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# A Sample of Folk Poetry of the Sui: *The Volume of Ancestor Worship*

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2021.020>



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**W**henever bizarre or seemingly supernatural events occur, whenever a family faces serious problems, calamities, or quite the opposite, plans a wedding, welcomes a new child, prepares to undertake a specific activity such as building a house, its members, if only to remain loyal to traditional customs, try to seek guidance and support from their ancestors.

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The proper execution of a relevant ritual is, however, far beyond the knowledge accessible to ordinary people and requires the use of services provided by shamans known as [pju<sup>1</sup> ta:i<sup>3</sup>]. The most capable are also referred to as [ʔai<sup>3</sup> ha:ŋ<sup>6</sup> le<sup>1</sup>], i.e. those who have mastered [le<sup>1</sup> sui<sup>3</sup>] – the original writing system and the divination books written using it.

When invited to perform a ritual of ancestor worship, a shaman starts his preparations by setting up sacrificial goods and the necessary utensils. Right in front of the [ei<sup>3</sup> qoŋ<sup>5</sup> pu<sup>4</sup>] – a special place in every family's home dedicated to male forebears – a long table is placed with one bench on both sides. Subsequently, the following items are arranged in a specific manner: tofu, boiled pork, a piglet, a bowl of salt and hot pepper, ten joss sticks, joss paper, five cups, five pairs of chopsticks, two pieces of bamboo called [bin<sup>5</sup>], a smoking pipe, a bowl of rice, another two bowls of boiled glutinous rice and, finally, some farm tools. After everything is put in the right order, the shaman picks up a pair of chopsticks in his left hand, and then uses the other hand to put some rice in his mouth. He doesn't swallow it, though, but spits the rice out in the direction of the [ei<sup>3</sup> qoŋ<sup>5</sup> pu<sup>4</sup>]. Now, it is the time to start the recitation of *The Volume of Ancestor Worship* – the proper ritual thus begins.

The ritual depicted above is merely a small sample picked out of the great variety of traditional beliefs and customs still practised by the Sui people<sup>1</sup> one of the ethnic minorities of China, officially recognised by the People's Government, and that inhabiting mainly the southern-eastern part of Guizhou Province, and particularly the Sandu Sui Autonomous County<sup>2</sup>. With a total population exceeding 400,000 people, the modern Sui successfully preserve their own language, classified within the Tai-Kadai family, as well as a logographic writing system, applied strictly for divination purposes<sup>3</sup>. The latter was the object of in-depth study presented in this author's PhD thesis (2015), which is supplemented with an additional introduction of the Sui ethnic group, its language and culture.

Among hundreds of volumes of mysterious books whose meaning and application were until relatively recently a secret strictly guarded by Sui shamans, there is one dedicated to the custom of [he<sup>4</sup> ha:u<sup>3</sup> qoŋ<sup>5</sup> tsje<sup>1</sup>], literally “preparing an alcohol offering for a male ancestor”. In Chinese publications, the book is often referred to as *The Volume of Ancestor Worship* (*Jizu Jing* 祭祖经). As in the case of all other Sui written literary pieces, its textual layer conveys only a part of the whole content. Therefore, during ritual recitation, a shaman must rely on his memory to deliver all the passages that he learned from his master in an oral form. For this reason, the contents of volumes that bear the same title, but that have passed among different lineages of shamans, may differ considerably. The one presented here was recorded, notated phonetically and translated into Chinese by Wei Shuqi 韦述启, a native Sui researcher, during his visits to Wei Chaoxian 韦朝贤, a renowned “master of the books” who until his death in 2008 lived in the Sandong Township<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Sui: [sui<sup>3</sup>], Chinese: *Shui* 水. This article employs IPA for all Sui language terms and names. Each syllable is annotated with superscripted numbers from one to eight, representing respective tones (cf. Burkiewicz 2015: 67). Chinese terminology appears both in a Romanised form according to the Hanyu Pinyin standard and as the original writing, represented by simplified Chinese characters.

