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'Treading waves' on the Qiantang River: an exploration of wave riding in Chinese history and literature

Abstract:

During my academic years at the sinology department of Ca' Foscari University (Venice, Italy) in the early 1990s, I kept bumping into detailed descriptions of tidal waves and references to fearless watermen – from the ancient state of Wu (located south of modern-day Shanghai) – who would tame them. At that time, I simply dismissed these as oddities. Then in 2006 I lucked into an enigmatic installation of about 30 wave riders displayed in the Bamboo Temple (筇竹寺 *Qiong Zhu Shi*), a Buddhist monastery in Yunnan Province (southwest China). The bass-relief, was dated 1880, decades before surfing spread from Polynesia to the West. Their perfect sideways stance, the stoked grin on their faces; it was a 'different beginning', disconnected from the Polynesian version of the sport. The temple's abbot gave me the key into this fascinating story. 'They are Buddhist *Luohan* (*Arhat* in Sanskrit), people like you and me who followed the scriptures and attained enlightenment. We call them 弄潮兒 *Nong Chao Er*, Children of the Tide.' This encounter and those three Chinese characters ignited a decade-long research that culminated in my recent book. In this essay I will try to cast light on the 弄潮兒 *Nong Chao Er* and the activity called 踏浪 *Ta Lang*, Wave-treading, focusing on philological analysis of poems and dynastic chronicles from the Tang (618-907 AC) to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AC) and on first-hand accounts collected in Hangzhou, where wave-treading was conducted, often in secrecy, until the late 1980s.

Biographical note:

Former editor of *SurfNews* magazine (Italy), sinologist from Ca' Foscari University (Venice, Italy), course presenter for the ISA, Nik Zanella has spent the last decade working in China at several levels of the national surf development project and researching the untold story of dynastic surfing, dating back to the 9th century. His recent book *Children of the Tide* (Grafiche Antiga, 2019) has been praised by surf and mainstream media worldwide.

Keywords: creative writing, surfing, wave-treading, China

During my academic years at the Sinology department of Ca' Foscari University (Venice, Italy) I kept bumping into realistic depictions of waves in figurative art and references to fearless watermen who would tame them. Chinese culture is plastered with mouth-watering waves. For example, I used to spend hours contemplating Song Dynasty landscape paintings, in particular Ma Yuan's (1160-1225) '*Studies on Water*' and Xia Gui's (1195-1224) '*Contemplating the Tide of the Qiantang River*' (Ma, 2017) where waves were represented at a level of intimacy unknown to western artists of that era.

Figure 1. Xia Gui, *Contemplating the Tide of the Qiantang River* (1195-1224)

Most of them were bore waves, a peculiar kind of riverine breaker climbing up estuaries during major tidal fluctuations. China is bisected by tens of rivers, creating the fertile lowlands that have nurtured its civilisation. Several of these rivers, from the Pearl River in subtropical Guangdong, through the majestic Yangtze, to the Yellow River in the colder Shandong province in the north, produce tidal bores, magnificent often surfable waves up to five metres in height, travelling upstream at great speeds, for great distances. Such descriptions weren't only visual, but also literal.

The first scientific description of the phenomenon, detailed as the 'tide-head' (潮頭 *cháo tóu*), appears in the Han dynasty (206 BC-25 AD). Philosopher Wang Chong (27-100 AD) linked the 'tide-head' with the lunar phases in his *Critical Essays*: 'The Three Rivers, upon entering the ocean, begin to roar and foam in their channels, which are usually narrow and

shallow and thus rise as great waves. The rising of waves follows the growing and waning, the fullness and extinction of the moon' (translated in Forke, 1962).

One reference to wave riding deeply touched my imagination during those early years: it was contained in chapter 38 of *The Water Margin*, one of the four great novels of Chinese literature, where author Shi Nai'an (1296-1372) described the outlaw Zhang Sun as: 'Using his two legs to tread waves, as if he was moving on flat land, with water not even covering his belly, submerged only to under his navel'. Zhang Sun was riding a wave, prone, like a body boarder! (Shi, 2010, translated by J. H. Jackson).

