
The Mysterious Dead and the Generation of Life: ——John K. Shryock's Anqing Ethnography Revisited

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Abstract:

This essay explores a selection of John K. Shryock's field data from a hundred years ago, from the province of Anhui. Focus is on the ceremonialism of ancestry and the cultural semantics of ancestor worship. The account tries to demonstrate how certain phases of such rituals connect with the construction of continuity in social life, either through the cultural idiom of the cultivation of rice, or the idiom of procreation of children. The liturgies and paraphernalia employed show symbolic complexities, the understanding of which may lead us to new insights into the culture of southern China.

Key Words: Ancestor worship, Social continuity, Cultural modalities, Southern China

1. BACKGROUNDS

Thinking about ‘ancestry’ in the human sciences is to think about a system of belonging that stretches beyond physical death into a partly unknown past.¹ This entails a set of imagery with the explicit capacity to bring together living people with those long since dead. It is hard to think of any society where the phenomenon of death has not given rise to some systemic figures of thought and patterns of imagery relating to social continuity and discontinuity. It seems that such configurations are universal and ultimately generated by the factual presence of death in a realistic ontology. In China notions of ancestry and the accompanying celebration of the dead has a documented history of more than two millennia. China is a vast country where ancestry and its manifestations in the social world have been regarded as forming a pillar of structural continuity. Rules of ancestry have often regulated power. Ancestors, and the cult of ancestors, are common enough themes in anthropological, sociological and religious studies of China, and yet, it is striking how dependent such investigations are on texts and other discursive materials. In this essay I wish to explore iconic expressive visions of ancestry within a limited and yet fairly detailed ethnography. This exploration of ritual as a world of iconic, pictorial thinking is a tentative search for, and description of, demotic notions in terms of cultural semantics.

Down the centuries the social scene in China has been a vast ocean of family resemblances where each village, despite appearances, 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. To explore for unities in this vastness of dissimilarities, we must develop new research strategies with which to understand variation, rather than search for superficial similarities. In a more abstract sense, ancestry is a sort of belonging that could be studied with advantage from several different analytical perspectives — ways of comprehending phenomena of social life based on differing ontologies — in the operational (realist), discursive (language-based) and iconic (visually based) orders.²

The here employed method will seldom lead to finally ‘proven’ results. Rather, what we gain are appropriate suggestions, a kind of simulacra of the cultural intuitions that members of a society are believed to have. The difficult scholarly task is to translate motifs from non-verbal expositions generated by an iconic code into messages of linguistic accounting, from iconic texture into verbal text.

The ethnography that has been examined for this essay was assembled by John Knight Shryock (1890–1953) who spent the years from 1916 to 1926 in China, of which a period of eight in the city of Anqing 安慶, the then capital of Anhui Province. These were years of work in association with St. Paul’s School, first as a chaplain and later as a headmaster. His early life

¹ Thanks are due to Virgil K.Y. Ho and Robert Parkin for their valuable help with this text.

² For a fuller account of the symbolical approach, see Aijmer 2001.

was passed in Philadelphia where he joined and graduated at the University of Pennsylvania. He was later ordained in the Episcopal Church. His years in China were marked by scholarly curiosity and he produced several works of an anthropological leaning, among them the monograph to be examined here, *The Temples of Anqing and their Cults* of 1931 (preface dated 1927). This was successfully submitted for a Ph.D. degree at the University of Pennsylvania in 1931. This book is well known among China scholars, but today few seem to have actually read it. His most well known contribution to discussions on Chinese society is his thorough study of Confucianism as a state ideology. Returning to Pennsylvania he pursued an ecclesiastic career in Philadelphia.³

In this study I will thus explore data assembled by an observant foreigner with an interest in 'religious' phenomena. This ethnography reports on things that are not so commonly mentioned, or explained, in Chinese sources, matters that often seem to be taken for granted. The foreign eye sees things locally not observed, or sees them differently. For this region, Shryock's data on ancestral cults seem to be the most detailed available. To complement the outsider's report I have consulted a local chronicle — in this I have relied on the systematic extracts provided by the 'Imperial Encyclopaedia' of 1722. I have also looked into the edition of 1683 of this local chronicle. I have no intention to cover in full existing Anhui ethnography. The study presented here is tentative, explorative and limited.

Anqing had since the seventeenth century been a capital of Anhui Province, a status which was changed in 1949. This region had in the decennia that preceded Shryock's residence seen dramatic changes in that the countryside had been devastated by the arrival of the armies of the Taiping rebellion and, as a consequence, extensive tracts of forests had been destroyed. In addition, the city itself was exposed to violence and most of its historical buildings, including its temples, were destroyed. When Shryock arrived it was a relatively modern city.

The Yangzi rice-wheat area covers the flat of gently undulating plains of the lower River Yangzi where it passes southern Anhui. The province is topographically and population-wise very varied, but the southern parts belong to the rice-producing realm of China. Lakes are a particular feature of the province. The physical conditions for agriculture are good with ample rainfall, high temperatures, and a high humidity that is accentuated by the large amounts of water in the lake basins. There was a continuous growing season with a short resting period in winter, and two crops a year were grown. Agriculture supported the population. In the early years of the 20th century Anhui was a province that exported rice. There were, besides the rice in summer, also the winter 'dry' crops such as wheat, barley, or beans, which were harvested in May or June, and thus had the advantage of the pre-monsoonal period. The 'wet' crop, being particularly rice, is grown under the summer monsoon and harvested in the autumn of the year. Rice is the principal production of the province. Southern Anhui was also a tea growing area,

³ See obituaries in *The Living Church*, vol. 126, No. 13, 1953, p. 21, and *The New York Times*, 7 February 1953, p. 15.

taking advantage of the mist that forms on the hills to grow the best kinds (*China Proper* 1945b: 14-15, 65, 341, 518).

Anhui was already in the early part of the last century a highly densely populated province, featuring over one thousand five hundred inhabitants per square kilometre. Population in the province was about twenty millions. It had a relatively small proportion of its population living in towns. In 1938, Anqing had an estimated population of 23,000 inhabitants (*China Proper* 1945a: 243, 247, 257). Shryock (1931: 23)⁴ provides his own guess as to size of the population: 40,000.

