

KINSHIP AND FICTITIOUS KINSHIP IN EASTERN CHINA:  
SOME ASPECTS OF THE CULTURAL SEMANTICS OF  
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An ethnographic account of 1936 from a village in Jiangsu Province, eastern China, reports that one feature of social life there was the extensive use of kinship terms to designate almost everyone living in the village, despite a lack of genuine biological bonds. It is suggested that this comprehensive use reflected a shallow cult of ancestry that drew on a cultural semantic complex, a figuration combining rice, ancestral land and the dissolving and subsequent absorption of the dead into the sphere of divinity. It also reflected a fragmentation in ownership of land. Through this metamorphosis of the dead, separate lines of agnatic kinship were fused into unity. The combination of kin and land into a notion of common local belonging provided a grammar for marriage, women, funerals and celebrations for village people. By internalizing 'agnatic matter' (rice) from iconically coalesced land, people were turned into quasi agnatic relatives and acted accordingly in their daily discourse. Kinship in the real world was openly paralleled by an iconic imagery of kinship in a possible world.

**Keywords:** Eastern China, kinship, social discourse, cultural semantics, ancestry, land, rice

**Introduction<sup>2</sup>**

In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My curiosity will not be repressed. I must be allowed to return once more to Fei Xiaotong's classical ethnographic description of the village of Kaixiangong, situated in the province of Jiangsu near Lake Tai in eastern China. This farming settlement is found in what is known as the 'water country', a stretch of land in which the relatively flat landscape is criss-crossed by waterways connecting lakes. In an earlier period its teeming population was mainly occupied in the cultivation of rice and the production of silk.

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Fei's careful ethnographic observations from about a hundred years ago still excite our curiosity by sometimes being records of social 'heterodoxy'. Such notes invite us to try and reach some novel understandings of Chinese social conventions. By using anthropological thought experimentally, we may hope to illuminate some hidden aspects of pre-modern southern Chinese society.

Fei informs us that this riverine village consisted of eleven areas locally called *yu*. This was the local term for a unit of land surrounded by water. Each *yu* also had its own specific name. The size of a *yu* depended on the distribution of streams and therefore varied a great deal. *Yus* had no clear boundaries. The residential area of the community was a cluster of buildings found at the confluence of three streams, and the houses were distributed on the margins of four of these *yu*. Two temples were found on the outskirts of the residential area (Fei 1939: 20 f).<sup>3</sup> There were altogether 360 houses (pp. 38 ff.). In 1936 the population of Kaixiangong was estimated to be 1,458 (p. 22).

It is reported that these villagers had three characteristic features that set the local population of Kaixiangong apart from those of surrounding areas. One was their peculiar language articulation, a second the circumstance that women did not do any work on the farm, and the third that the women always wore skirts (p. 24).

Fei's work was conducted in the mid-1930s at a time when rapid change occurred in the countryside he investigated, especially with regard to the local production of silk. However, in some important respects Fei's account reflects the features of pre-modern society in this part of China. This present re-reading of Fei's data constitutes an attempt in the realm of historical anthropology, and it has been made with the ambition to throw fresh light on a 'traditional' society of the past.

My focus will be on the social articulation of belonging. I will try to learn what configurations in cultural semantics were at work in the generation of social discourses of togetherness in this village. The ethnographic starting point for my enquiry is Fei's account of this village, where he describes Kaixiangong local kinship, a report that contains this particular observation: All the terms for relatives on the father's side, with the exceptions of those for father, mother, grandfather and grandmother, are used for addressing fellow villagers according to their sex and age and the consanguinity and affinity to the village. The terms for mother-side relatives, with the exception of mother's parents, are used for addressing the people in the village of mother's parents in similar manner. This type of usage of kinship terms serves the function of classifying local and age groups, and defines the different types of social relation towards each of them by that derived from the existing kinship relation (p. 90).

My question is: Why should people in Kaixiangong do this? Fei, writing in the spirit of his teachers Bronisław Malinowski and Raymond Firth, suggests that the function of classifying is also the meaning, sociologically and psychologically, of the act. And yet, we are not really told why people thought that this type of 'false' classificatory labels was important in their application in social life and why people accordingly created a nebulous sort of fictitious kinship system, which did not at all reflect actual biological kinship ties. We may note that this extension of a fictitious kinship domain embraced the residents of one's own village, as well

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<sup>3</sup> In the rest of this paper, references to Fei (1939) will be given only by page number.

as the inhabitants of one's mother's original settlement, but not the villagers in the locality from which one's bride had been recruited. So there was a difference involved in this. This extended social, but somewhat 'frivolous' use of kinship terms is something I wish to discuss in this paper. I believe it is a matter of some importance.

