOME GENERAL ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

The present article is an attempt to understand what the ancestral cult was about, nearly a hundred years ago, in the village of Kaixiangong, close to the southern shores of Lake Tai. This is in southern Jiangsu Province, in the vast area known as Nan Jiang, or ‘South of the River [Yangzi]’, a vast stretch of watery and marshy land criss-crossed by rivers and canals, dotted with lakes and ponds, mainly producing rice and cotton. A winter crop of broad beans was also common, and at one time the area was important for silk production. In Kaixiangong, as in most parts of the plains, hills and mountains of southern China, rice was the staple food, highly ritualized and a concern in many social contexts. More than ninety per cent of the land was used for rice cultivation, and there was a special reverence for rice. Rice should not be trampled underfoot or wasted, and not even sour rice should be thrown away carelessly. The proper manner was to eat all the rice that had been cooked. If this could not be done, it must be thrown

into the river in order to feed the fish (Fei 1962, 100). Life in this comparatively prosperous area has generally been regarded as conservative and ‘traditional’.

In the early 1930s that famous student of Malinowski, Fei Xiaotong, conducted fieldwork in Kaixiangong, his own native area. He carried out his research in the spirit of the then modern functionalism. In this account of symbolism in Jiangsu, now distant in time, my consultation of his material should be seen as an exploration in terms of historical anthropology. In looking for tradition, I shall disregard the profound changes that have occurred in the many years that have passed since Fei’s data were collected. For our present purposes these data form in a sense a closed universe.²

At the time of the field investigation which provides the material for the present essay, the people of Kaixiangong were divided into a number of agnatic cognominal kinship clusters which were somewhat like shallow lineages, but with the difference that they did not have any corporate possessions. Such kinship communities were limited in scope and were designated *zu*,³ a term which anthropologists are otherwise prone to gloss as ‘lineage’, but which seems misleading here. What we find in Kaixiangong kinship does not tally, for instance, with the criteria established by Maurice Freedman (1958) in his classical terminology in that, in this Jiangsu village, the only important function of the cluster of cognominal kin was to regulate exogamous marriages. The latter were generally inter-village affairs, with a marked tendency towards cross-cousin liaisons. These were of two types: one that favoured a son marrying his MoBroDa, the other – regarded as ‘unlucky’, but still possible — involving a son marrying his FaSiDa. I return to this below.

In Kaixiangong all the houses in the village faced south. Transport was by boat on canals and lakes. There were two temples in the village territory and several other houses of worship in nearby towns and villages. There were few outsiders in the area.

3. ANCESTRAL CULTS IN KAIXIANGONG

3.1 Notions of Death and Ancestry

The local Kaixiangong term for continuity of descent was ‘continuity of incense and fire’, meaning the continuity of ancestor worship. It is said that beliefs connected with the relationships of living descendants to the spirits of their ancestors were not clearly or systematically formulated among the people. The general view was that the spirits live in a world very similar to ours, but economically they were partially dependent on the contributions

² More recent work on Kaixiangong includes the accounts of Geddes 1963 and Fei 1983. They are irrelevant for my present purposes.

³ Romanization of Chinese words is in pinyin. Fei uses the Wade-Giles spellings. Local words in the Wu dialect are rendered as in Fei’s text.

of their descendants, which were made by periodically burning paper money, paper clothes and other paper articles. Therefore it was essential to have someone to look after one's well-being in the afterworld (Fei 1962, 30).

We learn that neither the period nor the acts of mourning were correlated with matters of descent, but to some extent they were connected with actual social relations and their standardized ties of affection. This, it is claimed, was different from ancestor worship, which was thought to consist in a definite contribution to the welfare of the spirit. The burning of paper money to the dead indicated directly the prolonged economic obligations of the young towards the old, even after death (Fei 1962, 77).

People conceived it to be their duty to worship the ancestors because it was through their children that they could pay back their debt to their own parents. Ancestry was a chain of debts. Thus the desire to have children was sustained by a two-fold motivation: in the first place, it ensured the continuity of the line of descent; and in the second place, having children was a concrete expression of filial piety by a father towards his ancestors. It is also said that ancestor worship reflected the sentiments of attachment to dead kinsmen. Furthermore, the deceased were thought to have a controlling function within the domestic group. At least, they sometimes reacted to the neglect of the periodic sacrifice, unrepaired damage to coffins and tombs, or the selling of land, houses and other things of which they did not approve. When this happened they sent misfortunes and sickness as a warning of their continuing dissatisfaction (Fei 1962, 30-1, 76, 102).

