

JAMES L. WATSON

**WAKING THE DRAGON: VISIONS
OF THE CHINESE IMPERIAL STATE
IN LOCAL MYTH**

The Emperor is like a sleeping dragon. You wake him at your own peril.

Mr Man Tso-chuen, 68-year-old elder
of the San Tin Wen Lineage, 1969

ONE of the central themes that dominates Maurice Freedman's writings is the relationship between local lineages and the Chinese imperial state. Freedman argued that there was a thin line beyond which state authorities would not tolerate the expansion of lineage power, particularly in the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian (see, for example, 1958:124-5; 1966a:95-6; 1974). This essay examines one aspect of the lineage-state relationship, namely the consequences of crossing that line and challenging the emperor.¹

Cantonese villagers in rural Hong Kong are notorious for their cynical views on politics, a characteristic Freedman was quick to register (1966b).

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on 'The Limits of State Power in China', sponsored by the European Association of Chinese Studies and held at the Bellagio Study and Conference Centre. It was also discussed at the Traditional China Seminar, Columbia University, and at the Social History Workshop, University of Pittsburgh. The author wishes to thank Stuart Schram (organizer of the Bellagio conference), Donald Sutton, Tang Tsou, Myron Cohen, Benjamin Schwartz and Rubie Watson for their helpful comments. The field research upon which this study is based was made possible by grants from the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), the Social Science Research Council (UK), and Joint Committee on Chinese Studies (ACLS/SSRC, USA), and the Foreign Area Fellowship Program (USA).

This cynicism tends to be projected into the past as well as the future. Most of the elders I encountered during two stints of field research in the New Territories of Hong Kong believed that the power of the Chinese state—imperial and modern—was based, ultimately, on terror. Understandably, given Hong Kong's delicate position, they are more willing to discuss the past than the future. In local folklore, the emperor is portrayed as a dangerous and vengeful ruler. From the ordinary villager's point of view, the state was a remote and formless entity, represented by agents of imperial power (e.g. district magistrates, tax collectors, troops) who rarely intruded into local affairs unless provoked. The peasants preferred to keep the state at arm's length; their myths and legends underscore the folly of drawing attention to oneself.

This vision of a remote, potentially dangerous ruler is only one aspect of a more complex set of collective representations found among Cantonese villagers. The present paper deals specifically with a number of interrelated myths that tell of the horrors associated with the waking dragon. It would be misleading in the extreme to rely on such oral accounts as a guide to historical events. This is not my intention. Rather, I am interested in these myths because they provide an insight into the way Chinese villagers *think* about their universe.

The origins of the myths discussed in this paper remain obscure, although it is obvious from the content that they derive from the late imperial era (probably the Ming–Qing transition of the mid-seventeenth century—see discussion below). This is not to say, of course, that the oral presentations have been unchanged over time; I have been present on many occasions when local myths were updated or embellished to suit contemporary needs. However, all the myths can be stripped down to a basic set of key elements. These elements, taken together, convey essentially the same message, irrespective of the additional 'noise' the myths have acquired with each new telling. The message is unmistakable: beware of provoking the dragon; to do so invites systematic extermination.

It will be obvious that my approach owes much to the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1969) and Edmund Leach (1967, 1969), but I do not pretend that this study constitutes a structural analysis of the type usually associated with those names. My aim is less ambitious, in the sense that local myths are examined for what they can tell us about peasant attitudes toward the imperial state, the emperor, and his officials. If one assumes (as I do) that the basic content and structure of these myths derive from the late-imperial era, it follows that the oral tradition may provide a useful commentary on the work of historians who rely exclusively on written records produced by and for the literate élite. We know very little about the ordinary peasants' representations of themselves, or their perceptions of state authority (prior to the initiation of social research in the 1930s). There was, as Evelyn Rawski (1979) has shown, a surprisingly

high rate of general literacy in China during the Qing (1644–1911), but literate villagers rarely engaged in self-conscious introspection when they recorded local events. In the area under study, one can find genealogies, local histories, account books and manuals outlining the proper worship of ancestors—all dating from the late imperial era (see Hayes 1985). These documents are, without exception, written in a very stilted, formulaic style that does not allow for personal observation or commentary by the authors. Very little exists (in writing) to tell us about the lives of ordinary people, or what the French would call the *mentalités* of a lost historical era (see, for example, Ariès 1962, 1981; Foucault 1965, 1977). I hope to demonstrate that the careful dissection of local myth can help us fill this void.