At that time, I simply dismissed this as an oddity. I could not imagine that a native wave riding community, with specific lingo and rituals, could be hiding in the *mare magnum* of dynastic history.

Figure 2. Li Guangxiu, The 500 luohans, Qiongzhu Temple, Kunming, Yunnan

The epiphany occurred to me in 2006 during a trip from Hainan Island, where I now reside, to the Everest Base camp in Tibet. I lucked into an enigmatic sculptural installation depicting about 30 wave riders, displayed in the Bamboo Temple, a *Chan* (the precursor of Japanese Zen) Buddhist monastery in Yunnan Province, 600 km from the nearest coastline. In particular, the central figure in one of the sculptures struck my attention. He was riding erect, gliding across an unbroken, head-high wave in a technically perfect surf-stance. Back-foot flat, front foot 45 degrees, eyes fixed five metres in front of his craft. His face was 'stoked' and I was hooked.

The bass-relief was dated 1880, decades before surfing spread from Polynesia to the West. Who were these surf-riders and what were they doing? How could the sculptor Li Guangxiu, born at the beginning of the 19th century in southwest China, so realistically depict wave riding biomechanics if he had, most likely, not seen surfing? I spoke with the Abbott who knew almost nothing about modern surfing but gave me an important clue: 'Those are living saints (*Luohan* 罗汉 in Chinese, *Arhats* in Sanskrit) real people like me

and you, who have followed the scriptures and attained enlightenment. They are enjoying life at its utmost. They are 弄潮儿 *nong chao er*. You should look for them in Hangzhou'. Those surfing saints and these three words, *nong* 弄 *chao* 潮 *er* 兒, sent me into a ten-year-long exploration journey through remote coastlines, muddy river banks and five thousand years of Chinese literary history.

Surf philology

The starting point was a dictionary of Chinese etymology (Li, 2012). I needed to cast light on the three words given to me by the Abbot of the Bamboo Temple. Most words used today can be traced back to a style called 甲骨文 *jiǎ gǔ wén* commonly known as 'oracle bone script', from the Shang dynasty that flourished in the valley of the Yangtze River from the 16th to the 11th century BC. This form of divination was used any time the King of the Shang wanted to connect to the spirits of his ancestors. Questions ranging from warfare to weather were carved on flat bones using a bronze pin. Oxen scapulae or turtle plastrons were then charred until the organic matter cracked open. Divinations were deduced by reading the patterns of such breaches. The answers were then carved on the same bones. These 'oracular bones' give us the deepest shamanic meaning of modern Chinese characters (Lindqvist, 2008). The first translation of 弄 *nong* is 'to manipulate'. Its oldest form revolves around the component 'jade', possibly a precious bowl, in the middle (玉), surrounded by two stylized hands holding it. Over time *nong* has come to mean 'playing a musical instrument', but also 'toying with', 'fooling with' or 'activating', and even 'deceiving'.

Chao's 潮 first meaning is 'tide', the alternate rising and falling of the water level caused by the gravity of the moon and sun. Chinese dictionaries couple this with 'river bore' and the word 'wave'. The dictionary explained every graphic component of *chao*. On the left we have the radical for water 氵 also defined as 'wet' and 'damp'. On the top and bottom of the central part we can see the component 'grass' enclosing a 'sun' 日 *rì*. The right part 月 *yuè* stands for 'moon' and suggests the periodicity of the phenomenon. Patch all this together, and the description reads, 'in the morning the sun rises, casting light on the meadows along the river banks, and the water level periodically rises'.

The use of the word 'tide' is strictly dependent on the context. If you take away the radical for water 氵 on the left, for example, 'tide' turns into 朝 *cháo* 'imperial court' or 'dynasty'. It was a prerogative of dynastic kings of the Shang to perform rites at sunrise, to guarantee peace and prosperity to the fields and rivers. This form of 'tide' can also be pronounced 'zhāo' meaning 'day', 'dawn' or 'period of time'.