3.2 The Domestic Sphere of the Ancestral Cult

The cult of ascending dead relatives was articulated in sacrifices before the ancestral tablets in their shrine in the front room of the house. The shrine was kept on the back wall, facing south. Here the deceased received worship on a regular basis. Special sacrifices were offered on the birth and death days of each particular ancestor, and collective offerings for all ancestors took place five times a year, at the major calendric festivals. On such occasions a feast was prepared for them, at the conclusion of which some token money, made of tin foil, was burnt. The usual discourse expressed the thought that such sacrifices constituted a definite contribution to the welfare of the spirits. The front room was a sanctuary for the celebration of agnatic kinship bonds. Women were never allowed to sleep in the room where the ancestral shrine was kept (Fei 1962, 76-7, 121).

When a person passed away, it was believed that the spirit of the dead left the corpse and was admitted to the world of spirits, returning to the house on the seventeenth or eighteenth day after death. On that day the house would be prepared to welcome the spirit. A tablet with the deceased's name would then be put into a wooden pavilion presented by the husband of the deceased's daughter and put down in the middle of the front room. Heavy mourning was now observed for forty-nine days. Each meal would be prepared in front of the tablet pavilion, and a woman would wail beside it with dirges. This wailing was the obligation of a wife towards her

husband and a daughter-in-law towards her parents-in-law. Men never took part in such wailing (Fei 1962, 76, Plate V).

Daily sacrifices to the newly dead would come to an end on the forty-ninth day. The tablet pavilion would be burnt at the end of a period of two years and two months, and the tablet was then put into the ancestral shrine with the other tablets that were already there. This event concluded the mourning period (Fei 1962, 76).

Men and women usually ate separately in different rooms — women in the kitchen, men in the front hall — thus turning each routine commensal group into a non-reproductive, single-sex unit, one in the company of the Stove God, the other in the company of the ancestors (see further Aijmer 2005, 42).

Ancestors were also highlighted at weddings. At a marriage the girl who had been selected as the bride was introduced to her new relatives and then worshipped her husband's ancestors in the house of his family for the first time (Fei 1962, 44-5, 50-2). In the future she would kneel beside her husband in jointly offering a sacrifice to his ancestors at the ceremonies for her husband's kin. When she died, she would receive sacrifices with her husband. We learn that she lost her membership in her father's *zu* community when she married, in the sense that she would no longer attend the offerings of sacrifices to ancestors on her father's side and would not be offered sacrifices by her own agnatic relatives after her death (Fei 1962, 46, 85-6, Plate V, facing p. 103). There is nothing in the description of the marriage conventions that suggests that she took a farewell of her own ancestors by worshipping them a last time before moving house.

Dead forebears were relevant also in another sphere. Unhusked rice was changed into rice grain by threshing, traditionally with a mortar and pestle, and this took place in the front room before the ancestors. Divided domestic communities which had established separate stoves to demonstrate their separation from an earlier common single unit might nonetheless continue to share one front hall for threshing purposes (Fei 1962, 60, 165). The practice of threshing in Kaixiangong fits into a widespread pattern in southern China where rituals to the dead are connected with agricultural production, especially of rice (cf. Aijmer 2003, 155-63).

The tablets on the domestic shrine were allowed to remain there as long as they were within the span of five generations back, apparently counting from the house's main worshipper. The ethnography is not clear on this point, but a reasonable reading is that tablets which were pushed beyond the bottom line of five generations in the course of generational history were removed from the shrine. What happened to them then is not known. The 'general' Chinese picture is that they would be either burnt or buried. They would also usually be replaced by a new tablet which was ideally installed in an ancestral hall, where it remained in eternity. In Kaixiangong there were no ancestral halls, and therefore it seems that, after a period of five generations spent on the shrine in the house, the ancestors were allowed to vanish and were no longer in existence, at least not as separate individuals. There was either a nothingness or a

nebulous collective existence without any further obvious representation. It seems as if irrelevant ancestors were destroyed.