The term ‘myth’ is used in a rather broad sense in the following pages, and little effort will be made to distinguish between stories based on the exploits of real people (categorized as ‘legend’ by some anthropologists) and oral accounts that focus on imaginary figures. There is considerable debate in anthropological circles, summarized in Maranda 1972, regarding the proper definition of myth. For the purposes of the present study, myths are taken to be oral accounts that dwell on the fundamental contradictions and problems of social life. The myths considered here focus on the precarious relationship between ruler and ruled. These are, quite literally, stories of life and death in an autocratic, authoritarian state system. What distinguishes these particular stories from other oral accounts is the ritualized manner in which they are told. Village elders signal their intention to recount a myth with the words, ‘long ago there was...’² To qualify as a myth (in the present context), the oral account must also be a *collective representation* of the group. It must, in other words, be shared by members of a community who agree on the basic elements of the story; a myth cannot be an idiosyncratic creation, devised on the spur of the moment to satisfy a specific audience. In Cantonese villages, the visitor learns all too quickly what local residents consider to be myth by the sheer boredom of hearing them repeat the same stories whenever they make a new acquaintance.

A ‘local’ myth is precisely what the term implies: it is shared by members of a village, a lineage, or a community defined by the catchment area of a market town. The myths recounted here are ‘local’ in the sense that they are told by residents of one marketing community (see Skinner 1964), centred on the town of Yuen Long in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Yuen Long’s catchment area incorporates approximately fifty Cantonese villages. I have not heard these stories outside the Yuen Long region, although it is likely that myths of a similar nature are found in

2. When an elder signals his intention to recount a myth, everyone in attendance stops to listen. It is considered impolite not to pay attention. Myth-telling sessions are set apart from ordinary discourse.

other parts of the New Territories and in Guangdong province. We are not, therefore, dealing with folklore that is common to all Chinese, as in the case of the Wu Zixu epics studied by David Johnson (1980). Furthermore, local myths are rarely if ever recorded in writing. They are passed by word of mouth from one generation to the next. These myths are brief, simple and straightforward; no special skills or training are required to tell them.³

This paper is based on field data collected in the villages of San Tin (1969–70) and Ha Tsuen (1977–8), controlled respectively by the Wen and Deng lineages. The Wen and Deng are representative of the land-owning lineages that dominated much of rural Guangdong prior to the land reform of the early 1950s (see J. Watson 1975 on the Wen, and R. Watson 1985 on the Deng). During my second field trip, I also worked regularly in tenant villages inhabited by people who are neither Wen nor Deng, in the hinterlands of San Tin and Ha Tsuen.⁴ The myths examined below are told by landlord and tenant, literate and illiterate, male and female. They constitute an integral part of the folklore of the region under study.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that the Wen and Deng were not renowned for their success in producing scholar-bureaucrats who served the imperial state. The Wen can boast of only one ancestor with a title, and this appears to have been purchased during the Qing. The Deng of Ha Tsuen had three (genuine) degree-holders, all of the lowest rank, in 27 generations. The people discussed in this paper, therefore, were a far cry from the super élites commonly studied by historians (cf. Beattie 1979; Ebrey 1978; Ebrey and Watson 1985; Twitchett 1959). They did not, in other words, belong to nationally prominent kinship groups that produced generations of government servants. There is no question that they represent the ruled rather than the rulers, at least in respect of the imperial state.

The Dragon Awake: Rivers of Blood

The first set of myths to be examined has three core elements: a powerful lineage challenges the authority of the emperor; troops are dispatched to punish offenders, who are caught and massacred; this results in a river of blood. Near the village of Ha Tsuen, there is a small market complex

3. Compare the oral traditions described by Hrdlickova (1965).

4. These communities are 'satellite villages', in the sense that all residents are clients of dominant lineages (such as the Wen or Deng). Until 1905, satellite villagers did not own any land they cultivated (J. Watson 1977).

called Hung Sui Kiu (Red Water Bridge). Most versions of the myth place the massacre in a village that once stood in the hills above Hung Sui Kiu. The following version was collected in 1977 from a 66-year-old elder of the Ha Tsuen Deng lineage (my own commentary is in square brackets):

Version one, 'The Three Tigers of Nga Chin Wai':

Long ago there was a village in the hills above the place we now call Red Water Bridge. This village was called Nga Chin Wai [lit. 'Tooth Money Compound', which in colloquial Cantonese has connotations of 'gouging' or 'grabbing-money compound']. It was the home of the Mao lineage. Among the Mao there were three rich and arrogant bullies, called the Three Tigers of Nga Chin Wai. These bullies robbed merchants and demanded tribute from passing ships [the Castle Peak channel, through which all barge traffic to Canton passed, is near]. The Three Tigers grew very powerful and began to brag that no one dared to challenge them. A travelling *jin-shi* [進士 high-level imperial degree, used colloquially for government officials or men of note] heard these stories and went to investigate, dressed as a beggar. He was beaten by the Three Tigers, who proclaimed, 'No one, not even a dragon [i.e. the emperor], can control three strong tigers.'