Chao can also convey love and emotion. The word 'high tide' 高潮 *gāo cháo*, for example, is synonymous with 'orgasm'. This sexual implication of 'tide' is traced in literature back to the 1st century. The *Spring and Autumn Apocrypha*, a commentary compiled during the Western Han Dynasty, stated that 'young women are as strong as the river tide' (Huang,

1993). Further, tide can mean ‘fashionable’ or ‘edgy’ in expressions such as ‘currents of thought’ (思潮 *sī cháo*), ‘new trend’ (新潮 *xīn cháo*) and ‘emotional uplift’.

The first appearance of a tidal wave in Chinese literature is in the *History of the Southern States of Wu and Yue* compiled by Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) historian Zhao Ye. Emperor Fu Chai condemned Minister Wu Zixu to death (in 484 BC) because he didn’t trust his military advice, ordering him to be boiled alive in a cauldron, sown inside a leather sack and thrown into the river, close to modern day Hangzhou. But Wu Zixu’s infuriated soul ‘enraged the waters’ until they ‘rose in great billows causing havoc among his enemies’ (Li, 2015). These were the first documented victims of the tidal waves of the Qiantang River. Here, the combination of a 100 km wide, funnel-shaped delta and drastic tide ranges (up to 4m during spring tides) creates the world’s largest river bore, active over 100 days per year with waves up to five metres high, travelling at an average of 20 km per hour. The Qiantang is considered the Mount Everest of bore waves (Colas, 2017).

Not surprisingly Chinese scientists accurately predicted tide cycles much earlier than their western counterparts. The first tidal measurement happened during the Tang dynasty (618-907) in 770 when Dou Shumeng came up with figures less than one second different from modern calculations (Lu, 2015, p. 127). Dou Shumeng was from Zhejiang province, where he witnessed the regular patterns of the river bore climbing inland along the banks of the Qiantang. The first published tide tables are also on the Qiantang in 1056. In contrast, the first recorded tide chart in the West appeared in London in 1213, developed for the convenience of shipping (Aldersey-Williams, 2016).

China, meanwhile, was also interested in the spectacle of the river bore. During the Mid Autumn festival, people flock from all over the country to contemplate this ‘wonder of the world’, celebrated by poets, as it roars upstream ‘with sound of thunder’ (Strassberg, 1994, chap 30). The number of wave-related terms used in literature is staggering. There are ‘single line waves’ (close outs), ‘cross shaped surges’ (out in the delta), ‘dragon’s head backwashes’, ‘white capped breakers’, and many more specific terms that denote a particular interest in wave shapes or patterns.

The last word in *nong chao er* (兒 *er*) stands for ‘children’ or ‘young person’. The original character resembles a newly born baby. In the upper part you can see the cranial bones still open and not fully formed, while the bottom part is constituted of the pictogram ‘person’ 人 *rén*. This infers that ‘river-side child’ could also be a translation of *nong chao er*.

Nong chao er can mean a number of things depending on the context. Simply put, it can mean ‘children of the tide’, ‘fooling with the tide’ or ‘playing with the tide’. But it can also infer ‘inducing an orgasm’. The sexual implications immediately indicate that ‘children’ is not an age-related term, but a reference to the roots and activities of the *nong chao er*. Further, it can be inferred as ‘activating the tide’ as if the *tide players* were capable of controlling the wave, or forming revolutions and quite literally ‘overturning a dynasty’. And

today in Chinese business, when someone is called a '*nong chao er*' it means they take risks with style and flare (Zha, 2011).

Poems

The first reference to wave riding I found was contained in a poem by Song Dynasty author Pan Lang, dated 1009 (Li, 2015) brought to contemporary fame by president Xi Jinping who quoted it in his inaugural speech at the 2016 G20 summit in Hangzhou. Although his date of birth and death are unknown, we do know that Pan Lang was a doctor living in the Hangzhou area during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127).

