

is highly recommended for anyone who wishes gain a better understanding of a critical, formative period in the history of Chan.

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THE WRITING OF WEDDINGS IN MIDDLE-PERIOD CHINA: TEXT AND RITUAL PRACTICE IN THE EIGHTH THROUGH FOURTEENTH CENTURIES. By CHRISTIAN DE PEE. pp. xiv, 365. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2007.

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In many ways this is a remarkable book. It is replete with detailed and interesting data that relate to the celebration of weddings in the 'middle-period' of China's history – the Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties. The time span covered is thus one of about five hundred years, years of dramatic changes and at times political upheaval. However, the theme of the book does not directly reflect eventful disorder. Rather, what is conveyed are glimpses of a general ideological progression, in a sense reflecting counterpoint attempts at creating a kind of timeless stability by idealising the past.

Chinese weddings is a vast subject of considerable complexity, implying both geographical variations, differences according to social class and divergences in the processes of cultural semantics that help forming social morphology. Nuptial celebrations have taken many forms in a country of long history and infinite ritual intricacies. The author steers through all this by looking at Chinese weddings through the lenses of discursive examination, especially focusing on textual analysis. The materials used are handbooks for weddings, collections of betrothal letters of literary excellence, surviving calculations (someone putting brush to paper) according to calendars and almanacs, determining favourable dates for marriages. The author also discusses materials relating to various law cases concerned with disputed marriages and engagements, and ends up with an examination of the notion of the tomb as a final reunification of husband and wife – somewhat reminiscent of marriage. The author's reading of a vast number of rich sources is highly original and will certainly prove upsetting for traditional historians, the guardians of causal analyses of corpora of facts.

In many ways this is a remarkable text. It is, indeed, a text about texts and should be read as a meta-text dealing with many kinds of other texts and so there is a lot of intertextuality involved. The author distinguishes between text and practice, although he also sees the production of text as a ritual practice. A main focus of the book concerns such texts which gave normative advice on how to stage a proper and dignified wedding. Whether such guidance was ever heeded, we cannot really know, but de Pee sets out to examine the wedding recommendations as such. What he finds is that the composers of these handbooks rather than recording existing ethnographic facts and using them as normative suggestions, provided counsel that was both political and idealistic. These texts offered liturgical prescriptions that could be traced in the ancient books of a golden past. This style was part of a re-invention of a classical tradition of decorum, thought to have existed once and still possible to recover from a study of the early writings. It was hoped, it seems, that by the authoring of manuals for, for instance, proper weddings, the changes in times and of mores could be arrested and brought to give place to retrieved ancient values as principles of guidance.

In de Pee's account, then, the various wedding manuals are seen as the results of a particular genre of composition. His view is that writing was a ritual practice and the text so produced a ritual object. Its relation to actual wedding practice was only remote and, so the argument goes, the ritual manuals did not really attend to the realities of contemporary customs. Instead they were intended to provide messages about the morality of social reproduction – as part of the greater project to reconstruct and reintroduce the manners of the ancient Chinese world.

de Pee's account is thought provoking and proceeds from a meticulous study of the sources available. An additional reflection here is that when, much later in history, literary and bureaucratic circles began taking an interest in actual popular practice, there was – apart from the wish to document – again a tendency to engage in an essentially similar type of discourse, but now one that worked in the opposite direction. What was actually seen in the present connected in essential nature with the great legendary past. Scholarly attempts to provide regional descriptions of social landscapes, including popular customs and conventions, often included explanations of popular practice by reference to old-time historical anecdotes, classical tales of the doings of heroes and anti-heroes, and the moral lessons that could be learnt from these. Popular practice was seen as age-long surviving manifestations of ancient wisdom.

The discussion moves forward to another topic – the habit of ceremoniously exchanging elegant letters between the parties before a wedding, and also to the composing of special wedding poems. Such tokens of sophistication were 'ritual objects' in handsome calligraphy and delivered in elaborate boxes or beautiful tubes. It was, de Pee assures us, a display of 'cultural capital'. Yet another section deals with annual calendars and almanacs, and so with the discursive calculation of fate and the reckoning of possible blessings for the married couple-to-be by matching their respective celestial signs.

Finally the author examines laws and legal codes from the Tang, Song and Yuan periods and their respective regulations regarding marriages, and the tomb that finally reunites husband and wife after a temporary separation by death. We can follow how various surviving court verdicts illuminate the way the universal and 'transparent' imperial order was confronted by the conventions of the local lived-in world and its actual marriages. We learn among other things that, in de Pee's account, the tomb is a text – and yet it is not a text. But then, we learn, the text is a tomb, and yet the text is not a tomb. Here is, indeed, food for thought.

