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Cosmogonic and Anthropogenic Myths in Sui Oral Literature

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Abstract: This article provides a brief and selective introduction to the Sui oral literature, thematically limited to cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths. An essential description is provided of the Sui living in southern China, mainly in rural areas of the southwestern region of Guizhou Province, their society, numbering 400 thousand people many of whom still preserve indigenous customs and traditions, and their language which, as other members of the Kam-Sui branch of the Tai-Kadai family, possess analytic, isolating and tonal features. The description is followed by an explanation of the most popular motifs of the Sui oral literature, many of which are shared with neighbouring ethnic groups. Separate paragraphs are also dedicated to the genres and structural characteristics of Sui oral literature that have a special social function as the repository of people's collective memory. The literature is exemplified through fragments of two songs recorded in Li Fanggui's *Studies on the Sui Language* (1966), accompanied by English glosses and poetic renderings. The latter constitute the first attempt to translate Sui literature while preserving its syllabic structure and rhymes.

Keywords: Sui, oral literature, myths

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Kosmogeniczne i antropogeniczne mity w literaturze ustnej Sui

Streszczenie: Artykuł stanowi szkicowe i selektywne wprowadzenie do literatury ustnej ludu Sui w południowych Chinach, ograniczone tematycznie do mitów kosmo- i antropogenicznych. Przegląd najpopularniejszych motywów, często spotykanych także wśród sąsiednich grup etnicznych, poprzedzony jest zwięzłym opisem społeczności Sui, której populacja, licząca około 400 tys. ludzi, zamieszkuje głównie rolnicze obszary południowo-wschodniej części prowincji Guizhou, oraz jej języka, który, podobnie do innych członków gałęzi kam-sui rodziny taj-kadajskiej, charakteryzuje się analitycznością, izolacyjnością i tonalnością. Osobne akapity poświęcono gatunkom i specyfice literatury oralnej. Dla Sui, którzy wciąż pielęgnują tradycyjne zwyczaje i kulturę, pełni ona szczególną funkcję nośnika pamięci zbiorowej. Całość została zilustrowana wybranymi fragmentami pieśni zebranych przez Li Fangguī'a w *Studies on the Sui Language* (1966). Umieszczone pod nimi angielskie tłumaczenia stanowią pierwszą próbę przekładu utworów literatury Sui z zachowaniem oryginalnej struktury i rymów.

Słowa kluczowe: Sui, literatura ustna, mity



Brother and sister taking refuge in a giant gourd during an apocalyptic flood

Author: Kamil Burkiewicz

Fragment 1: Verses 1-6 of the opening song (Li 1966: 2).

tsa:u⁴ tsi⁵ zən¹ ʔbən¹ me² ɛən¹ ti⁶
begin create man sky NEG become earth

Ere man's dawn, sky stuck on earth.

me² ɛən¹ ʔbən¹ ɛən¹ ʔnam¹ tin² lan²
 NEG become sky become CLF rock big

Former sky, huge form of rock.

ʔda:n³ ʔdau¹ qu³ lu³ sjen¹ pan¹ sum³ ɛau³ fu² ho³
 hard wheel deity divide SUC know wealth poverty

Hard disk split by god's knock, judged wealth from few.

ti⁶ qa:u⁵ qo³ mi⁴ ɣo³ fuŋ¹ tsən¹
 ancient times MODP NEG know word proper

Old times phew, none knew what's right.

fən¹ tən¹ ma¹ ɛən¹ li⁶ tshuŋ³ k^ha:i³
 primordial chaos come become knowledge open

Tight matter, foresight came through.

At the dusk of the 1930s, after the Republic of China's military forces once again succumbed to the Japanese invading army and eventually lost control over the important region of Wuhan (武汉 Wūhàn), all governmental institutions, along with the masses of refugees, were transferred to Chongqing (重庆 Chóngqīng). Since then, the heart of the war-torn state started to beat in its erstwhile southwestern periphery – an area ethnically, culturally and linguistically unfamiliar to the immigrants displaced from the unsteady eastern provinces. Despite the difficult conditions, the academic staff of the evacuated universities was able to partially return to their proper activities. Various so far remote and little known ethnic groups, including those living in Guizhou Province¹, henceforth became one of the few accessible research objects for the resettled linguists and other scholars.