3.3 Temples in the Village and Beyond

Thus, there were no ancestral halls in Kaixiangong, and this fact corresponds to the shallow kinship communities of the area. However, there were two temples on the outskirts of the village, one kept by a resident local Buddhist priest, the other by an absentee priest. The ethnographer describes these houses of worship as the residences of priests and gods, both being segregated from everyday community life except on special ceremonial occasions (Fei 1962, 20-1). Both were situated at a water-course and were run by hired caretakers. Fei notes however that the village was not a 'self-sufficient religious unit', many ritual activities taking place in the district town.

He notes further that earlier there had been a 'harvest festival' celebrating the gods responsible for the crop, at which blessings were also sought for the coming year. The idols of local gods would be seated among the people, and an opera company would perform on a stage. Those gods who were thus celebrated were housed in the two local temples on the outskirts of the village. The village itself was divided into five sections called *degi*, meaning 'the foundation of the stage', each of them being responsible for the management and expenses of this gathering in turn (Fei 1962, 103-4). A further scrutiny of the ethnography reveals that the local gods who were responsible for the cultivation of the rice and were celebrated in the harvest feast were possibly two in number. We read that they 'are found in two temples in the village: one at the south end and the other at the west end' (Fei 1962, 104). The best reading is that each temple in the village had its own 'rice god', and both were entertained together at the opera performance staged in the autumn. Whether the temples also housed other gods is not known, nor do we know whether the gods had other functions.

We learn further that each *jia* or domestic community (Fei 1962, 27-8) sent a representative to visit a temple twice a month to make sacrifices there individually. This was not obligatory and was usually neglected, though those who did continue this observance consistently directed all their attention to one of the two temples, a choice determined by the locations of their own houses. The village was divided territorially into eleven units of land, each surrounded by water, and four of them being inhabited. The territories were without clear boundaries, of varying size depending on the flows of the streams, and each carried a name (Fei 1962, 20). Two of these village settlements and part of a third went to the west temple, the rest to the south temple. There was no organization surrounding this (Fei 1962, 104). We are not told anything about these local village gods, apart from their being associated with the cultivation of rice. Their names are not known, nor do we have a description of the idols.

For more important rituals, including the burning of incense for newly deceased relatives, people went to the big temples in the town or to the banks of Lake Tai, where the gods were seen as more powerful (Fei 1962, 105). Sacrificing to one's own ancestors in a foreign temple

implies either that people believed in the possibility of some sort of ancestral presence there, or that the gods in these houses of worship could convey transcendental greetings and gifts to one's deceased forebears.

3.4 Genealogies and Temples

The resident priest served the village community in various ways which need not concern us here. But one important function of one of the priests was to keep the ancestor records on behalf of the villagers, a task that also took him beyond the village temples. It is unclear whether this was the resident Buddhist monk or the absentee one, who was residing elsewhere. This record of the dead took the form of a book into which the priest entered the name of the deceased at a death. This list of deceased persons was not intended to be a full historical record, as it excluded collateral lines and was used only to keep track of those forebears to whom one was obliged to make an ancestral sacrifice. The information on this list apparently corresponded to that on the inscribed tablets themselves — nothing was added.

Somewhat surprisingly, we find that the genealogical records of the village families were kept in different 'outside temples', that is, outside the village domain. Since the record-keeper was rewarded by the family whose ancestor's names were being recorded, in a way that is not entirely clear the record book became the personal property of the priest. This could perhaps be understood as reflecting a convention that recurrent fees for handling the ancestral list turned these documents into an asset for the priest as much as for the commemorators. Like other kinds of personal property, it could be bought and sold. This somewhat astonishing information, taken at face value, should mean that the priest could sell a set of ancestors to another group of people. This seems rather unlikely, the implication rather being that the priest could, should he so wish, sell the register to another priest or temple. Again, the thinness of ethnography is of little help here, though we learn that the circulation of wealth among the priests had made popular allegiance to the temples more complicated (Fei 1962, 104-5).

The story these data tell us is thus somewhat obscure, but what remains clear from Fei's description is that written genealogies – or more accurately the name lists of ascending relatives, excluding collateral relatives – were preserved in a temple at some other place outside the village. These lists were thus not family trees intended for the identification of living kindred. Siblings were definitely not entered into such 'lists of spirits'. The purpose of these registers was solely to determine who among the dead forebears should be worshipped.