The *jin-shi* escaped and wrote an urgent message to the emperor: '*Ya [nga] qian [chin] san hu, yi bu huang gong*' [牙錢三虎一步皇宮 meaning roughly, 'Three tigers of Nga Chin, one step from the court'].

The emperor was furious and sent a thousand troops to punish the Three Tigers and all their kin in Nga Chin Wai. The village was surrounded in the dark of the night on the evening before the Hungry Ghost Festival [during which wandering ghosts gather to be nourished]. With the Mao trapped inside their *wei* 圍 ['compound' or 'walled village'], the troops broke down the gate and began to catch everyone they found inside. They were taken out and killed, one by one. The hundreds of corpses were dismembered and thrown into the river nearby. To this day it is called Hung Sui Kong [Red Water River]. Every year, on the night before the Hungry Ghost Festival, the river turns red. It is a terrifying sight. If you stay too long you will hear the Mao ghosts crying for mercy.

The troops spared only one person that night. They discovered a pregnant woman and allowed her to flee Nga Chin Wai as a warning to others. She changed her son's surname from Mao to Sheng, which means 'holding the memory for future generations' [this is how the informant interpreted the character *sheng* 盛, which is not a common surname in the area]. The Mao, as you know, have all disappeared from our region. Anyone with that surname⁵ would be afraid to settle here for fear that the emperor's troops might return on the eve of the Hungry Ghost Festival.

The second version of the Blood River myth was told to me, with minor variations, on dozens of occasions by members of the Deng lineage

5. According to my older informants, the use of *mao* 毛 (i.e. Mao Zedong's surname) in these local myths predates the communist revolution. It seems unlikely, therefore, that a modern political message is being conveyed (no one in either village ever offered this interpretation).

at Ha Tsuen. The village in question is called Lan Wai 爛圍 ('Ruined Compound' or 'Broken Village'), and, like Nga Chin Wai, a place bearing this name actually exists. Lan Wai is a marvellously preserved archaeological site that has yet to be excavated. Although, judging from appearance, the location has been uninhabited for centuries, it was a walled and moated complex built on a stone foundation approximately the size and shape of a soccer pitch. It stands out in stark contrast to the open fields that surround it on all sides. Lan Wai is now well over a mile from the sea but, prior to the enclosure of brackish-water marshes and the construction of irrigation works in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the site would have been strategically located on the coast. My guess is that Lan Wai was once a military garrison built during the Tang or Song (seventh to thirteenth centuries) as one of the many outposts to guard the extensive salt-works that existed in this part of coastal Guangdong.⁶ Not surprisingly, Lan Wai figures prominently in the folklore of Ha Tsuen and surrounding villages. In the second version of the Blood River myth, the scene shifts from Nga Chin Wai to Lan Wai.

Version two, 'The Pirates of Lan Wai' (collected from a 70-year-old Deng elder in Ha Tsuen, 1977):

Long ago, before our Deng ancestors settled in Ha Tsuen, there was a very powerful lineage living in the place we now call Lan Wai. The people left no survivors and no records, so we do not know their surname or the name of their village. This is why we have no choice but to call it Lan Wai. The people who lived there were fishermen until they discovered how easy it was to steal goods from ships. They became pirates and gave up fishing. The stronger they became the more they fortified their village. You can still see today what a huge *wei* they built to protect themselves.

When the pirates of Lan Wai robbed the ships of wealthy merchants, complaints began to reach the magistrate. But he was too weak to do anything himself. He wrote to the emperor begging assistance.

The emperor sent troops in 100 ships that docked near Lan Wai. The people inside the *wei* were terrified and fled to the hills near the place where Ling Dou Si [a Buddhist temple] now stands. There they tried to hide, but the soldiers found them one by one and killed them by cutting off first their limbs and then their heads. The massacre was total. Not a single person survived so there was no one left to bury the dead.

The stream nearby flowed red with their blood. We still call the place Sei Yan Hang [Dead People's Gully]. The ghosts of the pirates still lurk in this gully. If you do not leave the area before dark you will see headless and limbless ghosts, covered in blood-stained rags. The stream will turn red with their blood again. Our Deng ancestors built a Buddhist temple (*si* 寺) above Dead People's Gully to placate the ghosts. Otherwise no one would dare live in Ha Tsuen district.

6. This is a topic that will be developed in a subsequent paper. On salt-works along the Guangdong coast, see *Guangdong* 1862.

