Whenever 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 [pju¹ tɑ.i³]. The most capable are also referred to as [ʔai³ ha.ŋ⁶ le¹], i.e. those who have mastered [le¹ sui³] – 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 [ɕi³ qоŋ⁵ pu⁴] – 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 [biŋ⁵], 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 [ɕi³ qоŋ⁵ pu⁴]. 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 people¹ 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 County². 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 purposes³. 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 [he⁴ ha.ʃ³ qоŋ⁵ tsje¹], 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 Township⁴.

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¹ Sui: [sui³], 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.

² Sui: [ha.m’pa¹], Chinese: Sandou Shuizu Zizhixian 三都水族自治县.

³ 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).

⁴ Sui: [ɕian⁵], 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.

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he⁴ do

ha:u³ liquor

qoŋ⁵ male ancestor

tsje¹ eat

Preparing offerings for an ancestor

ha¹ŋ³ EXCLAM bless

pa:u³ bless

Hani⁵ blessed!

ha¹ŋ³ EXCLAM rich

fa⁵ Hani great!

niu⁴ this year

si³ =be¹ year

?da:i¹ good

Late year is bliss.

na:i² now

si³ =be¹ year

?njæn³ auspicious

This year is dear.

tən³ head

si³ qeŋ¹ =geng

ŋo² Near is geng-wu⁶.

pʰje¹ tail

si³ =war² auspicious

ŋat⁸ day

Now is clue day.

lən² pu³ behind

=be¹ year

qa:u⁵ Old year’s sway gone.

ᵐ be¹ qa:u⁵ Old one leaves here.

lən² pu³ also

=be¹ year

ma³ Don a new year.

lən² pu³ reach

=be¹ year

ma³ New year comes on.

lən² pu³ year

=be¹ year

ma³ Old one leaves here.

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⁵ A function word marking the beginning or end of a paragraph.

⁶ 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.
The sixth of the twelve Earthly Branches.

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.

[ka⁴] is the Sui ethnonym for Han people, constituting the majority of the Chinese population.
The Kam people, also known as Dong, are one of the ethnic minorities recognised by the People's Republic of China. Their main settlements are located in Guizhou Province (Guizhou Sheng) and adjacent regions.
in⁵ tʰam³ kun¹ Nests fill trees,

ɣuŋ² tʰam³ fa³ Bees build hives.

pjeŋ² njen² ei⁵ Come month four,

sui³ tsje¹ ljeu⁴ tsje¹ New Year Sui got,

ka⁴ mi⁴ tsje¹ tser⁷ Not for Han yet.

Bibliography


11 [ʦjeʰwa⁴], 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.