2. THE ANQING ETHNOGRAPHY

2.1 Kinship Clusters and Ancestral Halls

In his work on temples in Anqing, Shryock observed that ancestral halls were usually found in the country where there was a strong presence of agnatically defined kinship clusters, sharing a residential neighbourhood and bearing the same surname (p. 38). These localized clusters were said to have a long history. ‘Clan’ records went back for hundreds and sometimes, it is reported, even thousands of years. The head of the ‘clan’ was called the *hu zun* 戶尊⁵ and the representatives of different branches of the cluster, who met for the annual sacrifice, were called *fang zhang* 房長 or ‘*wen si*’ [文司?, 文士?].⁶ It is noted that these kinship clusters generally contained a mixture of generations. Since a man might have children after he had become a grandfather, it was not unusual to have representatives of all the generations of the family cycle alive at the same time (p. 39).

There were, however, eight such houses of worship also within the city of Anqing. It is likely that kinship clusters in urban areas were not confined to these institutions in town, but, like in neighbouring Jiangsu Province, urbanites were not isolated from their relatives in the countryside, and often attended rituals in some rural ancestral hall in rustic social contexts to which they still belonged (e.g. Mote 1970; Xu 2000). The ancestral halls are described as oblong enclosures about thirty meters long by twelve wide. In the countryside they were usually surrounded by evergreens except in front. It is noted that the roofs were not curved — as they mostly were on temples. Each compound contained three halls directly behind each other, separated by open courts in which trees were planted on either side. First came the entrance hall, where coffins were often stored, then a room used as a school for the children of the ‘clan’ or at other times as a meeting place, and lastly the hall of the ancestors. The main doors were not ordinarily open and entrance was made through a side door into the first court. On these main doors were often painted two ‘mythological figures’ who were said to act as

⁴ From this point and onwards all references to Shryock 1931 take the form of page references only.

⁵ Shryock romanizes 尊 as ‘chen’.

⁶ Shryock employs a version of Wade-Giles principles for romanization. On occasion there is a lack of clarity. He provides an index of Chinese characters — not fully complete.

spiritual doorkeepers. When someone dead had obtained high rank through the public examinations, a red pole was erected before the hall to which he belonged (p. 38).

Shryock's account of the liturgy employed at a major offering ritual in the ancestral hall indicates that there may have been a drum and a bell (or bells) placed somewhere in the hall, perhaps then in the third major hall (p. 41). However, it may also be that their location there was only temporary and for the sake of the special ritual. For the latter reading speaks the circumstance that at rituals a drummer and a bell ringer were hired for the ceremonies (p. 40). It could be added that ancestral halls had no images or pictures (p. 47).

The Anqing ancestral halls, always referred to as *ci* 祠, were special buildings, neither residences (excepting resident caretakers), nor temples. This apartness was marked, as already noted, by their not having curved roofs like buildings devoted to deities. The modal presupposition of these houses was a presence of 'death'. Even so, death was not necessarily a negative condition, even if it was most certainly characterized as a phenomenon belonging to the negative *yin* 陰 sphere of existence. It will be recalled that *yin* is the negative female and inward-going cosmic principle that connotes with death and earth.

The ancestral hall contained ancestral representations and also coffins. It is not said in the ethnography whether these were empty or not, but a possible reading of this piece of information is that they contained dead bodies, perhaps waiting for some auspicious day for funerals. This was a fairly common feature in late 'traditional' society. As mentioned, it was also conventional that ancestral halls served as schools for the young members of the kinship cluster, and furthermore, that such buildings offered meeting rooms for leaders for discussion and decision concerning the cluster's affairs. Mundane activities were thus supervised by the dead. The ancestral presence gave dignity to, and perhaps also some influence on, the proceedings.

The figures on the doors were also of the conventional type for this kind of building, guardian deities that were to function as a demonifuge. There are no further details in the ethnography.

We have learnt then that in the city of Anqing there were at least eight 'clans'. Anthropologically it seems more appropriate to say that these kinship clusters were 'lineages' or lineage-like organizations as their members had shared property, at least they owned together their ancestral hall (p. 28). The full span of such a kinship cluster was organizationally split up into a number of sub-clusters ('branches') but we do not know what kind of fission was promoting this. The segments were apparently called *fang* 房. These *fang* did not have any ancestral halls of their own, but overall unity was stressed in ritual matters.

2.2 Tablets in the Ancestral Hall

Shryock provides a description of the interior of an ancestral hall, but he does so in a generalized way, apparently not accounting for any one particular house of worship. Probably they were fairly similar in appearance. As my present focus is on the cultural semantics of

ancestors and ancestry, I will emphasize what the ethnographer has to say on the ancestral hall as a habitat of the dead. We learn that against the back wall of the third hall, which was also the rear of the building complex, were arranged a series of shelves like rising steps and on these were tablets, called *shen zhu* 神主, one generation to a shelf, with the founder of the lineage in the middle of the highest level. The tablets were made of wood and were approximately thirty centimetres high and twenty centimetres wide. On them was written ‘the name of the man, his wife and male children’, and the characters *zhi wei* 之位, meaning ‘his seat or place’. As an alternative to the term *shen zhu* a tablet in the ancestral hall could be called *shen wei* 神位. Before the tablets was a table or altar, generally of carved wood, on which were five sacrificial vessels, usually of bronze (p. 38).

Describing the tablets in some further detail, Shryock notes that the name was referred to as *pu ming* 譜名. Each ‘clan’ he notes, possessed a poem containing a certain number of syllables, and each one of these syllables, or characters, was used in turn to identify a generation of the lineage, so that the whole cycle would be in the neighbourhood of twenty generations.⁷ The ancestral name consisted of two characters, usually the first name relating to the generation and the second being that of the individual. The surname was not put on the tablet, where it would be superfluous, but appeared over the main entrance to the hall (pp. 38-9).

This tablet was made of a single flat board; it was set on a stand and placed on the same shelf with others belonging to the same generation. As we have seen, it carried the names of a number of persons, perhaps as many as ten, but no dates. Shryock did not find any distinction made between men and women, the latter following their husbands into their halls. More detailed records of lineage history were kept in books at the hall (p. 171).

