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The Oral and Ritual Culture of Chinese Women Bridal Lamentations of Nanhui

Abstract

This is the first study in a Western language on bridal lamentations of the Yangtze River delta region of China. It is also the first to examine Han Chinese lamentations as examples of oral traditional literature with a particular ritual and rhetorical strategy. Chinese women play only a minimal role in Chinese ritual culture, which focuses primarily on ancestor rituals performed by men. Bridal and funeral lamentations, performed by women to an audience of their family and the local community, are significant because they represent the two major occasions in the life of a woman when she is allowed ritual self-expression in a public forum. Four major song portions from different parts of the lamentation cycle are translated and analyzed here. It is argued that the lamentations consist of formulaic sung chants comprising a mixture of quasi-narratives, rhetorical persuasions, blessings, and curses, which are all performed at different stages of the lamentation ritual.

Keywords: China—marriage—ritual—oral tradition—laments—women

CHINESE WOMEN PLAYED only a limited role in China's rich ritual culture of the imperial era. At the popular level, Chinese ritual forms focused mainly on the consolidation of the forces of yang 陽 and the expulsion of the forces of yin 陰. Women, for example, had no role in the ritual plays of exorcism performed by village men during the New Year festival. In these performances, known as *nuo* 傩, the peasant players, wearing costumes and masks, call on the deities to enter their bodies and exorcise the yin forces of ill fortune and pestilence from the village. Women, whose bodies represent the concentration of yin essence, were necessarily excluded from participation in *nuo*, and were not even allowed to touch the costumes and instruments, although they were allowed to witness the ceremonies. To remove from their own bodies any taint of association with yin, village men taking part in *nuo* were required to sleep apart from their wives before performance and undertake other purification measures (WANG Zhaoqian 1995, 605; McLAREN 1998, 88). Similarly, women, played only a minor role in the ancestral rituals performed at the time of the Qingming festival; their contribution was restricted to the preparation of offerings and the cleansing of the ritual vessels.¹ Women were responsible for the upkeep of the domestic shrine but were excluded from the ancestral hall (*citang* 祠堂) (FREEDMAN 1979, 283, 285–86; CHAO 1983, 61). This ritual segregation along gender lines was paralleled in public life by the general exclusion of women from village and lineage meetings, and other public forums.

An important but little-studied exception to the male (yang) dominated ritual culture of China is the tradition of lamentations performed by women at weddings and funerals. In wedding lamentation songs (*kujia* 哭嫁 or *kuchujia* 哭出嫁) and funeral lamentation songs (*kusang* 哭喪)² women take center stage. The performances are lengthy (wedding lamentations take two to three days) and theatrical (lamentations include chanting, gestures, movements, and sobbing). Although conducted in the home or directly outside it, the performance is nonetheless “public,” in that the audience includes the woman's immediate family, kin members within the village,

and onlookers from the general community. The eloquent, histrionic woman performing *kujia* stands in contrast to the silent passive woman who stands, head veiled and dumb, in standard depictions of marriage ceremonies. Male members of the elite barely mention women's lamentations in their own writings, which means that this tradition is largely unrecorded and its history possibly irrecoverable. However, there is evidence that elite men were well aware of the power of lamentation rituals and regarded them as an aberration from accepted female norms. The loquacious woman was mercilessly satirized in the occasional story, as in the case of the fifteenth-century tale "The Shrew," which has seemingly drawn on the lamentation culture of that time (MCLAREN 2000). In his twentieth-century novel *Family*, Ba Jin dealt scathingly with "superstitious" practices, including ritual lamentations.³

Over the past two decades, Western anthropologists have done substantial work on lamentation culture, all of which has been based on Hong Kong women.⁴ Until the early 1980s, political conditions made investigation of lamentations in mainland China impossible as lamentations were suppressed because they were considered to be remnants of "feudal culture." Since the economic reform period, initiated in 1978, research into women's lamentations have been included in the revival of mainland Chinese scholarly interest in China's past civilization. If recent mainland Chinese scholarship is any guide, vestigial examples of wedding and funeral lamentations can be found in Chinese minority areas amongst the Tujia of Hubei and elsewhere, the Yi of Yunnan, the Sala of Qinghai, the Miao, Yao, Hani, as well as amongst the Han people.⁵ It is believed that in imperial times, lamentations were prevalent throughout Han China and the borderlands. Within mainstream Han Chinese culture, however, there are apparently very few surviving examples. It is possible that the remnant tradition surviving to the present day in Nanhui, a county to the south of Shanghai, is one of the few relatively complete remaining examples belonging to Han Chinese culture, as distinct from Hakka or non-Han minority culture.⁶

The purpose of this study is to add to the emerging picture of lamentation culture in the twentieth century by including perspectives from a region firmly in the Han cultural heartland, such as Nanhui, which is located in the lower Yangtze River delta. Are there any differences between lamentations on the periphery of China, amongst the Hakka and Cantonese women of Hong Kong, for example, and those located in the lower Yangtze delta? Initial indications are that the commonalities outweigh the differences. In both lamentation cultures, women learn by oral transmission a complex repertoire of formulaic chants from their mothers and other women in their village. In the period before they depart their natal home to live permanently

with their husband, they perform a lamentation ritual over several days, addressing each member of their family in turn. The lamentations, sung in non-rhymed verse in a steady rhythmic chant, center around the bride's grievance at being "sold" in marriage to a family that will probably mistreat her, her sadness and anxiety on leaving her natal home, and her own lowly status and unfortunate destiny. The mother, for her part, urges her daughter to fit in with the groom's family and to obey the mother-in-law. The lamentation is genuinely moving for the bride and all participants, and is often punctuated with weeping, as the bride and her audience break down in tears. Brides whose lamentations win the admiration of the audience are acclaimed as "talented" and win respect within their community.

There are also many variations in different lamentation traditions. To understand lamentations it is essential to understand the specificities of that region: its kinship structure, environment, and work practices. For example, women of the Pearl River delta learnt their lamentations in girls' houses where unmarried girls spent most of their days after puberty (WATSON 1994, 38–39; WATSON 1996, 115). In this case, the oral transmission of bridal lamentations strengthens close friendships between "sworn sisters" from within the village. In other regions, sworn sister relations and girls' houses are not a part of local customs and thus are not reflected in lamentation traditions. The lamentations that are the focus of this study were performed by Pan Cailian, a woman from Shuyuan, located on the southeastern tip of Nanhui. The coastal environment, diet of rice, fish and shellfish, a kinship structure that gives a dominant role to the maternal uncles, older brother and his wife, and, above all, the cotton culture in which women were immersed, are all indispensable ingredients in the imagery of Shuyuan lamentations.

Beyond adding another regional example to lamentation research in general, a further intention in this study is to examine the lamentations as an example of orally-transmitted culture used in ritual performance. The ritual nature of lamentations has been discussed by other scholars, for example, Jiang Bin, Zhang Zhengping, Fred Blake, and Elizabeth Johnson.⁷ Eugene ANDERSON has also noted the auspicious, "magical" power of the "Talking Songs" of Hong Kong boat women, performed at wedding ceremonies (1973, 19–20). Chinese scholars, however, tend to stress the function of lamentations as a form of social protest in an age of "feudalism," especially resistance to arranged marriages (e.g., TAN 1990, 121–40). Some Chinese scholars link the origin of lamentations with an ancient practice of marriage by abduction, which is believed to have taken place during the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society.⁸ Western anthropologists, in analyzing the significance of women's lamentations, see the laments

as less a form of social protest than as an expressive genre performed by the bride at a time of transition in her life. According to BLAKE, lamentations are the “licensed expression of the bride—in some sense they constitute her personal commentary on the rites” (1978, 17). JOHNSON sees lamentations as essentially a solitary performance of the bride. She contrasts the group nature of male tomb ritual with the single lamenting woman (1988, 159). She also notes that women’s lamentations, in spite of their recountal of grievances and implicit criticism, do not threaten major male concerns. For this reason lamentations at weddings and funerals are tolerated, or even considered appropriate, as female concerns (JOHNSON 1988, 157). Lamentations thus reflect the non-corporate, individual status of Hakka women whose power “derives primarily from their personal attributes”(159). For JOHNSON, lamentations constitute a form of ritual where “individual grievances could be publicly and poetically expressed” (160).