Written on the tune of Jiuquan by Pan Lang

I often remember the spectacle of the tide,
When everyone in town hurries to the river eager to watch.

When it arrives, it feels as if the whole ocean has drained empty,
Amid the sound of countless steel drums.

The *nong chao er* go towards the head of the wave and stand up,
They hold a red flag that never gets wet.

I have dreamt this view many times,
And when I wake up my heart is still shocked.

Pan Lang is watching a show, an elaborate spectacle, organised by the imperial court and attended by almost everyone in the town of Hangzhou. The show's prima donna is the tidal wave itself and the *nong chao er* taming it.

The verb used for 'contemplating' 觀 '*guān*' contained in the first line can mean 'to watch', 'to study', or an 'empirical investigation of phenomenon'. *Guan* is the way Daoists study nature, by immersing in it and 'contemplating' all its forms. The character depicts a man, looking at a bird, possibly a heron. It's a character also described in the *Shuōwén*, a famous dictionary compiled during the Han dynasty as '*carefully inspecting*'. Not surprisingly Daoist temples are also called *guan* (for example Beijing's famous Temple of the White Cloud) as if those structures, often immersed in nature, were observation stations to study nature, not mere places of worship.

Pan Lang's description is laced with the Daoist components of science, poetry and meditation. The wave is probably arriving just after a spring low tide (when the gravitational force of the moon and sun are aligned) during the Mid Autumn Festival, when 'it feels as if the whole ocean has drained empty'. I have personally seen current of more than 20 knots

preceding the arrival of the wave when the water rushes out at sea interacting with the oncoming wave, making it stand up even taller. Amid this apparent mayhem the *nong chao er* appear and 向 *xiàng* ‘go towards’ or ‘turn towards’ the head of the wave: ‘(弄潮兒向濤頭立 *nong chao er xiang tao tou li*) and stand up’.

The verb 立 *li* leaves no room for confusion. The meaning has remained constant from the oracular bones to modern Chinese (Li, 2012). It depicts a wide-shouldered person standing upright on something flat. And it suddenly struck me those simple five strokes are nearly identical to Hawaiian pictograms of surfing.

The character 立 *li* is clearly a person standing up on a plank. But no word in the poem is used to describe the craft they ride. The wave on the other hand, offers more hints. The term is not the modern-day Chinese for wave (浪 *làng*), breaker (波 *bō*) or swell (湧 *yǒng*), but a word I had not encountered before: 濤 *tāo*. *Tao*’s right part 壽 *shòu* means ‘long life’ and is commonly used as a blessing, often brushed on red paper and hung outside front doors at New Year. Its form indicates an old man holding onto his walking stick in front of a ploughed field. Is this a reference to the life span of this wave, roaming the river for nearly 100 km, in a process that lasts several hours? There is nothing in the dictionaries to answer this.

Nonetheless, it seems that both during the Tang and Song dynasties the word 濤 *tao* was used to depict big breaking waves. Song poet Su Shi (1037-1101) uses *tao* to describe ‘frightened waves breaking on the shore’ while later authors coupled it with ‘snow’ 雪 *xuě* to indicate cascading mountains of white water.

Although Pan Lang’s poem makes no mention of what craft the *nong chao er* are standing on, he does report that ‘they hold a red flag’ and apparently ride so skillfully that it ‘never gets wet’. Although not certain, this seems to support the idea of riding upright, not prone.

Dynastic chronicles and ‘brush notes’

A more detailed description is contained in ‘Contemplating the Tide’ in *Recollections of Wulin Garden* – a miscellany of ‘brush notes’ written around 1290 by late Song, early Yuan author Zhou Mi (1231-1298) (Zhou, 2018 and Strassberg, 1994, chap 30).