The arrangement of the ancestral tablets in the lineage hall followed a convention met with in most parts of southern China (e.g. Freedman 1958: Ch. 11). Belonging in terms of generation and ascendance were clearly expressed in the display. At the top was the founder of the local kinship cluster and next below the generation of his sons. The men of the lineage were accompanied by their wives, all of whom had originated in foreign kinship constellations. It seems that these women, incorporated by way of exogamous marriage, had their own tablets, rather than they being subsumed in their husbands’. However, this is not all together clear, but the more likely reading of Shryock’s ethnography. The male tablet was a ‘seat’ of a dead man, but its inscription also contained information as to the name of his wife — who then, in all likelihood, when dead, had her own tablet. Furthermore, a man’s tablet provided the names of his male children. A male tablet could provide as many as ten such complementary names. Thus, the tablet was not only a ritual focus for worship, but also a discursive source of genealogical information — each tablet being a marked node in an agnatic descent system, also paying attention to possible collateral lines. The lack of dates suggest that the dead was not completely individual, but rather a link in a chain of dead. What the female tablets conceivably

⁷ Similar ancestral poems have been found in Hunan; see Arrault 2010: 69.

conveyed, apart from the name of the dead wife herself, is not known as we lack all information on their inscriptions. Whether they carried notes on their husbands and sons is not mentioned.

We have found that the exposition of agnatic belonging was a prominent element in the textual composition that marked the male tablet. There were not only genealogical references but also, as mentioned, a generational name that was taken from a text of a poem in the exclusive possession of the corporate lineage. This practice indicated a cycle of about some twenty generations. It might have been possible to read this poem by letting your eyes follow the generational steps from top downwards. What implications (if any) went with this poetic cycle cannot be discovered, nor can it be discerned, when the poem was exhausted, whether a new cycle began making use again of the first character of the same poem.

It seems that the ancestral hall was for everyone dead who had been a member of the lineage. Shryock tells us that genealogical information — kept in a book in the hall — indicated that lineages were many hundred, even ‘thousands’, of years old. The accumulation of tablets in the lineage house of worship must have been considerable and the display even crowded.⁸ There is nothing to indicate a process of pruning, or some conventions limiting access, or a consequent proliferation of halls. As mentioned, there were no divisions of ancestral halls into *fang* segment buildings, the ethnography rather stressing a unified worship of the dead (pp. 39-40). The most likely reading is that lineage history stretched much beyond the local settlement. We must also remember that many ancestral halls would have been seriously damaged in the Taiping assault of 1853. Most temples were burnt down, but were rebuilt in the period 1862-75, but in a more modest appearance than before (p. 26). In a similar way, ancestral halls were likely to have been built in the years to follow. In what fashion the halls were restored we do not know, but the crowding of tablets might in Shryock’s days, sixty years later, not yet have been a serious problem. What was present then were reconstructions and, perhaps, the results of genealogical abbreviations.

Some distinctions in the hall applied though, revealed in the nomenclature of tablets that provided a special term for tablets of former lineage members of distinction.

2.3 Rituals in the Ancestral Hall

At ordinary times the ancestor hall was cared for by a poor member of the ‘clan’ who lived on the premises (p. 39). The caretaker of a hall lit red candles on the altar on the 1st and 15th of each moon, and kept incense always burning before the tablets. Food was not formally offered to the ancestors in the hall, except at what was known as the Da Ji 大祭, or Great Sacrifice (pp. 30, 39). In the ancestral hall the rituals, when conducted in front of the tablets, were on a grand scale and carried out only on particular occasions. Sacrifices were staged at the Winter Solstice, or Dong Zhi 冬至. The Great Sacrifice, or Da Ji, was distinguished from the Small Sacrifice, or

⁸ Shryock (Pl. 19, facing p. 160) offers a picture of a hall display of ancestral tablets — with many tablets, but hardly giving the impression of being crowded.

Xiao Ji 小祭, by the offering of a pig and a goat. Otherwise they were the same, and the minor version was only used when poverty compelled.

The sacrifice was just held before daybreak on the Winter Solstice. Some lineages were said to have held it at other times also, but when we are not told, nor do we know of any reason for this spread of rituals. It is said that the Da Ji could be part of a funeral (p. 42), but there are no further details. The celebrants were the *hu zun* and the *fang zhang* from all the branches of the lineage, who attended when possible. The *hu zun* sometimes fasted for three days before the sacrifice (p. 40).

Shryock knew of one lineage which required all its members who were within one half day's journey to attend (pp. 39-40). It is clear that attendance among lineage members was expected. Shryock offers detailed descriptions of the constituent rites of the Great Sacrifice including an account of who performed what. In this present endeavour it suffices to give a very brief list of the events that took place.

There was the 'sending up' of firecrackers when the *hu zun* entered. There was beating the drum and striking the bells. Flute playing was part of the scene. The *hu zun* was summoned to uncover his head and arrange his belt, The *hu zun* was directed to arrange his shoes. The *hu zun* inspected the sacrifice, accompanied by two officiants, the *zheng yin* 正引 and *fu yin* 副引, who took turns in chanting as they walked. We learn that the chanting was 'in turn with long drawn quavers impossible to describe and equally impossible to forget when they had been heard' (p. 40). What duties these two ritual officials actually had is not said. The characters seem to imply that the former was superior to the latter.

The already slaughtered pig and goat had been prearranged on stands before the altar. The *hu zun* bowed to each kind of article offered, and at this time laid his hand upon the pig and goat. The first worship entailed kneeling four times with two kowtows each. Then there was the offering of blood, which was spilled upon the ground. Finally, there was the offering of the first of three bowls containing one and the same item. Out of six different kinds of food there were three bowls of each variety (pp. 41-42), giving the total of eighteen bowls of food. The ceremony is then over, but if a death had occurred during the year there was added 'a farewell to the dead', consisting of three kowtows to the tablet of the newly departed.

If the 'clan' had business to conduct, the meeting was held that day (p. 42). At times the liturgical procedure could be elaborated.