Among the many local communities on which systematic field surveys were conducted were the Sui people², inhabitants of the southwestern part of Guizhou Province and its surroundings. It did not take long for the pioneer papers exploring selected aspects of the Sui culture to come out and intrigue academic circles. Cen Jiawu's article titled *The Books of Sui and the Origin of Sui Ethnicity* provided preliminary insight into the original logographic writing system used by the Sui shamans and its role in people's daily life (1943). At about the same period, Li Fanggui, a renowned historical linguist, focused his field works on the phonology of the Sui language. *Studies on the Sui Language*, a collection of his research, was published in 1966 and covered 119 pieces of oral literature, mostly songs, representing the region of Shuiyan³ (the first 84 pieces), as well as Shuili⁴ (the other 35 pieces). These pieces

¹ Guizhou (贵州 Guìzhōu) – a province in the People's Republic of China, located in the southwestern part of the country.

² *Shuǐzú* 水族, [sui³]. Original Sui terms are annotated with superscripted numbers from one to eight, representing the respective tones.

³ Shuiyan Township (水岩乡 Shuǐyán Xiāng) – an administrative division in the eastern part of Dushan County, bordering Sandu Sui Autonomous County in the east.

⁴ Shuili Township (水利乡 Shuǐlǐ Xiāng) – an administrative division in the northern part of Libo County (荔波县 Libō Xiàn), located south of Sandu Sui Autonomous County.

can serve as a guide through the most popular motifs in Sui cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths, and provide an opportunity to gain a cursory glimpse at the characteristics of this still imperfectly known literary heritage.

This article constitutes a brief and selective exploration of Sui oral literature, thematically limited to the myths describing the creation of the world and human beings. The part devoted to the most popular motifs, many of which can also be observed among the neighbouring ethnic groups, is preceded by an essential introduction to the Sui, their society and their language. A separate paragraph describes the characteristics of Sui oral literature, including basic genres, structural and functional properties.

Oral literature that will be described in this article is exemplified through fragments of two opening songs of Li Fanggui's work, dealing with the creation of the world and mankind. *Studies on the Sui Language* is still the most extensive compilation of Sui literary pieces in native language form. Other available sources, apart from a few stories and songs presented mostly in non-dedicated publications (cf. Pan & Wei 2004, Zeng 2004, Wei 2011, Lai 2012, Wei 2012), appear as translations or only cursory storylines in Chinese (cf. Fan 1987, Zu & Zhou 1988). Since some of the symbols utilised by Li Fanggui for phonetic notations differ from the present standard of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), in this article, the original script has been adjusted according to commentary found in Lai Jingru's PhD thesis *A Linguistic Study of Li Fanggui's Sui Language Text Collection* (2015). Phonetic transcriptions of the fragments of songs given in this article are accompanied by English interlinear glossing, abbreviated according to Leipzig Glossing Rules⁵, as well as by nonliteral, poetic renditions, which constitute the first ever attempt to translate Sui literature while preserving its syllabic structure and rhymes. Other than literary citations, this article also employs IPA for all Sui language terms and names. Chinese terminology appears both in a romanised form according to the Hanyu Pinyin standard and in the original notation, represented by simplified Chinese characters. All translations and illustrations included in the paper, with the exception of those otherwise credited, are this author's own work.

Fragment 2: Verses 7-18 of the opening song (Li 1966: 3).

ʔjət⁷ ʔnam¹ ʔbən¹ ʔya:i³ mbjen⁵ ʔnam¹ pjo⁶ tjo⁶ ta⁵ t^hiu¹ ku³
 one CLF day grow look like CLF gourd thick middle thin end

On one day, gourd-like plant blew, true middle, thin ends.

sjen¹ ʔo³ ʔba:k⁷ pan¹ wa:k⁴ he⁴ ʔa¹
 deity know grow up divide split become two

When grew fit, god split in two.

⁵ Meanings of abbreviations used in glossing are explained in Table 4 in the Appendix.