Thus we find that circumscribed written genealogies were composed in or around Kaixiangong, but, and as there were no extra-domestic ancestral halls, neither in the village, nor in this neighbourhood, they were kept in a temple, but then not as one might have expected in a local temple. Obviously they could not be saved in a residential house where the ancestral tablets were.

It is thus clear that the list of forebears was not a genealogy in the sense that it was a record of a founding father and a number of descendants. Rather, and in agreement with the tenets of the

local kinship universe, the names of ancestors further back than five generations were removed from the record (Fei 1962, 76, 84). The genealogical notes had no beginning and no end. Thus, we again find that after five generations the tokens of the ancestors, including their representations as written names, were erased and all memory of them dissolved into nothingness.

As already noted, the ethnography tells us that the people of Kaixiangong went to more powerful temples outside the village to burn incense for newly deceased relatives. It may be assumed that those temples were where the genealogical lists were kept.

3.5 Tombs

On the day after a death the coffin was closed and moved to the graveyard. According to the practice of the village, which was different from the town, the coffin was not buried underground, but placed above ground among the mulberry trees and covered with a shelter built of bricks and tiles. If the family could not afford a brick-and-tile shelter, a simple straw one would do. In this way no land was made waste for the burial (Fei 1962, 75). So, where were the mulberry trees? We read that along the edges of each of the eleven *yu* sections in the village (each surrounded by water) ten to thirty metres of land were left for planting mulberry trees. This land on the edge of the *yu* was higher and also served as a dyke for the farm (Fei 1962, 155, Plate V, facing p. 108).

It was the duty of the descendants to repair the shelter for their ancestors' coffins for up to five generations. In three consecutive spring periods of the Chinese solar calendar, named Qing Ming, Gu Yu and Li Xia, from 5th April to 21st May, the tombs were visited (Fei 1962, 152). In most other places this seasonal visiting of the dead is limited to early April. The tombs of the forebears were not regarded as things one really owned because — and may we add, in terms of a realistic ontology — they were not of any benefit to the descendants. On the contrary, the latter were obliged to keep the ancestral graves in repair, an obligation that was shared among 'the sibling chia [*jia*]', that is, among brothers, even after they had formed domestic communities of their own (Fei 1962, 76). This duty to keep the tombs in repair had a limit, and these structures were maintained only as long as there were relatives of the dead who could trace their descent from the dead within the stipulated five generations. As we have seen, this rule also applied to tablet worship and genealogical records.

The grammar of the local kinship universe generated some practical problems. There were inevitably decaying coffins which no one cared about because their deceased occupants had been pushed beyond the limits of recognized belonging by the passage of generational time. Special philanthropic institutions were therefore brought in to remove the dead and have them buried elsewhere (Fei 1962, 76). The physical remains of the dead left no traces locally.

3.6 Ancestors and the Calendar of Feasts

The Chinese year is conceived in terms of two different sequences of time: one of twelve lunar months (with an intercalary thirteenth month now and then) and a series of twenty-four named equal-length 'joints' following the astronomical progress of the sun. In terms of the solar calendar, at the sections called Qing Ming ('Clear and Bright', April 5-20), Gu Yu ('Grain Rains', April 20-May 5) and Li Xia ('Summer Begins', May 5-20), there were, as already mentioned, sacrifices to the ancestors and the visiting of tombs. There was also in this period of the year a prohibition on house building. In terms of the parallel time sequence we find that on the first day of the tenth moon there was a 'sacrifice to the ancestors' new rice'. This probably means that the dead were worshipped as a kind of thanksgiving for the new crop that had been harvested from the fields. On the thirtieth day of the twelfth moon, that is, New Year's Eve, there was another sacrifice to the ancestors (Fei 1962, 152-3).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The Domestic Sphere

Ancestral tablets were kept for five generations and were placed in the front room, on the northern wall facing south. This is the 'usual' superior ritual position in China, and in Kaixiangong the ideal could easily be translated into real life, as all the houses were built facing south, as were their front rooms. The halls were the architectural centres of the buildings, where men ate their everyday meals, sacrifices were conducted, rice husked and various major ritual events staged. Women were not allowed to sleep there, and generally they ate in the kitchen. Clearly the front room was a male concern.