Rubie Watson, in her study of the lamentation tradition of Ha Tsuen, also in the Hong Kong New Territories, adds a further social dimension to these earlier studies. She notes in particular the role of older women in the girls’ homes where they served as ritual instructors of young girls and presided over marriage ceremonies: “It is their job to empty the bride-daughter and to reconstruct her as a fertile wife” (WATSON 1996, 107). Watson argues that lamentations and marriage rituals served to transform young girls into married women and to express the ambiguous emotions and divided loyalties of brides as they left their natal home. Through lamentations, brides strove to carry out their duties to both their natal and their married families in order to achieve a feminine version of the Confucian virtue of filial piety. Lamentations are thus not the product of “an autonomous female realm,” nor could they be called “oppositional” (WATSON 1996, 126) but are rather an opportunity for women to reflect on “the contradictions inherent in their own lives as daughters, friends and wives” (129).

This study, conducted by two scholars in popular literature and the oral arts, while owing a considerable debt to the earlier work of anthropologists, will draw primarily from perspectives belonging to studies of orally-transmitted and ritual culture, such as sung narratives and verse epics, which are regarded as examples of “oral-traditional texts.” From these perspectives, *kujia* and *kusang* can be understood as a particular genre of oral literature with its own particular linguistic attributes and ritual or social functions. Lamentations are thus subject to the conventions of a genre shaped by generations of participants over time to serve a purpose of significance within their community.⁹ As will be discussed below, lamentations consist of formulaic sung chants comprising a heterogenous mixture of quasi-narratives, invocations for good fortune, blessings and curses, and, above all, rhetorical persuasion, all per-

formed at different stages of the lamentation ritual. As with other examples of orally-transmitted culture, the repertoire is rich but nonetheless highly formulaic, with particular conventions governing how the performer expresses herself. The implication of this is that although the expression of grievance and sorrow underlies the entire lamentation process, the grievances are not so much individual as collective. In other words, the formulaic nature of the repertoire, stored in the memory of the performer, dictates what one should or must say at various points of high ritual significance in the lamentation drama.

As has been noted for lamentation traditions in the Pearl delta, there is a “magical” aspect to the act of lamentation. In the Nanhui region, participants interpret their lamentation as a form of verbal sorcery. During lamentations a woman takes on vibrant ritual power, a power that allows her to bless or to curse, to praise or to blame, and to bring good or bad fortune on the heads of individuals in her family. Underlying women’s lamentations, as in the *nuo* theatricals of Chinese men, is the goal of exorcism of evil spirits. As one elderly practitioner, Ji Shunxian, told me,

one laments to the point where the noxious influences are expelled (*kudiao huiqi* 哭掉晦氣). It is considered unlucky to go happily to the groom’s home. Everyone must be very sombre, no one is allowed to laugh or smoke. If lamentations are powerful and effective they can get rid of the “hungry ghosts” [*egui* 餓鬼, the souls of those who die with a grievance and who in turn prey on the living]. The bride must continue lamenting until the point where her married home is in sight. Here she must stop lamenting or else the noxious influences, pushed thus far along the route, will poison her new home.¹⁰

The expression of grievance is arguably more communal than individual, more ritual than personal; nonetheless, the repertoire is sufficiently flexible to allow a woman various choices, depending on her own situation. For example, she can curse the matchmaker or praise her. Similarly, she can thank members of her family, but if she has suffered mistreatment, she has every opportunity to add subtle criticism. The lamentations, considered as a series of segmented performances addressed to family members at various stages of the bride’s departure before marriage, are a collection of strategies by which she seeks to draw on the affective ties that bind her to her natal home. She works on the emotions of the family by effusive gratitude, sly innuendo or subtle persuasion, and seeks to induce feelings of sympathy or shame.

There was much at stake for the Nanhui bride in lamentations. First,

lamentations, according to popular belief, could serve to expel evil influences from her family. Further, if she persuaded her natal family successfully, particularly the maternal uncles, her older brother and his wife, she would have powerful allies to call upon should she need them after marriage. Finally, if the bride performed well she would be hailed as “talented” and would gain respect in her community. There is a saying in Nanhui that captures the commensurability of the two forms of talent, male literacy/scholarship and female lamentations: “Men fear writing compositions, women fear performing lamentations.”¹¹

In this study, the “oral traditional” nature of Nanhui lamentations, together with their ritual power, will be demonstrated in a study of the content, rhetoric, and imagery of selected excerpts from the lamentations of Pan Cailian of Shuyuan in southern Nanhui. Before commencing this analysis, we will sketch the social and economic conditions shaping the “lamentation culture” of Nanhui, particularly the gendered division of labor.

LAMENTATIONS AND WOMEN’S LABOR

Modern Nanhui County, one of the counties under Shanghai administration, is a part of the region east of the Huangpu River known traditionally as Pudong. Today Pudong refers only to the area immediately across the Huangpu River east of the Shanghai metropolis. It is famous as one of the most prosperous of the special economic zones in China. Nanhui refers to the still largely undeveloped coastal county to the south of Pudong. Until the 1990s, Nanhui had been a remote, inaccessible region, a peninsula of reclaimed territory jutting into the Eastern Sea, bounded on three sides by the ocean and cut off from the rich Jiangnan region by the Huangpu River. Before the 1990s there were no highways in Nanhui and many coastal villages were inaccessible to vehicular transport. A trip from the south coast of Nanhui to Shanghai would take two days, including a ferry trip across the Huangpu. The lamentations investigated in this study come from coastal Shuyuan, not far from the southern tip, one of the most inaccessible areas in the entire county.

The outstanding characteristic of the region now known as Nanhui during imperial times was its remoteness, backwardness, and vulnerability to Japanese pirates. The *Nanhui County Gazetteer* (NXZ), published in 1879, notes above all its inconvenient transport and relative lack of merchant activity. The main crops were reported to be rice, soybeans, cotton, wheat, and barley (NXZ 1879, 20:2a/1433–3a/1435). Rice was grown in “wet” (irrigated fields) and cotton and soybeans in “dry” fields (unirrigated fields). In areas distant from the Huangpu River, peasants pulled water carts and ladled water to rice paddy (NXZ 20:2b/1433). The gazetteer noted that the

soil was more suited to cotton than rice. In fact in the late imperial era, what became Nanhui County belonged to Songjiang Prefecture, which was the nation's center of cotton production.¹² In coastal areas, cotton was more profitable than rice. For this reason the region was not always self-sufficient in rice. If the local harvest was not adequate to feed the population, people had to wait until peddlers came from Suzhou and Changshu. In times of natural disaster the price of grain skyrocketed (NXZ 20:2b/1434).

Women's labor was fundamental to the viability of the family. Although women worked predominantly in the spinning and weaving of cotton, they also toiled in the fields on a seasonal basis. Women took food to their men laboring in the fields, and in the summer helped to pull the water cart and ladle out the water (NXZ 20:2b/1433, 3a/1435). Women also undertook the backbreaking task of weeding in the cotton fields (NXZ 20:3a/1435).

In contradistinction to more developed regions, where textile production became the commercialized labor of men by the late imperial period, Nanhui women's labor in the production of cotton was an indispensable part of the family income.¹³ The gazetteer portrays a grim picture of conditions during the nineteenth century:

The women weave in order to supplement the [family] income and provide clothing and food. This is true not just for village settlements but also for the townships.... The rate of woven cloth is one bolt (*pi*) per day but sometimes they can reach two bolts per day. They [women] work through the night without sleeping. The income men earn from the harvest of the fields goes to official coffers to pay interest and is exhausted before the year has even come to an end. For their food and clothing [the family] relies utterly on [the work of] women.

(NXZ 20:3b/1436)

For the nineteenth-century gazetteer, Nanhui was a backward region, clearly hard to govern along Neo-Confucian lines. Even the gentry-scholar class (*shidaifu* 士大夫) are described as indolent and fond of litigation and of forming associations (NXZ 20:1a/1431). The women took an active part in working in the fields as well as in textile production, and their labor was essential to the well being of the family. Women and men both played active roles in the key cult of the area, shamanism, and women attended public festivals and sang "obscene songs" together with men (NXZ 20:1b–2a). The active role played by Nanhui peasant women in agriculture and shamanism provides a supporting context for the ritual power accorded them at weddings and funerals. It is also noteworthy that, according to the Nanhui women interviewed, only peasant women took part in lamentations.¹⁴ More

affluent women, such as one we visited in the township of Datuan, did not learn or perform lamentations, with its complex repertoire of formulaic songs. In fact, urbanized women, who did not toil in the fields, or engage in spinning and weaving, would have had little opportunity to learn the lamentation repertoire, which was primarily exchanged and practiced by women at work. In contrast to the Pearl delta region, women in Nanhui did not learn their lamentations in girls' houses but rather from older women in their local area and from direct observance of lamentation performance.