Historical anthropology is often regarded as a hybrid activity. The general anthropological world view is essentially built around the experiential process of fieldwork in actually existing places and situations. Anthropological field investigations imply a keen awareness of a myriad of details that are relevant in themselves and in their interrelation. There are so many features of social life to be observed and recorded for further analysis and synthetic generalization. When anthropologists turn to history in their search for interesting ethnographic data, they will find that existing accounts from the past seldom provide a compatible abundance of detailed information; rather, these sources of data and evidence appear as derived 'from that great dust heap called "history"' (Birrell 1884: 10); accordingly, any anthropological endeavour to deal with such dusty historical data will necessarily suffer. However, in the present case we are fortunate to have access to an early anthropologist's vivid report on a society that no longer exists, and through him to learn about a lost way of life. In his account we read about customs which were later thoroughly transformed.<sup>4</sup>

It is of course true that anthropological leanings vary a great deal, but at least some of us favour an ontological positioning which promises to open up new perspectives. The fieldwork lesson has brought about a holistic world view among anthropologists that may contradict many more conventional ways of thinking about human life. The approach implies an investigative spirit which favours synthesis rather than analysis, and that often puts system and structure before causality. It proposes interim understandings rather than positive vindication. This is not the place to venture into a detailed argument, but a few points may be made for purposes of guidance.

In this article, I will approach a body of historical ethnographic data in light of a theoretical position that allows ontological pluralism (see Aijmer 2001). It proposes that human beings use several cognitive strategies simultaneously in order to embrace the world they experience. An ontology should be understood as a kind of general grammar for the strategic cognizance of world phenomena (Harré 1998: 47 f.). People live with several different yet parallel ontologies, each of which is a particular way of coding emerging information. The anthropological approach also holds the view that the world should not just be seen as a bundle of parallel but ontologically differently natured spheres of existence. We must understand that each such cognitively defined universe may in turn dissolve into many modalities, each modality conditioned by conventionally held pre-suppositions. The stream of life provides alternative and equally acceptable forms of social morphology.

In this attempt at writing historical anthropology I shall be making use of three main and parallel analytical perspectives. One of these perspectives implies an exploration of data in terms of a realist ontology in a study of the 'operational order' of the community. This research contains a strictly sociological strategy for the formation of groups around practical

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<sup>4</sup> Accounts of the contemporary scene in Kaixiangong exist, for example, by Geddes (1963), Fei (1983), Gonzales (1983) and Chang (1999). These accounts are somewhat irrelevant for present purposes.

tasks — processes that in turn give rise to activity-orientated and economically purposeful social landscapes (e.g. Rivers 1924, Verdon 1991, Ingold 1993).

I shall also take advantage of the two other ontological perspectives, which are differently construed one from the other. In the discussion below, an exploration of these two dissimilar realms will bring attention to relevant phenomena of both discursive and iconic origins. The study of the 'discursive order' concerns the intentional performative acts of men and women in a society and their ongoing conversation about themselves and their experiences. As a wide and multifaceted field of social pragmatics, this order implies an attempt to come to terms with indigenous language games in constructing and construing worlds. The ontology involved is a pragmatically conceived universe that emerges in the communicative interaction of an array of people using language and language-like codes (e.g. Baumann 1996, Harré and Gillet 1994, Potter 1996).

Whenever it seems profitable, issues relating to non-verbal visionary symbolism will be included in the discussion. The iconic order is a little understood field of symbolic displays, the expressiveness of which works beyond language and linear causality and is thus without truthful reporting or referential meaning. Language and iconic imagery are entirely different sorts of code, neither being instrumental in reaching into the other. Together icons form universes that are essentially separated from the world of everyday living in that, as they are composed, they create their own realities. That is, they are grounded only in themselves and their construction — some symbols are used to buttress other symbols. Compositions of the iconic order make manifest possible worlds that are essentially different from realist day-to-day existence.

As already mentioned, the narratives that are generated and carried by discursive and iconic kinds of symbolism are all modal in character. A 'cultural modality' thus implies the possibility of a world being construed, not as one universe, but as one of a series of alternative narratives. The actually experienced world is always understood in a contrastive togetherness with what is suggested but unrealized. What it alludes to is what is not.

It may not be so easy for the observer in the field to perceive the different actualities of diverging cultural orders directly — phenomena are not tagged 'discourse' or 'imagery' when observed. When as I do here, we deal with historical data, a great many of these data will appear to belong to the discursive order. The ontological differences implied in their making only become evident through anthropological exploration and accounting. To add to the confusion, we find that, on occasion, many cultural modalities may be enacted simultaneously within the same episode of social performance. Only a careful analysis of their symbolic constitution can tell them apart.

With these few points in mind, we may now approach some aspects of village social life in republican eastern China, Fei Xiaotong's ethnographic account of a Jiangsu village he visited in 1936. The question is: Why did the villagers of Kaixiangong use an array of kinship terms to address biologically non-related people in their own village and in their respective mothers' villages in a systematic manner?

