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What is going to happen next?

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In the early and mid 1990s, while conducting fieldwork in northeastern China, I became friends with a farmer, Mr Huang. Although he was only sixty-one when we met, I thought at first that he might be a good deal older. He had a nervous disposition, and I later learned that he suffered badly from insomnia. It seemed he was worried about many things – indeed, about almost everything – ranging from the rising price of fertilizer, to whether or not Taiwan might decide to separate from China, thus provoking war. I can't really hope to explain, based on a few months' fieldwork, exactly what generated Mr Huang's various anxieties; but even a cursory glance at his life story may provide us with some clues.

He was born in 1932, and grew up during the Japanese colonial era in Manzuguo, so-called. This may well have been a nervous-making time to be a child. He told me that, among other restrictions, the Japanese forbade local people to eat rice, nor were they allowed, during the crucial New Year offerings, to give rice to their ancestors. Some families dared to do so in secret, but this could have dire consequences because there were informants in the countryside – “running dogs” – who might tell the Japanese. When Mr Huang was twelve years old, the colonial era collapsed around him, to be replaced by the further dangers and uncertainties of the Chinese civil war. Eventually, the Communists defeated the KMT, after which some of the “running dogs” were killed.

During this same volatile period of modern Chinese history, the 1940s, Mr Huang faced personal tragedy. The year before the Japanese defeat, when he was eleven, his mother died, to be followed by the death of his father four years later when he was fifteen. My

understanding is that both deaths were caused by illness, but I have not been able to confirm this.

Mr Huang's story since then has been one of trying to establish networks of support, however fragile, against the odds. With no parents to handle the negotiations, he nevertheless secured a marriage agreement. Then, as his ties to his parents' village became increasingly tenuous, he and his wife moved to her natal community – in order to receive help from her kin. This was an important consideration, not least because they had no children of their own. Eventually, however, they adopted a daughter who went on to marry a Chinese-Korean man. This new son-in-law, having come from a poor background, agreed to live in his wife's village, and in the home of Mr and Mrs Huang. He was to be their yanglaoxu – “support-the-elderly son-in-law” – but he did not take on Mr Huang's surname, nor did he hand over his income to him, nor was he, in any meaningful sense, under his father-in-law's control. Still, everyone liked and respected him, especially after his wife gave birth to two rather wonderful grandchildren, a girl and a boy. At the time of my first visit to the village of Dragon Head in the early 1990s, these children were six years old and two years old respectively.

It might be noted that Mr Huang, when I met him, was living with a number of kinship arrangements which, although very common in China, would still be seen by many people in the countryside as nervous-making. He did not have the support, to any significant extent, of an existing patrilineal network, nor – in the absence of a son – could he be said to have put very reliable arrangements in place for his old age security. Instead, he depended primarily on his wife's relatives, on an adopted daughter, on the adopted daughter's husband (who was an outsider in the community where they lived), on grandchildren who did not share his surname, on friends, and on the state.

Nor had Mr Huang exactly prospered under the post-Mao economic reforms. At an age when most people would like to stop worrying about such things, he faced considerable financial insecurity. When I met him, he was trying to figure out how to build a new house, because his old one provided limited insulation against the bitter cold of the north

China winters. As you might expect, this generated many headaches for him, not least because the house would cost more than seven times his annual income. In order to start building he was obliged, in his mid-sixties, to borrow a significant amount of money from relatives and neighbours which would fall due within three years. What if he could not pay it back?

Now, I could go on with this list of things that worried Mr Huang. But let me stop there, because my focus in this chapter is not so much on the particularities of Mr Huang's life, interesting though these may be. What I really want to examine are his attempts, in the context of this life, to address what is presumably a very common type of human question, namely: what is going to happen next?

I take it for granted that most people in most societies are at least somewhat anxious not only (retrospectively) about things that have already happened, but also about what is waiting around the corner. Of course, many anthropologists, on hearing this, will think of the huge range of ways in which such concerns might be articulated and addressed. Consider, for instance, Weber's famous account of religious anxiety. He tells us, among other things, that Calvinists were concerned about being "saved" – a prospect which, so far as I know, is a matter of total indifference to Mr Huang. More to the point, given the beliefs of Weber's Calvinists about predestination (which, again, are very unlike Mr Huang's ideas about "fate"), they approached the present and the future in very particular ways. They believed that worldly success now – something which required careful planning and investment – could be taken as a sign of having been chosen by God. To put this differently: anxiety about a future which could not, in any case, be controlled (thanks to predestination) was sublimated through (controllable, future-oriented) activity in the present (Weber 2001).