The third version of the Blood River myth relates the massacre to a specific historical event, the Great Coastal Evacuation of 1662.⁷ In the year of his enthronement, the Kangxi emperor ordered the evacuation of a fifty-*li* (approximately seventeen-mile) strip of coast in certain parts of Guangdong and Fujian provinces. The relocation of people was undertaken to deprive anti-Manchu forces of sanctuaries among the inhabitants. Villagers in Guangdong's Xin-an county (the southern half of which became the Hong Kong New Territories in 1898) had no advance warning of the evacuation and learned of it only when imperial troops arrived to begin the clearance in March 1662 (Ng and Baker 1983: 112). The Xin-an gazetteer, an official county history, presents a grim picture of the next decade, with residents seeking refuge in adjoining counties and experiencing great hardships, including famine, disease, and that ultimate symbol of breakdown in China, cannibalism (*Xin-an* 1819: 270, 364–73). The oral history of many local villages is replete with stories of the suffering inflicted on ancestors during this disruptive period. The emperor finally relented in 1669 and permitted recolonization of the coast. The Deng and Wen and several other surname groups rushed in to southern Xin-an to recover old territory and stake new claims (Baker 1968: 41; R. Watson 1982: 79–80).

Version three, 'The Proud Landowners Who Defied the Emperor' (collected from a 76-year-old Deng elder in Ha Tsuen, 1978):

Long ago there was a wealthy and powerful lineage of the surname Mao living near the place we now call Red Water Bridge. The Mao owned many thousands of *dou* 斗 [one *dou* equals approximately one-sixth of an English acre] of rice land in this area. They prospered and had many sons because of the excellent *feng-shui* [geomantic influences] they enjoyed from the hills behind their village.

When the Ming dynasty fell, the new Manchu emperor wished to punish the local people for their sympathies to the old court. The new emperor decreed that everyone should be moved away from the coast and sent to Dongguan [the adjoining county to the north]. Our Deng ancestors obeyed because they knew the consequences of resisting. But the Mao refused to leave. They said that no one, not even an emperor, had the right to move them from their ancestral lands and take away their good *feng-shui*. They defied the emperor and stayed behind.

When the imperial troops arrived they found that the Mao refused to leave their *wei*. The troops breached the wall and slaughtered everyone inside, save one pregnant woman who was allowed to flee as a warning to others. The Mao were then hacked to pieces so that they could not be buried properly. Their blood flowed out of the *wei* and into the nearby river, turning it red. This is why we call the place Red Water Bridge.

7. See the county gazetteer (*Xin-an* 1819) for a record of these historical events; relevant sections have been translated in Ng and Baker (1983: 111–13). See also Hsieh (1932) and R. Watson (1982: 79–80).

Our ancestors were allowed to come back to their villages and lands. But the Mao disappeared completely. This is what happened when people defied the emperor.

Provoking the Dragon: Local Defence and Imperial Massacres

Although the content of the three Blood River myths varies slightly, the underlying message is clear: challenging the emperor invites massacre of the most horrible kind. Note that the victims' bodies are systematically dismembered and allowed to rot, without burial. In the local view, this is the most terrifying aspect of the myths, because it is believed that the dismemberment and exposure of the corpse precludes the victim's spirit from finding peace in the afterlife (J. Watson 1982). The Mao are doomed to wander as hungry ghosts forever (it is significant that many versions place the slaughter on the eve of the Hungry Ghost Festival).

Another element of the myth provides a revealing commentary on local defence measures. Walled compounds (*wei*), enclosures, moats and watch-towers are common in the Canton delta region. Most of these defensive structures probably date from the seventeenth century, following the period of inter-dynastic chaos. Under ordinary circumstances, villagers claim, the walled compounds provided adequate protection from bandits and hostile neighbours. The *wei* in Ha Tsuen and San Tin enclose whole hamlets containing up to a hundred small houses and public buildings. The walls are approximately 15 feet high and 3 to 4 feet thick, composed of bricks, granite blocks and large stones. These compounds often have watch-towers at the four corners and a single, reinforced gate that can be closed at night or during emergencies.

What is interesting about the Blood River myths is that the *wei* are no use whatsoever when imperial troops are involved. If anything, the walls become a convenient means of trapping the victims. The myths thereby reinforce the notion that the power of the emperor is, quite literally, extraordinary—it is beyond anything that villagers might experience in the course of their ordinary lives. Violent encounters with bandits, pirates and vengeful neighbours were part of 'normal' existence in the area under study (see, for example, Lamley 1977). But, as the myth makes clear, such encounters are trivial in comparison to the wrath of the emperor.