## Family and kinship

Fei's discussion of kinship in the village he studied takes its starting point in the unit of the *jia*. *Jia* 家 is generally translated vaguely as 'family', but Fei understands this basic social cluster, which characterizes village life, as an 'expanded family' (p. 27). Exploring a realist universe, he sees the foundation of the unit essentially as a physical family combination (parents and young children), but he adds that the *jia* often included the sons, including when they had grown up and married. The *jia* would then include the wives and children of these sons as well. In the pragmatics of social life, there could often be additions of other 'patrilineal relatives' according to circumstance. With additions of unrelated persons, the unit would earn the status of being a 'household'. We learn that the *jia* possessed a house of its own, thus forming a domestic group. However, in ethnographic reality the majority of the Kaixiangong *jia* were not extended ('expanded' in Fei's terms) in this way but were made up of just four individuals or so. Fei lists a number of functions he ascribes to the *jia*, including common property, a common budget, labour co-operation, and the care and education of children born to its members (pp. 27 ff.).

Obviously this restriction of the 'expanding' *jia* to a single house could only be temporary because of this expansion. The *jia* was split when the building could no longer provide a measure of discreteness to the participating subgroups. Married sons were prone to start their own *jia* clusters. In this context, Fei points to the opposing forces of integration and disintegration (p. 28).

Fei states in a general way (p. 83) that kinship was the fundamental bond uniting the members of the *jia*, but kinship did not confine itself within this cluster. It extended to a much wider circle and formed the principle of association of larger social units.

From the description of Kaixiangong, we therefore learn that the village also contained wider combinations of kin of this sort, social morphs resulting from the repeated attention given to a certain founding father and his descending sons through time. This larger agnatic kinship cluster was an amalgamation in which members had preserved to a certain degree the relations that originated in the context of a particular *jia* cluster after it had split. It is noted that the divided units did not separate from each other entirely, although they were often spread around in the terrain. In the longer perspective these clusters with historical connections were only related in a subdued way, not sharing any property and being independent economically. Each newly formed *jia* was marked by having its own stove for cooking and, correspondingly, its own inscription of the Stove God. Nonetheless such split clusters were tied together by a bundle of social obligations. Some *jia* lived in adjacent houses and continued to share the space of the original house's large front room for various tasks. There was then a fair amount of mutual co-operation and intercourse (pp. 60, 83 f., 165). The intensity of co-operation varied with differing degrees of proximity between houses. It also grew weaker with the continuous additions of new collateral lines and the remoter generations that emerged from them (pp. 84 f.).

The *jia* clusters were further regulated by a principle of rigid exogamy, the women involved in the affinal inclusion were always recruited so that they were socially distanced by a clear difference between the two marriage parties' long-term agnatic belonging. The wives who were incorporated into a *jia* were thus outsiders to the set of men (fathers and sons)

that gave it structure. The choice of a daughter-in-law was always a parental obligation (p. 30). Daughters were also agnatic relatives, but later in life were married away and absorbed by other foreign clusters. Daughters could not inherit property from their parents (pp. 30, 40 ff.).

Marriages were thus arranged according to rules of exogamy that would exclude women of the same wider kinship cluster that the bride-takers belonged to, but they would not as a matter of principle leave out candidates that shared the same family name as the groom. This feature seems to have been rather unusual in the broad context of southern Chinese society (p. 86). Fei reports that there was a marked preference for village territorial exogamy, but the rule was not mandatory, and Kaixiangong villagers could marry each other, but this was not common. It seems that most wives were from other villages (p. 86).

It was mentioned above that over time many *jia* clusters that had split off came to form a network of units that could trace their common 'splitting history' back through the generations and follow their agnatic ascending links up to a point where, in principle, they encountered a founding male ancestor and his wife. This network, based on the participants' analysis of agnatically ascending kinship, formed a recognized higher-order cluster called a *zu* 族. In Kaixiangong the search for earlier ancestry was limited to five generations back in time. This rule of a generational limitation prevented the formation of very wide-ranging *zu* clusters and instead promoted the establishment of a plurality of such from one another distinguished 'clans'. These *zu* clusters were independent but had a then completely erased togetherness in the past. They would still share their old family name. My use of the term 'clan' here should be seen as an attempt to avoid confusion. The anthropologically much used term 'lineage' is not applicable here, as these Kaixiangong clusters did not share any corporate property. Fei himself translates the term *zu* as 'clan', and I follow his usage (pp. 57, 300). What we meet in the ethnography is a local discursive notion, *zu*, signifying an agnatic cluster of common belonging of five generations' depth.

There were twenty-nine surnames in the village in Fei's time. Fei notes that there was a tendency towards a spatial concentration of kinship-related clusters, a feature that indicated a close relationship between residence and kinship relations. In other words, there was a tendency for the various *jia* bearing the same surname — probably because of formerly lost kinship ties — to have lived in adjacent residential areas. There were at the time 359 clan clusters in the village, 98 of which wore the family name of Zhou, but the latter were dispersed over four *yu* settlements in the village. However, there was a dense agglomeration in one of these places (p. 49), and in another two neighbourhoods there were two more condensations of Zhou people. Two more Zhou *zu* lived in yet another settlement. However, we also learn that the number of surnames in the village and their spatial dispersal in the terrain indicated a multitude of smaller clan clusters and a low correlation of consanguineal and local ties (p. 92 f.).