Pierre Bourdieu, for his part, has written of people who face a very different kind of dilemma: those for whom the future is more or less without hope. Commenting on the

uneven distribution of life-chances in society, he suggests that those with power over the world tend to have aspirations that are, in effect, “adjusted to their chances of realization”. By contrast, the relatively disempowered are more likely, he says, to come up with aspirations that are:

... detached from reality and sometimes a little crazy, as if, when nothing was possible, everything becomes possible, as if all discourses about the future ... had no other purpose than to fill what is no doubt one of the most painful of wants: the lack of a future (Bourdieu 2000:226).

So although I’ve suggested that everyone worries about what will happen next, there is clearly a significant gap between the responses of Weber’s Calvinists and Bourdieu’s subproletarians to their respective predicaments.

By contrast with the enterprising hopefulness of the former, and the daydreaming hopelessness of the latter, there is also, perhaps, the possibility of indifference. And indeed we do have ethnographic accounts of societies in which relatively little emphasis – in some cases, almost none – is placed on thinking about or planning for the future (Day et al 1999). Along these lines, my colleague Rita Astuti has described the “short-termism” of the Vezo of Madagascar, a fishing people who claim to be constantly “surprised” (*tseriky*) by much of what happens to them (Astuti 1995, 1999). Astuti describes the Vezo as “present-oriented”, and notes that they see themselves neither as heavily determined by the past, nor as capable of planning for the future. But perhaps in thinking this they are being a bit disingenuous, because they do sometimes plan and save – not least in order to be able to meet future ritual expenses (1995:128). They also worry about some eventualities; for example, they speculate that the arrival of Japanese fishing vessels near Madagascar might cause the sea to run out of fish (1995:48). And activities in the marketplace compel at least some Vezo, some of the time, to try to predict the course of supply and demand (Astuti 1999).

So even in societies where a lack of concern about the future seems unusually marked, I assume there are at least a few mechanisms – historically and culturally variable ones, of course – for thinking and talking about what might happen next.

But let me stay for a moment with the Vezo. Astuti tells us that when it comes to dealing with life the Vezo describe themselves as “lacking wisdom” (tsy mahihitsy), and this specifically means that they do not know how to learn from the past in order to deal with the uncertainties of the present and the future (1995:51). Thus, as I’ve noted, they frequently express surprise at what happens to happen. A more rational way to proceed, as the Vezo themselves seem to know, would be to engage in a bit of learning.

When Mr Huang thinks (with some anxiety) about what is going to happen next, he has the benefit of more than six decades of personal experience, some of it bitter and all of it presumably educational. But he can also draw on a Chinese tradition which – unlike the Vezo one – is very strongly oriented towards both the past and the future. That is to say, this tradition stresses not only the extent to which the historical past (including the history of kin relations within and across ancestral lines) weighs upon and determines the present, but also the extent to which the future may be predictable, and in some ways even controllable. To put this differently, this tradition holds that the sequence of events we confront is not entirely (or even predominantly) random. Those who can see the patterns in the sequences, and who can learn from observed regularities, have acquired a potentially important type of knowledge or, as the Vezo might have it, wisdom.

In what follows, I want to focus on two “pattern-recognition exercises” of this kind, both of which are highly relevant to the case of Mr Huang. The second, which I’ll come to in a moment, has to do with patterns in interpersonal relations. But the first has to do specifically with predictions of the future, and is centred around China’s cosmological system.

I should start by saying that soon after I met Mr Huang he made it clear to me that he was against traditional Chinese “superstitions”, and had basically supported the Communist effort to root them out once and for all. He is certainly not religious in any observable

way. So I was a little surprised to learn that he is personally very keen on suan ming, i.e. on “calculating fate”, and actually sees himself as something of an expert in it. In fact, this isn’t entirely surprising, because there is something proto-scientific about Chinese cosmology which makes it attractive to people who wouldn’t be caught dead worshipping gods. In terms of comparisons across cultures, this is a very important point. One reason for Mr Huang to concentrate on what will happen next is that quite a few bad things have, of course, already happened to him during his lifetime. However, because he does not believe in gods – unlike many people in the world, including many people in China – a theodicy, as such, isn’t of much use to him. That is, he can’t make use of a god-centred explanation of his (possibly unfair quota of) suffering. What he relies on instead is the naturalistic or quasi-naturalistic system for explaining fate which is found in Chinese cosmology/astrology.ⁱ

There isn’t space here to go into the details of this system, but let me briefly explain its logic as understood by many ordinary people. Basically, what happens in the universe can be explained with reference to patterns. This is partly because the universe’s temporal cycles repeat themselves; but also because many other transformative processes in the universe (e.g. the process whereby one natural element changes into another) have their own repetitive logics. An individual, born at a particular moment in time, acquires a certain destiny. One can predict this destiny through analysing the individual’s position within the natural patterns of the universe, but one can also manipulate it in certain ways. For instance, one can reckon which days or years will be especially dangerous for certain types of activities, and then avoid them.