In contrast to the official histories focused on dignitaries and state affairs, ‘brush notes’ are based on personal experiences. During the Song, these tales often took the shape of novellas depicting everyday life in bustling cities and eye-witness descriptions of sporting events, theatre shows and social spaces. The author Zhou Mi was from the northern province of Shandong, birthplace of Confucius, and had fled south with his family after Mongol Kublai Khan (1215-1294) had invaded from the north, sieged his hometown Jinan, and marched all the way to the capital. In the flight south, Hangzhou had become the new capital of the Southern Song, and now the cultural and political epicentre of the country. Wulin Garden

was located next to the new imperial palace in Hangzhou, where intellectuals spent time drinking tea, discussing ideas and sharing stories.

The episode ‘Contemplating the Tide’ describes the Mid-Autumn Festival. The event – originally a celebration of the harvest between late September and early October, during autumn’s first full moon – had now evolved into an official celebration of the spectacular waves it brought forth (Gerne, 1962). The alignment of the moon and sun creates the biggest tidal range of the year, generating waves up to five metres high in the estuary of the Qiantang River.

Zhou Mi gives us a detailed first-hand account:

The tidal bore on the Zhejiang (the Qiantang) is one of the great wonders of the world. It reaches its full force from the 15th to the 18th day of the 8th moon. When it begins to rise far away at the Ocean Gate, it only resembles a silver thread. But as it gradually approaches, it transforms into a wall of jade and white capped mountains, swallowing the sky and inundating the sun. Its gigantic roar is as loud as thunder, exploding and rising up with extreme power worthy of brave heroes. The great poet Yang Chenghai described “silver waves as big as city walls traversing the river and breaking like jade belts”.

As in every year, the governor of the capital appears at the Zhejiang Pavilion to inspect the navy. Warships in the hundreds are arrayed along both banks. Suddenly, they all rush to divide into battalions of five. At the same time the cavalry wave flags, performing with fire-weapons and swords on the water as if standing on firm land...

Then hundreds of brave watermen from Wu, with unfastened hair and tattoos, holding ten coloured flags, race to the water at the sound of drums. They paddle against the flow, towards the oncoming waves, appearing and disappearing among the leviathan waves ten thousand ren (1 ren = 2.66 metres) long. Then they leap up, and perform a hundred manoeuvres without getting the tail of their flags even slightly wet. This is how they show off their skill. Hence the nobles reward them with silver prizes. (Zhou, 2018)

The description of the surge approaching Hangzhou is unequivocal. Outside of the ‘Ocean Gate’ (city harbour), towards the east, says the author, the tidal wave ‘only resembles a silver thread’ of unbroken water. But it rises up quickly just before entering the city centre, turning from ‘silver lines’ of unbroken waves to ‘white capped mountains’, a clear sign of a breaking river bore.

Zhou Mi described the wave ‘as loud as thunder’ and being ‘worthy of brave heroes’. Thanks to precise tide charts, the staged assault was just before the arrival of the biggest tidal wave of the year. The account reaches a crescendo when the local wave riders enter the scene ‘with unfastened hair and tattoos’. They paddle toward the oncoming waves literally as big as whales, then they turn and stand up, performing ‘a hundred manoeuvres’,

riding so skilfully that their red flags do not even get wet. They are not only doing it for personal pleasure, or for ritual purposes, they are competing. The verb 爭先 *zheng xian* can only be translated as ‘compete to be the first’. The use of drums and the ‘silver prizes’ given out to the best riders also confirms the competitive nature of the event.

The 吳 *Wú* people, historically located around the Qiantang River, are renowned in Chinese history for their water skills, and commonly worked as fishermen and barge pilots. The Wu (and their neighbouring 越 *Yuè*), are direct descendants of the Hemudu, Majiabang and Liangzhu cultures, settled on the southeastern coastline of Asia as farming fishermen and fishing farmers. Traits of their language are still recognisable in modern Chinese, including the word ‘river’ 江 *jiāng*. DNA research also suggests the connection between these early farming fishermen (among the first to domesticate rice) and Austronesian and Tai Kadai settlers.