<sup>2</sup> Sui: [ha:m<sup>1</sup>pa<sup>1</sup>], Chinese: *Sandou Shuizu Zizhixian* 三都水族自治县.

<sup>3</sup> The illustration on the initial page is intended to give an impression of the Sui script appearance. The characters used in the background come from *The Volume of the First and Seventh Months, the Volume of the Ren and Chen* (Wang 1994: 319).

<sup>4</sup> Sui: [ɕian<sup>5</sup>], Chinese: *Sandong Xiang* 三洞乡. Sandong Township is located in the central part of Sandu County.

The whole text of *The Volume of Ancestor Worship* can be found in Wei Shuqi's master's thesis (2012). It consists of nearly two thousand verses grouped into sixteen chapters, representing specific stages of the ritual. This paper, being only a brief glimpse into the subject, provides an English translation of the first 55 verses of the initial chapter, starting with a description of the traditional annual agricultural cycle. The structure of these verses corresponds with the typical properties of the Sui rhyming literature, already discussed in this author's previous article (2019). In the fragment presented below, the original verses in the left column are interlined with glosses abbreviated according to Leipzig Glossing Rules. All rhymes, combining intra- and inter-verse relations, are additionally marked with underlines. In order to preserve the original syllabic structure and rhymes, the English translation, placed in the right column, constitute a non-literal, poetic rendition of the original piece.

he <sup>4</sup> do	ha:u <sup>3</sup> liquor	qoŋ <sup>5</sup> male ancestor	tsje <sup>1</sup> eat	Preparing offerings for an ancestor
ha <sup>1</sup> ŋi <sup>3</sup> EXCLAM	pa:u <sup>3</sup> bless			Hani <sup>5</sup> blessed!
ha <sup>1</sup> ŋi <sup>3</sup> EXCLAM	f <u>u</u> <sup>5</sup> rich			Hani great!
<u>n</u> ju <sup>4</sup> this year	si <sup>3</sup> be	<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>?</u> da:i <sup>1</sup> good	Late year is bliss.
<u>na</u> :i <sup>2</sup> now	si <sup>3</sup> be	<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>?</u> njən <sup>3</sup> auspicious	This year is dear.
<u>tən</u> <sup>3</sup> head	si <sup>3</sup> be	qen <sup>1</sup> geng	<u>ŋ</u> <sup>2</sup> wu	Near is geng-wu <sup>6</sup> .
p <sup>h</sup> je <sup>1</sup> tail	si <sup>3</sup> be	<u>ts</u> <sup>2</sup> auspicious	ŋət <sup>8</sup> day	Now is clue day.
la:k <sup>8</sup> child	pa:i <sup>2</sup> give birth to	?dai <sup>3</sup> obtain	<u>ta</u> :ŋ <sup>3</sup> speak	Your heir comes plead.
la:k <sup>8</sup> child	<u>ha</u> :ŋ <sup>4</sup> give birth to	?dai <sup>3</sup> obtain	<u>?</u> me <sup>1</sup> make sign	Your seed comes pray.
lən <sup>2</sup> behind	pu <sup>3</sup> also	<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>qa</u> :u <sup>5</sup> old	Old year's sway gone.
<u>t<sup>h</sup></u> au <sup>5</sup> reach	pu <sup>3</sup> also	<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>mai</u> <sup>5</sup> new	Don a new year.
<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>mai</u> <sup>5</sup> new	?dai <sup>3</sup> obtain	<u>ŋa</u> :u <sup>6</sup> exist	New year comes on.
<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>qa</u> :u <sup>5</sup> old	?dai <sup>3</sup> obtain	<u>pa</u> :i <sup>1</sup> go	Old one leaves here.

<sup>5</sup> A function word marking the beginning or end of a paragraph.

