The theme of this book is the writing and practice of weddings. As a most important social custom, wedding has long been a popular topic in the study of Chinese society by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, as partly reflected in the secondary sources listed here. So, does de Pee's book increase our knowledge of the subject, or, on the contrary, does it run the risk of twisting our understanding of the historical sources?

The problems with this book are obvious: it tends to mix up the unusual and usual, overstate the exceptions, take trifles as significant facts, analyze historical sources out of context, suggest wrong analogies as a result of loose definitions or negligence with historical backgrounds, and take ritual guidelines, references, or even idealism as if they were martial laws to be strictly followed, when the writers themselves allowed for leeway and revision in practice (see for example Chao Ting’s 趙鼎 family instructions), so as to accommodate change in both family and society. Following are a few examples.

In order to argue that the wedding correspondence is a display of cultural capital “that redeems any social disparity asserted in the contents of the letters” (p. 98), de Pee claims that the “four-six parallel prose [used in the wedding correspondence] was once a dominant literary style: not a peripheral phenomenon of the eleventh century, but a pervasive, prestigious, powerful practice of literati culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” (p. 93). He is wrong if the four-six prose (四六文) referred to is advanced-level composition such as was demanded in the so-called Erudite Literatus examinations (博學宏詞) (p. 90). Thanks to Ou-yang Hsiu’s 歐陽修 promotion of ancient-style essays in general and Wang An-shíh’s 王安石 reform of the civil service examinations in particular, the advanced-level four-six prose had become so out of fashion that even the top winners of the ordinary civil examinations were unable to apply it with sophistication to the imperial edicts appointing and dismissing high-ranking officials. As such, advanced-level four-six prose was hardly used in wedding correspondence. More importantly, it was generally opposed by the Neo-Confucians whose ritual manuals are ironically used by de Pee to demonstrate the display of cultural capital.  

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De Pee is right only if the four-six prose referred to is the ordinary-level composition that was still in use in the ordinary civil examinations. If so, his arguments in Chapter Two are mostly inflated. Being common and habitual to the elite, the use of ordinary-level four-six prose in wedding correspondence can hardly make weddings “one site for the display of cultural capital … [which] confirmed the worth of one’s family and the value of the alliance” (p. 95, also pp. 103-104, 106-107). Unlike the evaluation of the candidates in the civil examinations, the worth of the wedding parties was not estimated by their composition of wedding correspondence for this particular event, but by their financial, literary, political, or social activities in general. No wedding correspondence would be exchanged without prior estimation of these usual activities or without prior marriage negotiations that effectively took the values of the wedding parties into account. It would simply be too late to confirm the value of an alliance at the time of exchanging wedding correspondence, and absurd to dissolve an alliance on the grounds of not-so-elegant correspondence. Simply said, the exchange of wedding correspondence was a mere formality with trivial significance in the entire marriage negotiation. Its historical value lies elsewhere, for example when it provides, though by chance, additional information about the groom and bride and their families (e.g. “the Shu family lives in my old homestead” on p. 95). It is the same as with the final elegy of an epitaph, which may happen to add information to the text but is mostly secondary to our understanding of the burial itself.3

Being mere formality, a lot of wedding correspondences become dispensable. Some are largely simplified, stylized, or standardized, so that their composition is close to filling-in the blanks in an application form. Contrary to de Pee’s remark that wedding correspondence is “a function of the practice of the text rather than a function of the practice of ritual” (p. 102), I think that most of it served more to complete the marital ritual than to show off compositional skills. It is the former that affects the theme, contents, and style of the latter. To the wedding parties, what is written is far more important than how it is written: many merchant families could simply hire a good writer.

De Pee also asserts that “the moral universalism of Wedding Ritual ill accommodates the strategic practice of wedding correspondence—and the analysis of A New Book for the Old Man under the Moon … will reveal further tensions between literary strategies and matrimonial practice” (p. 105-106). I think the ill accommodation or tension is created by de Pee himself due to his misreading of the sources, to the extent of contradicting common sense. The line “Deep furrows and shallow sowing are his art” in a marriage proposal letter is used to point out the profession and status of the groom in parallel to the line “Fine thread and thick yarn are her craft”; it is definitely not a metaphor implying that the groom