As we shall see below, the Nanhui lamentations performed in the twentieth century reflected the economic and social realities of the late imperial period, an age when the emperor was still secure in his palace, when the county township still had its enclosing walls, when boys studied the basic Confucian primers, and when bright young men set off for Nanjing to take the imperial examination. Above all, the lamentations reflect the labor of women in spinning and weaving and the production of cloth for sale, to clothe the family, and to build up the trousseau, the only asset the woman took with her upon marriage. Nanhui lamentations also reflect the strength and power of a woman's natal relations, particularly with her maternal uncles and older brothers.

KINSHIP STRUCTURE¹⁵

The kinship structure in Nanhui is similar to that of Han Chinese society generally, but the power of the uncles on the maternal side (*niangjiu* 娘舅) and of the bride's elder brother (often called *ajiu* 阿舅) is particularly strong. The high status of the uncle (mother's brother) is reflected in the appellation of respect *lao* 老 (old) as in *lao niangjiu* 老娘舅. When brothers divide up property on the death of the parents, if there is any dispute the final say rests with the mother's brothers, not with the father's brothers. Local people say "The *lao niangjiu* [only has to say] one word." His opinion is respected within the family and people do not dare go against it. When a bride marries she prepares her trousseau and displays it in public (known as "filling the box" *tianxiang* 填箱). The older brother and his wife (*saosao* 嫂嫂), not the bride's parents, have the final say on the contents of the trousseau. This brother (*ajiu*) also plays a role in the bride's departure from the natal home. As the trousseau passes through the door he allows it to pass with these words "These few poor things you can take away." Similarly, it is the *ajiu* who assists the bride in entering the bridal carriage. As the bride departs, the uncle, and bride's brothers, especially the elder brother, counsel the bride and bid her to return soon to see them. The *ajiu* also accompanies the bride to her new home where he will be invited to sit in the place of honor and drink wine. The ceremonies are not supposed to begin without him. After

the marriage, it is up to the *ajiu* to invite the bride to return to her natal home for a visit. Once a child is born, the *ajiu* will be invited to key ceremonies in the child's life, such as the ceremony at the end of the first month. He will also be invited to other significant occasions in the groom's family, such as the ceremony performed when a new house is built. Once the wife has children, the *ajiu* becomes a maternal uncle (*niangjiu*). If the bride should suffer any mistreatment, it is the maternal uncle who will be called on to mediate, and his advice will generally be respected by the groom's family. In the absence of an older brother, a younger brother can also play this role. In accordance with the high status of the *ajiu*, their wives are also important to the bride, especially the older brother's wife. The passage translated below as "Thanking the Sister-in-law" reflects the importance of the older brother, who will become a maternal uncle, and hence the importance of his wife.

The strength of a woman's natal ties after her marriage and the role of her maternal uncles have been noted in other Chinese contexts. For example, FREEDMAN, based on his fieldwork in Hong Kong and Guangdong, notes the role of the mother's brothers in the marriage banquet. When the woman dies, her brothers will check up to ensure that there was no foul play and that the funeral rites are appropriate (1979, 295). The uncles serve as "affectionate protectors of their sororal nephews and [are] often sought by them to act as mediators among themselves" (FREEDMAN 1979, 295). The strength of these ties in mediating disputes, offering economic assistance, and serving as loving uncles of their sisters' children has been demonstrated in the case of Taiwanese villages by WOLF and HUANG (1980) and GALLIN and GALLIN (1985). The ongoing ties between the married daughter and her mother have been studied by JUDD in her examination of post-marital residence patterns (1989). Judd notes that the strength of these natal ties has been little studied in the literature, which has generally focused on the "patrilineal" and "patriarchal" paradigm of Chinese kinship (1989, 525). The lamentation tradition provides a rich source of information concerning how the departing bride rhetorically constructs her relationship with her natal family, particularly how she attempts to forge strong bonds of obligation and sympathy to help her meet the challenges ahead.

MARRIAGE TRADITIONS

The marriage procedures in Nanhui are common to Han China generally, although one unexpected finding is that the Nanhui bride has greater than usual opportunity before she marries to get to know the groom's family, albeit not necessarily her prospective husband.¹⁶ When a girl reaches marriageable age (around fourteen), a go-between is called on to find a suitable

match from another village. The matchmaker examines the hours and dates of birth of the intended couple for compatibility (*na ba zi* 拿八字). If the dates are found to be propitious, the male side proposes the match to the woman's family (*tiaotie* 調帖). The latter always declines at first, using as an excuse that their daughter is too young. The woman's family sends family members to the home of the prospective groom to ascertain whether the two families are of similar rank and wealth. Eventually there is an exchange of letters between the two families. In this region, the woman meets the family of the prospective groom before marriage. Canals crisscross the entire Nanhui region, so the groom's family sends a boat to take her there. The bride greets her prospective parents-in-law but does not speak at all on this first occasion. All talking is done by the go-between. The prospective bride is invited to dine; she accepts the invitation but eats sparingly and then returns to her home. On the second day she sends a gift to the groom's family. After a few days she is invited by her prospective mother-in-law and other females of the groom's house to spend the night with them. She returns the following day. From now on she can spend more time at the prospective in-laws home, especially on festive occasions. The exchange of invitations and gifts continues for some time. This series of meetings is known as *hua guo men* 話過門. It gave the bride an opportunity, unusual in Chinese society, to understand the social circumstances of the family she would marry into. In lamentations, the bride will sing in some detail about the formidable status and possessions of the groom's family, a family she feels sure will look down on her lowly rank and meager dowry. This appears to be hyperbole within the context of the lamentations, but some brides may well have had a first hand knowledge of the home they were marrying into. Poorer families, unable to afford this expensive exchange of gifts and visits, would dispense with this stage altogether. In this case the bride and groom do not meet before marriage.

The actual marriage takes place when the bride and groom are between fourteen and seventeen years old. The groom's side asks a geomancer to decide on a fortunate day. They issue an invitation to the woman's family. If this is accepted, the marriage will take place. However, in accord with local custom, she will always decline once or twice at first. If the woman's family adamantly refuses at this stage, it is usually because the groom's family has become impoverished. If there is a refusal, the groom's family may consider abduction.¹⁷ If the woman's side accepts, the groom's family will send a small amount of money to seal the deal. One month before the marriage, the groom sends a larger amount. Just before the marriage the groom's family calls on the go-between to send ceremonial clothing for the bride to wear at the marriage ceremony. This ceremonial clothing is often hired for the occa-

sion. This stage, when the marriage is decided upon and a date fixed, is known as *hua hao ri* 話好日.

Three days before the bride is due to depart for the groom's home, the lamentation ritual begins. The opening lament is called "Filling up the [Trousseau] Box" (*tianxiang*) and consists of a sung dialogue between the mother and daughter. Then follow direct addresses, in the form of "thanks" to each member of the family: the grandfather, mother, ancestors, maternal uncles, matchmaker, aunts, sister-in-law, and so on. In some cases lamentation segments are accompanied by actions such as the unrolling, display, and ceremonial wrapping of the trousseau in red paper, eating a final bowl of rice before departure, getting into the bridal sedan carriage, and getting into the bridal boat. Once on the bridal boat she is not allowed to look back or to stop. The boat will meander along many canals, for the display of the local community. Lamentations only conclude when the bride sees the groom's house, when a final segment known as *fangzi* 房子 is sung.

The bride is borne on the bridal chair from the boat to her new home. Once in the main room the couple does obeisance before the ancestral altar, to family members, and, finally, to each other. According to custom, whoever kneels first will be subservient to the other in the marriage, so this ritual is prolonged as neither wishes to make the first move. The bride is now led into other rooms to meet more senior members of the family. During the wedding banquet, the bride, who has fasted for at least one day, sits separately from the husband and does not eat, only pretending to do so. Meanwhile the groom drinks with the bride's *ajiu*. Eventually the bride's family retires, leaving the bride to sit on the bed in the bridal chamber. Next follows the familiar tradition of *nao xinfang* 鬧新房 or teasing the bridal couple. Some try to force the bride to eat fatty meat. Her refusal adds to the hilarity of the assembly. She is called on to display the trousseau. Finally, the couple eats some fruit, such as sugar cane or pears, and the people at the party disperse. This marks the end of the marriage ceremony.

On the third day after marriage, the bride and groom return to her natal family for a brief visit bearing wine. On the fourth day, the bride returns to her natal home again, returning to her new home by the evening. Several days later both bride and groom visit the natal home once more, this time at the invitation of the *ajiu*. They bring food and rice cakes as a sign of respect. The groom will return home that day but the bride will usually spend some days with her natal family. After several days, the groom will take the bride to his home.