What we find in this description is that the tablets were provided for on a regular daily basis by the burning of coils of incense, smoke to be absorbed by the dead. The ancestral rites observed at new and full moons, here by lighting candles, is a widespread phenomenon in southern China. At the Winter Solstice it was different. The main items were raw meats in the form of a whole pig and a whole goat. Their bodies were shaven. There was the libation of blood from these animals on the floor in front. This was followed by the first three of eighteen bowls of cooked food. On a broader platform, we know that pork represents *yang* 陽 force — connoting

maleness, brightness, heaven and what is outgoing — among foodstuffs and so the cosmic principle of *yang* is highlighted in the sacrifice.

There was also goat meat, a whole goat, which is less clear an object as a carrier of symbolic senses. The goat was regarded as a generally auspicious creature, and was one of the animals in the calendar cycle of twelve animals, where each of these characterizes one of the years in the corresponding sequence of moon years, in a consecutive order. I have not found any local evidence, nor is there a more explicit general platform to inform us about what the symbolic load of the goat might have implied. The best we can do is to regard goat meat on this occasion as a complementary contrast to pork. As we know that pork strongly connoted the male *yang* principle, it is not far-fetched to see goat meat as symbolizing the female *yin* principle. Following this line of thought, the sacrificial meat given to the ancestors would have been a combination of male and female substance.

The Da Ji ancestral sacrifice had, within a somewhat wider frame of time, the character of a ritual commensality in that ‘each member or representative of the family receives a part of the sacrifice’ (p. 42). My reading is that this raw meat was cooked and eaten in the residences after the conclusion of the grand occasion and therefore such a domestic meal would in a sense have been shared with the dead. Perhaps this was a different commensality with the domestic ancestors — but we do not know. The fasting of the *hu zun* at the time of the sacrifice seems to have been a way to express that he (or perhaps the assembly) did not share what was being offered and that at this time there was in fact no commensality.

The offerings were finished off with (a minimum of) eighteen bowls of ordinary cooked food — in contrast to the raw meats and blood that entailed the iconic union of cosmic principles. We do not know by whom and where the food was prepared, if done by women or men, the former being the more likely. We are told though that food offerings were never cooked or burnt before the altar (p. 31). Neither do we know what became of the dishes once they had been presented to the dead. There is no indication of a commensality with regard to these dishes, although this seems possibly have happened. Cooked food was otherwise never part of the corporate hall rituals.

The ritual exposes a contrast in offerings in that raw meat is juxtaposed with cooked food. It is worth noting that raw meats preceded cooked food.

The Da Ji rituals seem discursively to have emphasized agnatic kinship belonging in a strong way, all members of the lineage being (ideally) requested to attend in union. This may have been more of a conventional norm and a figure of thought rather than ethnographic reality, as Shryock notes that the members of the ‘clan’ never met in body in a ‘family temple’ for worship (p. 28).

2.4 Domestic Shrines for Ancestral Tablets

We have learnt from Shryock's ethnography that, as is usual in southern China, there were also ancestral tablets kept in the private residences of Anqing people. In the domestic sphere there were actually two kinds of tablets used in commemorating the dead. One was the temporary soul tablet, called *ling* 靈, reported as a gaudy affair of red paper with the name of the departed in gilt characters, an object used at the funeral and burnt one year thereafter. The more permanent domestic soul tablet was usually called *shen zhu* 神主, but sometimes, in the case of great men, the term was *shen wei* 神位. It was made of two flat pieces of wood about fifteen centimetres high and five wide, and placed on a stand in such a way that the two halves fitted together as if they were one piece, the inner overlapping at the top.

The outer face contained a line of eleven characters down the centre, beginning with the name, and ending with the word *zhu* 主, the dotting of which character marked the tablet's inauguration. This 'dotting' referred to the completing of the graph 主 with the uppermost brush-stroke. In the lower left hand corner was a name, usually that of the eldest son, the 'continuator'. The inner face had the same eleven characters down the centre, while on the right was the date of birth, and on the left the date of death. My understanding of 'right' and 'left' here presupposes that you look at the tablet's front. The number of characters must be the same on both faces, and must be odd — with *yang* connotations. This tablet was never placed in the ancestral hall, but remained in the home where the dead person had lived, and here it received regular worship or reverence. Usually it was placed in an elaborately carved wooden case. It was the tablet of one person only (pp. 170-1). The domestic tablets were usually, when residential space allowed, kept in a special room with an altar before them (p. 37).

In an early version of the Anqing prefectural chronicle, compiled and printed in 1683, there is an interesting note concerning the celebrations on the twentyfourth day of the twelfth moon, just before the lunar New Year, that on this day people sprinkled and swept halls and apartments and they took pleasure in the portraits of the ancestral dead. They provided them, in a set (genealogical?) order, with sacrifices of wine and delicacies.⁹ To display ancestral portraits, scroll paintings to hang on the walls, at the time of the arrival of the New Year has been a fairly widespread custom in southern China. Shryock does not mention such portraits so we must understand that these had been abandoned at the time he was in Anqing.

The two sets of ancestral tablets — the domestic and the corporate — were different in size, shape and content, but they were known by the same term, *shen zhu*. What was further shared was the name of the deceased, but we do not know whether the domestic tablet also carried the *pu ming* or some other referential name in the inscription. The domestic tablet had a hidden inside as well as an outside, while the corporate tablet only had one surface. This means that the domestic version had a sort of 'secret' information, not immediately available to the public eye. On the inside was recorded the name (two or three characters, depending on whether the

⁹ 安慶府志 1683, 卷3, 風俗 20a.

lineage name was included), and the two-character localizer 之主 at the end. Between this beginning and end were six (or seven) other characters of which we know nothing. Perhaps they formed just a conventional phrase. There was a genealogical marking in that the name of the eldest son of the deceased appeared. The two names of the inscription indicated an agnatic line of succession that was to structure the future. The indexical characters of the eldest son seem to have stressed a discursive approach implying lines of agnatic ascent. How women's tablets were inscribed is not remarked on.