Massacres similar to the ones described by my informants did occur during the Ming-Qing transition of the 1640s in some parts of China, only on a much larger scale. Walled cities rather than enclosed villages were involved. Jerry Dennerline's book, *The Chia-ting Loyalists* (1981), focuses on a famous massacre of Ming loyalists that occurred in the city of Jiading

(Yangtze delta region) in 1665. Dennerline quotes a chronicler whose neighbour witnessed the slaughter (1981: 297):

Li [the commander of imperial troops] entered the city and ordered massacre.... The sound of swords tearing through flesh was everywhere, and the cries of people begging for their lives rose like the din of the marketplace. Countless numbers were murdered in this way. Everywhere there were bodies hanging from roof beams, tossed into wells, limbless and with bloody faces, struck down and dying but still moving about. Flesh and bones were scattered in the streets. Thousands plunged into the canals only to die there. Days later their bodies clogged the river from the west gate of the city to the Ko-lung [approximately five miles away], until boatmen had no place to sink their poles and the scum rose several inches from the water's surface.

These grim scenes were repeated in other areas where Qing troops encountered stubborn resistance. Frederick Wakeman provides another example from the city of Jiangyin, also in the Yangtze delta. In October 1665, the new emperor ordered his troops to 'fill the city with corpses before you sheathe your swords'. Only 53 out of Jiangyin's population of nearly 100,000 are said to have survived two full days of slaughter (Wakeman 1975: 83). Here, as elsewhere, the troops were primarily ethnic Chinese (Han) and not Manchu.

The events that Dennerline and Wakeman describe also became the subject of myth, but of a different order from the myths told to me by Cantonese villagers. Chinese chroniclers distorted the account of the Jiangyin massacre in such a manner as to make it appear that the sacrifice of so many loyal Ming subjects was instrumental in prolonging resistance in other parts of the country. The leading figures in the Jiangyin tragedy were later enshrined in heroic accounts that reach epic proportions (*ibid.*: 84). The message of these historiographic/literary myths is quite the opposite of the Blood River myth. Resistance in the Jiangyin case is equated with loyalty to the Ming court; death under such circumstances results in something akin to deification. Cantonese villagers do not suffer any illusions about the consequences of resisting imperial troops. Nor do they deify the victims of Ming loyalists. Rather than lost heroes, the Mao are portrayed as fools. To confront the emperor, Manchu or otherwise, results only in the complete obliteration of the lineage—the worst of all fates. There is nothing heroic in such an end.

Did the Blood River massacres, or anything like it, actually happen in the New Territories region? It seems unlikely that imperial troops would have bothered with a small village of the type described in the myth. Had such an event occurred, it surely would have been recorded in official chronicles or in the county gazetteer. Other atrocities, including numerous bandit raids, *are* mentioned in the latter. In 1681, for instance, residents of a tiny village near Ha Tsuen, Kai Pak Leng, were killed by bandits

(*Xin-an* 1819: 373). The gazetteer does mention a place called Hung Sui San ('Red Water Mountain') in its geographical listings. The passage reads: 'Here many farmers were killed and their blood ran into a river.' In contrast to oral accounts, however, the editors of the gazetteer observe that the perpetrators were bandits (*ibid.*: 146).

As noted earlier, it does not really matter whether the events described in the Blood River myth actually happened in Xin-an county. Villagers were certainly aware that horrendous massacres did occur and that imperial troops were often responsible. What matters is that many local people *believe* that a massacre took place near their homes. Given the chaotic events of the mid-seventeenth century, it seems likely that the myths originated during or immediately after the coastal evacuation. I have argued elsewhere that another set of myths relating to the patron goddess Tian Hou 天后 can be traced to the immediate post-evacuation period (J. Watson 1985). The fact that the 1819 edition of the Xin-an gazetteer mentions a place called Red Water Mountain might be taken as documented evidence that some version of the Blood River myth was already well established in local folklore by the end of the eighteenth century.

The Dragon's Wrath: Benevolent Officials, Suicide and Execution

One of the most striking features of the local myths under study is that the emperor is rarely portrayed as a sympathetic or nurturing personage. Rather, he is depicted as the personification of forces that guard the prerogatives of state power. The closest parallel to the emperor in local folklore is Tian Di 天帝, the supreme deity in the villagers' pantheon. Like the highest god, the emperor is remote, unapproachable, and extremely jealous of his power. In most cases, the emperor or his agents (i.e. troops) are associated with acts of unspeakable violence. It is this apocalyptic vision of imperial power, rather than the benevolent exercise of enlightened rule, that is played upon so dramatically in local myth. I shall return to this point in the conclusion.

There is another set of local myths that bears on the relationship between the emperor and his subjects. These are the myths of the Benevolent Officials, as they are known locally, the subjects being two Qing administrators, Zhou Youde 周有德 and Wang Lairen 王來任, who served as Viceroy of Guangdong-Guangxi and Governor of Guangdong respectively during the evacuation of 1662-9. These two officials are credited in local folklore with allowing the long-suffering residents of southern Xin-an county to return to their homes. The Wen, Deng and

other lineages in the area have elevated Zhou and Wang to the status of deities. There are two major temples dedicated to the worship of Zhou and Wang in the New Territories (see Baker 1968: 193–5). They are also mentioned on many of the multiple-god tablets found in village shrines throughout the region. Zhou and Wang have been enshrined as well in the myths of the evacuation.