ɕən¹ ya¹ ɕim³ kwa:ŋ⁵ ham³ kwa:ŋ⁵ lja²
become two CLF CLF face down CLF face up

Made two parts, one up, one prone.

mja¹ ʔŋam¹ kon³ tai² tsa⁵ va:t⁷ pa:i¹ ʔu¹
hand CLF lift hold SUC wave go up

Thrown by his hand, tossed against sky.

va:ŋ¹ jet⁷ nu² tsən² te³ ʔbən¹ hoŋ¹ ha:u¹
high over mountain slope below sky vast space

Over high peak, streak across space.

jaŋ² ts^hjen³ li⁴ tsi⁵ ni⁴ ⁿda¹ van¹
PR create CLF.FEM sun

[jaŋ² ts^hjen³ li⁴], created suns.

sup⁸ ŋi⁶ ni⁴ ⁿda¹ van¹ ka:ŋ¹ t^hau⁵ van¹ sa:n²
twelve CLF.FEM sun bright to night

Twelve luminous suns, keep bright till night.

sup⁸ ŋi⁶ ni⁴ nja:n² ka:ŋ¹ t^hau⁵ van¹ ɕət⁷
twelve CLF.FEM moon bright to morning

Twelve moons on sight, show might till morn.

ʔbən¹ tsa:u⁴ sət⁷ tan³ tjum¹ ɕət⁷ tjum¹ qa:ŋ¹
sky begin produce wear hat iron hat steel

Light was born, so put on steel hat.

tan³ su⁴ ɕa:ŋ¹ tjum¹ qa:ŋ¹ tjum¹ toŋ²
wear screen from sunlight hat steel hat copper

Screen from that, steel hat, copper hat.

tun¹ la:u⁴ ljo³ joŋ² tin² pa:k⁷ ŋa¹
heat up big CPL dissolve rock uneven

So hot ugh, stones crack rugged.

tseŋ⁴ me² ʔdai³ pa:i¹ peŋ⁵ ⁿda¹ van¹
bear NEG POT go shoot sun

Can't bear it, let's shoot those suns.

1. The Sui people, their history and culture

At the time when Li Fanggui was engaged in collecting language data in the southwestern part of Guizhou Province, the whole region was still only partly controlled by the state administration. Even in the early years of the People's Republic of China, local life in these mountainous, poorly accessible areas was organised according to its own rules. It was not until the fifties of last century that the communist government initiated a program of systematic surveys and efforts aimed at acquiring knowledge about the various communities

that formed the complex ethnic patchwork of the region. Eventually, many minorities were officially recognised, including the Sui people.

Today, with a population reaching 400,000⁶, the Sui are concentrated in Sandu Sui Autonomous County⁷ and the adjacent administrative divisions, including Libo County, Dushan County (独山县 Dúshān Xiàn) and Duyun City (都匀市 Dūyún Shì). This part of Guizhou Province, where members of Sui communities live in the neighbourhoods of Han (汉 Hàn), Bouyei (布依 Bùyī), Miao (苗 Miáo), Dong (侗 Dòng), Yao (瑶 Yáo), Zhuang (壮 Zhuàng) and other ethnic groups, is not, however, believed to be their place of origin. One view, held mainly by the ethnic Sui researchers, maintains that the roots of the Sui can be traced back to the times and lands of the Shang Dynasty (商 Shāng, 1600–1046 BC) (cf. Pan & Wei 2004: 11). On the other hand, the majority of Chinese scholars see the present Sui people as descendants of a branch sprouted from the Baiyue tribes⁸ (cf. Zeng 2004: 37). Even the approximate period when the Sui settled in the present area remains a matter of controversy. The first known written source mentioning Sui people is a collection of various myths and stories *Red Ya* (赤雅 Chì Yǎ), compiled in the last decades of the Ming Dynasty (明 Míng, 1368–1644). The Sui were at the time already submitted to the Chinese state and administered through officially recognized native chieftains.

Regardless of the actual course of history, both the Sui and other ethnicities living in the same region reflect strong influences from the Central Plain civilization⁹. After settling down, the Sui people developed a highly patriarchal agricultural society. Living in characteristic wooden houses, traditionally two stories high and covered with shingled gable roofs, they opened up vast paddy fields as well as farmed fish and kept livestock. The Sui also became skilled in handicrafts, the most renowned of which is known as horse tail embroidery¹⁰. Despite continuous struggles against the feudal oppression exercised by representatives of the imperial government, Chinese influences not only permeated the vocabulary of the Sui language, but also traditional customs. Sui shamans to this day refer to ancient Chinese astrological concepts to calculate auspicious dates for performing different activities like funerals, weddings or celebrations of annual festivals. The most popular of the latter is [tsje¹twə³], whose date falls at the end of each year in the traditional Sui calendar, ca. the ninth or tenth month of the Gregorian calendar.

