
Christian de Pee’s *The Writing of Weddings* is an ambitious study which shows how we can comprehend more fully the texts on weddings and marriage produced from the late Tang of the ninth-tenth centuries through the end of the Yuan period in the fourteenth century. The author argues vehemently, and convincingly, for a new hermeneutics dealing with historical documents, which are not just writings on paper or some other surface, but remain historical discourses that engage not only its authors from the past but also today’s scholars, and are ritual practices as well as ritual objects that re-establish “the organic connection between ritual and history” (p. 18).

The “Middle-Period” China, to which de Pee refers spans about five hundred years during which time enormous changes occurred in areas where Han Chinese culture was dominant—political regimes with rulers of different ethnicities (Khitan, Tangut, Jurchen, Mongol, as well as Han Chinese), an increasingly commercialized economy, the formation of a new elite in Song China, just to mention a few. Although de Pee is fully aware of these historical developments and addresses specific changes in his discussions, it may have helped to underline how the shifting historical discourse discerned in texts can be illumined and illumine the changes through the long period he considers.

In Chapter 1, “Ritual Manuals,” the emphasis is on hermeneutical shifts between the Tang and the Song, and also between the Northern and Southern Song, which resulted in a profound rewriting of the canonical ritual manuals. The Tang, Five Dynasties (and early Song) works, de Pee argues, exhibited an exegetical bent that married the ancient canonical writings with precedent, i.e., actual ritual practices of the times. By comparison, Northern Song scholars influenced by a renewed study of ancient inscriptions and ritual vessels, endeavored either to adhere more closely to what they knew of ancient rituals, or to recover (or re-inscribe) those that were lost. This latter process was feasible because of Northern Song writers’ faith in the “timeless, inherent, moral structures” posited by the ancients and whose traces could be recovered in through their active dialogue with the ancient manuals. By the Southern Song, Zhu Xi 朱熹’s (1130-1200) *Jiali* 家禮 (Family rituals) expressed an even greater confidence in its authors’ understanding of the essence of ancient rituals by significant additions and deletions that rendered ritual practices both suitable for their times and faithful to the universal, timeless spirit of the ancients. De Pee is generous and imaginative in discussing the creation and practice of these texts and the rituals and practices they describe or prescribe. When it comes to modern scholarship, however, de Pee is less forgiving. For example, he writes that Patricia Ebrey’s argument that the new Song elite was recasting ancient texts on rituals (and so many other subjects) as an
effort to assert its ritual hegemony and to preserve some popular customs, is far from complete. Nevertheless, Ebrey’s explanation is one that he could have usefully admitted into his own very rich discussion.

Chapter 2, “Wedding Correspondence and Nuptial Songs” discusses the use of four-six parallel prose in the composition of a wide variety of wedding correspondence (letters between the families of the bride and groom, with go-betweens, invitations, congratulations, etc.) enclosed in elegant containers. Indeed, every step of the production of such texts embodies the practice of an important set of rituals and the virtuosity of the literary style expressed cultural capital most valued by the literati elite of the Song. By the thirteenth century, however, this practice had declined, because the numerous texts had “exhausted many of the possibilities of nuptial allusions and witty self-deprecation” (p. 103), and their reproduction in printed collections challenged authors to equal earlier virtuosity and enabled less skilled authors to mine the available resources.

Actually, the printed editions expressed a variety of different attitudes toward these works. For instance, the *Hunli xinbian* 婚禮新編 (Wedding ritual: a new edition) “was useless to all but the very skilled among writers” (p. 106), while *Xinbian hunli beiyong yuelao xinshu* 新編婚禮備用月老新書 (A new book for the old man under the moon), clearly a cheap commercial edition, was geared toward writers of wedding literature for commoners (i.e., the less educated non-elite). About the latter work, de Pee argues that the sly and insulting allusions in the letters written on behalf of commoners actually provide them with no cultural capital, which remains in the hands of the clever authors displaying a cruel condescension. Maybe, but while commoners may have been ignorant, they were not stupid, and they could well have re-interpreted many of the supposedly insulting allusions in a more laudable fashion.

Lastly, a suggestion for a study of the “afterlife” of Song four-six parallel prose in general. Although its composition by the elite may have died out in the late Southern Song, and the “victory of ancient-style prose over parallel prose in late imperial times” (p. 175) is undeniable, well-known works such as Li Liu's 李劉 (jinshi ca. 1208) *Siliu biaozhun* 四六標準 (Standard for four-six prose) continued to be reprinted. A casual and by no means exhaustive search nets four late Ming editions (at least three by commercial publishers) and one Qing edition, not to mention its incorporation into the *Siku quanshu*. Taking a cue from de Pee’s own examination of this genre for the Song, we could ask how these texts were used in later times, and by what kind of different writers and for what readers and users.

Chapter 3, “Calendars, Almanacs, Miracle Tales, and Medical Texts,” considers the many different (and often conflicting) practices of calculating cosmologically favorable and unfavorable factors for human undertakings, including marriages. The relatively few surviving calendars and almanacs produced by the state and private individuals and groups suggest how important this cosmological discourse was and why it was important to claim authority for these practices.