<sup>6</sup> In the Sui calendar, years, months and days are recorded with a Chinese-origin system of cardinals, comprising the set of ten Heavenly Stems (*tiangan* 天干) and twelve Earthly Branches (*dizhi* 地支). The Stems and Branches are combined to form cycles of sixty terms. *Geng* and *wu* are respectively the seventh of the Heavenly Stems and the seventh of the Earthly Branches.

<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>da</u> .i <sup>1</sup> good	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	taŋ <sup>1</sup> come	Good year comes up.
<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	ei <sup>4</sup> sí	<u>ta</u> <sup>6</sup> pass		<i>Si</i> <sup>7</sup> year ends,
<u>sa</u> <sup>5</sup> go up	<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>ŋo</u> <sup>2</sup> <i>wu</i>		Sends <i>wu</i> year.
<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	<u>ŋo</u> <sup>2</sup> <i>wu</i>	<u>ta</u> <sup>6</sup> pass		<i>Wu</i> year ends,
<u>sa</u> <sup>5</sup> go up	<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	mi <sup>6</sup> <i>wei</i>		Sends <i>wei</i> year.
hut <sup>7</sup> cut	tin <sup>1</sup> foot	njen <sup>2</sup> month	ŋo <sup>4</sup> five	When month five <sup>8</sup> ends,
ka <sup>4</sup> Han	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	qa:u <sup>1</sup> open	<sup>m</sup> be <sup>1</sup> year	Hans <sup>9</sup> start new year.
ʔbuŋ <sup>3</sup> keeper	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	ɕeŋ <sup>2</sup> pasture	kui <sup>2</sup> water buffalo	Folks put out cattle.
va <sup>1</sup> spring storm	pu <sup>3</sup> also	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	<u>tsəŋ</u> <sup>2</sup> rise	Spring storms then land.
<u>fəŋ</u> <sup>1</sup> rain	pu <sup>3</sup> also	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	tok <sup>7</sup> fall	And rains then fall.
ka <sup>1</sup> dragon	pu <sup>3</sup> also	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	<u>ɕam</u> <sup>4</sup> roar	Dragon then roars.
<u>nam</u> <sup>3</sup> water	pu <sup>3</sup> also	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	taŋ <sup>1</sup> come	Pours water high.
bən <sup>5</sup> well	pu <sup>3</sup> also	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	<u>tʰaŋ</u> <sup>1</sup> rise	Wells rise and fill.
<u>ɣaŋ</u> <sup>2</sup> pond	pu <sup>3</sup> also	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	pja:u <sup>6</sup> overflow	Spills break pond banks.
ʔja:ŋ <sup>5</sup> stride	njen <sup>2</sup> month	ljok <sup>8</sup> six		Come month six,
va <sup>5</sup> leaf	mai <sup>4</sup> tree	<u>mboŋ</u> <sup>1</sup> sprout		Trees' leaves burst,
nuk <sup>8</sup> flower	<u>joŋ</u> <sup>2</sup> rhododendron	kʰum <sup>3</sup> bloom		Spring's first blooms.
pjen <sup>2</sup> flat	njen <sup>2</sup> month	ɕət <sup>7</sup> seven		Come month seven,
li <sup>2</sup> plow	ho <sup>4</sup> do	<u>na</u> <sup>2</sup> field		Field gets plough,

<sup>7</sup> The sixth of the twelve Earthly Branches.

<sup>8</sup> The first month of the Sui calendar, defined by the time of harvest completion, corresponds with the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, ca. the ninth or tenth month of the Gregorian calendar. The fifth month is, therefore, equivalent to the beginning of the year in the lunar calendar.