⁶ According to the Fifth National Population Census of the People's Republic of China; cf. on-line data available at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/renkoupuocha/2000puocha/pucha.htm>.

⁷ Sandu Sui Autonomous County (三都水族自治县 Sāndū Shuǐzú Zìzhìxiàn), located in the southeastern part of Guizhou Province, contains over 60 percent of the Sui population.

⁸ Baiyue (百越 Bǎiyuè) is the collective name for the conglomeration of partly or completely unincised peoples who inhabited the southeastern part of present China between the first millennium BC and the first millennium CE.

⁹ The Central Plain (中原 Zhōngyuán), covering the area on the lower reaches of the Yellow River, is traditionally considered as the cradle of Chinese civilization.

¹⁰ Horse tail embroidery (马尾绣 mǎwěixiù, [ʔba³ɛ²]) is a needlework technique in which threads are made of horse tail hairs wrapped in cotton fibre.

2. The Sui language

Although the traditional lifestyle of the Sui is challenged by inevitable changes, and wooden villages one by one have given way to well-connected concrete and brick settlements, the vitality of the local culture remains strong. This can be testified by, for instance, the current status of the native language. Classified within either the Kam-Sui branch of the Tai-Kadai family (by Western scholars) or the Sino-Tibetan family (by Chinese scholars), the Sui language remains in daily use among over 200,000 speakers (Frawley 2003: 210). While unquestionably dominating in the countryside, however, it turns out to be partially replaced by southwestern Mandarin dialects in more urbanized communities, including county-level towns and cities like Sanhe¹¹.

Like other members of the same language branch, Sui is an analytic, isolating and tonal language. Its phonetic complexity is especially evident in the Sandong (三洞乡 *Sāndòng*) dialect, one of the three local dialects recognised by most researchers in the field¹². The other two are Yang'an (阳安 *Yáng'ān*) and Pandong (潘洞 *Pāndòng*), which in terms of geographical coverage and population hold by far the minor position. The Sandong dialect, illustrated by the fragments of songs included in this article, possesses an inventory of 44 consonants (cf. Table 1 in the Appendix). With the addition of labialised and palatalised clusters, these consonants provide a total number of 73 possible syllable onsets. Only six consonants, i.e. stops [p, t, k] and nasals [m, n, ŋ], occur as codas. Diphthongs, which can be composed of eight available vowels (cf. Table 2 in the Appendix), are restricted to open syllables. The tone system includes six tones specific to open syllables and those ending with final nasal consonants. The other two tones, whose values differ depending on the length of nucleus vowels, appear exclusively on syllables closed with stop consonants (cf. Table 3 in the Appendix). Monosyllabic single-morpheme words are predominant in the Sui language vocabulary, and cases of polysyllabic constructions are mostly modern borrowings from Chinese (Lai 2015: 25–33).

Fragment 3: Verses 1-8 of the second song (Li 1966: 5).

tʂa:u⁴ tʂi⁵ zən¹ ɕin¹ van¹ pu² pa:k⁸ tʂi⁵ la:k⁸ pu² kwa³
begin create man become seed gourd white create CLF gourd white

Ere man's birth, white gourd seed blew, white hue gourd breed.

van¹ pu² kwa³ ma:ŋ⁶ ʔda:u³ ja⁴ wu²
seed gourd white hope only PR

White gourd seed, deed of [ja⁴wu²].

ka:i⁵ ja⁴ wu² ʔdai³ ŋui⁶ pu² ŋa¹
rely on PR obtain seed gourd come

Trust [ja⁴wu²], gourd is due gained.

¹¹ Sanhe Town (三合镇 *Sānhé Zhèn*) is an administrative center of Sandu County.