We learn that, in the pragmatics of village life, keeping a strict genealogical account of clan clusters was not so important. There were no written documents tracing genealogical links. People's memory of ascent and descent was not very exact. Actually, sets of 'family trees' were kept by the 'priests' in the two temples, but they were not used for tracking kinship ties between living villagers, but rather to keep a record of the relevant ancestors to whom

sacrifices were due. Siblings were not introduced into these lists of spirits. The enumerated ancestors were removed from the family tree after five generations, so more remote connections could not be traced at all. Fei adds that if these restrictions had been followed closely, there would have been one division for each *zu* for each generation, and that did not happen. The *zu* was in fact seldom divided. It was rare for a *zu* to spill over into other settlements, and Fei did not find any *zu* with members in other villages (p. 85). It was said that at the time of his investigation the average size of a local *zu* was some eight *jia* (pp. 84 ff.).

Fei devotes a long Appendix (pp. 287-296) to a structural and functional analysis of Chinese relationship terms that are relevant for his account, terms which he stresses should be understood in their sociological and psychological perspectives. In the present context we need not be concerned with this issue.

I have referred earlier to the systematic use of kinship terms between villagers who were not relatives, and between people of different villages who were connected by established uterine *cum* agnatic ties. This discursive use of terms in the construction of a fictitious kinship system is the theme of the article. This broad habit did not have any truthful realistic references but was entirely conventional. Later we shall be looking for possible iconic underpinnings for this conformist use of ontologically realist falsehood.

Fei's view of this fictitious kinship system is that it provided an extension of kinship-based emotional attitudes to embrace persons who were not actually related, as the words imply. This usage did not necessarily involve an extension of specific privileges and obligations. However, Fei maintains that there was a more definite purpose in this extended use of relationship terms. Each term carried certain psychological attitudes corresponding to the intimate relationship it was originally devised for. This may well have been the case, but I suggest that there were other factors at play that, from a holistic perspective, could provide a somewhat more satisfactory explanation of this phenomenon of a system of fictitious kinship.

This kinship system embracing non-related people existed as a discursive reality in many ways, creating a fictive, large kinship group on a village basis (pp. 90 f.). This assumed level of kinship clustering was also expressed in the almost obligatory application of village-based exogamy (p. 52). This discursive convention of the exclusion of possible local marriage partners was not supported by true kinship considerations, which would, in principle, accept women from any foreign *zu*, even if these carried the same family name or lived in the same village (p. 86).

The structural duality of the foundation of a *jia* cluster (agnatic/affinal) implied a measure of social contradiction. I have addressed this dynamic paradox in marriages in Kaixiangong elsewhere (Aijmer 2005) and shall not repeat my detailed suggestions there in this paper. Some rough pointers may nonetheless be of use. My understanding of the *jia* relies on an exploration of the iconic use of symbolism in the construction of alternative yet parallel worlds. In discursive terms the various *jia* were each dominated by men linked by agnatic ties, incorporated women in marriage becoming sort of absorbed by their husbands. While this view was recognized in social conversation, it was also true in another sense, especially when, as was customary, systematic cross-cousin marriages were favoured, women formed another kin cluster within the *jia*, as all wives were agnatically related. In pragmatic social life there was some variation here, but the female cluster within was always there and was articulated in

symbolic acts. This duality was also expressed in terms of a clear division of economic activities: women produced silk, men cultivated rice.

Women had a double generative power, giving birth to new children and transforming raw foodstuffs into consumable food. This double generative capacity (children + food) was not allowed to compete with the corresponding generative force intrinsic in the grains of rice plants and grains embedded in the fields. This sphere was men's work. Rice was agnatic matter and a gift of the dead ancestors. To consume 'agnatic rice' from the inherited family fields in togetherness created a community of agnatic relatives. It was a paradox that it was the outsider women who transformed rice grains into edible rice with the help of heat. This was a parallel to the notion that a new-born child belonged to its mother and was only later taken possession of ('consumed') by its biological father. While women were ritually organized around the Stove God in the kitchen, men combined with their ancestors in the front room of the house.

## **Ancestors**

In an earlier study of the Kaixiangong material, I examined in some detail the ancestral cult that prevailed in the village (Aijmer 2015). In the present context I will only give a brief outline of my previous suggestions regarding this topic. Ancestral tablets were kept in the main hall of a house for five generations back in time and were placed in a shrine on the north wall facing south. It was also in this room that a dead person received a tablet and so became an ancestor. Here too the dead were confined and mourned. After the coffin had been removed to a new tomb, the presence of the dead was marked by another tablet featuring the deceased's name. The tablet was placed on the ancestral shrine, where it would receive offerings at festivals, as well as on the relevant dates of birth and death. After passing through a time depth of five generations the ancestor was erased, his or her tablet being taken away without further consideration.

