
Submitted as a dissertation at the University of Erlangen in 2003, this book is a comprehensive study of the discussions on four different aspects of the Song state cult during the years 1034-93. Following the Introduction, Meyer starts with an overview of the premises of the debates which are his subject. He deals with the concept of *li*, which following Angela Zito (a name that reoccurs frequently in the footnotes) he characterizes as one among three of the most prominent discourses of Chinese history, the other two being *wen* and *xiao*. (I have to confess that I have some reservations regarding this generalization.) After a brief discussion of the term *li* he justifies why he speaks of “rites” in the book, although one might think that “matters of state cult” would be a more appropriate description of the subject. As far as I am concerned it remains a problem because *li* is a term which includes a) cultic matters, b) general rules of propriety, best translated as “Sitte” in German, as well as c) ceremonies for the *rites de passage*. “Rites”, therefore, is only one aspect of *li*, and not a very good translation for it. Especially with regard to a) and c), it seems that “rites” only refers to only one among several aspects of the matter covered.

These introductory remarks are followed by a very brief historical overview (pp. 50-59) and by considerations on the actual meaning of the rites, seen by Meyer as important components of the hierarchical division of society. Here for the first time Meyer introduces the term *renqing*, which he translates in this case as “reale Lebenssituationen und menschliche Gefühle des Menschen” (p. 69), although later on he rather speaks of “menschliche Gefühle”, or prefers to use no translation at all. The discussion of *renqing* could have been longer since the term is so important for Meyer’s thesis, and also because I believe that there is an important difference between “human feelings” and “situations of human life”. It seems in fact that the latter interpretation is what the passages quoted in Meyer’s footnotes on pp. 69f hint at. Finally, this first part of the book is followed by a general account of the ritual activities undertaken during the Northern Song dynasty.

The second part is devoted to a “Rekonstruktion der ritologischen Problemstellungen und des amtlichen Diskussionsverlaufs 1034-1093” (lit., “Reconstruction of the ritological problems and of the official development of the discussion during the period 1034-1093”). Behind this complicated title the reader will find a detailed description of four different subjects important for state cults in the Song: 1. The discussions concerning the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. 2. The discussions on the music to be played during these and other central sacrifices. 3. The famous debate that took place between 1064 and 1067 about the correct way to venerate the prince of Pu. As is well known, the prince of Pu was a nephew...
of emperor Renzong, who had died in 1063 without having produced a direct male successor, and the father of emperor Yingzong (1063-1067); appeal was made to renqing during the so-called Puyi 讨議 discussions by those who thought that the emperor should also venerate his own father, not just Renzong (p. 264), a fact suggesting that the term renqing had developed since its invention in Zhuangguo times to involve real human emotions. 4. The fourth and last item in this section is the conflict over the mourning for Sima Guang that broke out between the factions of the Luo faction of Cheng Yi and the Shu faction of Su Shi in 1086.

Meyer’s painstaking work of reconstruction in this whole section is, indeed, extremely valuable. On almost 200 pages he provides wonderfully detailed information, and this is an achievement that can hardly be overestimated. Yet at some points it seemed to this reader that an attempt to analyze the historical background of the discussions in question should have been made at this stage of the book already. It feels a little strange that after his presentation of the discussions on music, for example, Meyer should muse over the fact that the bells that were used are now lost, rather than address the question of why all these discussions were led in the first place. In the case of the debate on the mourning for Sima Guang, Meyer does mention that it has usually been understood as a conflict between two factions, but prefers to analyze it in a purely ritual light. That is, of course, a possible thing to do, but he should have developed an argument to justify himself.

Part III deals with the structure and context of the ritual discussions. Meyer first defines the shidafu as the group most concerned with the debates because of what he calls their “ritual identity”, an idea he further develops within the context of the fugu movement. He then moves on to the question of a civil society in Song times, and starts a discussion of the four subjects introduced in Part II in the “Spannungsfeld von Ideologie und Parteienstreit”. Here he isolates several different fields in which the debates on rites could be useful. The emperor, for example, could increase his prestige, while for their part the bureaucrats could gain a profile of their own by positioning themselves in one way or the other. On pp. 441ff. Meyer explains that the Puyi discussions may have served to strengthen the position of the emperor, but he cautiously adds that why they were led so fiercely is a question still unresolved (p. 449), which he plans to address in Part IV of his study; he also warns against too easy reconstructions of the factions that opposed each other at the time (p. 464).

Part IV—the last of the three main parts of the book—situates the debates on cultic and ceremonial matters (“Ritendiskurs” in Meyers’s words) in the context of the beginnings of “Neoconfucianism”. This section consists of three short sketches of the lives of the major protagonists, Ouyang Xiu, Sima Guang and Cheng Yi, and of the role that “rites” played in their biographies. As before, Meyer, this time following Ji Xiaobin, stresses personal career interests as a driving factor in the discussions—thus, the case of Ouyang Xiu (pp. 469ff); at the same time he tries, sometimes more implicitly than explicitly, to play down the factional