One recurrent theme through these chapters and in their conclusions is the author's stress on the separation between 'the practice of the text' and the 'practice of the ritual'. In this view the source material we have is bad ethnography. The *Writing of Weddings* carries out this sort of discussion in fascinating detail, drawing on a wealth of sources. History is found incomplete, only providing a fragmented narration independent on linear time and rational causality. The empirically based arguments presented are, by and large, convincing and the reader is rewarded with both amusement and novel discernment. Anyone interested in Chinese social life in times past will profit by perusing these many learned pages. 'Middle Period China' is brought to life in a fresh way.

Having said this I must also add that some readers may not have the patience required to understand the finer points of the project as such. Writing in a clearly postmodernist's style de Pee engages the reader in a meta-discourse relating to texts and intertextualities. The going offers hardship and some of the author's propositions are remarkably evasive. His claimed ambition is to "write in American academic prose without rupturing the organic connection between the present and the past". (p. 20) A European reader not so well versed in American academic prose will at times have reason to hesitate, sit back and contemplate sentences like:

"In the detailed ritual scripts text and performance coincide and become interchangeable: the text becomes the performance, the reader becomes the performer, and the written spaces and bodies acquire a ritual efficacy of their own". (p. 38)

"Writing here becomes a ritual act that parallels or replaces choreographies of bodies through ritual time and space, and thereby becomes subject to the same hermeneutics of canon and precedent". (p. 41)

"The materiality of these funeral metaphors collapses sign and referent, and thereby enables the convergence of incompatible discourses in ritual time and space". (p. 224)

The pages are studded with such propositions and the reader will soon nourish a dawning suspicion that this text has been written for the comrades in arms. This is not so very upsetting in itself – it

is perhaps even natural – but on the wider scene it will no doubt counteract whatever intentions the author had writing this book. In fact, by the frequent use of American academic prose he creates a meta-text about himself, which in its intertextuality with the results he has actually so marvellously achieved, will generate mists of incomprehension between the two. What is worse however, is that de Pee does not integrate his arguments with any explicit statement about his theoretical positions. Instead he provides us with a reading list of nineteen items, the appraisal of which has formed his ‘insights’. It would have been interesting for the reader – as the author has pronounced theoretical claims – to have been allowed to follow, at least in outline, the formation of those thoughts. What we get now is the *ad hoc* note of reference and a largely eclectic discourse of seeming incongruence. We are, for instance, entitled to know what the author actually means by frequently and provocatively used words such as ‘ritual’ and ‘culture’.

If Professor de Pee ever reads this review, he may by now be very angry with me and at my post-post-modern stance. He may think ill of me but I can only hope he will allow me to assure him that *in the essentials* I approve of his work.

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CONFUCIANISM AND WOMEN: A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION. By LI-HSIANG L. ROSENLEE. pp. ix, 200. Albany, State University of New York Press, 2006.

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Confucianism and Women is reminiscent of Dorothy Ko’s two thought-provoking monographs, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (1994) and *Cinderella’s Sisters* (2005). In the former, Ko scrutinised meticulously the two dichotomies of *yin-yang* (female-male) and *nei-wai* (inner-outer), which offer alternative ways of looking at the Chinese gender issues. In the latter, she alerted the reader to a “modern nationalist bias” when scholars address the issue of Chinese footbinding. Scholars, for example, often fail to perceive the footbinding issue within the context of Chinese cultural tradition. By the same token, Li-Hsiang Rosenlee strives to seek answers to certain questions posed in her insightful book, such as, is Confucianism inherently sexist? Can western feminism be adopted in the Chinese cultural context? Is it possible to reconcile Confucianism and feminism, and in turn develop a new terminology of ‘Confucian feminism’ in future? In addition to adopting a philosophical approach to these questions, Rosenlee is eager to rethink Chinese women’s issues from within the Confucian cultural tradition.

The book has seven chapters. In Chapter 1, Rosenlee is successful in drawing attention to the book’s various objectives. The first is to identify the intellectual tradition of Confucianism, which is often perceived as ambiguous and complex. The second is to demonstrate the cultural conceptual schemes in the Confucian world, which are conducive to the construction of gender in the Chinese context. Third, the book is to probe into some possible interconnections between the Chinese gender system and Confucianism, where Confucian ethics help sustain the patrilineal family structure in Chinese society. Fourth, the book tries to offer another way of viewing women as participants in transmitting sexist practices that conform to Chinese cultural ideals. The final objective is to suggest Confucianism as a potential viable resource for the liberation of Chinese women. These objectives are clearly outlined in the introductory chapter, preparing readers for what they may expect in the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2 seeks to address the origins of Confucianism. For Rosenlee, the term ‘Confucianism’ is a Jesuit ‘invention’ (p. 17) but not a singular doctrine centring on the thoughts of Confucius. To argue for the ambiguous and mysterious origins of *Ru* (Confucianism), she satisfactorily presents *Ru* before