
This edited volume is a collection of essays united by the common theme of “authority,” which the editors define as “the capacity and right to author and to authorize” (vii), maintaining that “it is precisely the ambiguities surrounding authority that make it so appropriate as a thematic focus for studying the ways different Asian societies have negotiated the contrary demands of change and constancy” (ix). The volume is the product of a two-year series of workshops and a culminating online conference, the aim of which was to produce materials for use in a core undergraduate curriculum in Asian Studies. It brings together nine essays about China, arranged more or less chronologically (with a couple of significant exceptions) from pre-Qin times to the twentieth-century. The editors do not contribute any chapters. An explanation of the relevance of the intriguing “Confucian cultures” of the volume’s title is absent in the introduction.

Readers acquainted with Henry Rosemont Jr.’s writings of the past couple of decades will have a sense of déjà vu when they read the opening essay, “Two Loci of Authority: Autonomous Individuals and Related Persons,” as many ideas and passages are conscripted from his earlier publications as he prosecutes, once again, the good fight against his old nemesis “individualism.” In this essay, Rosemont contrasts two notions of “personhood”: the modern Western one, in which freedom is valued over justice, and the “classical Confucian” one, in which the priority is said to be reversed. In the West (read USA) this freedom has led to the enshrinement of rights that have facilitated the accumulation of resources by the few, which conflicts with the ideal of justice. In contrast (and no surprises here) the “classical Confucian” self is “not a free, autonomous individual, but is seen relationally…I am a student of my teachers, teacher of my students, colleague of my colleagues…,” et cetera (10, 11). We learn that the virtue of the Confucian model of self is that it encourages the “authoritative person” to contribute to the welfare and wellbeing of others.

Tao Jiang’s essay, “Intimate Authority: The Rule of Ritual in Classical Confucian Political Discourse,” addresses the topic of “political authority in the normative political discourse of classical Confucianism” (which for Jiang is to be located in the writings of Xunzi) (21). He characterizes “the classical Confucian paradigm of political authority” as “the rule of ritual” (23). The rule of ritual—so called because Jiang emphasizes the rule-based normative function of ritual—seems to boil down to the idea that by observing ritual propriety sage kings (and their latter-day emulators) came to be regarded as moral exemplars, which in turn afforded them personal authority and served as the (ideal) basis for political legitimacy. The chief insight in this study amounts to the following: “As a political model, the rule of ritual is predicated upon an extension of the natural hierarchy observed within a family to the whole kingdom or empire. It is through the observance of li that such a form of authority is exercised” (29). A substantial part of the chapter is devoted to providing extended summary accounts of (i) comparative philosopher...
Tom Kasulis’s distinction between intimacy and integrity, with Jiang borrowing the notion of intimacy to characterize “the rule of ritual”; and (ii) intellectual historian Robert Eno’s account of “Ruist ritual.” The final part of the chapter treats the reader to a rehearsal of Confucian li vs. Legalist fà.

The title of the next essay, “The Wei (Positioning)-Ming (Naming)-Lianmian (Face)-Guanxi (Relationship)-Renqing (Humanized Feelings) Complex in Contemporary Chinese Culture,” is as opaque as the essay’s contents. Wenshan Jia’s litany of non sequiturs and naïve anecdotes is delivered in contorted and at times impenetrable prose. How this embarrassing hodgepodge managed to find its way into print is a mystery. The following passage from the conclusion will suffice to give the reader a foretaste of what to expect: “In this complex of wei-ming-lianmian-guanxi-renqing, wei and guanxi are ontocosmological, while ming is rhetorical and communicative, and lianmian and renqing are primarily socio-emotive. Together they constitute the grammar for understanding Chinese politics, communication, sociology and psychology” (62).

Keith N. Knapp’s “Creeping Absolutism: Parental Authority as Seen in Early Medieval Tales of Filial Offspring” is the first essay in the volume to relate the theme of authority to a Chinese social context in a sustained and academically rigorous manner. Knapp sets himself the (perhaps overly) ambitious task of determining “the nature and extent of paternal authority in the early medieval period (A.D. 100-600)” (66) by comparing tales of filial piety from this period with their earlier counterparts. He shows that the early medieval tales laid greater stress on filial obedience and speculates that this was because in this period there was an expectation that children should treat their father as they would their ruler. “In early medieval times…the Ru normative sources go from stressing ruler as father to father as ruler” (71). He relates that as a consequence of a weak central government in the Eastern Han, large families filling the power vacuum at the local level. In order to sustain the authority and protect the interests of family heads, Knapp speculates that “the authors of the tales realized that one means of doing so was to elevate the status of father to that of ruler” (72). Drawing on his observations of the common practice of shengfen (splitting the patrimony while the parents are still alive), he concludes that these early medieval family heads did not achieve “the unconditional authority that the filial piety stories hoped they would…The tales’ emphasis on parental authority and their anxiety over its weakness, combined with the prevalence of shengfen, indicate that early medieval family heads had much less power than their Roman, or even their later imperial, counterparts” (79, 80).

Robin Wang’s essay, “Virtue (de), Talent (cai), and Beauty (se): Authoring a Full-fledged Womanhood in Lienüzhuan (Biographies of Women),” neatly complements Knapp’s essay. In this study of stories/biographies of women in Liu Xiang’s (79-8 B.C.) Lienüzhuan, Wang aims to “demonstrate how the authority of women was constructed, comprehended and contested in…early Chinese thought and culture” (93). She finds evidence of moral autonomy being celebrated in the book and cites examples which she argues set out to demonstrate that women are