Version one, 'The Suicide of the Benevolent Officials, Zhou and Wang' (collected from a 72-year-old elder in San Tin, 1978):

Long ago, there was an emperor who wished to punish the local people. So he ordered everyone to move a hundred *li* back from the sea. There was much suffering, death and loss of children. It was so bad that people had to eat corpses in order to survive.

Finally, after ten years of suffering, the good officials Zhou and Wang took pity on the people and ordered the soldiers to let everyone return to their homes and fields. Zhou and Wang did this without asking permission from the emperor because they knew he was cruel and would never agree.

The emperor learned of their actions and summoned Zhou and Wang to Peking for trial. Knowing that they would be executed horribly, they committed suicide. We local people now recognize them as our protecting deities (*bao-sheng* 保聖), and their tablets are worshipped in many temples.

Version two, 'The Execution of Zhou and Wang' (collected from a 65-year-old elder in Ha Tsuen, 1977):

[The story is essentially the same as version one above except for the conclusion.] When the emperor learned that Zhou and Wang had allowed our ancestors to return to their lands, he ordered his troops to arrest the two officials. They were taken to Peking and subjected to horrible tortures for a hundred days. When they would not admit that they were wrong and the emperor was right, their heads were chopped off and their corpses thrown to dogs. This is how the emperor treated those who disobeyed him, even though everyone agreed that Zhou and Wang were good and benevolent officials.

We now worship Zhou and Wang along with our other gods in local temples. They saved our ancestors from starvation and death. We must now worship the spirits of Zhou and Wang to thank them for their help.

The Zhou and Wang myths are particularly interesting because they deal with real people who were actually involved in the events described. But here the similarities between local myth and documented history end. We know from written sources that Zhou and Wang did indeed serve in Guangdong during the evacuation. Furthermore, Wang wrote a memorial to the court in 1668 arguing that it was time to open the coast for settlement again.

The memorial stresses, first, the continuing cost of the evacuation (wages for troops, naval support, etc.) and, secondly, the hardship of the people who had been removed (Ng and Baker 1983: 120). Zhou and Wang were both enshrined in the state-supported temple for loyal officials in the

county capital (*ibid.*: 90). It is hardly likely that two men executed for treason would have their tablets placed in a government-sponsored temple. Governor Wang's intercession was obviously instrumental in relieving the suffering of local people, and accordingly, the gazetteer lists three temples dedicated to his memory in Xin-an county. There is no hint in any published source relevant to the history of Xin-an that Zhou and Wang were implicated in anti-state activities during or after the evacuation.

And yet the villagers of the New Territories have turned these workaday officials into culture heroes who incurred the wrath of the dragon. From the villagers' point of view, what is significant (and worth retelling) about the myths is not so much that Zhou and Wang helped local people but that they died as a consequence of their actions. The villain of the piece is the emperor—a cruel, jealous tyrant who is not the least concerned with the suffering of his subjects.

Conclusions: The Dragon Asleep?

It is undeniable that the myths outlined in this paper have a didactic quality and may have been preserved (in part) as a warning to each new generation of lineage toughs. In my view, however, the educational message is secondary: of far more interest for comparative purposes is the *imagery* of the myths. It is no coincidence, I would argue, that their emperor is portrayed as a remote and dangerous entity, outside the norms of ordinary human compassion. Imperial troops, the agents of violence, act only to maintain the authority of their master. Benevolent officials, such as Zhou and Wang, occasionally intercede on behalf of villagers but the consequence, for the officials, is death. More often, imperial officials (e.g. county magistrates) are portrayed as faceless and ineffectual servants of the emperor. The myths make it clear that the ultimate source of power is the person of the emperor.

This representation of the emperor—and by implication the state—fits well with other notions of local history. When asked, lineage elders deny that state officials (other than the two mythic exceptions Zhou and Wang) ever made a positive contribution to life in their county. Magistrates, their court messengers, tax collectors, police and troops rarely intruded into local affairs according to my informants, except to make punitive raids that are enshrined in myth. The usual response to questions about the relationship between the imperial state and local people begins with the adage: 'Heaven is high and the emperor is far away.' The state, therefore, is very much the dragon—in normal times it is asleep, but, when provoked, the beast awakens to terrorize the countryside.

Is this an accurate representation of the state in late imperial China? My informants' own vision of their social history reinforces the negative image of the state. Wen and Deng elders claim that their ancestors had effective political and economic control over their respective lineage territories, with no active support or encouragement from state officials whatsoever. It is not surprising that this view of Chinese local politics is reproduced in the writings of many anthropologists: one of the aims of anthropological field research is the comprehension and faithful translation of an alien system of thought—including political attitudes.