This is the same group that triggered the Austronesian migration throughout the South China Sea to Polynesia and Eastern Africa starting from the second millennium BC, reaching as far as Rapa Nui in the east and Madagascar in the west. One of the world’s oldest recorded boats – the five-metre-long *Kuahuoqiao* dugout canoe datable at around 8000 BC – was excavated in the Wu-Yue territory and is now on display at the Zhejiang museum in Hangzhou (Underhill 2013). Also in the same museum is a depiction of a man from Wu-Yue, a statue dated around the 5th century BC. The tattoo patterns – stylised waves, armbands, triangular shapes – and face masks bear remarkable resemblance with Polynesian tattoos. The mask on the torso, in particular, is very similar to the *Tiki*, a recurrent theme in Polynesian body art (Kwiatkowski, 2012).

Then came a breakthrough that fired me up – the first-hand description, dated circa 1270, by another independent historian of the late Song Dynasty Wu Zimu, of ‘treading waves’ (踏浪 *tà làng*): ‘In a group of about a hundred, they hold a flag and tread waves to enjoy the practice of playing with the tide. Some hold five small flags, move on the tide’s head and play tricks’ (Wu, 1964). And a further ethnographic account of the Wu-Yue people came from Song poet Yang Wanli (1127-1206) – one of the most prominent (and nationalistic) poets of the time. In a poem called ‘Boat People’, Yang Wanli describes how the Wu ‘learn to *tread waves* from a very young age’ (Li, 2015, my italics).

There is clearly great reverence for the skills of the Wu-Yue people at the time of the Tang and Song dynasties, and the art of ‘wave treading’ is a commonly used term to describe their technique. Perhaps these are the ‘hundred manoeuvres’ described by Zhou Mi. In another section of *Recollections of Wulin Garden*, Zhou Mi also references ‘treading waves’ and, even more revealing, mentions that they ride on drifting wood, and compares the Wu to Buddhist monks:

Among the watermen in town, there are some that resemble Buddhist monks. They gather in a group of a hundred, holding coloured flags, and compete in treading waves. They head straight to the river mouth to welcome the tide. Moreover, there’s some

who tread on drifting wood, tossed around by the water like puppets, performing hundreds of water tricks, having fun, each displaying great mastery. (Zhou, 2018)

Clearly, these brave young men from Wu-Yue are not the navy soldiers performing the staged assault, but civilian experts on the river. As the tidal wave approaches, ‘they head straight to the river mouth to welcome the tide’ as if they are willing to offer their lives to placate the river, perhaps inspiring Zhou Mi to compare them to Buddhist monks, drawing parallels with the Luohan of the Qiongzhu Temple.

When riding the tidal wave, the *nong chao er* are ‘performing hundreds of water tricks’ (水百戏 *shuǐ bǎi xì*), having fun, each displaying great mastery’. There is a clear difference between the ‘hundred manoeuvres’ (百變 *bai bian*) described earlier by Zhou Mi and the ‘hundred water tricks’ (水百戏 *shuǐ bǎi xì*) described here. The first reference revolves around the word 變 *bian* that means ‘mutation’, ‘transformation’, or ‘sudden movement’, without much ‘fun’ or ‘play’ involved. So ‘a hundred manoeuvres’ could also be translated as ‘a hundred movements’. In contrast ‘a hundred water tricks’ revolves around the word 戏 *xi*, that implies ‘a movement done for fun’, ‘play’, ‘a game’ or ‘trickery’. Thus ‘tricks’ is a good translation.

But the big revelation is in Zhou Mi’s preceding line where ‘There’s some who tread on drifting wood, tossed around by the water like puppets’. Previously, even though there are numerous references to the poles and flags held whilst riding the river bore by the tide players you could infer that they were swimming and bodysurfing without a craft. Perhaps some were, but Zhou Mi explains how some ‘tread on drifting wood’ (踏混木 *tà hùn mù*).