Overall, it appears that the bride had a lot of opportunity to get to know the groom's family before marriage, and one suspects that she may have had some say in the decision to go ahead with the marriage. The prevalence of

marriage by abduction, in some cases by prospective grooms who are refused because they cannot make the bride price, is one indication of the importance of the *hua guo men* process. This relative freedom before marriage to get to know the groom's family, together with the importance of the maternal uncle and bride's older brother throughout the life of a woman, served to elevate the status of Nanhui peasant women within their own natal families, and provided some safeguards against mistreatment after marriage. Lamentations during important rites of passage (marriages and funerals) were also an important signifier of a woman's ritual power. In her lamentations, the bride will always insist on her miserable fate and lowly status, a characteristic she shares with the "women's script" community of Jiangyong County and which can be found in other Chinese lamentation traditions. Paradoxically, however, it is when she most strongly insists on her inferiority that she is most able to exercise magical ritual power.

THE LAMENTATIONS OF NANHUI WOMAN: PAN CAILIAN

The translations of the lamentations in this study are based on transcriptions of the lamentations of Pan Cailian, an illiterate woman from Shuyuan, Nanhui. Pan was invited to perform these lamentations before Pan Wenzhen and others in the Nanhui Culture Bureau in 1982 and 1984. At that time, the lamentations were recorded and transcribed into the Wu dialect and were then later published (REN 1989a). The printed transcription was made in Chinese character script but includes such a high number of local colloquialisms that it is impossible to read without a knowledge of both the local dialect and the conventions of its encoding in characters.¹⁸

Pan Cailian was born in 1907, so at the time of her performance she was in her seventies. According to Pan Wenzhen, at first Pan Cailian had been reluctant to perform funeral lamentations because she had lost too many family members and feared bringing on bad luck. She was also seemingly reluctant to perform the wedding laments because, as a married woman with three sons, she felt very removed from the circumstances of a bride departing from her natal home. However, once she began she was able to recapture much of the emotion she had felt as a young bride. The first excerpt translated here, "Filling the Trousseau," is a dialogue in song conducted by mother and daughter. Another local lamenter, Zhang Wenxian, was invited to play the role of mother, while Pan played the part of the departing daughter.

Pan Cailian was said to be representative of Nanhui lamenters in general. They were illiterate women, often of poor families, who practiced the lamentation repertoire while weeding in the cotton fields and spinning cotton. According to Pan Cailian, she learnt her repertoire of lamentations and

folk songs, including love songs, from a local village woman. She was married at the age of twenty. Her husband smoked opium and gambled, practices that led to their gradual impoverishment. She initially stayed at her sister-in-law's home—that is, the wife of her older brother (*dasao jia* 大嫂家) but later on lived in a lean-to dwelling on the landlord's estate. She gave birth to three children but had no means to keep them and they were adopted by other families. The lamentations analyzed here are thus those of an elderly woman whose marriage ended in disappointment and lifelong poverty. In her performance she recreates the fears and anticipations of those dramatic days when she stood on the crest of womanhood, her fate yet to be determined.

This study will be limited to a translation and analysis of four segments of the wedding lamentations of Pan Cailian: "Filling the Trousseau," "Thanking the Sister-in-law," "Thanks to the Matchmaker," and "A Bowl of Rice." It will be apparent from the examples given below that the lamentation repertoire is a powerful example of oral literature, rich in rhetorical tropes and imagery. Far from being an unremitting expression of grievances, these lamentations are best considered as a cumulative sequence of rhetorical strategies designed to bring about a powerful ritual and social goals. In these lamentations the bride takes on herself the power to bless, to curse, and, above all, to move her audience to bonds of sympathy and consolation.

FILLING THE TROUSSEAU

"Filling the Trousseau" is the longest of all the lamentations transcribed in the collection of Pan Cailian. Only a small portion is translated here. As mentioned previously, it consists of a sung dialogue between mother and daughter, initiated by the mother. Lines are of uneven length, usually between seven and fourteen syllables. There is no rhyme. Each line is sung in the same simple melodic mode. The effect is hypnotic rather than monotonous, with the uneven line lengths providing for variation within an invariable musical pattern. There are no accompanying instruments but much facial gesture and occasional actions. The language is marked by striking imagery that relies on stock formulae from the local dialect. Most are metaphors, although in the English translation similes are sometimes used. For example, the opening line is literally, "You must be a reborn sun rising in the sky" but is translated here as "like the newly-rising sun." As in much Chinese poetry, the line of thought moves in paratactic units; that is, the link between disparate images is assumed rather than explicit. In English one sometimes needs to add conjunctions and linking phrases to make these relations obvious to the reader. An example of this kind of paratactic juxtaposition of images occurs in lines twelve and thirteen, which dwell with

vivid images on the family's poverty and misfortune. These lines could be rendered literally as "Living in the chambers of your mother's home, the oil lamp is too small to bathe in/ [From the] wheat stalk container seeking bamboo divination slips [for] the devils to count." These lines are translated here as "Living in your mother's home, we are so poor we bathe in oil from the lamp/ Using wheat stalks to tell our fortune, we let the devils do the counting." As WATSON noted with the lamentations of Ha Tsuen Village, the highly "stylized" mode, together with the complete reliance on the dialect of that village, makes lamentations very difficult for non-locals to understand (1996, 114).

At the level of structure, the mother-daughter sung dialogue consists of a series of rhetorical challenges expressed in hyperbole. The mother seeks to convince her daughter that she is being married into an affluent family and will be much better off than living with her impoverished parents. However, she will have to shed her childish habits and learn to follow their household practices. The daughter turns this on its head by complaining that she is being treated like cut-price merchandise; she has not been raised to understand the rules of the formidable, wealthy household she is marrying into and for this reason is sure to be mistreated. This implies a criticism of the mother, in spite of the recognition that the bride is marrying into a wealthy household. Throughout the lamentation, the daughter seeks to tear away the exaggerated consolations of the mother and begs her instead to "speak words as plain as rice chaff in the stove."

FILLING THE TROUSSEAU¹⁹

Mother to daughter

Daughter,

1. You must always be like the newly-rising sun, like the sky born anew.
2. Once you change your household, you must learn how to follow their ways,
3. You must not compare your new home with living here.
4. When you live in your mother's house, you can play idly with cotton skeins [as children do],
5. You can roam from the western chamber to the eastern chamber.
6. Living with your mother, you do not have to steam three *sheng* of rice,
7. Nor do you have to cook salty and bland foods,
8. But when you go to the groom's home, they are a family of substance,
9. Their family heads are well known in the world outside,
10. And within their family the seniors cherish the younger ones.

Daughter,

11. When you change your household, learn their practices.
12. Living in your mother's home, we are so poor we bathe in oil from the lamp,²⁰
13. Using wheat stalks to tell our fortune, we let the devils do the counting,²¹
14. But when you live with the [groom's] family, now they are a family of substance.
15. Living at your mother's home, the roof is low and the eaves bent down,²²
16. The "wall-foot"²³ is as narrow as a thread,
17. The eaves are only two feet (two *chi*) two inches from the ground,
18. The muddy canal [outside our house] is a place for raising ducks,
19. The left "wall-foot" is dug out from mud, the right "foot" has collapsed.

Daughter,

20. You are marrying into a family of substance.
21. Their newly built home is big and grand,
22. The newly cut brick wall is like the county walls of Nanhui,²⁴
23. Their rafters are lacquered, glistening crow-black.
24. In their house the eaves are deep and the "wall-foot" broad,
25. When they rinse and boil rice they don't need to get their feet wet,²⁵
26. They walk on their stone bridge as if secure in a horse's saddle,
27. A railing secures each step they take.

Daughter sings

Mother,

28. From birth I have borne my father's name [family name].
29. As fixed and certain as the nail knocked into the weighing scales,²⁶
30. I am just poor merchandise like the shells purchased during the "moldy season"²⁷
31. Or like wet cigarette butts.²⁸

Mother,

32. When I live with you, you take care to cook the rice and gruel,
33. You labor to make soups and boil water.
34. Now I go to another home as a bride, I cannot match your skills....

Mother,

39. You've pampered and spoiled me.
40. When you pamper a son, you can do this until he is old.²⁹
41. Now I go to another home as a bride,

42. The threshold of their home is three feet three inches tall [a noble house].
43. It is easy to enter their home but hard to leave.
44. How can I change my eyebrow movement and facial appearance to their command?
45. How can I make their “teeth open like flower buds and lower cheeks move” in welcome?³⁰
46. How can I make them flash their teeth [in welcome]?
47. In spring, during the third month, warmth pervades the air,
48. I will long for my brothers, big and small, to invite me to return home.
49. If I want to return home, it’s difficult for me to leave,
50. It will be as if I am eating “imperial rice” or “ruled by officials.”³¹
51. Following the path of officialdom, there is the law of officials to control you.
52. From now on I will live at another home as a wife,
53. I am marrying into a family which will [treat me] unreasonably,
54. They will be completely stubborn and unreasonable.
55. In my future life I will eat my full of bitterness and endure endless difficulties....