The villagers' image of the state as a sleeping dragon fits well with anthropological theories regarding the development of powerful kinship groups. Ordinarily, patrilineages of the sort found in Guangdong are not expected to thrive in societies with centralized state systems (see e.g. Fortes 1953). However, if one assumes that the Chinese state did not penetrate below the administrative level of the county capital, it follows that large sections of the countryside were left to evolve their own systems of social control (cf. Hsiao 1960). Anthropologists who accept this argument also assume that lineages flourished in frontier areas remote from the centres of imperial control (see, for example, Baker 1979: 155–6; Freedman 1966a: 160 ff.; Potter 1970). Accordingly, powerful kinship groups are thought to have emerged *in spite of* China's autocratic state system. Recent research suggests that this model of Chinese political economy may be misleading.

The vision of the Chinese state projected in local myth represents only one side of a complex relationship. Lineages like the Wen and Deng did not develop in spite of imperial authority, they evolved *as a consequence of* the interplay between the state and economic forces at the local level. The state was largely responsible for guarding the major waterways of the Canton delta and the associated transportation facilities that allowed a sophisticated market economy to emerge in the post-evacuation era (Hsieh 1974; J. Watson 1985). It was during this economic boom (mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries) that modern lineages assumed their full form and came to dominate the best lands along the delta. There is also evidence to suggest that certain lineages (such as the Ha Tsuen Deng) emerged, as consciously created entities, to enable otherwise unorganized settlers to take advantage of economic opportunities provided by the opening of Canton to foreign trade—a decision taken by state authorities (R. Watson 1982). Furthermore, many of the lineages in the delta benefited from state monopolies granted for the exploitation of salt-pans, oyster-beds and transportation facilities.

It will be noted that these are all indirect benefits stemming from the gradual extension of imperial control over the southern coast. The waterways of the Canton delta were never completely pacified (Murray 1982), but by mid-Qing, commerce and local industries were booming.

The Qing ancestors of my Wen and Deng informants may indeed have had very little *direct* contact with state officials. Maurice Freedman demonstrated that lineages often collected their own taxes, maintained their own systems of justice, and did everything possible to keep the state at arm's length (1958: 114–25). Ruling from a distance was a strategy that worked under these circumstances, and it has been documented by many observers of Xin-an history (e.g. Hayes 1977). But the fact that imperial officials rarely intervened in local affairs does not mean that the state was necessarily the mythical beast of peasant folklore (asleep and irrelevant, or awake and destructive).

It is obvious, therefore, that there is a serious disjunction between the peasants' vision of the imperial state and what outside observers might be tempted to call the realities of Chinese political economy. The Wen and the Deng have a vested interest in portraying themselves and their ancestors as autonomous people, in control of their own destinies. The state, personified by the emperor, played a minor, and primarily repressive role in their conception of local history. And yet the lineages in question could not possibly have survived for so many centuries without the support, or at least acquiescence, of state officials. Lineages and related kinship organizations evolved *after* the Chinese imperial state had pacified the Guangdong frontier (J. Watson 1975: 34–7, building on Pasternak 1969). State officials defined the limits beyond which kinship corporations were not allowed to develop. When the boundaries of acceptable behaviour were transgressed, the state intervened but not always with disastrous consequences. There are, for instance, several stelae in the New Territories demonstrating that county magistrates often settled local problems peacefully. But undramatic interventions of this nature are not enshrined in local myth. Rather, it is the apocalyptic vision of imperial violence that villagers choose to develop in their folklore.

What does this study of local myth tell us about the nature of the Chinese state? It is hazardous to generalize on the basis of such a small sample, but I suspect that further research in other parts of China would lead to similar conclusions. Cantonese peasants appear to have had a conception of the social order that differed radically from the dominant ideology as reflected in the writings of educated literati and imperial officials. For peasants, the exercise of state power always resulted in death and destruction—sometimes justified, often not. In local myth, the emperor is responsible for the restoration of order only when it suits his own interests; the concerns of his subjects are incidental. Accordingly, the Confucian ideal of loyalty to the emperor had little meaning to ordinary peasants (in parts of Guangdong, at least). Those at the very bottom of China's administrative hierarchy believed that the proper order of the cosmos could only be maintained by keeping the dragon at bay.