It was found that the relationships between the living descendants and the spirits of their ancestors were not clearly or systematically formulated by the people themselves. The general discursive view was that the spirits lived in a world that was very similar to theirs. Economically they were partially dependent on the sacrificial gifts of their descendants (p. 30). The deceased were supposed to have a controlling function within the domestic group (pp. 30 f., 76, 102).

Five generations of deceased members of the *jia* 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. The data suggest that these erased forebears were lost for good. What happened then to the actual physical tablet is not known. Ancestors denied further social existence left behind a sort of metaphysical vacuum. The same fate awaited the dead in their other version of physical remains in a coffin placed in a tomb among the mulberry trees on the dykes of the rice fields. After five generations these tombs too were abandoned, the coffin being reburied by outside charities 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 (Aijmer 2003: 155-63), but there was a difference in Kaixiangong in that the coffins were kept above the ground in sheds so that the decaying bodies did not become a part of the earth that was cultivated (see further Aijmer 2023). Nonetheless they were placed among the rice fields, as well as among the mulberry trees linked with silk production.

Written lists of the dead were kept in the two temples, which were situated on the outskirts of the village territory. The village inhabitants were each orientated towards one of these 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 necessarily 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 ascent in a single line. They gave no information that was not also found on the domestic tablets. It seems that these 'family trees' had a ritual importance in their own right. The lists had to be deposited outside the village proper. They were subject to the five-generation rule and its consecutive process of elimination and were handled by some ritual officiant who was not really part of the village scene. The two temples did not function as alternatives to ancestral halls. It could be that the temple lists of dead, seen as a limited accumulation of names, gave shape to an iconic collective. This assembly in death was known through written characters, the resulting text signifying a period of transformation. Ethnography is vague here, and so is its interpretation.

My reading of the Kaixiangong scene suggests that all these ritual displays should be seen together as a cluster of iconic imagery that carried a symbolic story line, understood in the following direction:

The listed dead featuring in a text kept in a temple were physically removed in space from their former social sphere of existence. Inside the temple, their ancestry was transformed into divinity. After five generations they had become drawn up into a deity and become part of it. This transfer, I have suggested, was between two spheres of non-human existence, and as a process it was not so dissimilar to what takes place in such forms of ancestral worship, where all the descendants are drawn up into a first lineage founder and worshipped as integral aspects of him (e.g. Aijmer 1967). In the Kaixiangong case the ancestral de-individualization took place only after a period of respite, at a point when no one living would remember the now evaporating dead. The dead were transformed from being ancestors into becoming part of the divine sphere. The best suggestion that could be made on the basis of the available data is that the dead of the village became integrated parts of the two major gods in the Kaixiangong temples.

The beneficial symbolic force of the dead was channelled through the two deities, this also being an energy that concerned the cultivation of rice in irrigated fields. In earlier phases of their death careers, the domestic ancestors would have maintained some social control through social discourses but, predominantly using iconic means, they were helpful in constructing social continuity by way of promoting future children.

In their tombs they also protected the mulberry trees, and thus the silk business. Seemingly, somehow they also reached out to the rice fields with their blessings. Although being buried above ground on the dykes, they were still among the fields. Whereas in other southern Chinese communities the dead in their underground graves created rice directly, in

Kaixiangong this process of creation was only achieved in a roundabout way of long duration. This latter path implied the complete extinction of the ancestors as ancestors and their survival in eternity as components of a god (cf. Aijmer 2019).

The two Kaixiangong gods were thought to be responsible and provided blessings for the fields of rice, being brought out from their temples and celebrated in the open in grand rice rituals, including theatrical performances. These two gods were thus essentially the containers of the absorbed dead of the village community, celebrated in togetherness, and without any obvious kinship discriminations.

## Rice

In our search for an explanation for the use of kinship terms between non-relatives, it is now time to broaden the enquiry by drawing on a holistic perspective. We now proceed to examine the features of the cultivation of rice in the village of Kaixiangong. All over 'traditional' southern China rice was the staple food that sustained the people. In a realistic worldview, rice was a builder of continuity in that the basic consumption of rice carried society physically through time into the future. For their foodstuffs people in Kaixiangong were entirely dependent on the produce of their own farms. The cultivation of rice was everywhere surrounded by many rituals, often linked to the work of the ancestors. These symbolically intensified events appeared according to the passage of time indicated by the moon and sun calendars and were celebrated as important festivals, mobilizing communities into action in ritual episodes. We must examine the situation in Kaixiangong as it was recorded in the 1930s (pp. 154-73).