It was also in this room that a dead person received a tablet and so became an ancestor. Here he or she was coffined and ostentatiously mourned. After the coffin had been removed to a new tomb, the presence of the dead was marked by a new tablet featuring the deceased's name. But here something occurs which, from a more synthesized southern Chinese perspective, would appear ungrammatical, namely the convention that a man presented the tablet of a dead parent-in-law with a wooden pavilion to contain it. Doing so, he may have been demonstrating that a woman of his own agnatic cluster had once contained the life which was now lost.

Five generations of the dead were worshipped at home on a domestic shrine. Additions to the set of tablets would inevitably lead to older tablets being removed and, apparently, destroyed. There is nothing to indicate that the dead that had been displaced in this way were transferred to anything different, the data merely suggesting that these forebears had been erased for good. What happened to the actual physical tablet is not known.

4.2 Female Ancestry and the Stove God

Married women were worshipped along with their husbands, but there was also symbolism which pointed to differences and separation. Women, or more correctly wives, were outsiders, and their separation was emphasized in various ways. It is relevant here to understand women's belonging and the alternative construction of continuities in the village of Kaixiangong. As I

have explored this elsewhere (Aijmer 2005), what follows is only a brief summary of some of my earlier findings.

The kitchen in a house was a female space of ritual purity. Nothing which connoted sexual activities was allowed in the vicinity of the presiding Stove God. This purity seems to have been related to the Stove God's hostility to the domestic ancestors and their living descendants, which dominated the other parts of the house, shunning their procreative influence while obscurely representing the foreignness of the foreign in-married women of the kitchen. The Stove God was thus in some important ways contrasted with the ancestors. In the kitchen, directly supervised by him, a female team performed the transubstantiation of the rice grains into cooked rice for the table, eating this rice being the symbolic cement of the domestic kinship community. Unhusked rice was transformed into grain in front of the ancestors, and its further transformation by heat into food happened in front of the Stove God. The Stove God received his offerings on the very same days as the ancestors obtained theirs, meaning that stove and ancestry were closely connected. The Stove God was to the kitchen what the ancestors were to the front room.

One role of the Stove God was to guard and validate a married-in woman's activities in the house. If her marriage was of the customary FaSiSo/MoBrDa type (which brought luck and was thus preferred), the deity embodied the agnatic line from which former wives in this house had also, and systematically, been recruited. The Stove God emerged in the iconic imagery as a sort of founding father of their agnatic kin cluster. This cluster was not conceived of as a structure dominated by a principle of ascent but was a nebulous form of belonging. It was the Stove God who ruled the women's realm of the kitchen, where 'his own' female agnatic descendants were at home. The domestic ancestors had no special interest in the women: to them all the women in the house, except the daughters, were and remained outsiders until death. The Stove God represented the ancestry of the wife-givers, in contrast to the wife-takers. In the case of the much rarer and disfavoured MoBrSo/FaSiDa marriage, the Stove God was a much more uncertain figure, then embodying a diverse female ancestry of many cognominal agnatic kinship clusters, though still, and along the same lines, functioning as a guardian and giving this multi-stranded feminine collectivity its shape and ritual focus. The deity gave the assembly of demonic forebears a shape and a structure, allowing them to be controlled within the sphere of the house. Whatever strategies had formed the cluster of women in a house, the Stove God embodied their own agnatic dead. The Stove God was an explicit iconic emblem of their original agnatic ancestors, so totally suppressed in the open Jiangnan social discourse.

The only time that food was not prepared in the kitchen was during the forty-nine days of heavy mourning after a death had occurred in the house. Once the spirit of the dead had been installed in a special wooden pavilion set up in the front room and its ancestral shrine, each meal would be prepared in front of the pavilion, and a woman would wail beside it with dirges. It seems that this removal of the cooking of food from the kitchen and thus from the presence of the Stove God to the front room and its ancestral shrine implied a major shift in ritual strategies.

Death provoked an unambiguously agnatic setting for the creation of a new ancestor, a process that had to be separated from the realm of the Stove God (Aijmer 2005, 43).