REFERENCES

- ARIÈS, Phillippe 1962. *Centuries of Childhood*, New York: Vintage Books.
 ... 1981. *The Hour of Our Death*, London: Allen Lane.
- BAKER, Hugh D. R. 1968. *A Chinese Lineage Village: Sheung Shui*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
 ... 1979. *Chinese Family and Kinship*, London: Macmillan.
- BEATTIE, Hilary J. 1979. *Land and Lineage in China: A Study of T'ung Ch'eng, Anhwei, in the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DENNERLINE, Jerry 1981. *The Chia-ting Loyalists*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- EBREY, Patricia B. 1978. *The Aristocratic Families of Early Imperial China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- EBREY, Patricia B., and James L. WATSON (eds.) 1985. *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China: 1000-1940*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- FORTES, Meyer 1953. 'The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. LV, no. 1, pp. 17-41.
- FOUCAULT, Michel 1965. *Madness and Civilization*, New York: Random House.
 ... 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, London: Penguin Books.
- FREEDMAN, Maurice 1958. *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*, London: Athlone Press [LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 18].
 ... 1966a. *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung*, London: Athlone Press [LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 33].
 ... 1966b. 'Shifts of Power in the Hong Kong New Territories', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. I, pp. 3-12.
 ... 1974. 'The Politics of an Old State: A View from the Chinese Lineage', in John H.R. Davis (ed.), *Choice and Change: Essays in Honour of Lucy Mair*, London: Athlone Press [LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 50].
- Guangdong 1862. *Guangdong Tushuo* (Guangdong Illustrated), Canton [also Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Reprints].
- HAYES, James 1977. *The Hong Kong Region, 1850-1911: Institutions and Leadership in Town and Countryside*, Hamden, Conn.: Archon-Dawson.
 ... 1985. 'Specialists and Written Materials in the Village World', in David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds.), *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- HRDLICKOVA, Vena 1965. 'The Professional Training of Chinese Storytellers and the Storytellers' Guild', *Archiv Orientalni*, Vol. XXXIII, pp. 225-48.
- HSIAO, Kung-chuan 1960. *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- HSIEH, Kuo-ching 1932. 'Removal of Coastal Population in Early Tsing Period', *Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, Vol. XV, pp. 559-96.
- HSIEH, Winston 1974. 'Peasant Insurrection and the Marketing Hierarchy in the Canton Delta, 1911', in Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner (eds.), *The Chinese City Between Two Worlds*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- JOHNSON, David 1980. 'The Wu Tzu-hsu Pien-wen and its Sources', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. XL, pp. 93-156, 465-505.

- LAMLEY, Harry 1977. 'Hsieh-tou: The Pathology of Violence in South-Eastern China', *Ch'ing-shih wen-ti* (Journal of the Society for Ch'ing Studies), Vol. III, no. 7, pp. 1-39.
- LEACH, Edmund R. 1967. 'Introduction', in Edmund R. Leach (ed.), *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, London: Tavistock.
- ... 1969. *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays*, London: Cape.
- LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude 1963. *Structural Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books.
- ... 1969. *The Raw and the Cooked*, New York: Harper and Row.
- MARANDA, Pierre (ed.) 1972. *Mythology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- MURRAY, Dian 1982. 'Mid-Ch'ing Piracy: An Analysis of Organizational Attributes', *Ch'ing-shih wen-ti* (Journal of the Society for Ch'ing Studies), Vol. IV, no. 8, pp. 1-28.
- NG, Peter Y. L., with Hugh BAKER 1983. *New Peace County: A Chinese Gazetteer of the Hong Kong Region*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- PASTERNAK, Burton 1969. 'The Role of the Frontier in Chinese Lineage Development', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXVIII, pp. 551-61.
- POTTER, Jack M. 1970. 'Land and Lineage in Traditional China', in Maurice Freedman (ed.), *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- RAWSKI, Evelyn S. 1979. *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- SKINNER, G. William 1964. 'Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 32-43.
- TWITCHETT, Denis 1959. 'The Fan Clan's Charitable Estate, 1050-1760', in David Nivison and Arthur Wright (eds.), *Confucianism in Action*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- WAKEMAN, Frederick, Jr. 1975. 'Localism and Loyalism During the Ch'ing Conquest of Kiangnan: The Tragedy of Chiang-yin', in Frederick Wakeman and Carol Grant (eds.), *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- WATSON, James L. 1975. *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage: The Mans in Hong Kong and London*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- ... 1977. 'Hereditary Tenancy and Corporate Landlordism in Traditional China: A Case Study', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. XI, pp. 161-82.
- ... 1982. 'Of Flesh and Bones: The Management of Death Pollution in Cantonese Society', in Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ... 1985. 'Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou (Empress of Heaven) on the South China Coast, 960-1960', in David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski (eds.), *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- WATSON, Rubie S. 1982. 'The Creation of a Chinese Lineage: The Teng of Ha Tsuen, 1669-1751', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. XVI, pp. 69-100.
- ... 1985. *Inequality Among Brothers: Class and Kinship in South China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Xin-an 1819. *Xin-an xianzhi* (Xin-an County Gazetteer), Canton [also Taipei: Ch'eng Wen Reprints].