<sup>9</sup> [ka<sup>4</sup>] is the Sui ethnonym for Han people, constituting the majority of the Chinese population.

pa <sup>2</sup> hoe	ho <sup>4</sup> do	ʔya <sup>5</sup> field		Now hoe ground.
sa <sup>5</sup> go up	njen <sup>2</sup> month	pa:t <sup>7</sup> eight		Come month eight,
au <sup>4</sup> grain	pa:i <sup>1</sup> go	ta <sup>3</sup> field		One plants crops,
dja <sup>3</sup> rice seed	pa:i <sup>1</sup> go	ti <sup>6</sup> rice field		Drops seeds through.
sa <sup>5</sup> go up	njen <sup>2</sup> month	tu <sup>3</sup> nine		Come month nine,
sui <sup>3</sup> Sui	sot <sup>7</sup> say	lam <sup>1</sup> insert seedlings		Suis plan out,
kam <sup>1</sup> Kam	sot <sup>7</sup> say	ne <sup>2</sup> pluck		Now Kams <sup>10</sup> pluck.
sa <sup>5</sup> go up	njen <sup>2</sup> month	sup <sup>8</sup> ten		Come month ten,
au <sup>4</sup> rice	tjen <sup>6</sup> become	hon <sup>2</sup> stem of a plant		Rice pricks soil,
qon <sup>1</sup> work	tjen <sup>6</sup> mount	tən <sup>3</sup> end		Toil is done.
sa <sup>5</sup> go up	njen <sup>2</sup> month	sup <sup>8</sup> ʔət <sup>7</sup> eleven		Come month eleven,
tsin <sup>5</sup> stem	au <sup>4</sup> rice	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	kwa:ŋ <sup>1</sup> shining	Rice is well grown.
sa <sup>5</sup> go up	njen <sup>2</sup> month	sup <sup>8</sup> ŋi <sup>6</sup> twelve		Now come month twelve,
m̩bja:ŋ <sup>1</sup> ear of grain	au <sup>4</sup> rice	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	m̩a:n <sup>3</sup> yellow	Paddy rice ripens.
sa <sup>5</sup> go up	njen <sup>2</sup> month	tsjen <sup>1</sup> first		Come month one,
au <sup>4</sup> rice	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	m̩a <sup>1</sup> come	ya:ŋ <sup>1</sup> house	Grain fills store rooms.
pjen <sup>2</sup> flat	njen <sup>2</sup> month	ŋi <sup>6</sup> two		Come month two,
va:ŋ <sup>1</sup> straw	ʔdai <sup>3</sup> obtain	t <sup>h</sup> au <sup>5</sup> reach	ba:n <sup>3</sup> village	Straw piles in towns.
sa <sup>5</sup> go up	njen <sup>2</sup> month	ha:m <sup>1</sup> three		Come month three,

<sup>10</sup> The Kam people, also known as Dong 侗, are one of the ethnic minorities recognised by the People's Republic of China. Their main settlements are located in Guizhou Province (*Guizhou Sheng* 贵州省) and adjacent regions.

in <sup>5</sup> swallow	t <sup>h</sup> am <sup>3</sup> build	<u>kuŋ</u> <sup>1</sup> nest		Nests fill trees,
<u>yun</u> <sup>2</sup> bee	t <sup>h</sup> am <sup>3</sup> build	fa <sup>3</sup> hive		Bees build hives.
pjen <sup>2</sup> flat	njen <sup>2</sup> month	ei <sup>5</sup> four		Come month four,
sui <sup>3</sup> Sui	tsje <sup>1</sup> eat	ljeu <sup>4</sup> ASPP	<u>twa</u> <sup>3</sup> new year <sup>11</sup>	New Year Sui got,
<u>ka</u> <sup>4</sup> Han	mi <sup>4</sup> NEG	tsje <sup>1</sup> eat	tsjen <sup>1</sup> first month	Not for Han yet.

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<sup>11</sup> [tsje<sup>1</sup>twa<sup>3</sup>], which literally means “to celebrate the end of a year”, is one of the most popular and celebrated festivals among the Sui people. Performed after completion of the harvest season, it symbolically ends one cycle of farming works and starts another.