¹² Andy Castro proposed a further division of the Sandong dialect into four local subdialects, among which the southern one, present in Libo County and southern areas of Sandu County, is said to particularly differ from the other three (Castro & Pan 2014: 13–14).

na:i⁶ ʔdai³ ma¹ m^hbja¹ ho⁴ n^hdjon³ nau¹
 DEM obtain come plant do place INT

Seed obtained, now need plant scheme.

n^hda:u¹ tu³ ka:u⁵ n^hdjon³ nau¹ ʔjau³ ʔdai³
 1.PL.IN mutually consult place INT think proper

Let us deem, which place seems right.

ja⁴ ha:i¹ nui⁶ eui⁶ ho⁴ ʔa:u³ fja:n¹
 PR give seed ask do middle land

[ja⁴] gave seed, need find field's middle.

van¹ pa:i¹ n^hda:i⁵ ʔdau¹ ho⁴ ta:i⁵ tin¹
 day go field SUC do side right

Go by light, put at right side.

3. Overall characteristics of Sui oral literature

One of the greatest treasures of the Sui cultural legacy, officially recognised on China's Intangible Cultural Heritage List¹³, is its original logographic writing system, known under the native name [le¹sui³], which refers to both the script and the books written with it. As far as we know from the research studies hitherto conducted, the Sui script has always been, however, limited only to divinatory purposes (cf. Figure 1). Due to its special application and lexical constraints, extensively analysed in this author's PhD thesis (Burkiewicz 2015), the script was insufficient for recording more complex narrative contents. Therefore, people's collective memory of historical events, traditional customs and models of ethical and moral values were passed down through generations in the form of oral literature. The remarkable vitality of this cultural phenomenon among Sui communities was largely determined by the specific social function of this oral literature. Countless songs and parables served, and to a certain extent still serve, as a socializing tool not only during festive celebrations, but also in everyday life. The level of acquaintance with literary pieces, especially rhyming songs or aphorisms, remains an important indicator of personal refinement.

西 日 支 支 允 及

ju⁴ van¹ ja³ si² ljok⁸ tjon⁵ eon¹
 In the summer, the *you* days and times bring
 misfortune from a demon named [ljok⁸ tjon⁵].

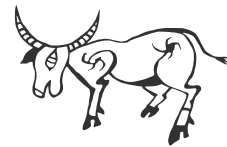


Figure 1. Fragment of a passage from *The Volume of the First and Seventh Months of the Qilin* (Yang & Wei 2010: 22), annotated with its pronunciation and English translation.

¹³ China's Intangible Cultural Heritage List (中国国家级非物质文化遗产名录 *Zhōngguó Guójiā Jī Fēi Wùzhī Wénhuà Yíchǎn Mínglù*) is cyclically updated by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, then approved and published by the People's Republic State Council.

The rhyming compositions along with prose creations constitute two main categories of Sui oral literature (Fan 1987: 19). Both are used to cover similar topics, such as legends and myths depicting the process of world-creation, the appearance of the first human beings and their struggles against unfavourable forces of nature. The variety of prose tales also provides explanations for, i.a., the origins of traditional festivals and customs, agricultural and other technologies used in everyday life. Another, equally popular narrative genre concerns the motifs of love, jealousy and sacrifice. Topics related to romantic affection are widely explored in rhyming compositions as well, especially in so-called “single songs” (单歌 *dāngē*, [ɕip⁸tsik⁷]), also often referred to as “mountain songs” (山歌 *shāngē*). Performed by individuals, enamoured couples or choirs, they can be heard mainly during important festivals, country fairs and field work. In terms of internal arrangement and structure, these “single songs” contrast with “double songs” (双歌 *shuānggē*, [ɕip⁸tsau⁸]), also identified as “festive songs” (酒歌 *jiǔgē*) by some researchers. These are pieces wherein subsequent calls and responses, usually exchanged between a host and his guest, constitute the essential part of the composition, preceded by a spoken introduction. Other popular rhyming forms include *dou* (兜歌 *dōugē*, [ɕip⁸hoŋ²]), comprising spoken and melodic sections, and children’s songs (儿歌 *érgē*, [ɕip⁸la:k⁸ti³]), which include lullabies and counting-out rhymes with didactic and entertainment functions. There is also a separate kind of song that praises [Qoŋ⁵ Ljok⁸to²] – the legendary creator of the Sui script. The most relevant creations in the context of this paper are, however, epic “narrative songs” (古歌 *gǔgē*, [ɕip⁸tsi⁵]), devoted to traditional tales and legends. These pieces, exemplified with the fragments cited in this article, are performed mostly by the elderly on various occasions such as grand celebrations, matchmaking and dispute-solving gatherings (Pan & Wei 2004: 436–467, Li & Zhang 1998: 602–604).