踏 *Ta* is the verb ‘to tread’ (as in 踏浪 *ta lang* – tread waves), composed of 沓 *ta*, that gives the sound, and 足 *zu* ‘foot movement’ pointing to the original meaning ‘to step on, trample on’. 混木 *hun mu* can result in a number of translations, from ‘uncut wood’, ‘rough wood’ or ‘drifting wood’, or even ‘log’, ‘branch’ or ‘pole’. Therefore, this could be a reference to the plank or board they ride prone or stand up on, or it could be a further reference to the long pole with flag already described in Zhou Mi’s account.

The nuances of translation could lead in a number of different directions and conclusions. But in the Qiongzhu Temple in Yunnan, the wave riders are depicted standing upright on top of mythical animals, mostly fish (and carp to be more specific). So I began to search for the character 鱼 *yú* fish with *nong chao er* and made some new breakthroughs that shed light on Zhou Mi’s reference to the tide players ‘resembling Buddhist monks’. The oldest mention I found that linked *nong chao er* with ‘fish’ was contained in a poem from the late Tang dynasty author Chen Tao (824-882) called ‘Records on the Qiantang River’. Chen Tao was strongly influenced by Daoism and Buddhism (Li, 2015). His poem features in the 300 Tang Poems collection, and adds a religious context of the parades. It must be noted that this poem was written 400 years before ‘Contemplating the Tide’ by Zhou Mi.

Records on the Qiantang River by Chen Tao

When the cold wind comes birds and people alike feel sad
 So the commanders let the people perform with red flags on the head of the waves
 They ride on the fish of the God of the Eastern Sea
 And the atmosphere on the river becomes cheerful.

Chen Tao's reference to 'cold wind' here means both 'wintertime' and 'times of social distress'. The 'God of the Eastern Sea' – also known as the God of the Sea, the Sea Spirit 海神 *Hǎishén*, or more commonly, The Dragon God or The Dragon King 龍王 *Lóngwáng* – has long been venerated as the water deity along all coastlines and waterways in China, and remains so to this day, often depicted encircled by waves, riding upright with a sword in hand.

Therefore, riding 'on the fish of the God of the Eastern Sea' would certainly be the domain of extremely skilled and revered people. Similar descriptions of fish-inspired craft being ridden by the men from Wu come from Xin Qiji (1140-1207) in 'Fishermen and Tide Watchers in front of Prime Minister Ye' (Li, 2015). Xin was a poet living five decades before Zhou Mi, still under the Southern Song. His poem offers further illumination onto the riding abilities of the *nong chao er*, who were not only performing manoeuvres, water tricks and treading waves, but dancing.

Fishermen and Tide Watchers in front of Prime Minister Ye by Xin Qiji

Young men from Wu are not afraid of the fury of the flood dragon.
 They dominate wind and waves.
 Look at their swallow-tailed red flag fly,
 They jump up on the flying fish.
 Stomping and treading they dance on the wave foam.

The 'brave watermen from Wu' here are not simply riding the waves, they are doing it in style. The character 舞 *wǔ* is also used by Zhou Mi in *Recollections of Wulin Garden* 60 times, often combined with 歌 *gē* (singing). The word *wu* is still used today in its modern meaning of 'dancing'. The original character carved on the oracular bones of the Shang dynasty shows a shaman, performing leaps, walking up and down in codified movements and holding one ox tail in each hand.

Yet in the subsequent Ming dynasty (1368 - 1644), as catastrophic tides continued to cause havoc in Hangzhou, a few writers described the *nong chao er*, but not in reference to festivals or in respect of water deities, but as outlaws. In the novel *On The Water Margin*, Shi Nai'an (1296-1372) described the outlaw Zhang Sun as 'using his two legs to tread waves', as if he was moving on flat land. Tian Rucheng (1503-1557) in *Notes About a Trip*

to *West Lake* wrote, ‘people living close to the river are good in treading waves and traversing billows, and they call this *nong chao*. Some of them in antiquity were very talented at this’ (Li, 2015). There was a clear sense by now that if the *nong chao er* were riding the tide, they were doing it in secret to avoid arrest as the practice was officially banned. By this time the safety along the waterways was the responsibility of local officials. Moreover, if there was an accident, the officials could be held responsible and put to death. The trailblazing feats of the *nong chao er* were policed and gradually disappeared from literary sources.