The land was mainly, but not exclusively, used for the cultivation of wet rice. In the winter supplementary crops of wheat and rapeseeds were grown on higher land. The rice cycle started in the month of June, when the nurseries were prepared and sown. There was no ritual ceremony at the beginning of the agricultural labour and no particular given landmark for starting the work. The main fields were under preparation, while the nurseries produced shoots. The soil was made ready for planting, and irrigation systems were geared up. Transplantation of the young shoots from the nursery farm to the main field was a major part of rice cultivation and followed about one month after sowing. After this work was completed, there followed a period of weeding, often under heavy rains. In the early part of September the rice blossomed, and at the end of that month it bore fruit. During the latter part of October, harvesting started and continued up to December. Then followed threshing. The grains were first hulled in a wooden mill, after which there was another process of refined husking with a mortar and pestle. After that the grain was ready for consumption. In this village animals were not used in the work, everything being carried out with human labour. The tool was a long-shafted hoe, and ploughs were not used.

Although actual ownership of land, seen as a mapping of rights at the time of the investigation, are not of concern in this essay; according to the local theory of land tenure, land was divided into two layers, the surface and the subsoil. The owner of the subsoil was the land's title-holder (p. 177). Ownership of the land was always held by a *jia* cluster, which

supplied its male members to the work on the farm (p. 178). A single plot might be owned by several persons, these obviously representing different *jia*, and each of these persons held a part in it. All the farms were divided between *jia* for cultivation. The full owners, lessees and tenants did not form clear-cut or water-tight classes. The same *jia* might possess all the rights to some parts of its land, but it might have leased another part from or to others, parts of which might belong to absentee landlords (p. 192).

There were no dykes separating the parts owned by different persons. The boundaries of holdings did not necessarily coincide with the dykes constructed for the regulation of water. They were immaterial demarcations, and were marked only by planting two trees at each end of the plot on the dykes. The boundaries of individual holdings became very complex as the result of successive divisions upon inheritance. The farms were divided into narrow belts, with a width of a few tens of metres (pp. 175, 194).

Fei notes that the non-contiguity of farms was widely observed in China, and this was also the case in Kaixiangong. According to Fei, the frequency of land division should not be taken as the origin of this mosaic, but it definitely intensified the scattering of holdings. The size of the farm was small, and the holding of each owner was scattered widely in separate places. Each *jia* possessed several plots of lands widely separated. The plots were small, and each *jia* had three to seven of them. In a single plot there might be several owners, each of whom was responsible for his own patch (pp. 159 f., 195 f.). The village land as a unit was thus seen as an intricacy of interwoven plots of land which in some ways defined belonging. There were no stretches of corporate ownership singling out any particular *zu* as special.

## Iconic imagery

At periods of natural disaster — flooding, drought, locusts — it was customary for villages in the area to call in the magistrate from the magistracy capital to perform ‘magical’ acts and organize ritual processions against the evil. This was a sort of standard pattern in southern China, where the representatives of the state were called on to restore natural imbalances that had occurred in the realm. There was no conventional local resource for fighting the unexpected. The magistrate, resident in the prefectural capital, also performed such services in Kaixiangong (p. 167).

Apart from this official involvement in restoring the natural order, locally there was a concern with more existential matters. It was not only that land in general had a particular value to the people, but that the property inherited by the members of a *jia* had a very specific value for it. Men inherited their land from their fathers. The Kaixiangong sentiment regarding land has been understood as originating in this agnatic kinship relation, a bond reinforced by ancestor worship. This attitude was manifest in the personal attachment felt towards a *jia*’s particular plots of land. ‘Religious’ belief in the importance of the continuity of family descendants found its concrete expression in the continued holding of ancestral land. To sell a piece of land inherited from one’s father offended the ethical sense (p. 182). Local land was something that produced local rice, which was a manifestation of the dead of a local kinship-defined group. This latter point is somewhat evasive in Kaixiangong, as their dead were not

buried in the earth but placed in sheds among the mulberry trees. The associative connection between ancestors and rice cultivation was more complex in this region than in other parts of southern China (see Aijmer 2023).

Everywhere in the south the cycle of rice cultivation was reflected in the annual calendars of festivals, some of these feasts appearing in the solar sequence, some in the lunar sequence. In the spring, in the Qing Ming solar period, in April, people usually went to their ancestors' graves to sacrifice to them and engage in commensality with the dead. This event served as an invitation to the dead to make a return visit to their living progeny later in the summer. This ritual phase was correlated with the sowing of rice in the nurseries. The dead were given rice in a double form, at the graves and (as seeds) into the agricultural ground.

Also in Kaixiangong, people visited their dead in their tombs on the dykes. We have no description of this event, but possibly it was regarded as a 'rejoicing feast' (p. 152). The connection with the sowing of the nurseries should have been somewhat vague, as the latter event did not happen until the month of June, rice here obviously being a late variety. Fei also notes that '[t]here is no ritual ceremony at the beginning of the agricultural work and every household is free to determine its own time for starting' (p. 162). Obviously he does not link the Qing Ming events with the sowing of rice. However, villagers might still have experienced such a connection.