2.5 Domestic Rituals for the Dead

We learn that a very religious man would light three sticks of incense in his home every evening about sunset, placing one in a niche outside the front door, one before the Kitchen God and one before the tablets of the ancestors, which, as we have seen, he (being a man of means) usually kept in a special room with an altar table before them. An oil lamp (a copper dish with a wick) might be lit each evening before the tablets. Apparently, darkness (a state of *yin*) was of importance for the ritual. Food was ordinarily offered to domestic ancestors only on three occasions and at funeral rites. After the service the sacrificial food was recooked and eaten by the family, or devoured by small boys. The three occasions for serving the dead with cooked food were the festive events on the twentythird day of the twelfth moon (which day is generally called Little New Year),¹⁰ the fifteenth of the first moon (which would be the Lantern Festival), and Qing Ming 清明 in the spring — a domestic ritual parallel then to the sacrifices on the graves (pp. 37-8).¹¹

The food sacrifice at Winter Solstice only applied to the ancestral hall (p. 37). In the private residences, a little later after this major lineage event, there was a special occasion for welcoming the ancestors, otherwise belonging to the corporate hall, back to their former lifetime homes. This took place on some day, varying with different families, around the twentythird of the twelfth moon (Little New Year), the day when the Kitchen God was sent off to Heaven to report on the family's decorum. Shryock's phrase for this is: 'Welcoming the ancestors back home from the ancestral temple, where they ordinarily reside' (p. 37). As we have seen, this was also a time for the exposition of ancestral portraits.

This ritual duration that saw the presence of the hall ancestors as guests in the domestic region, came to an end by sending them back to the house of worship. The day for this return was different in different localities, but in Anqing proper it was the fifteenth of the first moon in the lunar calendar, a day otherwise characterized by dragon processions in the streets (pp. 29, 37).

¹⁰ Acts of ancestral worship was also carried out in the early morning of the New Year Day, according to the description in the local prefectural chronicle. See 古今圖書集成 1885-8: VI, 774, 風俗考 1b; 安慶府志 1683, 卷 3, 風俗 20a.

¹¹ In Anqing Prefecture there were also sacrifices to *zu* 祖 ancestors on the fifteenth day of the seventh moon, a day mentioned as Zhong Yuan 中元; it had Buddhist connotations and seems to have referred to a different universe of thought. See 古今圖書集成 1885-8: VI, 774, 風俗考 2a.

These New Year rituals that included the ancestors, point to some major problems in the ethnography. We have already learnt that in Anqing, when a person died, he or she was directly represented by a temporary ancestral tablet, designated *ling*. This red paper tablet was employed during the funeral and was burnt later, after one year. We are not told where this burning took place or what ceremonies may have surrounded the event. We do know, however, that the ‘soul essence’ of the dead on some occasion was transferred to the domestic tablet, which was ideally kept in a decorated cabinet and in a special room within the residence. The inclusiveness of this domestic shrine seems generous but there is a hint of some pruning among elder tablets. Shryock mentions that in a residential house a man worships his ‘immediate ancestors’ (p. 37) which perhaps suggests that those who were not immediate had been removed, or, alternatively, were regarded as, in some other sense, irrelevant. The fate of those removed (if so they were) is not clear, but a good guess is that they were burnt, like the temporary first *ling* tablet. What happened to the domestic ancestors who were thus (possibly) deprived of a tablet is not known. They do not seem to have been transferred to the ancestral hall — as that place already contained a tablet for the actual dead together with a complete set of tablets for all the dead of the lineage.

If a domestic pruning procedure were relevant, this would have led to only a limited accumulation of tablets in the residences. Another, alternative, reading would be that worshipping the ‘immediate ancestors’ would not exclude the presence of more removed ancestors, but that the latter received much less attention. Shryock does not inform us. In the case no pruning took place, the domestic shrine would seem as almost a replica of the ancestral hall, but with the difference that, accounting for ascent, it did not allow for collateral lines.

Thus the permanent domestic tablet was manufactured and installed about a year after the actual death. It is not mentioned explicitly when the corresponding hall ancestral tablet was made and introduced into the corporate building. However, we will recall that, after concluding the offerings of raw meat and cooked food at the Winter Solstice celebrations in the ancestral hall, there could be an addition. The main ceremony being over, there was yet a special ritual to be conducted if needed. If a death had occurred during the year there was a special ceremonial farewell to that dead person, the ritual consisting of three kowtows to the tablet of the departed. Accordingly there was then a tablet in the hall for a recently dead person — a double to the one in the residence.

On the other hand, the term for the concluding ritual was ‘Tsi Ling Li’ [祠靈裡?] (p.42), but then the word *ling* 靈 may have had widely cast connotations beyond being the designation of the temporary tablet used in the funeral and during the period of family mourning. It could possibly be that this farewell ceremony took place before it was burnt and so this kowtowing to the dead entailed a transfer of the deceased from the *ling* to a new hall tablet, after which the *ling* was burnt. Whatever was the case, we must conclude that there were available for worshippers two different ancestral tablets, both of them referring to one and the same dead person at the same time, one kept in a residence, the other in the corporate lineage hall.

Shryock says that it was in the ancestral hall where the dead ordinarily resided. If so, it would leave us with a situation where, most of the time, the domestic ancestor tablets would be sort of empty, only invaded by the dead for a couple of weeks at New Year. Against this straightforward reading stands the information that there was a continuous burning of incense, and a fortnightly burning of candles, in front of the domestic tablets, a ritual activity that bespeaks an ancestral presence also here. How can we understand this contradictory universe? I shall return to this later.

One of the prominent gifts to dead people was ritual paper money, which was burnt for their use (p. 30). However, Shryock does not contextualize this sort of offering and we have no information on when, or whether, paper money was used both in the hall and within the context of the domestic shrine. Other offerings mentioned are wine and tea; wine was used as a libation in the hall at the Da Ji sacrifice (p. 42), but what regards tea we do not know where or when this was part of the offerings (p. 33). We should understand libations of rice wine as an offering of liquid rice and in iconic correspondence to blood, the libations of the latter being the use of liquid meat:

Rice	Wine
Meat	Blood

2.6 Graves

Not much is known about the location of graves in Anqing, but what we do know is that rites were performed at the graves on the Qing Ming day, which was shortly after the vernal equinox (p. 37). The term generally signifies the first day of the solar period — of the same name — falling in between the fifth and twentieth of April, Gregorian reckoning. It is noted that in former days the festival was accompanied by the observing of a fast (p. 265). This could have entailed the sense that the offerings here were not in the character of a commensality.