This Chinese way of comprehending things – which is built significantly on “structural logics” in the Levi-Straussian sense – may be characterised as mathematical in orientation, and it certainly has a numerological tendency.ⁱⁱ For instance, fortune-tellers often simply manipulate numbers of years or days or hours in order to “calculate” (suan) the significance of a particular moment in time for an individual. If you visit a suanmingren, literally a “calculating destiny person”, you’re likely to find that among other things he writes down sequences of numbers, and literally does some calculations,

before discussing the possible course of events. As practices of this kind illustrate, within the Chinese cosmology numbers are held to reveal something profound about the nature of the universe and the position of individuals in it.

So this is one way of pondering the future, and even quantifying it.

But given that much of his life has already passed him by, what is its relevance for Mr Huang? In his house, he keeps copies of several different lunar calendars (almanacs), which contain a good deal of information useful for calculating fate, along with at least one well-thumbed specialist book about fortune telling. When he thinks of the future – e.g. when he sorts out his house-building strategy – there’s no question that the cosmological framework I’ve described comes into play. Outside experts may also be consulted, especially when very serious matters are at stake. For instance, his wife’s health was frail during my last visit, and everyone was of course taking incredibly seriously the news, from a “calculating destiny person”, that she might well die within the year to come.

Another matter of concern during the time I spent with him was the fact that one of his nephews (his wife’s brother’s son) was not yet engaged to marry. It drove Mr and Mrs Huang to distraction that this young man was so nonchalant about finding a wife. Fortune-telling indicated that he had only two years within which to arrange a satisfactory match, after which the prospects for a happy outcome would dramatically decrease. On the one hand, I found it easy to sympathise with the nephew in this case, who couldn’t quite believe that things were so pressing. On the other hand, given Mr Huang’s own experience of the brutal fatefulness of life, it doesn’t surprise me that he should be anxious about the risks – and turn to the cosmological system, i.e. the system for reading the patterns of the universe, for guidance.

Of course, Chinese cosmology is a very particular type of cultural-historical artefact, as is the more general “numerical orientation” – in many respects very highly elaborated – within Chinese culture and thought (cf. Stafford 2003a). And yet some of the principles

behind these things are undoubtedly widely shared across human cultures. So if, as I've been suggesting, it's a very human thing to ask questions about what is going to happen next, it is also a very human thing to seek answers through observing the patterns of reality in numerical or quasi-mathematical terms. Obeyesekere remarks, for instance, on the "persistence and proliferation" of astrological practices (which have a numerological orientation) in South Asian lay Buddhism, and a great many other examples of this same tendency could be cited.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, when Astuti tells us about ritual planning among the Vezo – who, as I've indicated, are generally very un-Chinese in their approach to the past and the future – it turns out that they, too, care a good deal about the auspiciousness of certain days and times for key activities. They consult diviners (known as ombiasa) who are specialists in the difficult task of finding "good days" within the flow of time on which important rituals can be safely held (Astuti 1995:129). It happens that the sikidy techniques used by these Malagasy diviners draw directly upon Arabic influences, and that they are explicitly numerical and mathematical in orientation (Ascher 1997).

I might add that one attraction of "scientific" divination techniques of these kinds is that they resist – or at least raise the possibility of resisting – interference from humans.^{iv} Through them, we might hope to gain direct access to the truth, while short-circuiting the messy business of human intentionality. And given the tendency of humans to interfere in the plans and projects of others, this is surely a wise move?

Now let me turn to the second "pattern-recognition exercise" I've referred to, the one which has to do with patterns in interpersonal relations. In thinking about this, it may help to draw on the notion of schemas as used by cognitive anthropologists. Schemas, in simple terms, may be thought of as "learned expectations regarding the way things usually go" (Strauss & Quinn 1997:49). An advantage of schemas, in terms of cognitive efficiency, is that they free us from the need to constantly rethink the fundamental categories and practices of life.

So: what is the pattern or schema, in China, for “the way things usually go” in interpersonal relations? As you might expect, a proper answer to this would be hugely complex, not least because in China there are folk theories of many kinds about human relationships, the life of the emotions and so on. But in previous work I’ve stressed the organising power of what might be called the “separation and reunion” schema (Stafford 2000a, 2003b). To put it as simply as possible, this holds that the normal thing in life is for people (and spirits) to go away and then to return again.