Whether the dead in Kaixiangong actually made a return visit to their living progeny is somewhat doubtful. In the general scheme of things, this social call should have occurred in or around the Duan Wu festival, generally celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth moon (around midsummer), after the transplantation of the rice shoots. Fei describes the Duan Wu event as a 'rejoicing feast', including a sacrifice to the Kitchen God. There is no mention of the spectacular dragon-boat races that characterized this period in other parts in the south. Perhaps this reflected the fact that there were no corporate lineage organizations in the village to keep boats, nor were there any lineage founders around to be celebrated in special ancestral halls. The dragon-boat races were generally intuited as bringing blessings to the coming crops, and they concerned both transplantation and weeding (Aijmer 1964). So perhaps the Kaixiangong villagers could not count on this sort of transcendental help. It should also be noted that transplantation did not take place here until, it seems, early July and thus much later than the Duan Wu festival.

It could also be mentioned that there was a sort of harvest feast on the first day of the tenth moon. This is described as '[s]acrifice to ancestors' first rice' (p. 152). This date, given by Fei, may refer to his mentioning a harvest-linked festival involving theatricals and the display of images of the two gods among the audience watching the public dramas (pp. 101 f.).

It has already been mentioned that rice was agnatic matter and a gift of the dead ancestors. This was an iconic figure of thought and a common cultural intuition that existed all over southern China (Aijmer 2003: Ch. 21). To consume 'agnatic rice' from the family fields in togetherness created a community of agnatic relatives. Kinship constellations like *jia* and *zu* were not only really biologically defined groups, but also, simultaneously and iconically, they were seen as clusters of 'co-eaters of agnatic rice'. In Kaixiangong there was a marked reverence for rice. Rice should not be trampled underfoot or be wasted. Even sour rice should not be carelessly thrown away. The proper manner was to eat all 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 notes that the 'rice taboo' gave rise to a vague feeling of fear of supernatural interference in daily life (p. 100).

People in Kaixiangong ate their own sacrosanct rice cultivated in their own fields inherited from their ancestors, but unlike what was current in other areas, we have noted here that there was no obvious and direct link between calendrical ancestral worship and the production of rice. We have also noted that there were no corporate estates found in relation to the tenure of village land, but instead a mixture of ownership in constant change, mainly by splitting inheritance. In Kaixiangong the 'agnatic source' that was land, so important in southern Chinese metaphysics, was, as a variant, not directly connected with extended families or clans/lineages. Instead the idea of land as a source of social continuity was tied here to the village as a whole, including a multiplicity of clans. In an iconic universe the terrain was cultivated by peasants sharing the same belonging, not by way of biological kinship relations, but by ties to a bounded locality. Sharing by compacting the manifold potential of ancestral sources of land into one, as a locally conceived collective matter without distinctions, had further iconic and discursive consequences.

## **Discussion and suggestions**

Symbols, so far as we know, occur in clusters with systemic interrelationships. The systemic nature of iconic symbolism, which we must take for granted—in fact there is not much option—allows us to impute from the ethnography analytically retrieved iconic significance back into the given data, like the reading of a rebus. In this way, anthropologists will produce a vision of a *possible* society and will do so by borrowing the historical realist facts and dressing them up in their own special knowledge of iconic processes. The explanatory force of this forthcoming narrative will rest on their ability to account for all the given data, leaving aside as few inexplicable 'exceptions' as possible. What is requested is that their elucidations of ethnographic information should not only account for all the given data, but also, their suggestions must be capable of accommodating all possible new data that might emerge from future diligence in the ethnographic or historical fields. The more data the explanation accommodates, the stronger is its exegetic power. The present essay in historical anthropology has explored these symbolological methods. It has dealt with a complex material drawn from an anthropological investigation made about one hundred years ago. It aims at an explanation that also accommodates a vision of the unceasing variation that is characteristic of the Chinese social landscape.

The discursive use of kinship terms in Kaixiangong drew on two abstract sources, one to be found in the body of concepts relating to a realistic ontology, the other existing in a visionary iconic ontology that produced a figure of symbolic association between [rice — land — death].

The systematic linguistic kinship terms in Kaixiangong were used to signify various categories of relatives and were derived from a world understood from a realistic perspective in which there were sets of people who were known to be united by way of biological bonds

and chains of such bonds, combined with the fact that people generate people. Fei sorts the words used into classes indicating address, reference and direct description (pp. 288-96). Here in our present context we need not engage in this particular empirical discussion. What is interesting in this enquiry is that, in their discursive use, the terms denoting the agnatic father/son relationships were pragmatically loaded with notions of conventional dominance. Differing and generationally marked labels were in social use to indicate chains of fathers in an ascending line that stretched back in time to form a span of four generations. On the mother's side, the corresponding terminology comprised three generations back in the mother's agnatic line of ascent.