3. DISCUSSION IN AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODE

3.1 Double Tablets

In Anqing the deceased were commemorated with two different ancestor tablets, one placed in the former residence, and one in the lineage hall. For a dead person to be remembered by two different ancestor tablets was a common feature in southern China, perhaps even a sort of standard convention in social life. However, there is something in the Anqing ethnography which is ‘ungrammatical’. The deceased in Anqing were conventionally twice represented, but, and this is what is ‘odd’, were so simultaneously. This is different from the general situation that prevailed at least in the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, summarized by Maurice Freedman (1958: 82): ‘[A tablet] represented one individual only. Moreover, no other tablet could stand for the same person’. Freedman’s analysis brings about a unique relationship

between the tablet and the ‘soul’ with which it was associated.¹² The main point in ancestral worship was, according to Freedman (1958: 84), that once the ancestor had been placed in the shrine belonging to an ancestral hall, he had ceased to be an object of personal devotion directed towards the domestic tablet, and had instead become an integrated part of the ritual centre of a lineage or lineage segment. This picture was not true in Anqing where two different tablets for the same person were, at the same time, the objects of worship, although somewhat different liturgies were used in the two ritual arenas. How can we understand this difference?

Examining ritual activities in Anqing we found that the ancestors who were located in the ancestral hall were invited on the twentythird day of the twelfth moon to come over for a visit to their old family residences. This piece of information must be part of a local discursive exegesis. A result of this invitation was that the hall ancestors arrived on this day and somehow occupied the domestic shrine, where they remained until the fifteenth of the first moon. On this ancestral visit there ought to have been some conceptual confusion: what happened in this period to those ‘immediate’ ancestors who were the regular occupiers of the domestic shrine?

We must not expect that we may reveal any detailed systematic ideas as to what happened in this mingling of ancestry at New Year. It may be that the hall ancestors had a more abstract presence without tablet representations, independent of existing tablets. Or, did the domestic ancestors abandon their tablets to give way to themselves (their doubles) — and others? If so, were there domestic tablets enough to harbour the hall crowd? Were the two sets of dead compatible? Could the two clusters referring to the same dead people bear one another in the domestic environment? Or, did the two versions of ancestry merge into one union? And also, what were the more long-term relations between the two sets of tablets when each participant forefather, or foremother, had simultaneously, as a sort of double, a tablet seat within each set of the two realms? More remote ancestors in the lineage hall would, in principal, have been invited to visit several different residences simultaneously, and so we may ask whether this could be accomplished, or whether the more distant dead relatives had a choice as where to go? Where would the founding father go?

There is one further point of interest found in the note in the local chronicle, mentioned earlier, that on the twentythird day of the twelfth moon, ancestral portraits were hung in the houses. These scroll representations were provided with wine and delicacies (cooked food) as sacrifices. The pictures were hung at the same time as the hall ancestors invaded the domestic scene. It could well be that the display of these scrolls made manifest the visiting ancestral hall ancestors — in which case the occupiers of the domestic tablets were left intact. These pictures may well have been hung as an answer to this symbolic domestic confusion. The ancestral portraits do not seem to have been in use in Shryock’s time.

¹² Freedman’s (1958: 82) dictum ‘one tablet — one person’ requires further consideration, but not in this article.

The most likely answer to such outsider's queries is that these questions were never asked and what seems illogical and confused in a discursive world could be smoothly achieved in terms of iconic modal constructs, like, perhaps, the exposition of portraits.

What remains problematic is that, as we have seen, there was no transfer of the dead, from a residence and its small tablet to one among the larger ones of the lineage hall. The two spheres were continuously co-existent and kept separate. A deceased was soon after death introduced to the lineage house of worship. If the domestic shrine was pruned and, if so, the abolished tablets in all likelihood burnt, this should have had no consequence for the hall. If pruning occurred, it seems likely that the domestic ancestors were erased after having been moved slowly upwards in the hierarchy of generations to find that their immortality was limited to only a few age bands back in time. But on this the ethnography is silent.

At this point it may be strategic to reconsider some aspects of our exploration of Anqing ethnography, now in terms of a modal analytical approach.

3.2 Ancestors and Prototypical Cultural Semantics

We may start the ethnographic exploration anew by strategically considering what may be called a known prototypical iconic tale — a pictographic narration providing structure to such conventions as form people's relationships with the dead. The sense of such non-verbal accounts, known by people merely through their cultural intuitions, can be understood by the outsider mind only by way of an understanding of the architecture of the combination of those pictographic elements that constitute rituals and other symbolic arrangements. So this is where we have to look.

Further upriver in the med-Yangzi valley, in the region around Lake Dongting, earlier studies have provided an integrated view on certain aspects of the symbolism of death. The synthesized account of the prevalent iconic world characteristic of this area is based on the ethnographies of several communities.

In the Dongting area the Qing Ming and the Duan Wu 端午 festivals concerned rice and ancestors as providers of rice. These *yin* ancestors, inhabiting the graves, were puristic agnaticists, seeing to it that an exclusive kinship cluster reproduced itself in splendid isolation. Their tools were rice, and the consumption of rice. Later in the year, the Chong Yang 重陽 and the New Year 新年 festivals, both concerned continuity in the form of future children (especially sons) and the ancestors were instrumental also in this. These ancestors, connected with mountains, heights and Heaven, were understood as *yang* ancestors and of the same agnatic leaning as characterized those connected with graves. They were true purists, who brought blessings in the form of children. Their mission was to endow a family cluster with a consequential fertility.