The mother sings

Daughter,

69. When you’re married off, it will be to a family of substance.
70. In their family, even though they do not eat “official grain,” they still eat well.
71. Although they do not cultivate the fields, they still wear good clothing.
72. They rent three hundred *mu* of “official land,” which surrounds their home.³²
73. Their ox-drawn plow winds around their fields planting sticky rice.³³
74. The surrounding curved paddy fields [enclosed by water] all belong to their household.

Daughter,

75. We live on the lowlands but they live on high banks.
76. We poor people have to climb high to see them,
77. [Like] grass climbing up bamboo clumps by the shore.

Daughter,

78. You are marrying into a family with a vast estate.
79. They are like musk melon tendrils climbing up bamboo groves.³⁴

80. Although they wear “straw sandals” [of ordinary folk], they have nonetheless married into officialdom....

The daughter sings

Dear mother,

115. Stop saying all those fine-sounding words.
 116. Those high-flown phrases, don't bother with those.
 117. Mother, and my seniors, speak words as plain as rice chaff in the stove.³⁵
 118. Tell me the truth honestly.
 119. Stop giving me new blue-indigo cloth and then changing your mind
 120. Or giving me dazzling clothes and then changing them to [plain] silk.³⁶

Mother,

121. Don't bother with those hackneyed words.
 122. I am only discount goods,
 123. I am just poor merchandise, like shells sold during the “moldy” season....³⁷

Mother,

137. You've made me, your daughter, into something useless like the dried grass which grows in abundance.
 138. Although now I've grown up, I still cannot do anything to help you.
 139. My mother, you have raised me to maturity and trained me how to behave.
 140. Living at my mother's home, we dine with thin bamboo chopsticks and large-size bowls.³⁸
 141. When I eat gruel and rice I can take my bowl and sit where I please,
 142. But from now on when I go to their home as a daughter-in-law,
 143. They use chopsticks of mahogany and ivory and bowls of exquisite quality.
 144. When eating gruel and rice, they dine [formally] at the table.
 145. Your daughter is neither intelligent nor competent.
 146. In days to come my senior sisters-in-law will appraise me,
 147. My brothers-in-law will compare my behavior [with the women of their family].
 148. In days to come when I go to their home as their daughter-in-law,
 149. This young daughter-in-law, how can I keep them satisfied?
 150. When I live at home, if I make my mother angry,
 151. [It is like] the snow and rain of the first month that falls beneath

- the eaves,
 152. The ice and snow are frozen but quickly melt away.
 153. My father's anger is like a brisk gust of wind in the sixth month, it
 blows away in an instant.
 154. But in days to come when I go to become their daughter-in-law,
 155. If I anger my father-in-law, it will be like offending the magistrate of
 Nanhui.³⁹
 156. If I anger my mother-in-law, it will be like offending the Wife of the
 City God.⁴⁰
 157. I will pass my days in the future as if living in prison,
 158. Hoping that my brothers come to visit and will not be too strict with
 me,
 159. Or that [if my brothers visit a lot] the family will beat me less.⁴¹
 160. I hope that my brothers will invite me back home in the second and
 third month of spring
 161. And will come and visit me in autumn, during the eighth and ninth
 month.

Mother,

162. You have raised a daughter who is nothing but worthless merchandise,
 I can do nothing for you....

The dialogue between the mother and daughter is one of the most moving and complex sections within the lamentation repertoire. Both mother and daughter seek to outdo each other in contradictory versions of the daughter's future, although both agree that the daughter will need to shed her childish ways and totally renew herself to meet the rigorous expectations of the mother-in-law and her family.

THANKING THE SISTER-IN-LAW

In the case of the bride's thanks to the *saosao* (older brother's wife), the rhetorical strategy is a simpler one. Essentially, the bride needs to flatter the *saosao* in order to strengthen their familial bonds, which will be an important form of insurance for her as she faces an uncertain future.

The *saosao* is a very important person for the bride because of the important function the older brother (*gege*) plays in the marriage ritual. Both the older brother and his wife have to approve the items of the trousseau before she can be married off. Occasionally they can decide to reduce the trousseau, which derives from the family's assets and which they will inherit in their turn. With the *saosao*, the bride's strategy is to be extremely complimentary, flattering her for her superlative work skills, thanking her effusively

for her generosity, and constantly hinting at her authority within the household. For instance, the sister-in-law is praised as the important hostess on social occasions. This implies she is serving as the real head of the household. Even her husband will obey her! She also is portrayed as assisting the father in carrying out the protocols for laying out the trousseau. In fact, the father does not undertake this task; the sister-in-law, signalling her importance, carries out this role on his behalf.

In spite of the flattery, the address to the sister-in-law implies subtle denigration of the way the *saosao* has reversed the usual Confucian hierarchy, where the bride's mother and father should take pride of place.⁴² It is also a recognition of the reality of the situation. When the older brother marries, the younger sister feels displaced by his wife who, ideally, then becomes her second mother, but more often becomes a powerful rival. Sometimes the mother can secretly give the bride extra goods, which in turn can be denied by the sister-in-law. Behind the bride's effusive compliments, then, lies an ambivalent relationship based on rivalry and need. Once the bride is married, if she meets with hardship it is to her older brother and his wife that she must turn.

To persuade the sister-in-law to act on her behalf, the bride makes use of two very important notions, *renqing* 人情 and *changmian* 場面. *Renqing*, literally "human emotion or sensibility," refers to the idealized relations between human beings that exist when the correct protocols are carried out in accordance with where each stands within their shared social hierarchy. More concretely, *renqing* refers to favors or gifts. In spite of the literal meaning of "human emotion," *renqing* relies not so much on the feelings between the individuals concerned as on their adherence to the appropriate protocol of favors and gift-giving. In this case, as the bride reminds the sister-in-law, it is incumbent on the senior woman to give generously to the trousseau in order to preserve face (*changmian*), both for the bride and for the family. *Changmian* is mentioned several times in this passage. It refers to important social occasions and to the lavish display of the trousseau, all of which adds to the family's "face."

This passage contains much parallelism of line structure. For instance, lines five through eight form a unit, where lines five and seven and six and eight echo each other in structure. Verbs are repeated within each line from twelve to fourteen and there is an abundance of four or five syllabic images that can only be weakly paraphrased in translation; for example, "dew water broad broad" refers to spittle, and "remnant bits and slanting angles" indicates scraps of cloth. The metaphorical "dark plum rice mix the gruel" parallels "stove pot scum washes the face" on the next line. Both are self-references to the bride as a black-hearted ingrate.

THANKING THE SISTER-IN-LAW⁴³

Sister-in-law,

1. Thanks to you, many thanks.
2. It is you who, setting store on our relationship,⁴⁴ has given me much,
3. Valuing our relationship, you have given me many favors.
4. Sister-in-law, on important occasions⁴⁵ you serve as hostess, welcoming guests.
5. You gave me new indigo printed cloth to add to my trousseau,
6. You gave me satin coverlets and helped my father spread out the bedding to add to the show.⁴⁶
7. You have given me cloth thirty-six feet long.⁴⁷
8. You helped my father to wrap up the coverlets and fold them into pairs.
9. Sister-in-law, you toil in your room, sprinkling abundant dew as you weave,⁴⁸
10. [Like] a steady wind and quiet ripples⁴⁹ you clean the cloth,
11. You pound more rapidly than the pole on the spinning machine.⁵⁰
12. My sister-in-law, in brushing the yarn you brush it out evenly,
13. In making ready the cloth you draw it out tightly,
14. In weaving, you weave close and fine.
15. It is you, sister-in-law, who teaches me to take pains in spinning and weaving.
16. It is you, sister-in-law, who helps me to tie the first threads to the loom.⁵¹
17. You help me get rid of the leftover ends of the yarn.
18. You help me smooth out rough spots on the yarn
19. From the first point down to the final knot.
20. Right from the start, you help me rid the cloth of soiled spots.
21. Sister-in-law, in using string to count my cloth, you're very generous.⁵²
22. In threading the warp yarn into the holes, you give me "face."⁵³
23. You let me take the remaining scraps of cloth,
24. Even the trimmings that fall from the scissors, you give them all to me.
25. There are not even enough odd-shaped clippings to make a stomacher for my nephew,
26. Nor any curved bits and pieces to make soles for his shoes.
27. I am a black-hearted person, black as dark plum gruel.⁵⁴
28. I have a wicked heart—I wash my face in black scum from the wok.
29. I complain if there is too little, but never if there is too much.
30. Sister-in-law, you toil through the night so I can keep up appearances.⁵⁵

THANKING THE MATCHMAKER

In “Thanking the Matchmaker,” the bride, far from thanking her, actually hurls ritual abuse at the matchmaker. The matchmaker is portrayed as avaricious and unreliable. She accepts gifts from both sides and is rarely loath to tell lies about the relative status of the two families in order to bring about the marriage. In this passage the bride takes on full ritual power to set a curse on the matchmaker. The language is pungent and forceful. Much is made of the alleged infertility of the matchmaker. Her presumed lust but lack of procreative power is described in crude sexual terms. She is ordered to wear a red wedding gown and ride on an upturned bench like an animal. A “hat without a penis” (a soft hat) and “limp shoe-covers” are (metaphorically) placed on her head. In this segment, the bride’s ritual power apparently stems from her own blighted destiny. The bride has brought misfortune on her natal family and will do the same to the groom’s family. The same sorry fate will bring disaster to the matchmaker.