This doesn’t sound too complicated, although of course the emotions connected with such arrivals and departures may be very complicated indeed. And here, for better or worse, there is presumably no question of avoiding the complications of human intentionality. But what I want to stress – and it relates closely to these psychological complications – is that patterns of “coming and going” have a great social significance in rural China. This is because they are intimately linked to deep patterns of reciprocity (including emotional reciprocity) between persons, and also because they organise, very explicitly, a good proportion of Chinese social life both inside and outside of families.^v The lunar calendar, for instance, is centrally framed around idioms and practices of separation and reunion, e.g. in the “sending away” (song) and “welcoming” (jie) of the gods and the ancestors at crucial moments throughout the year. This spatial logic genuinely matters because relationships of many kinds – including those between friends, between children and parents, between descendants and ancestors, and between communities and their gods – are conceived, in great part, as products of the practices associated with separations and reunions. To put this differently: while reciprocity is seen as the foundation stone of proper relationships, without moments of separation and reunion such reciprocity might never be recognised or sustained – and could eventually fade away.^{vi} It’s as if one needs a poignant departure (or at least a departure of some kind) in order to make a relationship real.

But how does this relate to questions regarding what is going to happen next? First, as I’ve noted, the schema is a key organising principle behind the annual calendar of festivals and events, which means that anticipation of the future is closely linked to it.

Second, the separation and reunion schema gives people strong expectations about the patterns which interpersonal relations will follow over time. For example, even when loved ones die, we can anticipate future reunions with them through the procedures for worshipping the dead. Third – and for me this is the most interesting point – the practices of separation and reunion help to actually constitute relationships, and this means that they are one way of actively trying to make a particular future happen. That is, through making certain that given relationships will continue to exist into the future, one can attempt to control one’s own destiny.

Now let me go back to the particularities of Mr Huang’s case. He once told me that his “taiye” (the term means paternal grandfather, but here was a reference to an older male ancestor) had been one of the migrants who set out from Shandong for northeastern China about 200 years ago. He and his younger brother hoped to escape the overpopulation and poverty of their native province. They went by boat and foot, according to Mr Huang, working and sometimes begging for food along the way. But while travelling, the two brothers became separated and tragically never managed to find each other again. Mr Huang’s “taiye” also never returned to Shandong. Knowing that the Chinese tradition strongly emphasizes not only ancestral ties but also ties to the land from which the ancestors have come, I asked Mr Huang whether or not he, the descendent, now had any links to Shandong. No, he said, that all ended a long time ago (zao jiu meiyou). He said that his “taiye” had no way of returning to worship his ancestors on occasions such as qingmingjie, so those ancestors were basically forgotten (wang le), and in his new home he simply “started again from scratch” (congxin kaishi).

This story of separation – in which brothers are lost, ancestors and homeland neglected – might almost serve as a parable for Mr Huang’s own life, which has been marked by various failures in terms of the classic separation and reunion schema. As I’ve explained, both of his parents died while he was a child, leaving him an orphan. After marriage, he left his natal village, to a great extent abandoning his ancestral and kinship

connections there. And then he and his wife failed to have a son. This, in turn, makes it more likely – or so many people around them would think – that Mr and Mrs Huang will be neglected in old age. It also makes it more likely that no one will bother, once they have died, to sustain the cycle of reunions with them which would provide their spirits with an ongoing connection, in the future, to the world of the living. What might happen next, in other words, is a final abandonment to mirror the parental abandonment of Mr Huang’s childhood.

But it is precisely in order to avoid a fate of this kind – both in life and after death – that Mr Huang and his wife have actively pursued strategies for re-connecting themselves to the world. For example, I noted that the Huangs, having realised that their ties to his community were of diminishing value, moved to her natal village. Mrs Huang told me they moved there because she wanted “to be around her own people”. Central to this was the fact that there were so many of her people – the Yangs – to be around. It was a big extended family, and as far as she is concerned “the more people who are around the better” (yue duo yue hao). Living in that kind of situation, she said, the “back and forth” (laiwang) is very intense. During the lunar new year festivities – as she told me enthusiastically – the pigs and chickens she and her daughter had raised in the previous year were always quickly eaten up by the guests who crowded into their small home for reunion meals.

I should point out, however, that a move of the kind made by the Huangs wasn’t very straightforward at all when they made it, in the early 1970s. China’s hukou system (a system of household registration) was at its most restrictive then, dramatically limiting mobility. Luckily, Mrs Huang’s younger brother was the village head, cunzhang, and he was able to smooth the way. But why would he bother to expend political capital in so doing? The simple answer is that he was heavily indebted to his sister. Mrs Huang’s mother died when she was 11 years old (exactly the same age that her husband was when his mother died). After this, it fell to her to take care of her younger siblings, including the brother who later became the village head. As a result, her siblings have always felt a stronger responsibility to Mrs Huang than they would have felt had she simply lived

amongst them and then “married out” to another family. This principle of reciprocity may be (and is) formulated in terms of the separation and reunion schema. The sister who acts as a mother is entitled, in spite of marrying out, to the kind of ongoing care and inclusion (that is, non-abandonment) which would normally be given to a mother. And because the Huangs live amongst her relatives, they constantly have the kind of “back and forth” with them which is a prerequisite for strong relationships.^{vii} Mr and Mrs Huang benefit hugely from this. It gives them an anchor, and helps them control, at least to some extent, an uncertain future.