There was an alternative view and that vision saw these, in principle, same *yang* ancestors as part of a possible world, the foundation of which was the domestic house, where children were

the result of a componential mixing of agnation from many lineages, but their own agnatic strand somehow remaining dominant. In this cultural modality exogamous marriages and the engaging of foreign women's generative capacity was of greatest importance. In this version ancestors were the benign protectors of the residential cluster that worshipped them.¹³

Other *yang* ancestors resided in tablets in corporate halls. They were the descendants from the apical founder of the wider agnatically defined kinship cluster and they were the custodians of abstract agnatic descent. They were worshipped in their halls at great festivals and on a more modest regulat basis. They were regarded as protectors of the community, guardians of land and corporate agnatic rights, and exercised dominance in political processes (Aijmer 1964; 1979; 1991; 2003).

After this excursus, it is time to return to Anqing.

3.3 A Reading of the Anqing Data

The ancestors of the ancestral hall in Anqing seem similar to those we have met in the Dongting area; in this guise they were agnatic protectors. A contrasting element is found though in the Anqing ethnography, suggesting that it contains a more elaborated iconic catastasis, a pictographic narrative the story-line of which entailed that the forebears from the graves (Earth) and those from the mountains (Heaven) came together in these buildings to form a union at Winter Solstice, to become 'complete ancestors'. This iconic construction united *yin* terrestrial and *yang* celestial energies into the formation of ancestral progenitors of an extraordinary strong generative power.¹⁴

The narration entails the recognition of a double composition of human beings and the separation of these two basic componential parts at death, one destined for the grave, the other more nebulously associated with the celestial sphere. This partition — and a remedy for it — found its expression in the twofold meat and blood offerings provided at the Winter Solstice. Raw meats associated with the dead as associated with Nature and their activities according to the annual moon and sun calendars, their food not being consumable by living people.¹⁵ The two kinds of dead seem to have carried respectively *yin* (goat) and *yang* (pig) connotations, their togetherness in the sacrifices expressing the accomplishment of the metaphysical union of Earth and Heaven in bringing the two aspects of the dead physically together. When complete ancestors had been established, they were served with cooked food, now being human-like in their conceptualization. What the officiants in the Great Sacrifice did at Winter Solstice was to

¹³ For an interesting explicit empirical example from southeastern China, see Cohen 1976 and Aijmer 2016.

¹⁴ A similar reconstruction of 'complete ancestors' at New Year appeared also on the riverine Sichuan scene; see discussion in Aijmer 2018, and also, for Zhejiang, Aijmer 2019a.

¹⁵ Raw meat marked an ancestor as different than did cooked food. This was so also in Sichuan (see Aijmer 2018a, also for further references) where raw carcasses of slaughtered animals were the correct offerings to the dead associated with graves at Qing Ming. After harvest, they again received offerings of raw meats, this time in the ancestral halls. It is reported from Taiwan that there gods are offered 'uncooked food' or meats that are cooked, but not seasoned (Wolf 1974a: 77; Wolf 1974b: 177; Harell 1974: 194; Feuchtwang 1974: 111).

construct fully human-like progenitors for the benefit of the social continuity of the agnatic community.

We have assumed that the ‘celestial type’ of ancestry was in focus at the celebration of the Chong Yang festival, held on high-up places. Here the ancestors were invited to visit their living progeny. In Anqing this festival was actually celebrated on the eighth day of the ninth moon, when people are said to have ascended hills, pagodas and other high places (p. 166). However, the *Anqing fu zhi* 安慶府志 (*Prefectural Chronicle of Anqing*) says that in 1683 this took place on the ninth day, when people ‘wandered and ascended high mountains’. There they drank wine and made merry. It is added that there was also a custom to send presents — but between whom is not mentioned.¹⁶

What about the terrestrial dead in the graves? We may assume that they were invited at the Qing Ming visits to the graves, where offerings were made — but in the Anqing case the ethnography is a little more complicated. These offerings were accompanied by a separating fast — so there was no commensality held on the occasion. Instead, the Qing Ming attentions, conducted according to the sun calendar, were also ritually transposed and carried out on the third day of the third moon. This was a day ‘for the sacrifice to spirits’ and many went into the country on picnics (p. 165). It could be added that at night people ‘watched the lights of the dead’ (看鬼火) — possibly the word *gui* 鬼 here indicating the dead in the graves. These lights were perhaps some fluorescent insects or cases of *ignis fatuus*; Shryock takes note of the local exegesis expressing the opinion that the more lights were seen, the greater the number of deaths within the year (p. 165, 168).

What we can say about the iconic contents of the spring meeting with the dead is that the offerings to the deceased at the graves were not a commensality, but that this was compensated for at a different event, separately. The second occasion was also marked by contacts in nature with the dead, presumably those belonging to the graves. Together the two festivals formed a summons for the grave ancestors to come back. Their invitation at the spring offerings should have seen its response already at the Duan Wu events at midsummer.¹⁷

What possibilities were there for a renewed invitation of the terrestrial ancestors for them to come home at New Year? What could we discern in the ethnography? There is one day of interest here in the data from Anqing, although the account is vague. This was the Shi Yue Zhao (十月朝) in the tenth moon, on its first day, ‘when spirits and ghosts are worshipped’. It is noted that this was a night when fires were lit (pp. 166, 168). The further implications we do not know, but the festival is a good candidate in our search for a possible occasion for another ancestral invitation.

¹⁶ For notes in the local chronicle of Anqing, see 古今圖書集成 1885-8: VI, 774, 風俗考 2a., or 安慶府志 1683, 卷 3, 風俗 20a.

¹⁷ The Duan Wu festival was carried out in the fifth moon in a style reminiscent of that in the Dongting region. See 古今圖書集成 1885-8: VI, 774, 風俗考 2a; see also Aijmer 1964.

My reading of the ethnography points in the direction that in the autumn Anqing people took part in festivities that involved both kinds of ancestors and implied equal invitations to the celestial and terrestrial versions to visit their former domestic abodes in the coming winter, in the lunar New Year duration. When later they arrived, they did not come directly, but they landed first in the old ancestral hall, and this happened at the Winter Solstice. Here they were received and treated in a grand way by their progeny that secured the two versions of ancestors being united into one — their old humanity being temporarily restored. On this occasion the ancestral hall was a converting apparatus supplying the living with human-like super-ancestors of an extraordinary power to be solicited for the future building of the agnatic kinship cluster.