Generically, this segment is akin to a ritual curse. Similar curses of the matchmaker are found in other lamentation traditions (see TAN 1990, 136–40; XU 1991, 189–92).⁵⁶ The matchmaker is an indispensable but often reviled figure in the Chinese tradition. With her “oily mouth” (deceitful speech) she is condemned for exaggerating the advantages of both households in order to effect the union and win gifts from both sides. The bride’s “thanks” to the matchmaker are thus ironic and expressed with black humor. In this example from Shensi, the bride conjures up the imagery of mortuary rituals to curse the matchmaker: “This bride thanks you with a pair of shoes/Take them back to serve as your spirit tablet...” (cited TAN 1990, 147, n. 20).

The accusations of deceit by the matchmaker parallel the more subtle criticism of the mother for her “extravagant words” about the bride’s future. Here the bride seeks, with more trenchancy than before, to tear away the ceremonial aspect of the marriage and expose the commercial side of the transaction—she is being sold in marriage just like the buying and selling of fields.

THANKING THE MATCHMAKER⁵⁷

1. You confused the Eight Characters⁵⁸ and matched us all wrong.
2. You became a matchmaker because you can have no children.
3. You made this worthless match—what kind of matchmaker are you!
4. When you spoke with us you said that everything was wonderful.⁵⁹
5. You have married me into this family, with their long white gowns and rolled-up sleeves.⁶⁰

6. With this family you can't tell if they're good or bad.
7. It's all your fault, matchmaker, you've done a dreadful job.
8. I don't blame anyone else,
9. I blame only you—matchmaker!

Matchmaker,

10. You ate their rare fish heads, but it only addled your brains.⁶¹
11. You ate their greasy noodles—slippery soft.⁶²
12. You ate their meatballs and threw the brocade ball.⁶³

Matchmaker,

13. Turn the bench upside down and sit on it,
14. Match-maker, sit astride it like a horse.
15. Place a hat without a penis on your bitch head,
16. Place a limp shoe-cover and floppy hat on your bitch head,
17. Place a red wedding gown on your bitch head.

Matchmaker,

18. Only those with no descendants can be matchmakers.
19. It is my destiny to set a curse on you,
20. To blight your life and your whole family.
21. Living in my mother's home, I have brought misfortune on it.
22. When I live with my mother-in-law, I will lead her family to ruin.⁶⁴
23. When spinning and weaving, the yarn will snap.
24. In buying and selling fields, the go-between will die.⁶⁵
25. It is my destiny to blight your life.
26. Die, matchmaker, together with all your family!

A BOWL OF RICE

"A Bowl of Rice" is one of the most poignant moments in the entire ritual. On the final day of lamentations (the third day), the bride eats and drinks nothing because she is not allowed to produce body waste. To represent this symbolically, a barrel with fine red lacquer engravings on its lid, known as the "barrel of descendants" (*zisun tong* 子孫桶), similar to those used as chamber pots, is filled to the brim with foods, such as red colored eggs and red jujubes. The bride will take this with her to her destination. Until those goods are removed, she will not be able to relieve herself. Later on, when she undergoes the labor of childbirth, she will sit on this same barrel.⁶⁶ At the end of the second day of lamentation, the bridal sedan appears, borne by members of the groom's family. The bride prepares for her imminent departure from her natal home. She is now in that liminal state of transition between the natal home of her childhood and the new and unknown home of her

married life. Her mother, brushing away her daughter's protestations, assists her with putting on her fine garments. She helps the bride to arrange her hair in the married style and puts on the bridal hairpiece. Next the mother sits down on the bride's bed and, sobbing, warns her one final time to obey the rules of the groom's household. The bride cries in response. The sister-in-law (*saosao*) now brings in a bowl of rice. She makes three signs on the bride's mouth. The bride then throws herself on the *saosao* and sobs again. At this point she performs "A Bowl of Rice."

It is the sister-in-law, as substitute mother, who is invoked at this parting performance, which is a ritual that has all the drama of the last meal given to the accused before execution. In fact, in the Jiangsu-Zhejiang region there is a widely practiced custom of placing a last morsel of rice in the mouth of a person on the verge of death (*linbie fan* 臨別飯).⁶⁷ The bride ritually refuses to eat the rice and instead urges the *saosao* to give it to family members to whom it will bring not death but life, indeed extraordinary vitality. From the generic point of view, this passage is a blessing, expressed in the same hyperbolic language and with the same magical force as the curse placed on the matchmaker. The blessing falls particularly on family members associated with the sister-in-law, especially her husband and children (i.e., the elder brother, nephew, and niece of the bride mentioned in the song). The father and grandmother will be invigorated, the elder brother will succeed as a scholar-official, the nephew will become instantly literate, the niece will do superlative embroidery, and the sister-in-law will become even faster at her labor. Next, the bride envisages the bowl of rice placed sacrificially by her mother's bed, where the steam will rise to the household gods, just as the fortunes of the family will rise. In the final hyperbolic passage, the bride foresees extraordinary wealth and prosperity for the whole family, especially the elder brother. Her ritual power as she departs contrasts strongly with her earlier self-portrayal as a woman of blighted destiny, who can bring nothing but ill luck on those around her. It is only by her symbolic death, however, that this transformation from abnegation to charismatic power is effected.

A BOWL OF RICE⁶⁸

Sister-in-law,

1. Many thanks to you,
2. The chrysanthemum-patterned bowl has an elegant appearance.⁶⁹
3. You bear it on a four-cornered tray, walking with mincing steps into the side chamber,⁷⁰
4. But today, this bowl of rice, I do not want to eat it.
5. Give it to my father to eat.

6. Once he eats it, his ears will resound like a copper bell,
7. His eyes will be like a far-seeing telescope,
8. He will be able to see as far as a thousand *li*.⁷¹
9. Or perhaps I could give it to my elder brother to eat,
10. If he eats this rice he can go to Nanjing and take the imperial exams,
winning a red official's cap.
11. At the examination hall in Nanjing he will win a bejeweled blue hat,⁷²
12. The gold decorated blue hat will sit securely on his head.
13. Or perhaps you should give it to my nephew to eat.
14. Once he eats this he will be able to read square-form characters,
15. Next he will read the "Thousand Character Classic,"
16. And after that the "Hundred Surnames."⁷³
17. He will be able to read the seventy-two books fluently.⁷⁴
18. Large characters he will write clearly and easily,
19. His small characters will be as delicate as lotus roots.
20. He will love to read books as much as to eat rice, and when he goes
to school he will become famous.

Sister-in-law,

21. May I trouble you, may I bother you?
22. Give this bowl of rice to my niece.
23. If my niece were to eat this bowl of rice,
24. She would learn cross-stitch and *chaxiu* 插綉 stitch⁷⁵ so well she
would get to sit in the dragon chamber.⁷⁶
25. She'll embroider mice so true to life they will appear to climb up the
wall.
26. She'll embroider cats that look as if they can leap down to the ground,
27. And ducks that appear to leap about.
28. Her embroidered chickens will look as if they can fly,
29. Her embroidered dragons will be able to sip water.
30. Now I have caused you a lot of trouble and bother.
31. This bowl of rice, I don't want to eat it.
32. My sister-in-law, you eat it.

Sister-in-law,

33. You will wind the cotton skein so tight it will seem to be part of the
bobbin.
34. Your skein will be as tight as stone on the bobbin.
35. My sister-in-law, you will link up the warp and weft at the start as
quickly as the strike of a bell.
36. In less than an evening, you will weave three small bolts of cloth.