Meanwhile, Mr Huang has actively developed relationships of mutual support with others in the local community, and this is again described in terms of “back and forth”. For example, I mentioned that when I first met him he was preparing to build a new home, and that it would cost roughly seven times his annual income. In some respects, this was a very risky undertaking. But in reality the risks were mitigated by the existence of a network of support including his wife’s relatives, his adopted daughter and her husband, and his neighbours. Especially with the latter, he knew that they would come to his assistance, either donating or lending money, because for many years he had been doing exactly the same kind of thing for them. He participated in, and financially supported, most of their key rituals of separation and reunion – the weddings, the funerals, the New Year banquets – and they were therefore obliged to provide support to him when it was needed. To put this differently: no matter what happened next, they would have to be there.^{viii}

Needless to say, the separation and reunion schema I’ve been describing is a very particular type of cultural-historical artefact, with its own Chinese particularities. But I said earlier, with regard to “calculating the future”, that some of the principles behind Chinese cosmology are not unique to China. I noted that even the Vezo, who seem relatively indifferent to the future, nevertheless use mathematical divination to select auspicious days for important events. Similarly, features of the Chinese separation and reunion schema are undoubtedly widely shared across human cultures. Indeed, I’ve argued elsewhere that the “separation constraint”, i.e. the inevitability of separation and

loss in spite of human needs for attachment and support, is a universal factor in human social life (Stafford 2000a, 2003b). Not surprisingly, the problems associated with this constraint – including the strongly ambivalent emotions it may inspire – are explored in rituals everywhere, and are closely tied to underlying issues of human reciprocity.

This is strikingly so, for example, in the case of Vezo death practices, the logic of which would surely be very comprehensible to someone like Mr Huang. It seems natural for the living to feel a sense of loss when loved ones die, and for them to try to maintain some kind of reciprocal attachment with loved ones beyond the grave. But one of the problems with dead people, the Vezo say, is that because they also “feel a longing for the living” they may be inclined to return to them and, in some cases, create difficulties. Even the beloved dead are therefore a source of ambivalence. As Astuti notes:

... the living devote time and efforts to keep the dead away, raising a barrier (hefitsy) between life and death ... Raising this barrier, however, is a paradoxical enterprise, for in order to keep the dead away, the living are forced to engage with them. The deal is straightforward: The dead will refrain from interfering with their descendants (by making them ill, appearing in their dreams, preventing them from having children, etc.), if their descendants will remember and care for them by staging complex and expensive rituals aimed at building solid and lasting tombs (1999:87).

Separating life from death, and ensuring that the dead only impact on the living in positive ways, are therefore central concerns of Vezo death practices, just as they are for the Chinese (cf. Watson & Rawski 1988).

At this stage, let me briefly recapitulate what I’ve been saying. I’ve sketched out two very different pattern-recognition exercises. In the first, the recurrent patterns of the universe, as recognised within Chinese cosmology and numerology, are used to speculate about fate. (There is something rather logical about this, and it short-circuits human intentionality.) In the second, patterns of interpersonal relations, as organised around the

separation and reunion schema, give people strong expectations about how life will unfold – and how it can be made to unfold. (There is something rather emotional about this, and it is completely immersed in the world of human intentionality.)

But how are these two systems of patterns actually recognised and learned by individuals in the first place? In order to consider this question, I'd like to shift focus and look at things, however briefly, from a developmental perspective.

It's relatively easy to imagine how Mr Huang's grandchildren might learn the separation and reunion schema. For example, when their grandparents have gone away from the house, and are about to return, the children are sometimes instructed by their parents to show respect by walking to the outside gate of the farmhouse complex in order to greet (jie) their elders. By means of a great variety of similar practices and injunctions, the importance of arrivals and departures, and their connection to patterns of reciprocity, is repeatedly stressed to children by the adults around them. They come to pay attention to situations of this kind. Of course, what they actually learn from particular experiences (e.g. from observing the noisy rituals for "sending off" gods) is likely to be extremely subtle. But putting it all together into a recognisable pattern – that is, seeing that people and spirits go away and then return, and seeing that a fuss is often made about this – shouldn't be too complicated.