The place of women and their ancestry in the imagery of this Jiangsu village must be understood against the background of the silk industry. In terms of an ontology of realism, women were of great importance in the domestic economy because they were in charge of the traditional silk production. The art of breeding eggs into worms and moths passed from mothers to daughters. This means that, given systemic cross-cousin marriages of the preferred kind (MoBroDa), the women of the production group were indirectly related agnatically, a woman's mother-in law always being a FaSi. In the less valued form of cross-cousin marriage between FaSiDa and MoBroSo, women 'returned home', their mothers having been 'lent' to another cluster, the return not being theirs but their daughters. This comes close to being a 'half-agnatic, half-incestuous solution' to continuity through marriage. The women of a house, the wives and their daughters, formed a production group, its membership being recruited, but also filtered, through the strategies of marriage. It may be noted that the domestic group for silk production was the very same group that produced food in the kitchen, one difference being that they produced silk in the front room before the husband's agnatic ancestors, but cooked food within the realm of the kitchen. They also produced children.

4.3 The Tombs and their Ambiguity

As we have seen, the ancestors of a domestic group were erased from existence after five generations, leaving a sort of metaphysical vacuum. The same fate awaited them in their ancestral version as physical remains in a coffin housed in a tomb structure among the mulberry trees on the dykes of the rice fields. After five generations they were abandoned, reburied by outsiders elsewhere and in anonymity and irrelevance. The tombs were ritually exposed twice a year, at the sowing of rice and again after the harvest. As elsewhere in southern China the dead in their graves were associated with the rice crop, but there is a difference here in that the coffins are kept above the ground in buildings so that the decaying bodies do not become a part of the earth you cultivate. Nonetheless they were among the rice fields and also among the mulberry trees linked with silk production. One reading of the situation is that burial here is a compromise in which the dead affect the two major industries of the village. Collecting mulberry leaves was a male task and crucial to the successful breeding of silk worms. The strategic location of the tombs might have indicated that the dead not only provided the rice but also indirectly supported the silk. Of course, the dead consist of both ascending agnatic males and their wives, the latter coming very often from the same, but foreign, agnatic cluster. In togetherness they are a part of production. We may speculate whether gender among the dead influenced their efficacy in the two different directions.

But why are the remains removed from the scene after five generations? Unless we think of this phenomenon as reflecting a local theory that the generative capacity of the deceased becomes exhausted at this time, it seems more of a grammatical question where a discursive rule of attention being paid to five generations both dominates and excludes.

4.4 Genealogies in Foreign Temples

We have seen that the notes concerning the keeping of lists of the dead in foreign temples are somewhat enigmatic. Within the frame of the village the inhabitants were orientated towards one of the two local temples, going to the one of their choice to sacrifice intermittently and at festivals. Each house in the village directed exclusive attention to one temple, but this would not be the temple that kept their lists of the dead.

The lists were composed to keep track of obligations to worship and were based on the idea of single-line ascent. Why this was thought to be necessary remains very obscure, as these lists did not add any information that was not readily at hand on the ancestral tablets. And there was no regular worship outside the house. Worship took place in front of the very same tablets that the genealogical list was supposed to verify, and there was no corporate property to manage in terms of genealogical knowledge. On the basis of these indications, it seems rather that these lists had a ritual position in their own right. The discourse recorded by the ethnographer may be misleading should we seek meanings in terms of the iconic imagery of which the lists were also a part. They had to be located outside the village in a foreign territory. They were also dominated by the grammar of five generations and consecutive elimination. They were handled by some ritual officiant who was not really part of the village scene.

On the basis of the available data, it is of course impossible to determine what these lists really were in local symbolic thought and imagery. But taking a wider look at the local system of ancestral imagery, we find something which has explanatory force at least tentatively. The catastasis of the iconic tale may be along the following lines.

A dead person is buried above the ground and does not become part of the productive soil. Nonetheless he or she is disposed of in a tomb situated among the fields on the dykes, a location that may have a beneficial influence over the 'sacred' rice crops. The tombs are at the same time situated in the groves of mulberry trees on the dykes, possibly also giving them a positive effect on the harvests of leaves for the feeding of silk worms. The dead as physical remains in tombs are erased after five generations, being reburied anonymously in an unknown place by outsiders. In this period, when in the tombs, they will receive offerings twice a year, both occasions connected with the cultivation of rice.

The deceased enters an ancestral tablet on a day when its soul returns to the house. The installation is accompanied by its being placed in a wooden pavilion provided by the dead person's daughter's husband, so apparently marking an affinal presence, the dead being encapsulated by the symbolic force of the agnatic kinship cluster which is continuously delivering wives to the deceased's cluster (if the deceased is a man). Alternatively it marks the presence of one of several affinal clusters, perhaps only the principle of affinity. The tablet is later placed on the ancestral shrine, where it will receive offerings at festivals, as well as on the relevant dates of birth and death. After five generations, the tablet is erased, taken away without further consideration.