37. In less than a day, you will complete four large bolts of cloth.
38. With your right hand you will weave the hem of the satin,
39. While with your left you'll do the hem of "feather-silk" cloth.⁷⁷
40. When you take it to Shanghai town it will be hailed as top quality.

Sister-in-law,

41. About this bowl of rice, may I trouble you, may I bother you?
42. Give it to my grandmother to eat.
43. If my grandmother eats this bowl of rice,
44. Her snow-white hair will turn crow-black once more,
45. She will lose no more teeth, those fallen out will grow again.

Sister-in-law,

46. I'm tiring you, I'm troubling you.
47. Place this bowl of rice at the foot of my mother's bed.⁷⁸
48. Steam from the rice will rise upwards.
49. The hot air will rise and rise,⁷⁹
50. With each passing year it will rise, with each month it will rise!
51. To the east, we'll buy land as far as the ocean's shore.
52. As for fish, we can catch crabs and prawns with ease.
53. To the north, we'll buy fields beyond the emperor's very palace.
54. Our "uncle," the emperor, will smile upon us.
55. To the south, we'll buy land as far as Yunnan,
56. Then my older brother will find it easy to travel here and there.
57. To the west, we'll buy land as far as Shanghai itself,
58. So my older brother can readily eat fresh food on his way.
59. Wherever we go we'll get cheap goods, just as we please!

CONCLUSION

The wedding lamentations of Nanhui bear obvious similarities with other traditions, particularly those of the Hakka and Cantonese women of the Pearl River delta. Lamentations focus on a single performing woman, the young bride, at the dramatic point in her life where she departs forever from her natal home. The expression of the woman's grievance at her sorry fate is the dominant theme. This is evident in the expressions in the lamentations of the bride's sense of inferiority and worthlessness, as well as her anger at her family for selling her in marriage, her concern about the size of her trousseau, and her anxiety that the groom's family will mistreat her. Bridal lamentations belong to the same oral-ritual complex as "women's script" performance, which also deals with women's grievances.⁸⁰ However, Nanhui lamentations focus on building up relations not just with other women as in

women's script culture (mother, sisters, girl friends) but also with male kin who will defend the bride if necessary (in Nanhui, maternal uncles and brothers are prominent).

In this study we have discussed excerpts of lamentations from the perspective of oral literature. Considered as "oral traditional texts" or orally-transmitted cultural lore, the lamentations are essentially a genre with a rich formulaic repertoire whose conventions have been passed down through the generations and acquired over time from other women. Women have to learn how to lament. They practice before marriage with other women, observe other lamenters, and memorize a considerable stockpile of formulaic phrases. Lamentations are performed in set stages. The transcript of the bridal lamentations of Pan Cailian comprise fifteen separate segments. In this article we have attempted to analyze four segments, but even with this small sample it is apparent that lamentations do more than simply express the grievances of the bride as she departs her natal home upon marriage. Through lamentations the bride conducts what amounts to a verbal duel with her mother and she seeks to build ties of obligation with key family members who will be of crucial support to her should she be mistreated in her marital home. At the level of rhetoric, she seeks to mourn, persuade, cajole, shock, and, occasionally, to curse and bless. One could conclude that bridal lamentations are at once an expression of the woman as "victim" of an unfair marriage system but also paradoxically a medium in which women exert considerable ritual and rhetorical power.

The grievances she expresses are shaped by the formulae of the tradition she has learnt. These grievances are not so much personal as collective—a matter of ritual and face, performed with the intention of expelling noxious influences. This is not to say that lamentations are not emotional and moving to the observers. In fact it is the aim of the lamenter to work up her audience to a feverish pitch of emotion in order to consolidate her ties with her natal family and win admiration for her virtuosity. Talented lamenters are able to manipulate the tradition to add a strongly individual flavor to their performance. Observers are able to appraise different lamentation events and rank the talent of lamenters. A lamenter has succeeded when the audience is moved to tears. When Pan Cailian sang her funeral laments to the culture cadres in the 1980s, she recalled family members who had predeceased her and her own hard life. Her performance was so affecting and she became so distraught that in the end her audience begged her to stop.

It is important to note that lamentations are apparently exclusively practiced by peasant women. There are no known examples of affluent women, who did not take part in communal labor, engaging in this practice. Women from fine homes in Nanhui did not know how to perform lamenta-

tions. Confucian mores certainly frowned on the custom. A precious scroll from the Jiangsu-Zhejiang region that narrates a Buddhist story lists twelve prohibitions for women. One of them states that “It is forbidden to expose your body, sing songs or weep” (JIANG 1992, 340). Presumably all of these activities were considered commensurate—singing and weeping were seen as a form of almost bodily exposure. The intense expression of grievance that one finds in lamentations is possibly unparalleled in other fields of Chinese culture. Elite men contented themselves with veiled complaints about the tribulations of official life or their lack of recognition. Non-elite men could take part in exorcistic or shamanistic cults where, as masked players, they took on the roles of deities or historical figures to exorcise the demons of misfortune from their villages. However, no other group in China besides peasant women appear to have been given a generic license, as it were, for this uninhibited outpouring of anger, anxiety, and grief

In this study we have stressed the exorcistic nature of bridal lamentations as perceived by the Nanhui interlocutors. The rhetoric of persuasion, the blessings and the curses, the insistence on grievance and suffering, must all be understood within the context of a belief in the magical power of the sung lamentation. The more vigorous the performance, the more powerful the effect on the audience, the more efficacious will the lamentation prove in expelling noxious influences, the demons of misfortune. This opens up the intriguing question of gender relationality in ritual expression in China. For example, can one understand the exorcistic functions of male *nuo* ritual plays and women’s lamentations as two sides of the same coin, that is, as essentially aspects of the same phenomenon of ritual exorcism? If men take on a yang power to expel yin, then how can one interpret what women are doing in their “exorcistic” lamentations? What is the ultimate derivation of these gendered rites of exorcism? Does it all, as scholars native to this region suspect, harken back to the shamanistic culture of the ancient Yue people who originally lived in the Yangtze delta region and who were driven to remote mountainous regions by Han peoples migrating from the north? These intriguing questions await further research. In the meantime, the lamentations, when examined closely for their imagery and deeper intent, open up a rare vista into the extraordinary eloquence of illiterate peasant women and their dramatic ritual power.

NOTES

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1. Women's memoirs dating from the first half of the twentieth century are full of poignant anecdotes about the pain of these exclusions from ancestral ceremonies, see CROLL 1995, 30–31.

2. Scholars in China classify the lamentations as "songs" *ge* 歌, hence *kujia ge* and *kusang ge*.

3. "Women guests helped add volume to the weeping, bewailing their own unhappy fate at the same time" (BA 1972, 292).

4. There are three substantial Western studies to date: BLAKE 1978; JOINSON, 1988; WATSON 1996. In addition, E. N. ANDERSON, in his studies of the Hong Kong boat people, offers one example of a "Talking Song" performed by the bride to her husband's family (1973, 58–62). All of the above studies deal with the lamentations of Hakka and Cantonese women from the Hong Kong New Territories. Bridal lamentations in early twentieth century Guangdong are discussed briefly in FREEDMAN 1979, 292.

5. A section on bridal lamentations is often included in mainland Chinese studies on marriage. See JIA Xiru's studies of the Sala minority group of Qinghai (1993) and SHENG Yi's study of many traditions, especially the Tujia regions of Guangdong (1994, 144–53); see also WANG Qingshu 1995, 91–95 and LU 1998, 173–77. For an English language introduction to the wedding lamentations of the Tujia people of Hubei, see HUANG 1995. I am grateful to Antonia Finnane of the University of Melbourne for giving me the article by Huang.

6. On wedding lamentations in the Jiangsu-Zhejiang region, see JIANG 1992, 239–46. Jiang's study draws heavily on REN et al., (1989a), which consists of a transcription of the lamentations of Pan Cailian, a Nanhui woman whose songs are discussed here. There is also a companion volume of funeral lamentations from Nanhui, which records transcripts of the songs of several women (see REN, 1989b). Also on Nanhui lamentations, see the *Nanhui xian wenhuazhi* 1993, 140–42.

7. JIANG Bin believes that all ritual songs of the ancient Wu Yue region derive from an underlying shamanistic culture (1992, 224). I have not had access to ZIANG Zhengping's *Kugezici* (1969). According to BLAKE, "this is a polished selection of native verse from the Cantonese villages in the Yuen Long market of the Hong Kong New Territories. Chang [Zhang] characterizes these laments by the way they invoke good fortune for the bride's family, obtain luck for the bride and expel noxious influences in the neighborhood" (1978, 13). BLAKE also notes that lamentations protect the woman against the dangers of the perilous transition period as she departs her natal home for that of the groom (1978, 31). JOINSON notes that Kwan Mun Hau women had variable interpretations of the ritual significance of funeral lamentations (1988, 148–50). On the whole, Western scholars have concentrated more on the anthropological context and function of Chinese lamentations than their ritual aspects.