The last reference to a craft being used to ride the tides can be found in *Anthology of 24 Dynastic Authors* compiled by Shao Zhangheng (1637-1704), an imperial scholar from Jiangsu province, active at the onset of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912). In *Biography of Yan Dianshi*, author Shao Zhangheng describes a battle in 1641 between a horde of pirates operating on the river and the local population defending Hangzhou, led by a young official surnamed Yan. The account refers to the turbulent final years of the Ming dynasty and reports that: ‘There are hundreds of pirates on the river who spread their sails and ride the tide breaking into inland areas pillaging villages’. The newly appointed young official Yan organised locals in a small army and fought back the outlaws with arrows and bamboo spears (Li, 2015). An engraving from the same period titled ‘View of the Qiantang Jiang’ confirms the use of small sailboats as a wave-riding vehicle in the Hangzhou area at the time. But there is a stark difference between this episode based during the late Ming and the previous occurrences. The pirates did not ride the tide for fun. They did not ‘fool’ or ‘play’ (弄 *nong*) with the tide or perform a ‘hundred water tricks’ described by Zhou Mi. They did not ‘tread waves’ (踏浪 *ta lang*), or ‘dance’ (舞 *wu*) on the water. They simply used the wave to their advantage and ‘mounted’ it. The word ‘mount’ used here is 乘 *chéng*, as in ‘riding a horse’.

Conclusion

After witnessing several fatal accidents among tide-players, in 1065 Hangzhou governor Cai Xiang (1012-1067) promoted the first recorded ban against the activity. The document entitled ‘Quit playing with the tide’ reads:

Some swimmers partake in riding the tide, and accidentally throw the body given to them by their parents to the abysses, where fishes and dragons roam. They sink and drown to boast their ability. They send their soul straight to the underworld, their wives and kids crying and staring at the water surface. Their life comes to an end, but not according to natural fate; they die without being mourned, disrespecting human relations, causing unbearable pain. So, in all occasion of spectacular tides this year, watching the tide will be allowed as per consuetude. But if commoners or soldiers will brave the tidal wave, they will be punished.

The dare-devil nature of wave riding was at clash with the Confucian values of loyalty (忠 *zhōng*) and filial piety (孝 *xiao*). Thus, significant evidence suggests that Chinese river-surfers rode waves for ritual and recreational purposes during the Tang and Song Dynasties, while the surrounding society tried to shut the practice down as immoral and unsafe. The first challenge now is to fit this documented history into current western thinking about the history of surfing. Which includes, of course, a limited understanding of surfing's deepest past. How far back into the Austronesian diaspora did wave riding appear? Matt Warsaw in his *History of Surfing* (Warsaw, 2010: 34) suggests that 'some rudimentary proto-Polynesian form of surfing may have begun as far back as 2000 BC', right at the beginning of the migration. Is there a hidden link, a 'common ancestor', between 'wave treading' as practiced among the Wu-Yue people of coastal China around 1200 and Polynesian *He'e Nalu*, flourishing in the same period?

Despite Cai Xiang's emphasis on the apparent stupidity, futility and policing of the practice, there is no evidence of the *nong chao er* being caught and punished. The fact that wave-treading slowly slid out of the main literary sources, doesn't necessarily mean it disappeared. It may have just gone underground, practiced somewhere safe, away from the capital, with discretion, in the same way that Hawaiians rode waves in secret when colonising European missionaries repressed the activity (Hough-Snee and Eastman, 2017).

From informal interviews conducted in over 15 trips to Hangzhou, from 2007 to 2019, I understand that *wave-treading* continued to be practiced until the late 1980s in Haining county, 60 kilometres east of Hangzhou, where the banks were still silty and safe. This will constitute the field of my research in the oncoming years.

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