All the aforementioned kinds of rhyming literature share similar structural properties. They are usually based on lines of seven syllables with pauses separating the first three units from the next four, thus reflecting the phrasal prosody typical for the Sui language. Much less frequent are verses containing eight, 11 and 12 syllables, wherein pauses occur respectively after the fourth syllable, after the third and seventh syllable, and after the fourth and eighth syllable. Rare exceptions from such arrangements are predominantly caused by the presence of polysyllabic phrases functioning as subjects, predicates or compliments. Both regular as well as sporadic forms of rhyming literature adhere to a mixed rhyming pattern combining intra- and inter-verse relations. Intra-verse relations, depending on the number of pauses in a single line, appear as one or two rhyme pairs, each of which comprise the final and one of the non-final syllables in two consecutive phrases. Inter-verse relations occur between the last syllable of a line and an inner syllable of the initial phrase in the subsequent verse. Apart from similarities in terms of nuclei and codas, rhyming structures also involve specific tonal combinations. Pairs of equal tones, arranged in a manner where the first tone corresponds with the second tone, the third tone corresponds with the fourth tone and so forth, are the most commonly applied (Lai 2015: 36–40).

4. Selected myths in Sui oral literature

As in the piece whose fragment opens this article, narrative songs devoted to cosmogonic and anthropogenic myths usually begin with the words [tʃa:u⁴ tʃi⁵ zən¹], meaning ‘at the beginning of mankind’s creation’. Long before the first humans could leave their footprints on the vast tracts of untouched fertile lands and enjoy the life-giving rays of the sun, there was no heaven or earth as all matter existed in the form of a solid rock. It was only after the intervention of celestial powers that the universe took its present shape and became suitable for life (cf. Fragment 1). Most widespread narratives credit this achievement to the female deity referred to by the name [ja⁴vu²] ‘divine grandmother’, although less popular stories mention [qoŋ⁵ɣəŋ³] ‘celestial grandfather’ as the initiator of all creation. While the figure of [ja⁴vu²] is seen as a remnant of the matriarchal system that once prevailed among Sui communities, the latter deity originates from the Chinese Pangu¹⁴ (Fan 1987: 43–44). The world brought into being by either of the two was, however, still far from the condition needed for the expansion of life. At the dawn of the mankind’s history, days and nights were brightened by respectively twelve suns and twelve moons, causing even solid rocks to dissolve under the disruptive power of their lights. In the face of impending calamity, [ja⁴vu²] armed humans with bows and arrows and asked them to shoot down all the surplus heavenly bodies (cf. Fragment 2). Similarly to the Chinese myth of the archer called Hou’yi (后羿 *Hòu’yi*), as well as tales popular among the Bouyei, Dong, Zhuang, and several other ethnic minorities that neighbour Sui communities, eventually only one sun was left shining in the sky (Fan 1987: 46).

Not only did the divine grandmother save mankind from the disastrous heat: she was also the one who actually brought humans into existence and asked them to rule over all life on earth, thereby relieving herself of the depressing view of unpicked fruits falling off their branches or beasts roaming carefree in the wilderness. Regarding the specific way in which the goddess shaped and breathed life into people, numerous tales provide different versions. One of the most widespread, unlike the Chinese myth of Nüwa (女媧 *Nǚwā*) who created man from clay¹⁵, describes the first humans as being cut out from paper or tree leaves, then transformed into flesh beings and incubated in a sealed box. During its later history, mankind engaged its innate intelligence and wisdom to prove its superiority over wild animals, as well as learnt how to take advantage of some of the natural phenomena (Burkiewicz 2015: 45–46). At a certain stage of successful expansion, however, a series of unpredictable and irresistible disasters almost resulted in the extinction of all human beings.