The mother would, of course, originally have been of a different clan. There were also other female, but tacitly subsumed kinship clusters within a domestic group, the results of the favoured and common cross-cousin marriages (MoBroDa, rarely FaSiDa). Discursively these clusters were totally unrepresented, but found an iconic expression in the cult surrounding the Stove God (Aijmer 2005: 54 f.). Women (wives, but also daughters) were alienated from any work with agricultural land. Apparently their foreignness (present or future) and their female capacity to generate (birth, food, silk) could in an iconic, agnatic and puristic understanding contaminate the generative force of death in the ancestral land that was devoted to rice. Women instead engaged in the production of silk. A 'sheet' of especially good moth eggs were provided by their own mothers after their marriage into another clan. The mothers had also conveyed to them a set of particular skills. Thus the trade of silk was passed on along a line of foremothers. Agnation connected with rice, uterinity with silk. Agnatic links of females combined in tacit clusters, iconically associated with the female generation of food [grain  $\Rightarrow$  food] and also the production of children. In a case of birth the new mother was assisted by her own mother and her own agnatic relatives, and it was only later that the father took possession of his newborn child.

The kin terms for 'realist' relatives also appeared in an iconic universe where they were applied to sets of people who were only intuited as 'agnatically related' because of their regular consumption of locally grown rice, harvested from the 'pluralistic' local land, which in turn was connected with the collective of the local community's dead. It was the ancestral correlation in iconic semantics [forefathers = land] which made the rice grains agnatically loaded and so special that they actually created shared kinship among those who consumed them. The eaters of this rice nearly consumed their ancestors, thus forming a sort of internalized unity with the past.<sup>5</sup> This iconic collective of anonymous ancestors was formed out of the mixing and integration of clan belongings, something that had come about by the dead being equally absorbed into unity, that is, into the beings of the two local gods.

What was special about Kaixiangong was that the ancestors were not, as in most other areas of southern China, buried in the ground, but remained in tombs above the land, but still placed among the fields.<sup>6</sup> After five generations of worship all recollections of the dead were erased and, as mentioned, the deceased were 'drawn up' into two local gods, gods that were

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<sup>5</sup> This figure of thought seems to follow the cultivation of rice in the wider Southeast Asian region. See, for instance, Bloch (1989) and Estévez (2023: Ch. 17, 18, 19).

<sup>6</sup> In large areas of Jiangnan in eastern China, earth burials were similarly shunned traditionally. Here cremation was an alternative to final abandonment. See further Aijmer (2023).

seen as responsible for the harvest of rice. This unorthodoxy in ancestral worship, its limitations and temporality, certainly reflected a confusion in the distribution of landholdings in the community. The lack of collectively owned landed property because of its fragmentation over time by inheritance had led to the formation of clans rather than landed lineages. All villagers who ate the local common rice cultivated in the village domain were by way of the inherent, collective agnatic force of rice turned iconically into relatives of a sort. What should have been a plurality of agnatic forces, each going with a special estate, were here mixed into a blend of what was intuited as general ancestral power. To protect this particular and embracing iconic order, the dead were not actually sunk into graves dug into the land. The individuality of the dead must disappear; as real persons they must not be part of the agricultural soil. The dead must be collectivized, losing all traces of personality, before being allowed as common village dead to influence the growth of rice in the village fields. The improvised fictitious kinship system was a sort of counterpoint to the very thoroughly structured grand patrilineal lineages of southeastern China (Freedman 1958, 1966).

Kaixiangong's fictitious system of kinship was translated into symbolic action in at least two important spheres. One was village exogamy, which was not mandatory but existed with a strong tendency to seek brides in other villages. Wives were from abroad, but mostly they came from places with which one had had earlier affinal relations — cross-cousin marriages were common. So kinship terms denoting relatives on the mother's side were also extended to embrace people in general in those villages that earlier had acted as bride-givers. In contrast to this extension, Kaixiangong's fictitious kinship system was not employed to embrace the village people from which ego had got his wife. They remained outsiders. There is an ethnographic problem here. If male ego's bride and his mother came from the same foreign village — the result of cross-cousin marriages — there would be a contradiction in practice. The social practice of distancing in this regard could perhaps be seen more as reflecting a conventional discursive definition of bride-givers as outsiders.

Our conclusion is that people in Kaixiangong talked to, or about, their fellow villagers as relatives because their iconic intuitions told them that what they ate in a sort of togetherness—agnatically loaded rice—created kinship. They differentiated between the two modalities of 'real kinship' and 'iconic kinship', and there are no signs that the two were ever mixed up, or led to any confusion. As Fei suggests, the only effect of a translation from the real to the iconic sphere may have been of a psychological kind, and it may have promoted a good neighbourliness. But this possible effect cannot be seen as the origin of the discursive practice.

We have now reached an answer to the question which has motivated this essay in historical anthropology. As long as this answer remains unchallenged by some better suggestions or new ethnographic data, it will serve as an explanation for a social phenomenon that was part of the building of southern Chinese systems of belonging. 'Traditional' China was an ocean of family resemblances, and ultimately it will be our understanding of this ever occurring variation that will allow us to approach and explore the 'underlying' principles of its social grammar.

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