By contrast, learning the patterns of the universe seems a much trickier business. Few people in the countryside, let alone children, would claim to be experts in calculating fate. And yet, quite early in life they are exposed to what I would call the Chinese numericization of reality. Simply put, in this tradition there is a strong tendency to think about and talk about reality using numbers and numbered lists. So, when people discuss rituals or banquets, the talk is constantly of numbers: how many sticks of incense, how many times to bow, how many tables, how many guests, how many dishes. Politics and political education are similarly numericized: we should support the "three represents" of Jiang Zemin, we should live in "ten star civilized households", and so on. Meanwhile, children learn that the Chinese language is itself conceivable in numerical terms. Written

characters are made of brush-strokes which are counted (and indeed most dictionaries are organised in a stroke-count order). An extension of this is that every person's written name has numbers attached to it. In one popular type of fortune-telling, known as "calculating the brushstrokes" (suan bihua), the number of strokes in an individual's written name, when related to the "eight characters" of their date and time of birth, are said to hold vital clues to their fate. Mr Huang's grandchildren, somewhat early in life – being constantly surrounded by talk of this kind – might reasonably decide that there is something numerical about the way the world is.

But let me push this question of learning a bit harder for a moment. How exactly is it possible for children to acquire knowledge of the patterns I've been discussing? We know from psychologists that acquiring numeracy isn't actually very easy, and that it takes children a long time to even use basic counting terms properly. However, we also know that processes of numerical learning among infants and children are assisted and guided by two things. On the one hand, there are cultural-historical artefacts (such as counting terms in particular languages) which heavily mediate the development of numeracy. On the other hand, there are evolved cognitive abilities and constraints specifically related to the domain of number. A great deal of evidence suggests that seeing and responding to numerosity in the world – that is, observing numerical patterns – is an evolved disposition not only in humans, but also in many other species (including, as it happens, pigeons and horses). It has proved to be useful for humans to be able to differentiate numbers of objects, events, and so on.^{ix} Human infants are therefore able to manipulate "number" long before they learn number words, and long before anyone teaches them anything at all about arithmetic.

Of course, there is a huge distance between the minimal numerical skills of infants and complex historical artefacts such as numeration systems, not to mention numerological divination techniques such as the ones used in Asia and elsewhere. But our evolved number abilities may help explain why it is that numerical representations of reality have a kind of 'catchiness' for humans, and are widely distributed among human populations.

One can make a similar argument, as it happens, concerning the separation and reunion schema. It may or may not be true, as some psychologists have argued, that human “attachment behaviours” are a set of evolved dispositions. But human infants are undoubtedly highly dependent on their carers, and the argument – which I find plausible – is that we as a species have been selected to instinctively pay attention to the problem of abandonment. In short, this particular form of anxiety may be genuinely universal (Stafford 2000). It also means that narratives of separation may have a natural resonance, both cognitive and emotional, for us. Mr Huang’s grandchildren, immersed in a social world where the coming and going of significant others is a matter of vital importance, have repeated opportunities to master such narratives and internalise them as part of their own understandings of how the world works.

My point, I should stress, is not that evolutionary adaptations somehow “explain” why Mr Huang is keen, for example, on using numbers to calculate the odds of his nephew achieving a good marriage or why his grandchildren are required, as a sign of politeness, to walk with guests all the way up to the main road outside of the village when sending them off. He might just as easily use non-numerical forms of divination and teach his grandchildren different rules of politeness. But the shared cognitive abilities and orientations of humans – including the ability to “see number” in reality, and the tendency to have anxieties about separation – may help explain why, for instance, the practices of the Chinese and the Vezo, which by all odds should be strikingly different, instead share some interesting and potentially important family resemblances.

Of course, it takes a lot of experience to change one from being a grandchild – starting to see patterns in the world on the basis of intuitions and experiences – to being a grandparent like Mr Huang. In his book The wisdom paradox, the neuropsychologist Elkhonon Goldberg (a protégé of Aleksander Luria’s) characterises this process of growing older in the following terms:

With age, the number of real-life cognitive tasks requiring a painfully effortful, deliberate creation of new mental constructs seems to be diminishing. Instead, problem-solving ... takes increasingly the form of pattern recognition. This means that with age we accumulate an increasing number of cognitive templates. Consequently, a growing number of future cognitive challenges is increasingly likely to be relatively readily covered by a preexisting template, or will require only a slight modification of a previously formed mental template. Increasingly, decision-making takes the form of pattern recognition rather than problem solving (Goldberg 2005:20).