8. On the link between marriage by abduction in ancient times and the origin of *kujia ge*, see JIANG 1992, 240–42. For an alternative view, see SIENG 1994, 44–146. Marriage by abduction was prevalent in the Nanhui and adjacent Pudong region prior to 1949. This will be the object of another study.

9. Scholars of oral traditions often adopt a three-stage methodology that seeks to identify the characteristics of the linguistic medium, the nature of the participating community, and the significance (social or ritual function) of the “message.” For an example of this analysis in “women’s script” narratives in China, see MCLAREN 1996, 383–85.

10. This interpretation of her own lamentations was provided by Ji Shunxian of Shuyuan. In a parallel case, Watson describes the ritual actions of the Ha Tsuen bride when she has reached a point halfway between her natal home and the groom’s house. The bride throws away a white handkerchief used to wipe her tears and reverses a mirror worn at the wrist. Her laments cease at this point. This is done to bring good fortune to the groom’s family (WATSON 1996, 124–25).

11. *Nan pa zuo wenzhang, nü pa ku liang sheng* 男怕作文章, 女怕哭兩聲.

12. For the history of cotton production in Songjiang, see NISHIJIMA 1984.

13. Francesca BRAY notes: “While elsewhere in China spinning and weaving cotton were exclusively women’s work, in the proto-industrial villages of the lower Yangtze whole families toiled at the wheel and loom, producing various qualities of cotton cloth that were exported all over China” (1997, 223). This was not the case in Nanhui, however. Bray’s hypothesis may be more accurate for silk production than for the cotton textile industry (see ELVIN 1998, 409).

14. TAN Daxian also argues that lamentations were only prevalent amongst the lower, predominantly rural, classes in China (1990, 112). A fifteenth-century source refers to “women of the commoner classes” performing bridal farewell songs in Guangzhou (cited in TAN 1990, 100). Ethnographic reports dealing with early twentieth-century lamentations report the prevalence of the custom amongst peasant women in many regions of China.

15. Information on kinship comes from Chen Qinjian, Pan Wenzhen, and other participants interviewed.

16. Material on marriage customs and on the life of Pan Cailian is derived from REN 1989a, 152–62 and an interview with Pan Wenzhen of the Nanhui Culture Bureau.

17. The abduction of the bride by the groom was prevalent in Nanhui before the 1940s. Generally it was a final resort by impoverished grooms (see MCLAREN 2001).

18. It goes without saying that the production of the translation below was a laborious effort, involving the explication of every line in Mandarin by Chen Qinjian and the translation into English by Anne McLaren.

19. A translation of REN 1989a, 3–12. Note that in this study phonetic transcriptions are given in Mandarin (pinyin) in the absence of a Wu dialect transcription of the lamentations.

20. This stock phrase denotes that the family is too poor to bathe (a lamp is too small to bathe in).

21. In Chinese belief when one selects a wheat stalk in fortune telling, it is actually Buddha who acts through that person in choosing the right stalk. But in this case the bride declares their family is so ill fated that the devils not Buddha do the selection.

22. Denotes a small squat house.

23. That portion of the house next to the wall which is sheltered by the eaves. In this case the eaves are narrow, which is another indication of a humble abode.

24. Knocked down in 1966.

25. Rice is washed in the canal outside the door. Women crouch on small stone bridges called *shuiqiao* 水橋, which crisscross the canals.

26. The placing of the nail determines its balance.

27. This refers to shellfish, an everyday food best eaten during the sunny season. The “moldy season” refers to the rainy season in this region during June and July.

28. An unusually contemporary image.

29. He remains in your house, unlike your daughters.

30. That is, how can I make them treat me favorably?
31. That is, it will be as if she were living in an official household. This is an exaggeration of the status of the groom's family.
32. That is, a substantial property. Another exaggerated reference to the size of their property and their "official" status.
33. Most people in this area grow *nuomi* 糯米 or "sticky rice" for ritual use on occasions such as the New Year's festival. The idea here is that they can afford to plant all kinds of rice and have enough for both ritual and subsistence needs.
34. That is, they are better able than our family to make connections amongst wealthy and official families.
35. This is a punning *xiehouyu* 歇後語 (allegorical saying) based on homophones. It means "tell me the true situation, do not embroider the truth."
36. Metaphorical: "you keep changing what you tell me."
37. At cut prices.
38. Basic eating utensils.
39. *Zhixian* 知懸 the term for magistrate in imperial times.
40. Chenghuang Nainai 城隍奶奶.
41. In this region it was customary for the mother-in-law to beat the daughter-in-law for the mistakes of the husband. The bride was often married by the age of sixteen or so to a boy-groom who might well be four years younger than her.
42. The bride's strategy here is an oblique attack: "pointing at the mulberry but abusing the locust" *pang qiao ce ji, zhi sang ma huai* 旁敲側擊, 指桑罵槐.
43. A translation of REN 1989a 74–75.
44. *Zhongzhong renqing* 重重人情 is translated here as "value our relationship."
45. *You changmian* 有場面 here refers to occasions during which lavish display is appropriate, such as when guests visit.
46. *Bang changmian* 幫場面 is translated here as "add to the show," that is, the display of lavish gifts.
47. This phrase indicates an unusually long, and thus a very generous amount of cloth.
48. The "dew" is actually spittle. When the cloth is stiff women spit on it to soften it. This makes the cloth better quality. This image, which equates the spittle of the sister-in-law with dew, flatters the sister-in-law.
49. That is, steadily and quietly.
50. This refers to pounding when she dyes the cloth.
51. The warp and weft threads have to be joined before weaving can begin.
52. The sister-in-law allows her to have more than her share of the woven cloth.
53. The sister-in-law allows her to make broader cloth in order to enhance her trousseau.
54. This refers to the bride's greed in taking all the leftover scraps, even cloth that could be used to make goods for her young nephew, the sister-in-law's own son.
55. *Bang changmian* is another reference to "face."
56. Ritual curses in verse were used in a range of other contexts in Nanhui. For example, women of the Zhejiang region commonly used curses in jingle form to get rid of insects, particularly at the time of the summer solstice, and to cure children of sickness (JIANG 1992, 570–74).
57. A translation of REN 1989a, 65–66.
58. At the first stage of negotiations, the matchmaker checks the birth dates of the couple, the eight character formula (*bazi*) referred to here, for compatibility.
59. Literally, that their rice and cotton were excellent.
60. That is, they are unrefined and lack education.

61. Literally, smashed your cranium.
62. A metaphorical reference to the matchmaker's greasy cunning.
63. A ball made of rolled up silk thrown to one's favorite man.
64. This is a reference to the woman's sorry fate.
65. An indirect reference to the matchmaker who sold her as if she were a field.
66. The bride's abstention from food and drink in order to avoid body waste appears to be a purification ritual. In a parallel but somewhat different case, WATSON notes that women at Ha Tsuen purified goods that were part of the trousseau (1996, 120).
67. For this ritual, see JIANG 1996, 497. As well as life-giving properties, the rice given at death indicates that the person did not die of starvation.
68. A translation of REN 1989a, 71–73.
69. *You taixing* 有台型 indicates that it appears of fine quality and hence gives one more "face."
70. *Xiangfang* 厢房, her bedroom, which is to one side of the main living room.
71. The telescope in line 7 is literally described as "a mirror that can see for a thousand *li*." This is echoed in line 8.
72. He will win even higher office.
73. The bride is here tracing the steps towards the attainment of basic literacy, from recognition of some basic characters to reading two primers, "The Thousand Character Classic" and "Hundred Surnames."
74. The number 72 has no particular referent. Seventy-two was a magic number associated with the ancient Chinese calendar.
75. Two types of stitches used in embroidery.
76. That is, to become empress.
77. *Yuchou* 羽綢 is a specialty cloth with variegated patterns.
78. In order to pray to the gods of the house for good fortune.
79. Just as our family's fortunes will rise.
80. Women's script writings (*nüshu* 女書) are verse narratives composed and written by peasant women in Jiangyong County, Hunan. *Nüshu* refers to the phonetic script transmitted amongst these women to record their rituals and correspondence. For studies on *nüshu* in English, see CHANG (1991), LIU and HU (1994), SILBER (1994) and MCLAREN (1996).

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