These super-ancestors arrived in relevant batches on the domestic scene at Little New Year on the 23rd of the twelfth moon, responding to their being invited by the residents. Here they were received and worshipped. Their visit promoted the birth of children. Their bestowal of blessing resulted in a pure agnatic line in coming generations.

We still have to account for the ancestors who in everyday life were the residents of tablets in domestic shrines and in ancestral halls. In contrast to the ‘calendric forefathers’, who were peripatetic, oscillating between their own lugubrious environments and the world of the living, the tablet forebears were stationary and always present among the living. The domestic tablets indicated affinal relations. If the ‘nature ancestors’ existed within an iconic ontology, the tablet residents were to a considerable extent a product of the discursive order.

The two sets of ontologically differently understood ancestors did not really compete or interact, but some distinctions were made.

At lunar New Year Day people switched their attention from the super-ancestors to the domestic tablet ancestors, and so took on a more discursive approach to their dead relatives.¹⁸ The two sets were clearly separated in the course of time, each being given a discrete duration — but this twofold was later somewhat blurred. The notion of tablet ancestors was of a rather hybrid character, including some iconic features like the wooden tablets themselves and their daily and fortnightly sacrifices, but very much of their ancestral existence depended on the written word and on texts, inscriptions found on the inside and the outside of the tablet, and, furthermore, they were accompanied by separate genealogical texts. The inscribed tablets articulated individuality together with indexical links of ascent and descent. The house tablets also indicated wives, which was not the case with hall tablets. The domestic ancestors watched permanently over their offspring. They were observers of decorum, but also benign protectors and bringers of good luck.

It was mentioned above that in a wider southern Chinese perspective the ‘souls’ of individual dead persons were moved from a first location at an altar in their former residences, to a corporate ancestral hall as with time they became irrelevant in domestic recollection. Apart

¹⁸ Not mentioned by Shryock, but described in the local chronicle; 古今圖書集成 1885-8: VI, 774, 風俗考 2a.

from this irreversible transfer, both sets of discursive ancestors were stationary; their place in respective locality was permanent. In the Anqing case this was somewhat different. We have seen that domestic ancestors remained domestic forever, while at the same time they had a parallel double from the very beginning in the corporate hall. The hall ancestors were not a set continuous with, and recruiting from, the domestic sphere. They were forming their entirely own realm and they drew directly on the source of people who passed away.

The domestic arrangements of ancestral tablets were — in locations where the economic situation allowed it — in a special room, in a decorated cabinet with an altar with ritual vessels in front. It was like a small parallel ancestral hall at home. The difference we can glean between the two sets was in their respective aptitude to represent social continuity — a variance indicated by the texts they carried. The domestic tablets made manifest a notion that in linking the past with the future, a kinship cluster was dependent on a present that acknowledged the generative force of foreign women (agnatic exogamy being the basic principle in marriage). The domestic discourse was about ascent and the branching of bilateral relations. This relative openness was incompatible with the discourse of the wider kinship corporation and its ancestralk hall. In the latter, tablets stood for descent from an apical founder, included branches of collateral lines that followed from him and made manifest a figure of thought entailing the concept that a kinship corporation was, in a sense of iconic understanding, a self-reproducing unit.

The two principle ‘models for’ social continuity were comprehended as so apart, and perhaps even antagonistic, that they must be given mutually exclusive spatial arrangements. In each of these possible worlds, a different construction of past and future took place — and there was no link between the two modalities.

In the wider perspective, but from a different angle, we may again hypothesize that the iconic version of ancestry is part of a widely cast southern Chinese cultural complex, the focal centre of which is the cultivation of rice. A further hypothesis is that this rice complex, in which the dead propel continuity, is even wider and that southern China in this respect is closely linked with Southeast Asia. These matters must remain outside the scope of this present essay (but see, for instance, Aijmer 2019b).

Let us now return to our comparison. What we have found in our scrutiny of the fragmentary Anqing ethnography is that the cult of the iconic ancestors of Heaven and Earth operates with some minor variations in much the same way as in the prototypical synthesis based on data from the Dongting region. There is the difference though that at New Year the Anqing ancestral hall was regarded as an automaton that from a cosmic metaphysical input created super-ancestors, who in turn created new members of the kinship constellation. In the Dongting area, earth ancestors served the concerns of rice, celestial ancestors saw to children.

Another main variance found was that one dead person was represented by two different tablets simultaneously. It may be that this twofold construct reflected regional influences in the social

landscape. Perhaps a degree of urbanism may have played a part, but then the Anqing ethnography was in this case predominantly rural. It could also be that Anhui formed a zone where a strong lineage presence (as in Hunan and Hubei) met with weaker unilineal kinship arrangements and stronger bilateral interests (as in Jiangsu). The double, and yet simultaneous tablets may have resulted from centuries of cultural negotiation between contrasting social forces.

4. FINAL WORDS

This exploration of Shryock's Anhui ethnography dating from Republican China (also reflecting late imperial China), has added some new layers of understanding to the original account, by means of an analytical deconstruction and a subsequent synthetic reconstruction of the symbolic rebuses involved. What has emerged in this procedure connects in various ways with what we know from other parts of rice cultivating southern China, but how these connections are formed is probably too early in the research process to say. What is clear is that demotic ancestor worship is a far more complex affair than sinology has generally acknowledged. It is only superficially and solely in elite discourses, a strictly Confucian matter. Again, we can trace both expected family resemblances and features that we intuit as 'ungrammatical' in the larger perspective. Variation and the generation of variance are the key concepts for future endeavours, should we wish to go on learning more about the fundamental semantic structures of 'traditional' Chinese culture.

In the human sciences, an explanation is a device that accounts in an interesting way for all the given data, leaving, ideally, no unexplained exceptions. In the present case the Shryock ethnographic data examined are less than complete and so the explanations offered must here be regarded as informed suggestions. Still, and until such time that someone can present a more comprehensive and more interesting account of the data discussed, this attempt at clarification of conventional Anhui forms of ancestral cults should have a bearing on our accumulating knowledge about 'traditional' southern Chinese society.

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