According to Goldberg, the empirical evidence for this change is found in its neurophysiological correlates. Briefly, with age and experience we build up sets of neural networks in our brains, known as “attractors”; and these are the basic mechanism through which we recognise patterns and make connections between past, present and future events (2005:20-1). The activity of these pattern-recognition networks is located in the neocortical regions of the brain, and the evidence does indeed appear to show that cognition becomes “increasingly neocortical in nature” as we get older.^x In very simple terms, the change described by Goldberg is one in which our ability to solve problems efficiently is enhanced with age, and he even suggests that competence of this kind, when taken to its extreme form, may be close to what we normally think of as “wisdom”.

But if Mr Huang has gone through this process, thereby becoming a wise old man, we are still left exactly where we started: with the problem of his anxiety. As I explained, he suffers from insomnia and everyone in the village of Dragon Head knows that he is an anxious type of person. He worries about money, about his wife’s health, about China-Taiwan relations. He worries about his nephew’s smoking, saying the young man should preferably restrict himself to just one cigarette per hour, no more. These days, he and his wife also worry about the fact that the Chinese government is insisting on the cremation of the dead. This costs quite a lot of money, he says, and is “inconvenient” in various ways. In fact, the main inconvenience of cremation is that it threatens to complicate relations between the living and the dead, and to make it impossible, in the view of many,

for proper ancestral rituals of reunion and separation to be held. Then what? It is yet something else to worry about.

Nor does the Chinese tradition, with its wealth of mechanisms for recognising, and even controlling, the patterns of life, seem to have reduced Mr Huang's sense of disquiet. Indeed, if anxiety is seen as a culturally-constructed state, then one possibility is that the Chinese tradition is actually good at inducing it. At weddings I've attended in the northeast, for example, the bride and groom are sometimes made to eat what are known as "broad-hearted noodles" (kuanxinmian). They are served precisely eight such noodles, which are very thick, and which are bound together in bundles of four tied up with red string. I was told that the numbers here – four and eight – stand for the expression siping bawen, literally "four peace, eight stable". According to my dictionary, this expression means "steady and sure, over-cautious, and loathe to take the smallest risk". As a recipe for life (and for marriage), this is surely a very nervous-making philosophy.

Perhaps more to the point, many Chinese people feel precisely that the two patterns I've outlined above – the numerical one and the relational one – can easily become too much of a good thing. That is, the obsessions with reading numbers as indicators of fate and with manipulating interpersonal relations in order to control the future are explicitly seen by many people in China as a kind of unhealthy mania. Mayfair Yang has written of the post-Mao fascination, bordering on obsession, with the art of cultivating personal relationships for pragmatic ends (Yang 1994). Meanwhile, as I was writing this essay I learned that taxi cabs in Shanghai with the number four on their licence plates were being taken off the streets during the period of college entrance exams. Parents – knowing that the word for "four" sounds like the word for "death" – were apparently worried that their children might accidentally ride in such taxis, thus fatally harming their chances of success.^{xi}

It is a bit hard to imagine a similar thing taking place in most other parts of the world. The Vezo and others may very well use mathematical divination from time to time, but few cultures have anything to match the deep Chinese fascination with number meanings

– which sometimes borders on genuine paranoia at what numbers might reveal and/or provoke.

But if anxiety can be seen as one product of Chinese culture, it undoubtedly also arises from personal experience, and from personal position. One can well imagine that as a young man Mr Huang must have learned that life is filled with risks and is very fragile indeed. In this world, “four peace, eight stable” is but a dream. As an old man, he reminds me of the typical ego in Alfred Gell’s discussion of growing old in the flow of time, surrounded by the accumulated “opportunity costs” of all the things which never happened (Gell 1992:217-220). Mr Huang’s parents might have lived, he might still be in their village, he and his wife might have had a son, and so on. What, he might well ask himself late in life, could have made these things happen?

As a system for explaining what does happen there is, as I’ve said, something proto-scientific about Chinese cosmology: something rigorous, and empirical, and logical. It sets out to reveal the structure of the universe and the place of individuals in it, partly through quantification. Through “calculating fortune”, people like Mr Huang may be able to take steps to control what happens to them and to others. But in general terms, the unfolding of the patterns of the universe is simply something one has to live with, while tinkering around the edges. By contrast, patterns of separation and reunion are, by their very nature, a field for strategic action. It seems that one can work on and transform relationships in a way that one can’t work on and transform the universe. And yet, what is often most anxious-making about relationships is precisely their contingent nature. The people around us have their own plans, which may or may not correspond to ours. And as Mr Huang’s unpredictable abandonment as a child reminds us, our lives always have the potential to change instantly and irrevocably, and this is bound to be a matter of ongoing concern.