The third version, in which the ancestors are represented as written names in a book, is from the very beginning an outside affair. It seems very unlikely that the temples where these lists were kept and guarded by a professional ritual specialist replaced ancestral halls in any way, as they were situated away from the village, and the local temples were not used as an alternative. Here too, the principle of a span of five generations was at work, the names being erased from the register after that period. But perhaps – and this is speculation based on circumstantial evidence – this accumulation of names written in characters in a list signified a period of transformation. We badly need ethnography here, and, as in so many historical cases, we must face that fact that we will probably never know. I am raising questions to which answers could not been given. Even so, there are still hints to be found from a close reading of the wider body of data from the locality. What I suggest is this the following.

The dead in the list in a temple which is physically removed from their former social sphere of existence are transformed into divinity after five generations, becoming drawn up into and part of a deity. The transfer, I suggest, is between two spheres of non-human existence and as a process is not so dissimilar to what takes place in such forms of ancestral worship, where all descendants are drawn up into a first lineage founder and worshipped as integrated aspects of him (e.g. Aijmer 1967). In the Kaixiangong case the de-individualization takes place after a period of respite, until no one living will remember the evaporating dead. The dead are transformed from being ancestors into becoming part of the divine sphere. The best suggestion that could be made on the available data is that they become part of the two major gods in the Kaixiangong village temples.

In this case (should we accept the argument) the beneficial symbolic force of the dead is channelled through two deities, a force that concerns the cultivation of rice in flooded fields. In earlier phases of their death careers the ancestors will maintain (in discourses, anyway) some social control, but predominantly they are helpful in constructing social continuity through children, as well as protecting the mulberry trees, one of the foundations of the silk industry. Seemingly they reach out to the rice fields too, being above the earth but among them. But whereas in other southern Chinese communities the dead in their graves directly create rice, this is achieved in Kaixiangong only in a roundabout way of long duration. This implies their complete extinction as ancestors and their survival in eternity as a component of a god.

It will be recalled that these Kaixiangong gods are thought to be responsible for rice and are brought out and celebrated in grand rice rituals. These gods are thus essentially the containers of the absorbed dead of the community, celebrated in togetherness and without obvious kinship discrimination.

5. IN PLACE OF CONCLUSIONS

This is as far as we can go in terms of ‘informed speculation’. What we have discerned in the Kaixiangong ethnography is possibly not unique in southern China, being a result of a generative process in a cultural grammar creating inspectable morphs. There is at least a vague

family resemblance with the ancestral symbolism found among the floating population of Macau (Brito Peixoto 1990).

The reading of the Kaixiangong case suggested here may serve as a temporary explanation of the particular variation of the common ancestral cult that existed in this Jiangsu community. Hopefully a more comprehensive reading of a more complete ethnography will in the future replace my present understanding. As it is, I suggest that we now have a satisfactory account of why the Kaixiangong people erase their ancestors from existence. They do so to transform them into the sphere of divinity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aijmer, G., 'Expansion and Extension in Hakka Society', *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 7 (1967), 42-79.
- [2] Aijmer, G., 'The Symbolological Project', *Cultural Dynamics*, 13 (2001), 66-91.
- [3] Aijmer, G., *New Year Celebrations in Central China in Late Imperial Times* (Hong Kong, 2003).
- [4] Aijmer, G., 'Women. Kitchen and Belonging in Eastern China: Idioms of Continuity in Kaixiangong', *Sociologus* 55 (2005), 39-59.
- [5] Brito Peixoto, R., *Dragões no Mar: Os Pescadores Chineses de Macau*, 2nd edn (Macau, 1990 [1989]).
- [6] Fei Hsiao-tung, *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in the Yangtze Valley* (London, 1962 [1939]).
- [7] Fei Hsiao Tung (Fei Xiaotong), *Chinese Village Close-up* (Beijing, 1983).
- [8] Freedman, M., *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London, 1958).
- [9] Geddes, W.R., *Peasant Life in Communist China* (Ithaca, 1963).
- [10] Pimpaneau, J., *Chine: Culture et traditions* (Arles, 1988).