Sui tales of traumatic events from the distant past do not differ in basic motifs from other literary traditions of the region. Analogously to the legendary floods that repeatedly devastated the Central Plain (Lewis 2006: 109–110), water calamities appear as the main reason for mankind’s decline, followed by its further revival. According to one of the songs collected by Li Fanggui, during a particularly devastating flood only a brother and sister

¹⁴ According to some versions of Chinese cosmogonic myths, Pangu (盘古 *Pángǔ*) was the first living being and the one who separated the Earth from Heaven.

¹⁵ According to the 78th volume of the *Readings of the Taiping Era* (太平御覽 *Tàipíng Yùlǎn*) from the late tenth century; cf. on-line version at: [https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/太平御覽_\(四庫全書本\)/卷](https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/太平御覽_(四庫全書本)/卷).

managed to escape the claws of death by hiding inside a huge gourd, grown from a seed obtained from [ja⁴vu²] (cf. Fragment 4). Several verses of the song examine the circumstances of their survival:

Fragment 4: Verses 35-44 of the second song (Li 1966: 8-9).

ʔu¹ pu³ ʔba:u⁵ te³ pja:u⁶ li¹ lin¹
up also rise down boil over plenty

Floods high grow, below burst too.

ɣa² fa:i⁴ nu⁴ ʔdan³ pjo⁶ ʔai¹ ja:ŋ²
two brother sister drill gourd CLF king

Two siblings, dug in king's gourd.

ʔdan³ t^hau⁵ pjo⁶ ʔmoŋ¹ eo³ pa:i¹ ʔu¹
drill to gourd float very go up

Dug in gourd, toward peaks flew.

ʔmoŋ¹ eu¹ eiŋ¹ q^huŋ³ te³ n^hdiŋ⁵ ʔbən¹
float blue go through down bottom sky

Reached blue highs, under sky's base.

ha:m¹ hap⁷ sən² nam³ ʔna:ŋ¹ eən¹ ha:i³
three CLF day¹⁷ water still become sea

Three days paced, sea keeps massed though.

ei⁵ hap⁷ ka:i³ nam³ ʔna:ŋ¹ eən¹ maŋ² tjaŋ¹ tjo³ mi⁴ qa:n⁵
four CLF day¹⁸ water still become deep water long time NEG dry

Four days flow, sea keeps immense, hence will stay long.

mi⁴ ʔdai³ ŋau⁶ la:k⁸ qun³ ŋa:u⁶ ʔbən¹ ŋo³ hoŋ⁵ eən¹ tsum²
NEG obtain dwell orphan cry sky rat make become hole

No place dwell, orphans yell god, blessed rat gnawed hole.

hoŋ⁵ k^hoŋ³ k^haŋ³ nam³ lui⁵ tja:ŋ³ ʔjam¹
make deep pit water flow down ground deep

Gnawed deep cave, water wave yields.

nam³ pa:i¹ ŋau¹ n^hdau¹ pja:i³ nu² tsən²
water go where moss smear over mountain hill

Water wanes, hills chains grow moss.

tok⁷ t^hau⁵ te³ mi⁴ ʔnaŋ¹ zən¹ ha¹ ja¹ la:n⁶ eən¹ ma:u²
fall dawn to down NEG have people AFF grass sodden became dung¹⁹

All drained out, none flew alive, grass turned to dung.

When the flood finally receded, the two siblings found themselves to be the only human survivors. After being persuaded by a celestial sage, the brother and sister decided to marry each other. The fruit of their union, a huge piece of flesh, broke into small pieces that eventually transformed into children. Various myths sharing similar plots are widespread among numerous ethnic groups of southern China such as Han, Dong, Zhuang, Buyi and Miao (Zhi 1990: 507). All of them connect the survival of mankind with a gourd – a plant crucial to the early history of Chinese civilization, culture and philosophy.

Relieved from the menace of extinction, humanity opened a new chapter of its expansion and civilization development. Sui oral literature thus became enriched with pieces of broad thematic scope, including the origins of agricultural knowledge, production techniques, traditional customs, taboos, as well as plenty of love stories or depictions of deeds accomplished by folk heroes. Although partly translated into Chinese, they still wait to be presented in Western languages.

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Celebration of [tsje⁴twa³], one of the most important festivals in the Sui calendar, Sandong Township, Sandu Sui Autonomous County, October 2011.

Photo by Kamil Burkiewicz