What we lack, it seems, is control. In his account of Chinese geomancy, Stephan Feuchtwang has suggested that geomantic practices are, at least in part, “motivated by anxiety” linked very directly to this question of controllability:

The anxiety is brought about by a situation in which the subject knows he is not in control of factors critically affecting the circumstances in which he finds himself. In [geomancy] the anxiety is related both to social factors out of the subject's control and to unpredictable and uncontrollable natural factors, such as the weather (2002:278).

The solution to these dilemmas, he suggests, is twofold: "to fabricate a sense of control where there is no real control" and "to regularise the making of decisions in an irregular and uncertain field of choice" (2002:279). Regularisation of decision-making might, one supposes, calm us down.

But some philosophical discussions of anxiety – rather less optimistically – draw a contrast, following Kierkegaard, between the nervousness we feel because we cannot control what is happening to us, and the nervousness we feel because we can control what is happening to us. Kierkegaard refers to the latter kind of anxiety as "the dizziness of freedom", a nervous state brought on by the "possibility of being able" to act (1980:44; cf. p. 61). Anxiety of this kind is held, at least by some philosophers, to be fundamentally constitutive of the human condition, regardless of whether one lives in China or elsewhere.^{xii}

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ⁱ I should point out that this system is also used by Chinese people who do believe in gods (including those who worship them fervently), and that even people like Mr Huang – who, for their part, would stress the “scientific” nature of fortune-telling activities – are inclined to shift back and forth between naturalistic and metaphysical explanations of events.

ⁱⁱ See, for instance, Stephan Feuchtwang’s detailed discussion of geomancy (2002), which illustrates the numerological orientation of Chinese cosmology.

ⁱⁱⁱ Obeyesekere observes that the explanation of what happens to individuals – including their sometimes unjustified suffering – should, in principle, be provided by the theory of karma. And yet, “It is well known that, in all societies which have karma-type theories of predestination, horoscopy and other astrological beliefs have been elaborated to an exceptional degree despite the fact that these beliefs are strongly deprecated in the formal religious doctrine” (Obeyesekere 1968: 21-2).

^{iv} I’m grateful to Maurice Bloch for drawing my attention to this important aspect of divinatory practices.

^v Anthropologists reading this may well wonder why I stress patterns of “separation and reunion”, as opposed to patterns of reciprocity, given that the former is surely just the local Chinese idiom for the latter. In brief, I do so in order to relate my analysis to the human psychology of attachment and separation – which, I would argue, strongly shapes and organises human practices of reciprocity in all societies. See my discussion in Stafford 2000.

^{vi} This is precisely what happens with gods if they are ignored by their worshippers, and not systematically invited to return to local communities: they actually lose their localised power/efficacy (ling) as their relationship with devotees fades.

^{vii} One small but important manifestation of this is that the village head’s youngest son – Mrs Huang’s nephew – was instructed by his father to visit his aunt and uncle every evening in order to make certain that they were well.

^{viii} One shouldn’t over-romanticize this schema, and pretend that it is always seen as a positive thing. The requirement to provide mutual support as and when necessary is often considered to be a huge burden (cf. Stafford 2000b). Mr Huang explicitly told me how troublesome and annoying it can be at times. There is, more generally, ambivalence about the burdens of close relations of many kinds, for example about those with one’s parents and with the dead. Mr Huang’s relationships with his adopted daughter, with his “support-the-elderly son-in-law”, and with his wife’s kin have sometimes been less than ideal. Some people even told me that this support network has actually treated Mr and Mrs Huang rather shabbily at times. But the point I’m making here is simply that the separation and reunion schema gives people, including Mr Huang, strong expectations about the likely pattern of interpersonal relations, about what should happen next, even if these expectations are sometimes confounded in practice.

^{ix} See Brian Butterworth (2000, pp.153 ff) on why numerical cognition may have evolved.

^x There is also a shift towards “increasing reliance on the left cerebral hemisphere” – i.e. on the part of our brains where understandings of how things work are largely situated (Goldberg 2005:104-5).

^{xi} “Number up for unlucky China cabs”, BBC News online, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4612869.stm>.

^{xiii} Patrick Gardiner explains the connection between Kierkegaard’s conception of anxiety and his conception of the person thus: “To be a person is to exist in the mode, not of being, but of becoming, and what every person becomes is his own responsibility, the product of his will, even if (as is frequently the case) this is something he does not want to confront and seeks to conceal from himself. Moreover, every individual can be held to be aware ... of a tension between his current conception of his condition and the presence of alternatives that are in some sense available to him; as it is put at one point, there is not a living being who ‘does not secretly harbour ... an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself’. Such disturbing intimations and attitudes ... [are considered by Kierkegaard] to be revelatory of our intrinsic character and to feature, in one form or another, in the life-story of every individual. In this way they are constant and pervasive, endemic to the human condition” (Gardiner 2002 [1988]:111).